

Leadership Tensions and Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT: Results from the Tasmanian Successful School Principal Project (SSPP) survey concur with the four major leadership tensions and dilemmas identified in a background literature review. These tensions and dilemmas relate to internal/external control, ethic of care/responsibility, and an emphasis on professional/personal as well as leadership/management. The results also offer new insights. These insights include differences in the effects of the tensions and dilemmas based on principal qualifications, experience and gender, school size, socio-economic status (SES) and organisational capacity, and student social and literacy/numeracy success adjusted for school SES.

A recent review of research concerning quality teaching and quality leading in Australian schools has highlighted a need to look at ways in which successful school leaders manage dilemmas and tensions that arise in schools (Zammit et al., 2007, p. 27). This article aims to review some representative literature in the area and provide results from the Tasmanian Successful School Principals Project (SSPP) project, which includes a set of survey items relating to leadership tensions and dilemmas.

Background Literature

Research studies from three countries, UK, Canada and Australia, focussed on dilemmas faced by school principals. In the UK, Day et al. (2001) saw dilemmas for principals choosing between courses of action which are to a greater or lesser extent mutually exclusive. Two of the dilemmas identified were development or dismissal, that is what to do with a teacher who is teaching badly and does not seem to be improving despite participation in staff development activities, and the dilemma of subcontracting or mediation, reflecting the position of principals who are caught between two sets of imperatives for changes – internal and external - whereby the external impetus for change was 'imposed' by central government and its agencies, and the internal imperatives comprising a complex mixture of school-based factors.

The notion of a leadership dilemma occurs when principals can no longer justify externally imposed changes that are incongruent with the needs of their school. The role of mediator allows the principal space in which to integrate the externally imposed change, whereas the role of subcontractor implies a loss of control, autonomy and decision-making, as key decisions are made elsewhere. The dilemma of development or dismissal relates to the internal decision-making of leaders as they struggle to formulate appropriate courses of action.

Day et al. (2001) reported UK research from case studies that involved some two hundred individual and group interviews with four hundred participants – principals, teachers, parents, governors and students. The data from the study highlighted a number of tensions and dilemmas that principals experienced and managed as part of their work, and specific sets of pressures within certain contexts namely: leadership versus management, development versus maintenance, and internal versus external change. Additional tensions identified from the case study included autocracy versus autonomy, personal time versus professional tasks, personal versus institutional imperatives, and leadership in small versus large schools. Further, principals experienced difficulty in managing responses to demands from inside the schools and demands from outside the schools.

From Canada, Castle and Mitchell (2001) claim that school leaders can at least partly offset the tension between change and stability by actively building organisational capacity for school improvement. Twelve elementary school principals from two boards of education in southern Ontario participated in a study aimed at uncovering what these principals did on a daily basis. Qualitative data were collected over twelve months through two semi-structured interviews and written narratives, and extended observations of each principal in his/her work environment, as well as

two focus sessions that brought participants together in specific groups. Four key tensions that faced principals identified by Castle and Mitchell were managerial demands versus instructional leadership, responsibility versus authority, change versus stability, and relationship-building versus control of personal work environment.

Management tensions pulled principals away from teachers, students, and instruction, whereas instructional leadership pulled them away from procedures, organisation and logistics. Principals perceived that they were endowed with responsibilities for which they did not have any corresponding authority, for example, the performance of students on provincial standardised tests. Further, principals felt that they had to cope with a multitude of change initiatives coming from the Ministry of Education, and occasionally from the school board, in the context of demands on the principal's work environment through an open-door policy. Management tensions existed, in part, because principals in the study felt a compelling need to operate on both sides of the dilemma – to manage and lead, to be responsible and autonomous, to handle change and maintain stability, and to build relationships and control their personal work space. Whenever tensions arise, the principals in the study responded according to their own beliefs, preferences and priorities.

Results from Australian research by Wildy (1999), involving unstructured in-depth interviews with principals engaged in a period of restructuring of schools in Western Australia, indicated that pressures from the contradictions of restructuring could be conceptualised as three dilemmas - the accountability dilemma, the autonomy dilemma, and the efficiency dilemma. Wildy describes factors confronting principals as they deal with dilemmas in terms of trust, autonomy, and efficiency. Wildy found that principals are required to operate within two sets of constraints: one is to set up and use participatory decision-making structures and the other is to work to defend centrally defined policies. However, when faced with choices between accountability and participation, principals chose accountability; when faced with autonomy or collaboration, they chose autonomy and likewise, efficiency took precedence over participation.

Wildy (1999) makes the point that principals aim to turn chaos into order within a framework of certainty, efficiency, and expediency, and therefore it is not surprising that principals are challenged by the untidiness of shared decision-making. For principals the problem of participation is that the collaborative arrangements they establish seem to be based more on the ethic of responsibility than on the ethic of care, whereas the ethics of care is based on participation.

Tensions and dilemmas related to competing value systems were identified in other Australian schools (Duignan, 2003; Wildy and Loudon, 2000.) An analysis of policy documents on school-based management by Lingard et al. (2002) demonstrated that tensions between centralised and decentralised control were increased with school-based management, as well as tension between concepts of market efficiency and equity/social justice. The research of Cranston et al. (2003), on the changing roles of secondary school principals in Australia and New Zealand, found a major tension between the requirements of leadership versus management. Tensions and/or dilemmas faced by a principal may arise due to external pressures placed on the school by an employing authority or because of a principal's perceived role conflict between being an educational leader and being a manager of supporting services within the school. Tensions and dilemmas may also arise following a concern about the quality of teaching staff and determining appropriate strategies for development and/or dismissal, or when requirements for change impact on the notion of stability within the school. Cranston et al. (2006) Queensland research identified a number of additional dilemmas for school leaders which typically were about welfare, performance and behaviours both of staff and students. Tensions and dilemmas may occur as principals relinquish some of their autonomy and control in favour of building commitment and relationships through collaboration and, similarly, when principals are required to implement, or have the responsibility for implementing, policy/decisions that they have had no say in the need for, or the formation of, that policy. Boris-Schacter and Langer (2006) expressed these competing dilemmas as three pairs of activity categories that they identified as 'principal tensions' namely: Instruction and management, Work and personal lives, and Societal/community expectations and individual priorities. For example, principals reported that when they wanted to go into classrooms they had to complete paper-work; when they wanted to stay in school they missed the evening meal at home; when the community wanted them to respond immediately, they wanted to gather information and carefully consider options. In summary, the background literature has identified four major leadership tensions and dilemmas:

- Control and change – internal/decentralised, autonomous versus external/centralised
- Ethic – of care (participation/collaboration/equity) versus of responsibility (accountability/efficiency);
- Major imperative – professional/instructional versus personal;
- Major function – instructional/development/leadership versus management/ maintenance.

The focus of this paper now turns to an exploration of data derived from Tasmanian principals concerning their perceptions of the tensions and dilemmas they face as school leaders.

The Study

The Samples

In late 2005 and early 2006, surveys on successful school principalship were distributed to all 195 government schools (excluding colleges and special schools) in Tasmania. A total of 131 survey responses were received from secondary, composite and primary school principals, which represents a return rate of 67 per cent. Surveys sought responses in areas such as demographic characteristics, leadership characteristics, values and beliefs, tensions and dilemmas, learning and development, school capacity building, decision-making, evaluation and accountability, and perceptions of school success. Results of the data analysis will be presented in two parts as follows: demographic profile of respondents, and areas of dilemmas regarding loyalty to employers, what constitutes success, competing values, inside/outside school expectations, and making decisions.

Demographics

The majority of principals were male (57 per cent), especially among those with 11+ years of experience (79 per cent). Females made up 47 per cent of principals in primary schools and 20 per cent in secondary schools, compared with national figures of 57 per cent and 41 per cent respectively (McKenzie et al., 2008). The mean age of principals was almost 50.0 years with most being between 45.0 and 57.5 years. This mean age and older age range of principals is very similar to the national profile (McKenzie et al., 2008). The mean years of experience as a principal was 9.4, with males (11.4) being higher than females (6.8). These figures are similar to the national figures of 11.0 years for males and 7.0 years females (Anderson et al. 2006). The average hours worked by principals was 58 hours, and again, this figure is similar to the national figure of 60 hours (McKenzie et al., 2008).

Results

The SSPP survey included nine items concerning aspects of school leadership. Principals were required to indicate how often they experienced tensions and dilemmas relating to each item, using a five-point scale of 1/never to 5/always. The tensions and dilemmas related to the employer, what constitutes success, competing values, ad-hoc problem solving and strategic planning, demands to be inside or outside their schools, and decision-making. In addition, an open-ended section of the survey invited principals to respond to the items: What conditions do you know about in your school that you do not talk about but, if you did, might lead to school improvement? What are the three most important changes that you would like to see over the next five years? In what follows, results from each of the quantitative survey tensions and dilemmas are reported along with illustrative qualitative responses from the open-ended items.

Loyalty to the employer.

Principals reported that they experienced tensions and dilemmas on three items concerning loyalty to the employer. These items were 'loyalty to employer limits my right to participate critically in the public discourse about schooling' (49% rank 4 or 5), 'loyalty to employer and the need to take part in the public discourse about schooling' (44% rank 4 or 5), and 'loyalty to the expectations of my employer and the priorities made at school' (41% rank 4 or 5). Despite experiencing tensions in areas relating to the employer, around two-thirds of principals reported a rank of one or two for never experiencing 'ethical dilemmas that have made me consider resigning from my job' (64% rank one or two). See Table 1.

Table 1: Loyalty to employer by Extent of agreement (Means in rank order)

Items	Extent of Agreement %					Mean	SD
	Never				Always		
The pressure to be loyal to my employers limits my right to participate critically in the public discourse about schooling	7	22	22	33	16	3.29	1.18
I experience tensions between loyalty to my employers and the need to take part in the public discourse about schooling	7	15	34	36	8	3.22	1.03
I experience tensions between my loyalty to the expectations of my employers and the priorities made at school	4	24	31	36	5	3.15	0.98
I experience ethical dilemmas that have made me consider resigning from my job as a school leader	47	17	15	15	4	2.11	1.25

Examples of tensions experienced by principals concerning school/employer relations surfaced in response to the open-ended question. The following statements are examples of areas in which principals consider that tension could be reduced:

*A reduction in demands from central authorities, which are peripheral to the main game
 Less Centre/system intervention and “one size fits all” approaches
 Central initiatives on evaluation are not relevant to our school
 A process that leads to open and honest discourse without fear of retribution by the system*

Two principals expressed their frustration with a top down approach to change and school improvement by claiming as follows:

*The current change agenda of the DoE [Department of Education] is in crisis. The leadership of the DoE is undisciplined and out of control. The **** level of coercion is appalling*

School improvement is seen as something bureaucrats do to schools. Now that they have failed utterly, the term ‘school improvement’ is but a sick joke

Another principal indicated that professionalism was being challenged by the employing authority:

We are professional people, and need to be treated as such, including more opportunities and quality time for professional learning

Moreover, a greater proportion of principals of schools with high literacy and numeracy scores compared with principals of schools with low literacy and numeracy scores report having concerns about relationships with the system (primary 42% compared with 6% and secondary schools 25 % compared with 0%).

Differences were also found amongst principals in responses to perceived tensions and dilemmas according to characteristics of qualifications, gender and size of school. Principals with educational administration qualifications compared with principals without such qualifications, male principals compared with female principals, and principals in larger schools compared with those in small schools, are more likely to experience tensions of loyalty to employers, and these differences are at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.5$).

As part of the SSPP study, four factors relating to Organisational Capacity were identified: Trust and respect, Empowerment, Shared and monitored vision and Supported experimentation. Principals who scored low on the factor Supported experimentation, when compared with those who scored high on this factor, experienced greater tensions with their employer, at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.5$). See Table 2a, Table 2b and Table 2c. There were no statistically significant differences on any of the items between responses from principals in schools of high or low needs as determined by an economic needs index (ENI).

Table 2a: Loyalty to the employer by Qualifications/ Gender

Qualifications Item		Ed Admin Qualifs	No Ed Admin Qualifs	Sig. (2-tailed)
Tensions between loyalty to employer and need to take part in public discourse about schooling	Mean scores	3.40	3.00	0.01
Pressures to be loyal to employer limits my right to participate critically in the public discourse about schooling	Mean scores	3.62	2.87	0.00
Gender		Female	Male	
Item				
Tensions between loyalty to employer and need to take part in public discourse about schooling	Mean scores	2.98	3.43	0.01
Tensions between to employer and priorities made at school		2.77	3.43	0.00
Pressures to be loyal to employer limits my right to participate critically in the public discourse about schooling	Mean scores	2.96	3.53	0.01

Table 2b: Loyalty to the employer by School Size

Item		Up to 200	201 - 300	301- 400	401 & over	Sig. (2-tailed) *
Tensions between loyalty to employer and need to take part in public discourse about schooling	Mean scores	4.29	4.48	4.78	4.84	0.00

* One way ANOVA: schools up to 200 differ from both schools of 301 to 400 and schools 401 and above

Table 2c: Loyalty to the employer by Organisational capacity: Supported experimentation by principal responses

Item		Lowest 17% principal responses	Highest 17% principal responses	Sig. (2-tailed)
The pressure to be loyal to my employers limits my right to participate critically in the public discourse about schooling	Mean scores	3.73	3.21	0.05

What constitutes success?

Most principals reported that they did not experience tensions and dilemmas in determining what constitutes success (63% rank 5/4 'never'). Further analysis of these results was undertaken according to a Student Social Success Index (a factor analysis of the SSPP data revealed an index of 15 items grouped together as one factor that was labelled the Student Social Success Index - SSSI) and the School Capacity factors. Results showed that principals who scored low on the SSSI adjusted for ENI, and principals who scored low on the Organisational capacity index of Trust and respect and Empowerment, were more likely to report that they 'found it difficult in determining success' than principals who scored high on these items, with differences at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.5$), as shown in Table 3a and Table 3b.

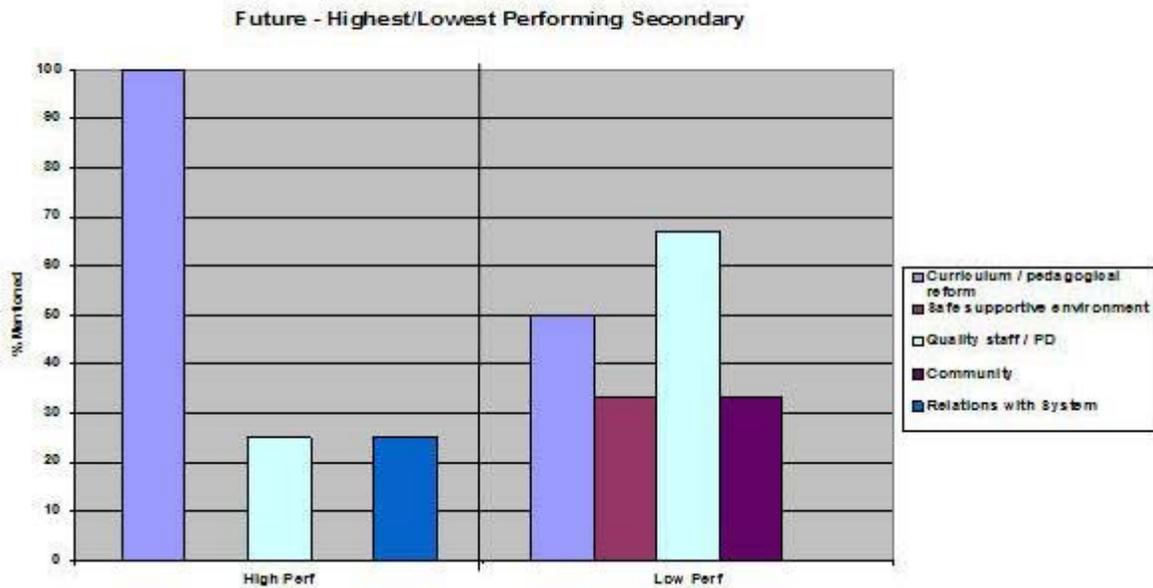
Table 3a: Determining success: Student social success index (ENI adjusted) by Organisational capacity

Item	Principals Lowest 17% of schools	Principals Highest 17% of schools	Sig. (2-tailed)	
I find it difficult in determining what constitutes success	Social Index (ENI adjusted)			
	Mean	2.64	1.86	0.01
	Organisational Capacity: Trust and respect			
	Mean	2,67	2.11	0.01
	Organisational Capacity: Empowerment			
	Mean	2.57	2.05	0.01

Table 3b: Determining success: ENI: High needs by Low Needs

I find it difficult in determining what constitutes success	Low High	Economic Needs Index: 1-6 Low needs, 7-11 High needs		
		1/ 2 (Never) (%)	3 (%)	4/5 (Always) (%)
		59	20	20
		52	44	4

Chart 1: Priority for change by Highest/Lowest literacy/numeracy scores- secondary schools



Competing values.

Just under half of the principals report that they do not experience tension in choosing between competing values (on a scale of 1 'never' to 5 'always': 20% rank 1, 28% rank 2, 34% rank 3, and 18% rank 4. - Mean 2.50). Further analysis was undertaken according to student academic success measures.

Student test results were made available by the Tasmanian Department of Education. School median scores were calculated for each year level (three and five for primary and seven and nine for secondary) for each of literacy and numeracy. Finally, an average of these medians was determined. Responses from principals regarding the item 'I experience tension in choosing between competing values' were analysed by comparing responses from principals of schools with students performing in the top 17% for literacy and numeracy, with responses from principals of schools with students performing in the lowest 17% adjusted for ENI.

Results showed that principals in schools with students performing at the top 17% are less likely to report difficulty in choosing between competing values than principals with low performing students, and these differences are at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.5$). Similarly, principals who score low on the Organisational capacities of Empowerment and Shared and monitored vision when compared with those who score high are statistically significantly ($p < 0.5$) more likely to experience tensions in choosing between competing values. See Table 4.

Table 4: Competing Values by Secondary literacy/numeracy (ENI adjusted) and Organisational Capacity

Item		Lowest 17% principals	Highest 17% principals	Sig. (2-tailed)
I experience tensions in choosing between competing values	<i>Sec literacy numeracy (ENI adjusted)</i>			
	Mean	3.17	1.75	0.03
	<i>Organisational capacity: Empowerment</i>			
	Mean	2.84	2.31	0.00
	<i>Organisational capacity: Shared and monitored vision</i>			
	Mean	2.60	2.22	0.05

Ad hoc problem-solving and strategic planning.

The responses of principals, as to whether or not they experienced tensions between ad hoc problem-solving and strategic planning, was spread between 'always' and 'never' (32% rank 5 or 4 'never' and 40% rank 1 or 2 'always'- Mean 3.06).

Principals scoring within the lowest 17% principals on the SSSI (adjusted for ENI) were more likely to report experiencing tensions and dilemmas between ad hoc problem solving and strategic planning than principals scoring in the highest 17% of principals, at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.5$), as shown in Table 5.

Similarly, principals who score at a higher level when compared with principals scoring at lower levels on the Organisational capacities of Trust and respect, Empowerment, and Shared and monitored vision, experience tension between ad hoc problem solving and strategic planning less frequently, with differences at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.5$).

Table 5: Problem solving and strategic planning by Student social success /Organisational

capacity

Item		Principals: Lowest 17% of schools	Principals: Highest 17% of schools	Sig. (2-tailed)
I experience tensions between ad hoc problem-solving and strategic planning	Social Index (ENI adjusted)			
	Mean	3.50	2.50	0.01
	<i>Organisational capacity: Trust and respect</i>			
	Mean	3.60	2.89	0.00
	<i>Organisational capacity: Empowerment</i>			
	Mean	3.41	2.86	0.01
	<i>Organisational capacity: Shared and monitored vision</i>			
	Mean	3.32	2.57	0.00

Principals of secondary schools whose students score in the lowest 17% for literacy and numeracy experience tensions and dilemmas more frequently than principals whose students score at the top 17 %, with differences at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.05$). See Table 6.

Table 6: Problem solving and strategic planning by Secondary literacy/ numeracy scores (ENI adjusted)

Item		Highest 17% student scores	Lowest 17% student scores	Sig. (2-tailed)
I experience tensions between ad hoc problem-solving and strategic planning	Mean	4.17	2.50	0.03

In the open-ended part of the survey, principals were also asked to indicate the three most important changes that they would like to see over the next five years. Differences were found between principals in schools with high performing students regarding their priority order for areas of change. Whereas the education system has similar priorities for change, the priorities of principals could be influenced by the needs of the school they lead, in particular, the needs of the students in their school. It seems that principals in secondary schools with high performing students desire to see change predominantly in curriculum and pedagogical reform compared with those principals in schools with low performing students who appear to distribute their priorities across all of four competing areas: namely curriculum reform, safe and supportive environment, quality staff and professional development and community issues (Chart 1).

In school or outside school.

A majority of principals indicated that they never experienced tensions between the need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school (69 % rank 5/4 'never'). Principals with eleven or more years experience as a principal, when compared with those with less experience, report fewer tensions and dilemmas in relation to the need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school, at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.5$). See Table 7.

Table 7: In school or outside school by Tensions and dilemmas

Item	<i>Experience</i>			Sig. (2-tailed)	Differences
	Up to 5 yrs	6 - 10 yrs	11 + yrs		
Tensions between need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school	3.86	4.13	3.49	0.01	3 1 2

A statistically significant difference was found between the mean scores of principals of small schools (200 students or less) compared with principals of all other schools in respect of experiencing tensions between the need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school (Table 8). Attendance at meetings mandated by the employer when coupled with a high classroom-teaching load leaves little time for the principal to play an effective leadership role in the school. For example, tension was expressed by one principal of a small school, as follows:

My involvement in cluster initiatives this year has been minimal due to the actual time needed to follow-up cluster activities. To elect not to attend these meetings further exacerbates the disadvantage experienced by small isolated schools

Principals of the highest compared with the lowest performing secondary schools on literacy and numeracy adjusted for ENI report that they experience fewer tensions (at a statistically significant level) between the need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school. Also, principals of schools that score at a lower when compared with a higher level on the organisational capacity factor, Shared and monitored vision, are more likely to experience tensions (at a statistically significant level) between the need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school (Table 8).

Though most principals experienced tensions between the need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school, it is evident that more principals in high needs schools (86 per cent) compared with low needs schools (71 per cent) 'always' experienced these tensions (Table 8).

Table 8: In school or outside school by Size of school, Secondary literacy/numeracy, ENI

Item			Sig. (2-Tailed)
Tensions between need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school	Size of school		
	Principals Small schools	All other principals	
	4.39	3.73	0.02
	Lowest schools	Highest schools	
	Secondary literacy numeracy (ENI adjusted)		
	4.83	3.50	0.04
	Organisational capacity: Shared and monitored vision		
	3.95	3.52	0.05
	Economic Needs Index: 1-6 Low needs, 7-11 High needs		
	1(Never)/2(%)	3(%)	4/5(Always) (%)
1-6: 14	18	71	
7-11: 12	20	86	

Making decisions.

The responses from principals were fairly evenly spread with regard to experiencing tension between being decisive and making decisions through participatory processes (35% rank 5/4 'never' and 38% rank 1/2 'always' - Mean= 3.03).

Principals, with eleven or more years experience when compared with those with less than eleven years, less frequently experience tensions and dilemmas in relation to being decisive and making decisions through participatory processes. Further, principals who score high compared with those who score low on Organisational Capacities of Trust and respect, Empowerment and Shared and monitored vision, experience fewer tensions regarding decision-making, with these differences at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.5$). See Table 9a and Table 9b. There is no significant difference between the responses of principals in

low needs schools when compared with those in high needs schools.

Table 9a: Making decisions –Principal experience

Item	Principal Experience			Sig.(2- tailed)*
	Up to 5 years	6-10 years	11+ years	
I experience tensions between being decisive and making decisions through participatory processes	3.12	3.37	2.63	0.01

*One way ANOVA: principals with 11+ years experience differ from both principals up to 5 years and principals 6-10 years of experience

Table 9 b: Making decisions by Organisational capacity by principal responses

Item	PrincipalsLowest	Principals Highest	Sig.(2- tailed)
	17% of responses	17% of responses	
I experience tensions between being decisive and making decisions through participatory processes	Organisational capacity: Trust and respect		
	3.57	2.85	0.00
	Organisational capacity: Empowerment		
	3.43	2.81	0.00
	Organisational capacity: Shared and monitored vision		
	3.39	2.50	0.00

When asked to identify the three most important changes principals would like to make in the next five years, the analysis of responses to this open-ended question revealed an intent by many principals to reduce tensions by improving their organisational capacity, through greater participation of staff in decision-making processes, as evidenced by the following comments:

Higher levels of staff collaboration and strategic planning leading to better student outcomes
 Embedding cooperative planning *More collaborative partnerships between all staff*
Continue the development of respectful relationships
Collective responsibility for the outcomes of all students
Being an] Inquiry based school with all members of our school being prepared to; question, be reflective and, change

When asked to respond to the open-ended question, ‘What conditions do you know about in your school that you do not talk about but, if you did, might lead to school improvement’, responses from principals indicated concerns about quality of staff and the need to be given more authority regarding staff selection and assessment. Principals expressed the need for the employing authority to give them, as stated by one principal, “Greater degree of autonomy in school based decision-making”.

The following representative responses of principals focus on staffing quality, staff selection, assessment of staff and staff development issues. Representative comments were as follows:

Freedom to hire and fire staff
Staffing ... has been sadly neglected for a long period of time
There is a significant gap between the quality of teaching provided by our most capable teachers and the few teachers who are not capable or successful. We have yet to develop the personal or professional trust that allows us to openly address this issue

Principals also reported the following views:

Lack of a staff appraisal system agreed to by the Union
(need for) Professional dialogue and learning about teacher standards/performance
(problems with) Aging staff profile, Teacher stress and burnout
The inability to deal effectively with just two under-performing teachers due to Ed Dept HR and IR structures. I could follow the process (which would be agonising) for little result and chances are I would be blamed! So why bother?

Also evident in responses were tensions related to the notion of collaboration and distributive leadership within schools:

The inability of some teachers to work collegially, in teams and on agreed priorities
Learning that we are professional people and need to work together professionally rather than working together because we are good friends outside the school. There are often conflicts between individuals or groups. We need to move beyond this, but it is difficult to deal with

A greater proportion principals of schools with the lowest 17% literacy and numeracy scores compared with principals of schools with the highest 17% scores, adjusted for ENI, (68% compared with 22%) expressed concerns about quality staff and professional development.

Community

One in four principals identified tensions and dilemmas relating to skills and relationships/community attitudes as an area of importance in the open-ended section of the survey. However, attention to community issues in the future is of greatest importance for schools in high poverty areas when compared to all schools. High poverty, and especially, small schools also saw community issues as not talked about but if they were might lead to school improvement. Principals of schools in high poverty communities experience tensions related to the level of support provided by the system/department as follows:

It's not what I talk about, it's what needs to occur – more support for families outside the school gate – poverty, domestic violence, neglect, dysfunctional families create major issues for my school regularly
Inadequate support for students with behaviour and learning difficulties – we only touch the surface

Principals of small schools experience tensions and dilemmas in rural communities, for example:

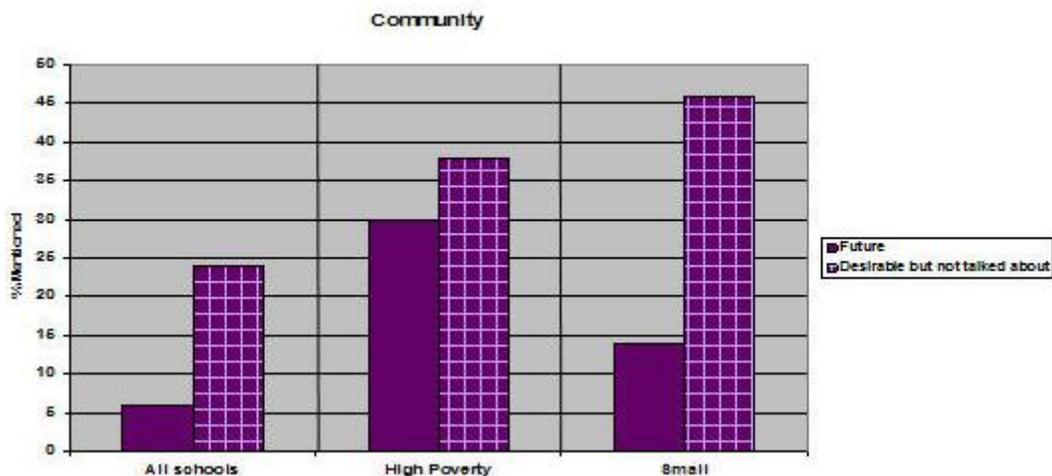
Very closed community
Change is seen as a negative concept. Very slow to be instituted
People very wary of change

Key areas of tension, in school communities, identified by principals are as follows:

Attitudes of some parents towards the school and education
Very negative and conservative parent community
Lack of parenting skills
Being able to engage more parents as genuine partners in their child's education
For more parents to genuinely value education and respect the great job that our teachers do and work with us to recognise that we do all have the same goal – the best possible outcomes for their child

Community issues are of greatest concern for schools in high poverty communities (38%) and small schools (46%) when compared to all schools (24%). The following chart indicates the planned focus of schools on community related matters during the next five years and compares that response with responses to the open-ended question asking what is not talked about but if it was might lead to school improvement (Chart 2).

Chart 2: Tensions and dilemmas -

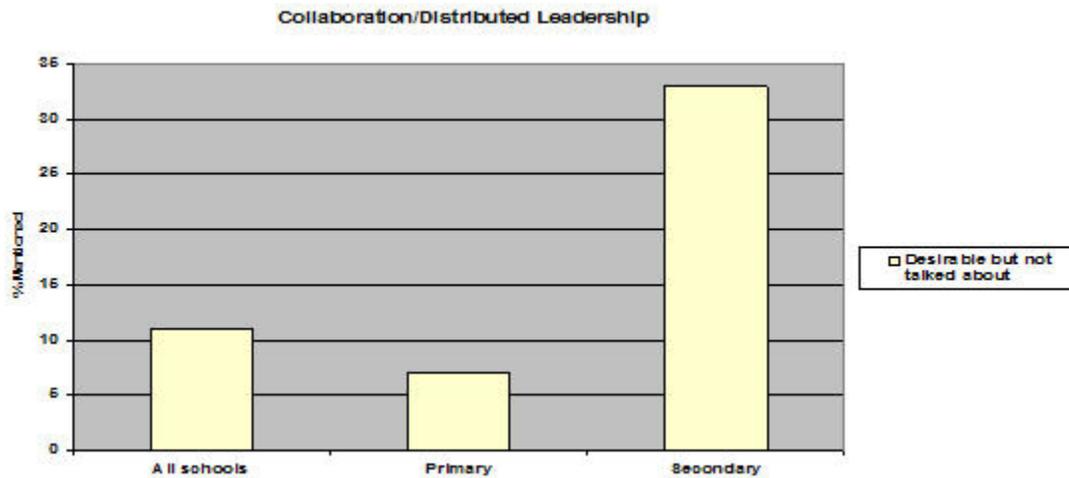


Community

Collaboration

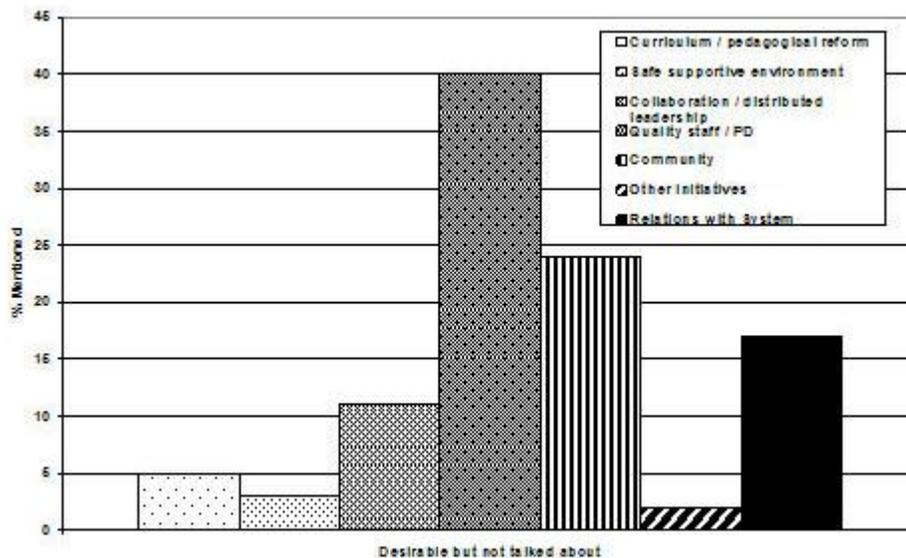
Tensions and dilemmas relating to collaboration that were identified as areas known but not talked about but, if they were, might lead to school improvement, were rated higher in secondary schools (33%) when compared with primary schools (7%) or all schools (11%). (See Chart 3)

Chart 3: Tension and dilemmas - Collaboration



The three most frequently mentioned tensions and dilemmas, in response to the open-ended question What don't you talk about but if you did, might lead to school improvement?, were; Quality staff and professional development, Community, and Relations with the system/employer. The number of times each group of tensions and dilemmas were mentioned, as a percentage of the total number in the open-ended item is summarised in the following (chart 4).

Chart 4. Tensions and dilemmas – Key responses



Conclusions

In conclusion, the results from the Tasmanian SSPP survey concur with the four major leadership tensions and dilemmas identified in the background literature namely; internal/external control, ethic of care/responsibility, and professional/personal as well as leadership/management imperatives. The results also offer new insights. These insights include differences in the effects of the tensions and dilemmas based on principal qualifications, experience and gender, school size, SES and organisational capacity, and student social and literacy/numeracy success adjusted for school SES.

Findings in the Tasmanian SSPP study showed that principals most frequently reported that they experienced tensions and dilemmas regarding loyalty to the expectations of their employer and the needs of their school, and this finding was statistically significant for several characteristics namely: qualifications, gender, size of school, as well as for principals who scored low on the Organisational capacity factor of Supported experimentation. It appears that principals who have educational administration qualifications, or who are principals of large schools and are male are more likely to experience tensions in this area. These results are consistent with previous research by Zammit et al.(2007). An interesting finding shows that despite tensions regarding loyalty to employers, most principals reported 'never' experiencing ethical dilemmas that made them considering resigning.

Previous research (Cranston et al., 2003, Day et al., 2001 and Lingard et al., 2002) found principals experienced tensions and dilemmas due to competing demands, whereas, in this study, most principals reported that they 'never' experienced tensions and dilemmas in the areas of the 'need to be present at school' and the 'need to participate outside school', and determining 'what constitutes success'. However, further scrutiny of these results revealed that there were statistically significant differences between principals of schools who score low on the Student social success index (adjusted for ENI), and principals who scored low on the Organisational capacity index of Trust and respect and Empowerment, with low scoring principals more likely to report that they 'found it difficult in determining success' than principals who scored high on these items, and principals with less experience reporting that they experienced 'in school/out of school' tensions more frequently than more experienced principals. Most principals of schools in areas of high need report that they always experience tension when required to leave their school.

Around forty percent of principals reported 'always' experiencing tensions regarding two areas: ad hoc problem solving and strategic planning and decision-making. These findings are consistent with those of Wildy (1999) and Castle and Mitchell (2001). However, differences between responses were found to relate to leadership characteristics, in that, principals who score at a higher level when compared with those scoring at lower levels on the Organisational capacities of Trust and respect, Empowerment, and Shared and monitored vision, experience tension between ad hoc problem solving and strategic planning less frequently. More experienced principals as well as principals who score high on the Organisational capacities of Trust and respect, Empowerment and Shared vision are less likely to report that they experience tensions regarding decision-making.

Principals of schools performing in the top 17 per cent of schools in literacy and numeracy adjusted for ENI tend to experience less difficulty in choosing between competing values than principals of schools in the lowest performing group, which suggests that principals' perception of school tensions and dilemmas are influenced by how they perceive student academic achievement.

Responses to open ended questions identified community and collaboration as areas of concern. Principals indicate that small rural communities do not readily accept change and many high poverty communities experience issues that impact on and create tensions and dilemmas within the school community. Tensions and dilemmas arising from the use of collaborative practices were more evident in secondary schools when compared with primary or all schools. There seems to be a commitment on the part of principals in this study to improve the organisational capacity of their school as a way of minimising the tensions and dilemmas they experience. Principals consider that important changes over the next three years would include the improvement of their school's organisational capacity by encouraging greater participation of staff in decision-making processes and the development of collaborative partnerships among staff.

In proposing areas for important change over the next three years, principals in secondary schools, with high student achievement in literacy and numeracy adjusted for ENI, focus predominantly on curriculum and pedagogical reform compared with those principals in schools with low performing students who appear to distribute their priorities across all of four competing areas: namely curriculum reform, safe and supportive environment, quality staff and professional development and community issues.

The present study confirms findings reported in previous research (Cranston et al., 2006, Lingard et al. 2002) that matters relating to the quality of staffing provided to schools by the employing authority/Department of Education, and difficulties arising through a limited capacity to address issues relating to underperforming teachers, creates tensions and dilemmas for principals. One source of tension reported by principals concerned difficulties in achieving collaborative teamwork among teachers, which can create conflict between individuals and groups. Principals in the lowest performing schools in literacy and numeracy expressed greater concerns about access to quality staff and professional development.

Research findings not previously reported relate to tensions and dilemmas experienced by principals in high poverty communities and small rural communities. Principals of schools in high poverty communities reported experiencing tensions related to the level of support provided by the Department of Education, whereas principals in small rural communities found difficulties in implementing change within their small school community.

Principals in the study were critical of the 'one size fits all' approach of the Department of Education and indicated that they preferred a process of honest and open communication without fear of retribution from the system. Principals desire a system that values the professionalism of its members and understands and acts on the different contexts in which they live and work.^[1]

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[\[1\]](#) For further work from the Tasmanian SSPP research related to some of these different contexts see Ewington et al (in press) in relation to small schools and Mulford et al, (in press a & b) for schools in high-poverty communities and principals in late career. Other SSPP publications can be found in Mulford (2007), Mulford and Johns (2004) and Mulford et al (2007).