

The Thriving Principal: Managing the Paradoxes of the Principalship

Project leaders: South Australian Secondary Principals Association (SASPA)

The aim of this research project was to use a Professional Learning Community (PLC) methodology to have principals work with other principals on how best to address the various ambiguities, paradoxes, and tensions evident in having to be a school and community leader and a member of a school system. The Thriving Principal project focused on a range of tensions which had emerged from an earlier collaboration between University of South Australia collaboration with SASPA and SAPPa.

- The tension between centralised measures of school success and the positive achievements of my school.
- The aspirations of the system and the goals and priorities of my school.
- The external accountabilities applied to me and my work and my need to act autonomously as a school leader.
- The need to sometimes oppose or resist centralised policy demands and the personal risks involved in such opposition or resistance.

(See Dr Chris Dolan, *Paradox in the Lives and Work of School Principals*, 2020 p.6)

Essentially what was being researched was whether principals' work could thrive despite finding themselves working within a culture of performativity.

Project Scope:

The research project sought to establish how principals were addressing the various ambiguities, paradoxes, and tensions evident in their work. It was anticipated that a range of strategies would be referenced which would be seen as helpful for principals to adapt or adopt across the SASPA and SAPPa networks.

Project Methodology:

Twenty primary and secondary principals were invited to trial this program. The program commenced with a full day workshop in March and concluded with a half day showcase in September. The work in-between these two events was undertaken in three Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups, all consisting of some primary principals and some secondary principals, and all recognising a range of levels of experience.

Each PLC was facilitated by a retired principal. PLCs met virtually using MS Teams. Each meeting's discussion was led by a principal member, who was responsible for deciding on the tension to be explored in the meeting.

The protocol used by each PLC was *The Final Word* (adapted from the Australian National Schools Network resources). The protocol was used as an effective way to expand a group's understanding of an issue in a focused way and in a limited amount of time.

1. The PLC Facilitator welcomes everyone, appoints a time-keeper for the session and hands-over to the principal leading the discussion.
2. The nominated principal leads the discussion for 5 minutes by sharing his/her experience of the tension selected for focused exploration by the group.
3. Each principal has up to 3 minutes to respond drawing upon her/his own experiences and wisdom.
4. The Lead Principal then provides a Final Word (up to 3 minutes).
5. For up to 20 minutes, the Facilitator (an experienced retired principal) asks questions and leads a whole-of-group discussion on the tension identified as the session's topic.
6. For up to 5 minutes, the Facilitator provides the Final Word on the topic (i.e., synthesis of the discussion but then finishing with the Facilitator's perspective).

[Total maximum time = 50 minutes]

Project Findings:

The final session for this project was held on 10th September 2021. It was designed to establish what had been learnt about:

- Effective strategies for managing the various ambiguities, paradoxes, and tensions evident in principals' work
- The methodology (Principal Learning Communities and The Final Word Protocol)
- The potential for future work of this type.

Effective Strategies for Managing Tensions in Principals' Work:

- Working to be influential within and beyond the school.
- Making and defending decisions through clarity of purpose and process.
- Maintaining focus on quality teaching and learning despite competing demands.
- Identifying the risks and ways to minimise or avoid them.
- Find and apply flexibilities wherever possible – go 'under the radar' (work the rules and this comes from experience)
- Acting in a wily, fox-cunning, 'strategic' way – clear about the end goal and creative about how to get there.
- Networking with principal colleagues: e.g., personal trusted colleague, principal networks, and this PLC - for advice and/or support.
- As professional organisations/groups, work to identify and fix issues – improve systems rather than blame those who identify issues (i.e., influence the rules).
- Leading – applying personal agency and/or autonomy where possible.
- Developing a rich understanding – for self and others - to work towards a solution orientation through negotiating, mediating, seeking consensus.
- Modelling and articulating learning and problem-solving processes as Principal's work.
- Leading the culture: i.e., culture of learning (which needs to be driven by values and purpose).
- Being open, honest, and clear (sometimes frank) about the end goal/purpose.
- Taking time to think, consult and plan/prepare before making decisions/taking action.
- Using data and evidence to make a case for change.
- Recognise the realities: politics, budgets, personalities, power bases.
- Be kind to yourself, realistic and self-forgiving.

Methodology:

- The Thriving Principal is such a great title for a program such as this.
- Such potential for professional learning about 'the psychology of being strategic' to be undertaken.
- The process was about leadership in schools and the level of school (primary or secondary) was irrelevant to the process.
- Genuine engagement and commitment by team members, willingness to share openly and honestly, and to be brave and vulnerable. There was an obvious level of trust. Participants really invested in each other and themselves and their feedback influenced thinking and practices.
- Changes to the time allocations in the process – lead Principals **needed 10 minutes** to describe their situation/paradox/tension and 5 minutes for Principal responses.

- The conversation/discussion/questions/problem-solving that occurred after the Lead Principal and responses from colleague Principals was vital in exploring the topic and surfacing strategies.
- Final Word provided by the Lead Principal was important in sharing their perspectives on the value of the dialogue.
- It was difficult for early career principals to make time to participate but so rewarding for them when they did.
- This program provided a good balance between face-to-face and online professional learning modes.
- The size of PLC groups was effective and worked efficiently (6 Principals and 1 Facilitator).

Next Steps:

Leaders in this trial indicated that the program should continue for 2022 but suggested a new group of principals should have access to this experience.

It was also suggested that some principal members from the 2021 trial program should lead/facilitate a Band B leader variant of this program in 2022.

The challenge, always, is making the time for one's own professional learning when the workload intensity of the principal role is so high.

There is no doubt in the minds of those who completed the trial program that professional learning, such as this, is important work. The immediate challenge is how we convince others.

Project Artefacts:

Dr Chris Dolan's 10th September slide presentation, "*Going Deeper – Strategies for Managing Tensions*", provides a synthesis for understanding the experience of practising principals in *The Thriving Principal* program alongside the various theoretical perspectives from his own research.

To read Dr Dolan's *Paradox in the Lives and Work of School Principals* (the research published in 2020 that suggested the idea for The Thriving Principal program), see:

https://www.saspa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Dolan_Report.pdf

SASPA acknowledges and thanks the Principals Australia Research Foundation for their financial support of the project.