

# **Principal associations: the struggle for political agency in neoliberalising policy regimes**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

My thesis investigates the contested terrain of public education policy in South Australia (1995–2020) between the bureaucracy that formulates it and principal associations that advocate for its improvement. Although studies of the work undertaken by constitutive principal alliances exist, these generally focus on how the strength of the professional network is utilised to build the capacity of its members to better perform the duties, functions, and responsibilities of the principal role. As a point of difference, and to initiate a contribution to the broader field of policy sociology, this thesis is interested in the political agency of principal associations; that is, their struggle to contest the neoliberalising policy regimes of governments and bureaucracies. This is a contest worth mounting considering the various damaging effects of neoliberalism on public education include, as Reid (2020) argued, “inequitable educational outcomes” (p. 28), “a socially segregated schooling system” (p. 30) and “an impoverished understanding of educational accountability” (pp. 39-40).

Primarily using genealogy as my approach, my thesis explains how principals have been constituted by the intensification of accountability approaches established by the bureaucracy and how this rendering has constrained the political work of principal associations. My study reveals that with each successive reform - *Partnerships 21 (1999-2002)*, *Partnership Performance Review Panels (2015-2022)* and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System (2018-2022)* - principals have become more subjugated by the bureaucracy’s technologies of surveillance, discipline and control. In contrast, findings from the analysis of my empirical data (i.e., interviews with education department and principal association heads) support the view that, at times, school leaders have collectively contested this terrain through the political agency of principal associations. Despite this resistance, by 2020 South Australia’s public education principals were accountable through a “flow of performativities” (Ball, 2000, p. 2) which included the external review of their school, the partnership

performance review panel, and the school improvement plan (which was quality assured by the bureaucracy's middle tier leadership).

For the theoretical foundation of this genealogy, I have adapted Bacchi's (2009) framework, 'What's the problem represented to be' (WPR). This framework, now considered to consist of seven steps, encourages the researcher to critically interrogate public policy by challenging its purpose(s) and its production; its effects and its representations; and its assumptions and its silences. As a tool for examining policy, WPR takes the position that policy meanings are contestable and contested, and, since there is no singular perception of a policy issue, the process of making policy and arguing for policy essentially becomes a political one of struggle.

Expanding upon Thomson (2008) and her idea that, "if the field is to take up the question of resistance" it will need to "move beyond a focus on individual headteachers to take seriously their collective professional organisations" (p. 86), my examination of one principal association's struggle for political agency to improve public education policy in South Australia establishes limitations and identifies possibilities. Adopting the notion of a "possibilising genealogy" (Lorenzini, 2020), I draw upon the thinking of Michael Apple, Chantal Mouffe and Michel Foucault, to offer principal associations some plausible options to expand their political work. I conclude by recommending that principal associations might become political activists if they are to interrupt the dominance of neoliberalising policy regimes.

## ***Declaration***

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. A. A.', written in a cursive style.

Date: 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2024

## ***Acknowledgements***

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I extend my gratitude to Dr Chris Dolan, for his mentoring and his willingness to discuss my research and its implications for the profession. Along the way, a handful of former colleagues have read chapters of this thesis and provided encouragement and feedback. I take this opportunity to thank Angela Falkenberg (President, APPA), Jayne Heath (Chief Executive, SASPA), Phil O'Loughlin (Chief Executive, SASSLA) and Pasi Sahlberg (Professor in Educational Leadership, University of Melbourne) for their candour and encouragement.

To the SASPA presidents and Department for Education chief executives who shared their reflections on the SASPA–DfE relationship, thank you for bringing your acumen and integrity to the discussion. Yours was difficult and complex work where the politics of it was not always immediately evident.

Completing this thesis proved to be a challenging enterprise. My eternal love and gratitude to my wife, Judy, for putting up with me for the duration of this study. A special mention must be made to my Labrador companion, Harper, whose insistence on being walked at the most inopportune times made the completion of this thesis all the more memorable.

## ***Glossary of Acronyms***

<b>Term:</b>	<b>Explanation:</b>
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
AEU-SA	Australian Education Union – South Australian Branch
AGPPA	Australian Government Primary Principals’ Association
APF	Australian Principals Federation
ASPA	Australian Secondary Principals’ Association
CAP	Coalition of Australian Principals
DfE	South Australia’s Department for Education
FGTG	From Good to Great: Towards a World Class System
GERM	the Global Education Reform Movement
LET	Local Education Team
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPRP	Partnership Performance Review Panel
PIA	Poststructural Interview Analysis
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SASSLA	South Australian State School Leaders’ Association
SAPPA	South Australian Primary Principals’ Association
SASPA	South Australian Secondary Principals’ Association
SIP	Quality School Improvement Plan
SISS	Self-Improving School-Led System
SMS	Self-Managing School Model (Victoria)

SoIR	Stages of Improvement Report
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UYLP	Unleashing Your Leadership Potential (SASPA's professional development program for Deputy and Assistant Principals).
WPR	Carol Bacchi's <i>What is the problem represented to be?</i> framework

## South Australia — Policy Genealogy Chronology

1970

- ***Freedom and Authority in the Schools*** issued by Dr Alby Jones, Director-General of Education (South Australia): August, 1970.

1977

- ***Freedom and Authority in the Schools: A Postscript*** issued by Dr Alby Jones, Director-General of Education (South Australia): August, 1977.

1989

- ***The Curriculum Guarantee Agreement*** ended permanent appointments for all school-based leadership classifications, including principal.

1996

- Principal Associations (led by SASPA) authored a discussion paper on ***Local School Management*** at the request of the Education Department.

1999

- ***Partnerships 21*** (South Australia's ***Local School Management*** initiative) was launched by Liberal Government and introduced the ***Quality Improvement and Accountability Framework***.

2002

- Rann Labor Government removed the P21 branding but retained most of its instruments and ***compelled all schools to be locally managed***.

2015

- ***Partnership Performance Review Panels*** were introduced as a collective accountability procedure for geographic clusters of schools and pre-schools.

2018

- McKinsey & Company developed the ***From Good to Great: Towards a World Class System*** strategy for South Australia's Department for Education.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 Contesting Neoliberalising Policy Regimes

It was 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2017 when I first learnt of an interest the Department for Education (DfE)<sup>1</sup> had in becoming a ‘world-class’ system. I was leading a delegation from the South Australian Secondary Principals’ Association (SASPA), and we were meeting with a senior executive from the DfE. It was a consultation meeting, and the Department’s interest was to gather feedback from a representative group of secondary principals about the draft strategic plan: *Building a Stronger Future*. What concerned me most was not that the document to which we were responding was fully formed: SASPA had been conditioned to having its feedback on policy sought at the penultimate stage. What troubled me was the prolific use of the term ‘world-class’<sup>2</sup> and, more importantly, how it was to be interpreted.

For the past three years I had been endorsing the concept of ‘world-class learners’ to SASPA members, so one might have thought I would be an advocate for the term ‘world-class’ and its use in any strategic plan developed by the education bureaucracy. Ever since Professor Yong Zhao, author of *World Class Learners: Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students* (2012), had provided a keynote address at SASPA’s 2014 annual conference, I had been championing his approach to curriculum and pedagogy across the association’s membership. I remember thinking at the time how

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<sup>1</sup> During the period from 1995-2020, South Australia’s public education agency has had various names including the Department for Education and Children’s Services (DECS), the Department of Education (DoE), and the Department for Education, Training and Employment (DETE). For this thesis, I have used the current departmental nomenclature, the Department for Education (DfE) as a generic descriptor representing the bureaucracy.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘world-class’ has become ubiquitous. I first came across DfE’s use of the term as an early career principal in 2002 when the stated aim of its Risk Management Framework was to create a world-class approach to managing hazards and risks.

inspiring it would be to have the education bureaucracy embrace ‘world-class’ along the lines outlined by Professor Zhao; that is, endorsing inquiry-based student learning and a set of student graduate qualities inclusive of creativity and entrepreneurial thought and action. However, rather than focussing on the future knowledge, skills and capabilities of its students, the Department’s fascination with ‘world-class’ heralded its own ambition as a system relative to the performance of other education systems. This direction troubled me deeply.

What would constitute a world-class education system? Would all its componentry – i.e., its various divisions and directorates, and its 830 schools and preschools – need to be outstanding for a system to be considered world-class? What would be the indicators of an outstanding public education system? How would an education system know if, and when, it became world-class?

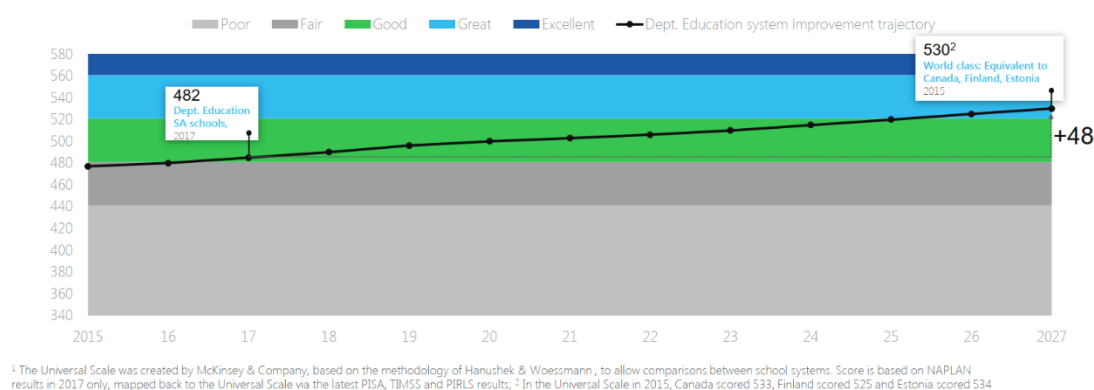
Imagine my reaction when the answer to this last question was revealed as a number, the value of which was 530. At their annual Leaders’ Day in February 2019, school principals and other leaders within the DfE’s system were told of this numerical marker. Here it was explained that the number 530 was derived from the ‘universal scale’ developed by the consultancy firm, McKinsey and Company, which had been contracted in 2018 by DfE (for a fee of \$940,000) to work with its senior executive on a system improvement strategy<sup>3</sup>. Introduced in *How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better* (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2011), McKinsey and Company’s universal scale is described as the basis by which the performance of

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<sup>3</sup> The DfE 2018 Annual Report specifies that McKinsey’s work was to: “Establish a differentiated approach to school improvement planning, accountability and support – a cohesive tailored approach for student outcomes.” This report is available at <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/department/about-department/annual-reports-department/annual-report-2018>

school systems can be classified as poor, fair, good, great or excellent. The scale was developed by McKinsey and Company to better enable system comparisons.<sup>4</sup>

## To become world-class we need to accelerate at a greater rate



**Figure 1: The Universal Scale Applied to DfE (Persse, 2019)<sup>5</sup>**

At its Leaders' Day (February 2019), the DfE Chief Executive used Figure 1 (see above) as a presentation slide to explain to school principals and other system leaders that, according to the McKinsey and Company's universal scale, public education in South Australia had been assigned a numerical value of 482. This meant that it was rated as a good system (notably on the cusp of fair and good), but not a *great* one. To be considered great, a rating of 530 on the universal scale would need to be attained. This signalled the Department's transition to its new strategy, *From Good to Great: Towards World Class*, where the next decade was to be devoted to improving

<sup>4</sup> The idea that systems see value in comparisons using 'big data' is consistent with the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), which I discuss in Chapter 3 as an example of a neoliberal ideological hegemonic project and in Chapter 8 as an instrument for bureaucratic control and compliance (i.e., South Australia's *Towards World-class* strategy).

<sup>5</sup> This slide was provided to me by the DfE's Executive Director, System Performance in 2021 and so constitutes permission to use it here.

standardised test scores and school completion rates to such an extent that a score of 530 on the universal scale would eventually be achieved. This was yet another neoliberalising policy strategy: one which followed the global education reform movement (GERM) template where high-stakes testing programmes drive system accountability.

The February 2019 launch of the DfE strategy, *From Good to Great: Towards World Class*, represented the beginning of another ‘political’ struggle in contesting the terrain of South Australia’s public education policy; one where those who make policy (the bureaucracy) put their resolve ahead of the collective concerns of the principals who enact policy (the principal association). It was at this moment that my interest in research was awakened: the type of research where I could examine the contested terrain of policy and, more specifically, the political work undertaken by principal associations within it. Here, I use the term political work to include the various efforts made by principal associations to contest the status quo; to seek more democratic approaches to policy making; and to leverage more socially-just policies from governments and bureaucracies.

## **1.2 Principal Associations**

Until recently I was the Chief Executive of the South Australian Secondary Principals’ Association (SASPA), having served in that role (and under the previous role descriptor of President) for 7 years from January 2015 – January 2022. Following a decision taken by the SASPA Board in 2011, the role of the president (or its newly conceived role of chief executive) has been full-time. This was a strategic decision, based largely on the Board’s interest to improve its influence over the policies of the education bureaucracy in South Australia (i.e., DfE). The decision also created parity with the South Australian Primary Principals’ Association (SAPPA) which had been operating strategically with

a full-time President since 2000, and with other Australian states – New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia – which all had full-time presidents for constituted primary and secondary principal alliances. To support these full-time positions, funding by education departments was provided, most often to cover 100% of salary and on-costs – a commitment endorsed by the government of the day. Although it is not a key thread of this study, the fact that government funding, administered by education bureaucracies, enables principal associations in Australia to provide a full-time service to their members brings into question the extent to which the ‘political’ dimension of that work can be truly independent of the interests of their benefactors. Certainly, in my own presidency, the threat of the withdrawal of funds to the Association was used on more than one occasion, and by more than one DfE chief executive, to make me more tractable.

Typical of other principal associations, SASPA has two key purposes. One is to build the professional capital of secondary education leaders. That is, to develop the leadership capabilities of principal members and of those assistant principal or deputy principal members aspiring to become principals. The other is to advocate for the work of educational leaders in South Australia’s public secondary schools. To progress the latter, the Association must enter the education policy arena since the work of public school principals is shaped by policy and bureaucratic settings. This makes the SASPA chief executive a policy advocate, positioned in the middle of a contested space between bureaucracies (and the governments they serve) and school principals (whose interests they are obligated to represent).

It is what has happened in this space over the past 25 years, and the possibilities for using this knowledge to change the rules of the policy game in the future, that interests me. Essentially the purpose for my study was to establish what can be learnt from the

DfE—SASPA relationship histories within this contested space, and how these understandings might offer SASPA, and other principal associations, some better tactics for impacting future policy contests. Whilst the work of school principals and how they have been constituted by neoliberalising policy regimes has been explored as part of this thesis, my resolute interest is in how this rendering has constrained the collective and organised voice of principals – that is, principal associations.

### **1.3 Research Question and Thesis Aims**

This thesis is interested in how the profession's constituted voice is included or excluded from public policy contests during neoliberal times, and what this might mean for the political work of principal associations in the future. To situate this problem in the South Australian context, I chose to focus on the three reforms periods of significance: *Partnerships 21* (which saw local school management enacted); *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (which introduced collective school and pre-school accountability across a geographic cluster); and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (which introduced an approach to school improvement that mirrored system improvement). Specifically, it sought to answer a three-part question.

- What is the problem represented to be in the various positions taken on principal accountability policy within the *Partnerships 21* (1999-2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015-2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019-2022) reforms?
- How have principals been constituted because of these policy representations?
- How has this rendering impacted the capacity of principal associations (i.e., the organised and collective voice of principals) to engage the bureaucracy in productive processes for improving public education policy?

Here, my aim was to identify the issues that were constituted as 'problems' in the policy positions the bureaucracy took regarding principal accountability and to examine the implications and effects of these problematisations on principal identity and the political

work of principal associations. Using Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to Be* framework (2009) as a theoretical foundation, a genealogy of these problem representations emerged: one which revealed the key effect that with each successive reform, the bureaucracy strengthened its domination of power relations and attempts to control school principals through various technologies. Despite this (or, perhaps, because of this), school leaders actively contested and resisted this subjugation through the political work of SASPA and other principal associations. Examining this activism and resistance over a twenty-five year period highlighted limitations and possibilities for the political work of principal associations that warrants closer examination.

## **1.4 Policy Genealogy**

Accepting the advice of Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) that the selection of a research approach is a "deliberative process" designed to achieve a "fitness for purpose" (p. 285), my reasons for considering policy genealogy to be 'fit for purpose' are outlined here.

As the title of this thesis suggests, my research was interested in policy struggles and the role of principal associations. Here, I was encouraged by Ozga (1999) who claimed that policy "is struggled over" in what is considered to be "contested terrain" (p. 1). To support my examination of contested policy over a 25-year timeframe I recognised that I would need to adopt an historically-informed method of analysis. One such methodology is policy genealogy which, according to Gale (2001), is concerned with how policies change over time; how the production of policy might be problematised; and how temporary alliances are formed around conflicting interests in the policy production process (pp. 389-390). Essentially, a genealogy considers the social and

historical context of a given idea, with the aim being to trace the history that has led to its emergence.

Considered a bespoke methodology within the field of critical policy sociology, genealogy owes much to the thinking of Michel Foucault. In *Nietzsche, genealogy, history* (2019), Foucault used genealogy to illustrate how contemporary political situations appear to be produced, sustained and revised through the relations between power and knowledge evident within, and across, various historical periods. In his 7<sup>th</sup> January 1976 lecture, Foucault claimed the term genealogy to mean “the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this tactically today” (see Kelly, 1994, p. 22). This was consistent with the ambitions for my research: first, to establish a historical knowledge about how principals were constituted by three different accountability models; second, how this rendering constrained the political work of principal associations; and third, to make tactical use of these insights in today’s policy struggles. Here, I was guided by Carol Bacchi (2009) and her framework: *What is the problem represented to be (WPR)*, which is consistent with Foucault’s thinking since it takes a genealogical approach and incorporates discursive analysis to reveal both the contested and the political.

### **1.4.1 Incorporating WPR**

The WPR framework is now considered to consist of seven steps<sup>6</sup>, each of which encourages the researcher to critically interrogate public policy by challenging its

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<sup>6</sup> In earlier iterations of WPR, an undertaking to apply the original six questions in the approach to one’s proposals was always included (see Carol Bacchi, 2009, p. 2). But according to Bacchi (2021, p. 2), researchers have tended to miss this important point. Consequently, Bacchi has made the task of self-problematism explicit with the inclusion of a seventh step.



purpose(s) and its production; its effects and its representations; and its assumptions and its silences. As a tool for examining policy, WPR takes the position that policy meanings are contestable and contested and, since there is no singular perception of a policy issue, the processes of making policy and of arguing for policy are essentially political<sup>7</sup>. For my part, the use of WPR provided a platform for examining the discursive apparatuses of various principal accountability models and how these expanded the conditions for bureaucratic control and regulation, and how principals – in their organised and collective form – found ways to contest and resist these conditions. This position was influenced by Foucault’s interest in power relations and, in particular, his notion of governmentality discussed in two of his lecture series, *Security, Territory and Population (1977-78)* and *The Birth of Biopolitics (1978-79)*. Here, Foucault’s thinking about the implications of governing others and governing oneself invites into the discussion the various resistance tactics used to engage with and contest power structures (e.g., counter-conduct, truth-telling and critical attitude). These tactics were relevant to my genealogy since they illustrated possibilities for struggling against the technologies of bureaucratic surveillance, control and compliance.

#### **1.4.2 Introducing Subjectivity**

Also germane to this genealogy were Foucault’s deliberations about power and subjectivity; specifically the “relations of power, and forms of relation to oneself and to others” (Foucault, 1984, p. 6), and how we are at the same time constituted by power

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<sup>7</sup> The notion that making policy and of arguing for policy is ‘political’ is consistent with Apple and Aasen (2003) and Ball (2012).

relations (subjection) as we constitute ourselves (subjectivation). As Lorenzini (2016a) expressed it, “*there is no subject outside the process of subjection and subjectivation*” because the subject “*is itself a process, a becoming*” (p. 74, emphasis in the original). Such an emphasis on subjectivity is not only in keeping with Foucault (1982b) and his claim that “it is not power but the subject which is the general theme of my research” (p. 778), it is fundamental to a genealogy that sought to explain how principals were constituted and constituted themselves by various accountability models and how this rendering constrained the political work of principal associations.

The three key policy reforms I chose to examine in this genealogy – (i) *Partnerships 21* (2000-2002); (ii) *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015- 2022), and (iii) *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System* (2019 - 2022) – are all system-wide strategies where school accountability and principal accountability were conflated and then intensified. The two most recent policy shifts narrowed the focus of those accountabilities to standardised test results and school completion rates.

Whilst a genealogical examination of principal accountability policies is one way of exploring how the identities of principals and principal associations are constituted, it is also important to establish contextual and cultural knowledge or, as Foucault reminds us, the “local memories” (in Kelly, 1994, p. 22). Accepting that “we interview to find out what we do not know and cannot know” (Hockey & Forsey, 2020, p. 71), the cultural knowledge elicited from four DfE chief executives and four SASPA presidents has been important to my research. Since no documented research existed pertaining to how policy contests are experienced by those performing such roles, adopting an interview approach seemed the most feasible way for me to develop an understanding of the forces at play over an extended period (i.e., 1995–2020).

This 'ethnographically informed' approach to genealogy supports the idea that understanding the juncture between those who make policy and those who advocate for its improvement is an ethnographic move: one where "we think of ethnography as an 'art of being in between'" (Lather, 2001, p. 481). It is in this 'in-between' that the various adhesions, conflicts, entanglements, and tensions evident in the enduring DfE – SASPA relationship are located.

## **1.5 Policy Making and Principal Associations**

From the vantage point of being a secondary school principal for 14 years and, subsequently, spending the next 7 years as the head of SASPA, I witnessed the DfE bureaucracy's embrace and defence of policy ideas from international 'evidence' framed by the new managerial notions of 'school effectiveness' and 'school improvement'. As these ideas took hold, the processes of performance management, school evaluation, school action plans, target setting, and data collection and analysis were introduced and consolidated. The dominant educational discourse behind these processes was choice and competition, principal and school autonomy, and standardisation and test-based accountability. Together, these reforms constituted what I refer to in this thesis as a 'neoliberalising policy regime'. Here, I suggest that South Australia's educational reforms across the period 1995–2020 were dominated by a neoliberal policy logic and sustained by a suite of new managerial practices. This regime has changed the conditions for the professional freedom and autonomy of principals and matched to this, constrained the agency of principal associations to act politically.

In this thesis, the relationship between the DfE and SASPA is explored through the lens of policy engagement. First, this is understood through the effects of principal accountability policy and how principals are constituted. Second, this rendering is used

as a juxtaposition to examine the variable attitudes the bureaucracy has taken regarding the political agency of principal associations.

## **1.6 Positioning the Research**

My research enters the “occupied territory” (Thomson & Kamler, 2010, p. 152) formed by the literatures of neoliberalism, performativity, and the organised and collective resistance of principals to neoliberalising policy regimes and new managerialism. Whilst the neoliberal project has yielded increased principal accountability in the public education sector, the constitutive voice of principals – the principal association – has periodically contested this terrain. Here, my research on the political agency of principal associations opens a new niche within the field of policy sociology. This follows the argument by Thomson (2008) for the field to look beyond an individual headteacher focus “to take seriously their collective professional associations” (p. 86). Although a handful of studies exist where the networking role and professional influence of principal associations are examined (Acton, 2021; Leithwood & Azah, 2016; Shirley, 2016; Thomson, 2001), there is an absence of literature on principal associations and their political activity. My study initiates research into principal associations and their political work to establish its value to policy sociology scholars examining the field of resistance in education. Findings from my research identify various limitations and possibilities of this political work. Here, the possibilities are discussed as tactical ideas for principal associations to expand their political work and to move beyond advocacy to activism.

## **1.7 The Structure of this Thesis**

The synopsis of chapters which follows establishes each one’s relevance and provides an account of the deliberations taken in their sequencing.

**Chapter 2** is a brief autoethnographic move. It provides additional cultural knowledge related to the political work of principal associations, given that the nature of such work is absent in the policy sociology literature which examines principal resistance. To illustrate the scope and impact of such work, I have chosen to reflect on four work samples from my SASPA presidency. Written as a 'history of my present', I introduce the thinking of Michel Foucault which relates to the research and explain how I used 'governmentality', 'regimes of truth' and 'critical attitude' as analytical tools to reveal how the political agency of principal associations has occasionally been empowered but more frequently constrained by the attitude of education bureaucracies.

**Chapter 3** situates my research interest within the literatures considering the effects of neoliberalism on education. My examination of the literature uses the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) as a case study to illustrate how the theories and practices of neoliberalism, new managerialism and performativity coalesce and function as a global strategy. Locating the thesis within the field of policy sociology, my approach works to address both "the politics of education policy" and "education policy as politics" (Lingard & Ozga, 2007, p. 3).

**Chapter 4** defends the relationship between the knowledge I am pursuing and producing through research, and the theoretical underpinnings and practical choices made in formulating its production. Here, I describe my research design and its scope, and I provide a rationale for my decision to braid a policy genealogy methodology with an ethnographic component. Influenced by Tamboukou and Ball (2003), who concluded that a degree of congruence between genealogy and critical ethnography can be achieved, I justify the selection of these two related methods as my toolbox. First, I explain my adoption of Bacchi's *What's the problem represented to be* framework (2009) as a theoretical foundation for my policy genealogy – one which

analyses the representation of principal accountability across three major reforms. Second, I introduce a poststructural approach suggested by Bacchi and Bonham (2016) and explain how it was used in the analysis of my ethnographic data (i.e., interview transcripts). Since both are consistent with Foucault's thinking, I settle on a description of my ethnographically informed approach as a 'Foucauldian-infused WPR genealogy'. The chapter goes on to discuss the ethical approach to the project – including how I manage being both the researcher and a subject of the research – and provides reflections on the value and limitations of my chosen methodology.

**Chapter 5** describes the poststructural interview analysis of my empirical data (i.e., transcripts from four DfE chief executives and four SASPA presidents). The knowledge produced from this exercise includes the formation of themes and patterns consistent with long-held theories about the 'sociology of conflict' (Simmel, 1904) and the complex relationships which exist within a 'political' context. I also expand upon my reasons for adopting Bacchi's WPR framework (2009) as a theoretical foundation for my policy genealogy. The application of the WPR method reveals a trajectory where, with each successive reform, principals have become more subjugated by the bureaucracy's technologies of power and control. In contrast, analysis of my empirical data supports the view that, at times, school leaders have actively contested and resisted this subjugation through the political work of principal associations.

**Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10** constitute the policy genealogy section of my thesis. According to Ball (2017) "a genealogy is an attempt to consider the origins of systems of knowledge, and to analyse the centralising power-effects of discourses" (p. 47). Using Ball's description, one of the systems of knowledge I navigate through this section is neoliberalising policy regimes and one of the centralising power-effects of its discourse I follow is performativity. These notions are apparent in how principal

accountability has been experienced across three major public education reforms: *Partnerships 21* (1999-2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015-2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019-2022). These reforms are linked: (i) by their erosion of the agency provided to South Australia's school principals in August 1970 (see Jones, 1970), and (ii) by the bureaucracy's apparent distrust of principals, and the narrowing of performance requirements, as reflected in the accountability regimen they introduced. Described as a decline from principal agency to bureaucratic compliance, the various policy positions taken over principal accountability have had implications for principal subjectivity and the political work of principal associations.

In **Chapter 6**, I examine *Partnerships 21* which promised increased principal autonomy only to have it enmeshed with higher levels of principal accountability. In **Chapter 7**, I explore *Partnership Performance Review Panels* which added a layer of collective accountability to an already well-established model of principal and school accountability. In **Chapter 8**, I address the *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System* (2019 – 2022) strategy which, with its Quality School Improvement Plan, added a third layer of accountability for schools and principals: one designed to fulfil the system's desire to measure its own performance, and to have that benchmarked to an international standard.

To undertake this genealogy, I draw upon Carol Bacchi's WPR framework. The task of tracing a policy genealogy essentially aims to answer WPR question 3: *How has this representation of the problem come about?* (2009, p. 48). Answering this question involves identifying and understanding the competing representations and different ways of thinking about the issue, thereby helping to "historicize claims to knowledge" (Carol Bacchi, 1999, p. 40). For this genealogy, Bacchi's framework is used to explain

the history of ideas, debates and past policy practices that help to explain how and why principal accountability policies have become more compliance oriented. This application of WPR is also used to trace the impact this trend towards compliance has had on how principals are constituted and how principal associations are treated in policy contests. In **Chapter 9**, various limitations in SASPA's political work are identified and discussed.

It is in **Chapter 10** where I invoke Bacchi's Step 7 (2021, p. 2) and critique some possibilities for principal associations to expand their political agency. Here, I use Lorenzini (2023a) to justify how this step is consistent with Foucault's use of genealogy which "does not tell us precisely what we should do" but, rather, constitutes "a concrete framework for action – an ethico-political 'we' – that *commits* us to resisting certain aspects of the governmental mechanisms and regimes of truth it reveals, thus inciting us to elaborate alternate ways of conducting ourselves" (p. 118, italics in text).

Drawing upon the thinking of Michael Apple (2015), Chantal Mouffe (1999) and Michel Foucault (in Foucault, Davidson, & Burchell, 2008), I suggest tactics to disrupt neoliberal inflected policy agendas, challenge the bureaucracy's new managerial practices, and introduce a policy design that is more concerned with the interests of the profession. It is here, by taking the step to address the absence of the political work of principal associations in the literature, that my research makes its most significant contribution to the field.

**Chapter 11** is where I make the claim that, with each successive accountability reform, principals have become more subjugated by the bureaucracy's technologies of power and control, but school leaders have actively contested and resisted this subjugation through the political work of principal associations. My examination of one principal association's struggle to improve public education policy in South Australia establishes



the limitations and possibilities of political agency. Within a broader summary of my research, this political struggle is understood as a series of skirmishes dominated by concerns over principal agency and bureaucratic compliance. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the distinctive features of my project before speculating about the possibilities for further research to result from my study.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

In summary, the structure of this thesis outlines the focus of my research and establishes its relevance. It situates the study within a 25-year time frame (1995–2020) where my related interests in tracing the effects of principal accountability policy regimes and the relationship between South Australia’s DfE and SASPA are confirmed. This places my research in the field of policy sociology where it is informed by the literatures of neoliberalism, new managerialism and performativity, and where I have interpreted them using Foucault’s notions of governmentality and regimes of truth. My Foucauldian infused WPR genealogy identifies trends in how principals have been constituted by the bureaucracy’s various approaches to school and principal accountability in neoliberal times and how these renderings have impacted the relative strength of political agency exercised by principal associations. My contribution, then, is what this knowledge means for policy sociology scholars and what it means for expanding the political work of principal associations if they (and others) are to effectively challenge the neoliberalising policy regime.

## 2. WORKING POLITICALLY

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### 2.1 Introduction

The political agency of principal associations and their resistance to the neoliberalising policy regime of governments and education bureaucracies are germane to this thesis. However, it is their almost complete absence from the literature that warrants the inclusion of this chapter. Here, I speculate as to the reasons for this absence from the literature before introducing the political work of principal associations to the field. Using Foucault as my “discussion partner” (Gunter, 2018, p. 1), I have fashioned a history of ‘my present’ using four vignettes selected from my work as SASPA President. Informed by Foucault’s thinking tools of “governmentality”, “regimes of truth” and “critical attitude” (see Lorenzini, 2023a), I include my understanding of these concepts and identify examples where the political agency of SASPA was constrained by the bureaucracy’s new managerial practices but also where its agency led to resistance. This chapter concludes with the knowledge that, within the machinations of contemporary power relations between the government, its bureaucracy, and the profession, principal associations can choose to be subjugated, or they can choose to resist.

### 2.2 Principal Associations

In Australia, the various principal associations<sup>8</sup> that represent the professional interests of public school leaders typically have two major functions: (i) to build the professional capital of their members, and (ii) to advocate for the professional interests of these

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<sup>8</sup> In 2024 there were more than 20 principal associations in Australia representing public school leaders at either the State, Territory or National level. In the case of SASPA and ASPA, members also include Deputy and Assistant Principals.

members. With regard to the former, principal associations utilise their network's strength to build the capacity of their members to better perform the duties, functions and responsibilities of the leader role. With regard to the latter, since the work of public school principals is shaped by policy and system settings, the advocacy role performed by principal associations takes the form of what Thrupp (2018) described as working with "policy makers to try to modify untrusted policy" (p. 132). However, the role and operation of formally constituted principal associations is largely unexamined (Thomson, 2008, p. 88). Where it has been examined, the focus has been on networks for professional learning and growth rather than political agency (see Fullan, 2018; A. Hargreaves & Fink, 2009; David H Hargreaves, 2003; Leithwood & Azah, 2016; Moolenaar, Slegers, & Leerstoel, 2015; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016; Shirley, 2016). So, why has the political work of principal associations been largely unexamined?

Thomson (2001), a former SASPA president, undertook a textual analysis of principal association and leadership academy documents from seven websites to establish the nature and orientation of principal's work and its relationship to the collective work of associations. This textual analysis showed considerable differences in the representation of this work as illustrated by her identification of ten discourses. Whilst that textual analysis does not actually describe the political work of principal associations, Thomson (2001) used her findings and theorisation with Bourdieu (2018) to contemplate what that work might be in the future.

It is interesting to speculate how far principal associations could push counter ideas through resisting atomised and managerialist representations of their work, answering back with more nuanced, empirically based snapshots of their daily work in the field. (p. 17)

Here, the references to “resisting” and “answering back” are indicative of how the political work of principal associations relates to agency and policy contestation. Whilst Thomson (2001) considered the importance of the future of such work, the major focus of her paper is how principals’ work had been constituted (using textual analysis as her method) and how using Bourdieu (2018) to theorise the *field* provided a view of the differences between how the employer saw the principal’s work compared to how the principal saw that work. My research intersects with Thomson (2001) in that I am interested in how the principal subject has been constituted, and how they constitute themselves, but my main interest is in how this rendering has constrained the political agency of principal associations. So, has the nature of that political agency, its purpose, its practices and its effects, been examined in the literature?

Building on her previous research into principal identity and resistance, Thomson (2008) noted how “many heads talk of selectively rejecting some changes while acceding to those that they judge relevant” and “the majority ... are resentful of any suggestion that they simply do as they are told” (p. 89). Her paper goes on to present cases of individual headteachers who acted counter to policy or who spoke out against policy. In recognising the importance of principals resisting the neoliberal project in education, Thomson (2008) suggested that “the field ... needs to widen its gaze to consider the ongoing collective activities of headteachers’ associations, who work at local, regional and national level not simply to implement policy, but also to influence it” (p. 94). This challenge, issued some sixteen years ago, appears to have been largely overlooked.

With the exception of Thrupp's (2018) reference to the New Zealand Principals' Federation response to the 2014 Investing in Educational Success policy<sup>9</sup>, I was unable to find any academic papers which discussed the political influence of principal associations on education policy in my literature search. There are examples of research initiated by principal associations for their political use, for example, an ASPA project, *Autonomy, Accountability, and Principals' Work: An Australian Study* (McKay & Pierpoint, 2020). Such research is invaluable to principal associations (and potentially useful to bureaucracies and governments) because the problems experienced by the profession are identified and qualified, and the recommendations provided offer some ways forward. However, using the ASPA study as an example, research of this type does not consider what principal associations have done previously in this policy space. It does not tell the story of policy contestation and of the role principal associations play in the challenge to improve education policy. What tactics have principal associations tried in the past? Why do these problems of accountability and autonomy still persist? One of the reasons for this, and it was certainly the case for McKay and Pierpoint (2020), is that the intended audience for research of this kind is government. The genre of these reports, whilst persuasive, shows little or no interest in providing a history of the profession's previous attempts to seek reform. Rather than focusing on the problems of principal workload and wellbeing that are attributable to the use of autonomy and accountability regimes by bureaucracies, the ASPA study used them "as lenses into understanding the work of principals in Australia's public secondary schools" (p. 5). The ASPA–Monash University report is a recent example of research being used as an instrument for policy

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<sup>9</sup> Thrupp's (2018) book chapter, To be 'in the tent' or abandon it?: A school clusters policy and the responses of New Zealand educational leaders, provides coverage of the problem – Is it better for principal alliances to argue policy differences with authorities from 'inside the tent' or 'outside the tent'?

change, rather than research being designed to inform the academic field of the collective work of principals advocating for improved policy. The distinction here is on how much is being revealed of the political work of principal associations.

### ***2.2.1 Teacher Unions***

Examples can be found of the role teacher unions play in contesting and resisting neoliberal inflected policy. In one of these, Maguire, Braun and Ball (2018) used a case study approach to describe “some discomforts, oppositions and resistances” evident in the experience of school-based trade union representatives to “educational reforms and policy imperatives” (p. 1060). Here there are similarities between the political work of teacher unions and principal associations, not the least of which is the importance of representation and contestation. For the union officers in the case study, their advocacy and representation provided a protection for members who were relatively powerless in their enactment of policy, and their contestation of policy (undertaken in a scaled-up form as campaigns at a regional or national level) enabled unfair policies to be publicly challenged (pp. 1064-1065). Similarly, advocacy and representation in the political work of principal associations does seek to protect individual members (although according to the Education Act, South Australian principals are the Minister for Education’s representative in the school) and does seek to contest unfair policies and practices at the local, regional and national level. What is fundamentally different is that the political work of principal associations is to challenge those ways of being governed by the bureaucracy that are unfair and unhelpful. In Australia, however, the political work of teacher unions is often directed at challenging the principal’s enactment of policy and its effects on classroom practitioners. That said, there is significant harmony between the positions taken by the Australian Education Union (AEU), the Australian Government Primary Principals’ Association (AGPPA) and the

Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) on the large macro educational issues currently being debated in Australia – e.g., the need for a just funding regime for public schools, the need to eradicate the inequities between our schools and our systems, and the need to challenge the obsession with test-based accountabilities.

What is important about focussing solely on the political agency of principal associations in this study, and not including similar work undertaken by teacher unions, is that my interest is in how principals have been constituted (rather than teachers) by the DfE accountability regimes and how this rendering has constrained the political agency of principal associations (rather than teacher unions). The key point here, is that I am interested in the employee—employer relationship as it is experienced between the principal (school leaders who enact DfE policy) and the bureaucracy (the chief executive and senior officers who make policy and administer its enactment). Ironically, if I had been undertaking this study prior to the year 2000, I might have been obligated to include a focus on the role of unions because most principals were also union members, but since the implementation of Partnerships 21 (South Australia's iteration of self-managing schools) and the emphasis placed on principal autonomy, there are now more South Australian principals who do not belong to a union than there are who do, with the move supported by the formation in 2001 of the Leaders Legal Fund which, since 2011, has been known as the South Australian State Schools Leaders Association (SASSLA). This trend was not unique to South Australia who had simply followed the lead provided by principals in Victoria and Western Australia in their formation of the Australian Principals Federation (APF).

So, considering the milieu of the various collective and organised groups looking after the professional interests of principals in South Australia, I feel comfortable with my decision to focus exclusively on principal associations (and to use SASPA as a case

study). This is because the AEU-SA has such a low principal membership within its ranks that it becomes compromised in its representation of the policy interests of principals, particularly when these might be at odds with the interests of teacher members. SASSLA, which has evolved out of the drift away from the AEU by principals, has a focus on the industrial instruments which govern the work of principals and on the legal representation of its members who are in dispute with their employer (the bureaucracy). This is very different work to that performed by principal associations. As mentioned previously, principal associations are primarily interested in building the capacity of their members to perform their duties better and in working with the bureaucracy and with government to improve education policies so that principals' work is enriched.

### ***2.2.2 Should Principal Associations Work Politically?***

As organisations, professional associations in western societies are thought to have evolved from medieval craft guilds (Vollmer & Mills, 1966). With the emergence of the middle class and the various professions in the late nineteenth century, these guilds evolved into study societies, so-called because of their shared specialised professional knowledge. Beyond sharing their specialised field of knowledge, members of these study societies were looking for “social interaction amongst those doing the same work, sharing of papers for discussion, protection of member interests, and development of collective solutions to common problems” (Rusaw, 1995, p. 217). We now recognise these study societies as professional associations.

Friedman and Phillips (2004) claimed that “there is general agreement in the literature that the professional association is an essential component of professionalism” (p. 187). This claim was supported by statistical data which included the United Kingdom having 450 professional associations representing 6.5 million professionals or 23% of



the workforce (p. 187). According to Hager (2014) professional associations are “identification and organizing bodies for fields of professional practice” (p. 41). Rusaw (1995) highlighted three contributions that associations make to professionals: “(1) as providers of updated and extended professional knowledge, (2) as builders of normative frameworks for enacting knowledge in practice, and (3) as change catalysts” (p. 215). Of the three functions, the latter is most closely aligned with the political work of professional associations and, by inference, principal associations. Rusaw (1995) suggested that “professional associations may enable members collectively to change organizational environments whose values conflict with professionally held ones through advocacy, public relations, and lobbying” (p. 221). This addresses specifically one of the political functions of principal associations; that is, to defend the attitudes, behaviours, norms, practices and values of the profession in the challenges they make to the neoliberalising policy regime (or to the managerial method of administering a bureaucracy).

Rusaw (1995) goes on to provide examples of some of the tactics professional associations might deploy, including “developing policy statements” and calling for “reforms and ethical codes in the public interest” (p. 221). As much as my interest is in education and, more specifically, principal associations, I can see that Rusaw’s commentary on “change catalysts” applies equally to the advocacy of other professions including doctors, engineers, lawyers, nurses, and psychiatrists.

So, although there is nothing specific in the literature that documents the nature of political work performed by principal associations, there is an indication of the role professional associations fulfill. This is useful in suggesting that this absence of principal associations from studies of resistance and refusal of neoliberal inflected policy is more accidental than judgemental. Rusaw (1995) not only identified a political

role for professional associations, she suggested ways in which they perform that role. Thomson (2008) not only suggested to the field that they should widen their gaze to include the role principal associations perform in influencing policy, she also encouraged them to “make headteachers’ associations an important site of study in their own right” (p. 99). Consequently, any contribution to the field that I have made with this research is through my acceptance of this invitation.

## **2.3 A History of ‘My Present’**

My personal experience is included in this chapter to prosecute the argument that my seven-year SASPA presidency afforded me a rich and detailed understanding of how the power relations evident within the contested terrain of policy constrained the political agency of principal associations. Relying on data accessed from my journals, Board minutes, and various communiques and reports I authored during the period of the presidency, my reflections on the DfE—SASPA relationship reveal diminishing levels of inclusion and trust. Analysis of these data is undoubtedly influenced by my personal beliefs and values. Whilst I discuss partiality later in this study (see Chapter 4), I mention it now to acknowledge the impossibility of an impartial account and to suggest that some counterbalance to potential bias is given by the inclusion of ethnographic accounts from DfE chief executives and other SASPA presidents in the genealogy section of this thesis (located in Chapters 6,7,8, 9 and 10).

The notion of writing the history of the present is located within Michel Foucault’s use of genealogy. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault introduced the phrase “writing the history of the present” (p. 31) to explain how his analysis of punishment in its social context was “writing the history of the past in the present” (p. 31). Essentially a critical approach to understanding the problems of the present, genealogy applies historico-philosophical analysis to the past, thereby revealing how power has operated, and

knowledge has been produced. Realisations emerging from Foucault's use of genealogy include how power and discursive practices regulate our sexuality (see Foucault, Burchell, Ewald, Fontana, & Gros, 2017), how governmentality shapes our conduct (see Foucault, Davidson, & Burchell, 2010) and how modern forms of governance seek to optimise and control populations through technologies such as statistics, surveillance and social policies (see Foucault et al., 2008).

According to Garland (2014), Foucault's approach to writing a history of the present begins with diagnosis (a statement of the contemporary problem) and proceeds through genealogy (a method of writing a critical history). It is here that "genealogical analysis traces how contemporary practices and institutions emerged out of specific struggles, conflicts, alliances and exercises of power, many of which are nowadays forgotten" (Garland, 2014, p. 372). The idea, therefore, is "to trace the erratic and discontinuous process whereby the past becomes the present" (p. 372). By problematising the present in this way, the power relations upon which it depends can be revealed. Essentially, this is what I have attempted in Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10, the genealogy section of this thesis. Starting with a diagnosis of a contemporary problem, that is, the subjugation of principals by accountability policies and how this rendering has seen the political agency of principal associations constrained, I use genealogy to trace the various adhesions, conflicts, entanglements and tensions.

To provide a foundation for the genealogy section, and to introduce the political work of principal associations, I use the remainder of this chapter to write a history of *my* present. Here, the 'diagnosis' or statement of the contemporary problem is described as:

the more managerial DfE acted, the more constrained SASPA's political agency became.

This is a notion explored through four vignettes chosen from my work history as SASPA President. These experiences have been analysed using the thinking tools of “governmentality”, “regimes of truth” and “critical attitude” (see Lorenzini, 2023a). Together, these notions constitute a theoretical framework that will be reprised in the genealogy section of my study (see Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

### **2.3.1 Governmentality**

Foucault’s thinking about governmentality has influenced a broad assortment of scholars with a shared concern about the lived effects of rule on human subjects (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991; Colebatch, 2002; Dean, 2002; Larner, 2000; Lemke, 2011; Rose, 1999). My aim in introducing governmentality in this chapter is to claim its use as a tool for thinking about how neoliberalising policy regimes and their methods of change (i.e., new managerialism and performativity) constitute individuals (e.g., principals) and groups (e.g., principal associations).

In *Security, Territory, Population* lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78, Foucault (2007) explained governmentality as a rationality of governing that consists of three components: the apparatus – i.e., the enablers of power; the knowledges – i.e., the articulation of the problems and objects of government; and the governmentalisation of the state – i.e., the ways that shape its form and define the limits of its operations over time (p. 110). As Foucault later articulated, “I would like to try and determine the way in which the domain of the practice of government, with its different objects, general rules, and overall objectives” is established so as “to grasp the way in which this practise that exists in governing was conceptualised both *within* and *outside* government” (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 2, italics added). Here, governmentality is understood as not only the ways in which power operates through forms of governance – e.g., the state, institutions and policies – but also the way that power is experienced

by individuals and groups through a complex and diffuse network of relationships and practices that operate at multiple levels of society. Governmentality, therefore, involves the ways in which individuals and groups are governed and regulated through a variety of techniques and technologies.

The notion of governmentality sits within the interest Michel Foucault (2007) expressed about the complexity of problems at “the intersection between a multiplicity of living individuals working and coexisting with each other in a set of material elements that act on them and on which they act in turn” (p. 22). Here, Foucault alluded to his idea that it is power relations that are exercised within a society rather than power, and that whilst individuals and groups are guided and disciplined by these power relations, they are also induced to regulate their own behaviour according to the prevailing social norms and expectations. Individual and collective conduct, therefore, are understood to be as much a product of self-governance as they are of state or institutional governance. As a thinking tool for considering how SASPA’s political agency had been constrained, governmentality enabled me to not only explore the bureaucracy’s new managerial practices and techniques for control but to consider the effects of SASPA’s self-regulation.

### ***2.3.2 Regimes of Truth***

My aim in introducing Foucault’s notion of regimes of truth in this chapter is to claim its usefulness for considering how individuals (e.g., principals) and groups (e.g., principal associations) constitute themselves within neoliberalising policy regimes but are also constituted by them.

Foucault, in his 1979-1980 lecture series, *On the Government of the Living* (in Foucault, Davidson, & Burchell, 2014), explored the notion of “the government of men

through the manifestation of truth in the form of subjectivity” (p. 80). Here, he considered that the “exercise of power as government of men” demanded “not only acts of obedience and submission, but truth acts in which individuals who are subjects in the power relationship are also subjects as actors, spectator witnesses, or objects in manifestation of truth procedures” (p. 82). Important to Foucault’s thinking was the idea that “power cannot be exercised without truth having to manifest itself, and manifest itself in the form of subjectivity” (p. 75). A regime of truth, then, is “that which determines the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestation of truth” (p. 93).

Lorenzini (2023a), explained that Foucault’s genealogy of truth regimes revealed “the multiple ways in which human beings engage in historically situated regimes of truth that govern their conduct through the ‘therefore’ that links the ‘it is true’ to the ‘I submit’ – or, in other words, “the multiple ways in which we give ‘truth’ the right to tell us what to do and how to live” (p. 121). As Lorenzini (2023a) noted, there is a commitment that individuals must make in relation to their truth obligation (p. 35). First, for there to be a truth obligation it must be that it “cannot be manifested or demonstrated by itself as true” and, therefore, has to be supplemented by force for one to “posit it as true” (p. 36). Lorenzini (2023a) understood that any submission made by an individual to a truth obligation is preceded by a “ ‘therefore’ that gives binding force to the truth” (p. 36). It is this commitment to the “‘therefore’ that, at the level of the regime of truth, links the ‘it is true’ to the ‘I submit’” (p. 36).

Consequently, “the ‘therefore’ of truth ... the often imperceptible procedures that lead us not only to *accept* certain truth claims, but to submit to them and give them the power to govern our conduct” (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 120, italics in original) represents a defining choice. But it is a choice. Just as we can choose to be governed by a truth

regime, we can choose not to be. We can refuse to submit. This possibility of refusal is what Ball (2016b) described as “the continuous responsibility to choose ourselves through what we do” (p. 1141). This is an important understanding regarding how individuals (e.g., principals) and groups (e.g., principal associations) constitute themselves within neoliberalising policy regimes but are also constituted by them, since it emphasises that not all principals made the same choices in relation to the bureaucracy’s regimes of truth, and so individual principals constituted themselves differently. My interest, therefore, is in how the subject is produced by a regime of truth, particularly as it relates to the notion of truth-telling. This is consistent with Lorenzini (2023a) who recognised that “Foucault’s thinking incites us to ask the crucial question of the conditions under which ‘telling the truth’ can be effective critical practice – and what it means to speak ‘the truth’ at an ethical, social, and political level” (p. 120).

There are two ways in which the production of the subject of the truth regime occurs: ‘subjection’ when the individual is required to tell the ‘truth’ about himself or herself for a certain mechanism of power to govern him or her, and ‘subjectivation’ which refers to the construction of oneself as a subject through practices or techniques of the self (see Cremonesi, Irrera, Lorenzini, & Tazzioli, 2016). Subjection occurs at the ‘therefore’ moment in Lorenzini’s (2023a) description of truth obligations (p. 36). In relation to the truth regimes discussed in this thesis, individual principals made their own ‘therefore’ choice in relation to *P21, Partnership Performance Review Panels* and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System*. Thus, individual principals were constituted through their making (or refusing to make) these ‘therefore’ choices. Subjectivation requires two moments: a reactive moment of ‘de-subjection’ which resists the mechanisms of power within a certain regime of truth, and a creative moment (which is the moment of subjectivation), being about the invention of a different

form of subjectivity, implying “practices of freedom” (Foucault, 1997, pp. 282-283). It is within this framework that it is possible to think of resistance to a given regime of truth.

The first form of resistance to the production of the subject of the truth regime is what Foucault (1997) referred to as ‘de-subjection’. This is the practice of actively refusing to be subjected to a certain truth regime, by refusing to conform to the expectations or standards of that regime. An example of this within the context of this chapter’s focus is SASPA’s refusal to endorse the *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* initiative (2019-2022). Here ‘de-subjection’ meant that as SASPA President, I used the monthly e-Bulletin to members to critique elements of the strategy (e.g., its ‘evidence-base’) and deliberately steered the Association’s professional development instruments (e.g., its annual conference and its aspiring principals program – UYLP) towards leader agency and empowerment to counter the DfE’s instrumental idea of the principal’s role.

The second form of resistance is what Foucault (1997) called ‘subjectivation’. This is the practice of actively constructing a new form of subjectivity which is different from the one prescribed by the regime of truth. This involves creating a new way of being, which is based on the individual’s or group’s own values and beliefs and is not dictated by the existing power structures. An example of this within the context of my thesis is the refusal by SASPA to submit to the Weatherill Government’s decision (circa 2016) not to move Year 7 students into a secondary education provision and, subsequently, building a compelling argument for why it needed to happen (a position subsequently adopted by the Marshall Opposition, which later won the 2018 election). In the face of considerable pressure from the Weatherill Government’s Minister for Education, SASPA refused to acquiesce. This act of refusal was consistent with the values of an independently constituted principal association but at odds with the expectations of a



government wanting to retain political power. But, as Ball (2016b) argued, “(t)he point is that in neoliberal economies, sites of government and points of contact are also sites for the possibility of refusal” (p. 1143). On this occasion, SASPA exploited that possibility.

By engaging in both de-subjection and subjectivation, individuals and groups can resist the power structures of the regime of truth and create something new and unique. In this way, individuals and groups can reclaim their agency and their right to define their own version of truth and create an alternative form of subjectivity. According to Ball (2016b), this becomes “a struggle over and against what it is we have become, what it is that we do not want to be” (p. 1143). For principal associations, this is a fight for political agency over neoliberal government and bureaucratic compliance: a refusal to submit to the power structures that are in place, so that the passions of the profession can be harnessed towards the creation of more socially just public education policies.

### ***2.3.3 Critical Attitude***

Lorenzini (2023a) recognised that Foucault showed in his approach to genealogy that “every regime of truth...must be addressed as a historical, cultural, and ultimately ethico-political problem” (p. 103). Here, critique becomes more than a “subversive or problematising endeavour”, it is also a “possibilising” one (p. 103). This ‘possibilising’ is evident in “the struggles against the processes implemented for conducting others” and presents itself in the form of “critical attitudes or counter-conducts” (p. 110). It is in such struggles that “the critical attitude focuses on moments in which people actually tried to no longer be, do, or think what they (were told they) were or had to do or think” (p. 112). It is in this “ethico-political ‘we’”, encompassed by the “individuals who endured and fought against those apparatuses and regimes in the past” and their

relationship with “those who are carrying on or will carry on their fight in the present” (p. 113), that the ‘possibilising’ approach to genealogy is found.

My aim in introducing Foucault’s notion of critical attitude in this chapter is to claim its usefulness for considering how individuals (e.g., principals) and groups (e.g., principal associations) have resisted some of the bureaucracy’s regimes of truth. Instead of accepting the subjugation that comes from accepting a truth obligation, there have been times when SASPA, for example, has refused to submit and has expressed its critical attitude through acts of “counter-conduct” (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 104) and “truth telling” (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 105). In Chapter 10 of this thesis, I provide my thinking about the tactics principal associations have adopted to interrupt the neoliberalising policy regime, and it is here that the relationship between critical attitude and a possibilising genealogy will be expanded upon.

Having provided a rationale for using *governmentality*, *regimes of truth* and *critical attitude* as thinking tools, my attention now shifts to their use in the analysis of four vignettes from my work history as SASPA President.

## **2.4 Truth-telling and Counter-narrative**

In April 2017 the then Minister for Education, Dr Susan Close, launched *Public Education in South Australia*, a foundation statement that described “the essence of public education in order to guide its work” (Reid, 2017, p. 2). Amongst its key inclusions was a description of six characteristics essential to public education: i.e., a focus on quality, equity, diversity and cohesion, collaboration and trust, community, and democracy (p. 5). These characteristics were subsequently promoted to school leaders in 2018 by SASPA (and its project partner, SAPPA) through a suite of six short

videos and associated materials including key readings and staff activities.<sup>10</sup> This work was undertaken with the support of a \$50K grant from the Minister for Education. The rationale for this was two-fold. First, principal associations have a less cumbersome governance structure than bureaucracies and so can move quickly on an initiative without getting bogged down in red tape. Second, my sense was that the Minister for Education had more trust in the Public Education Advisory Group (and in the SASPA, SAPPa, PDA and AEU-SA coalition within its membership) than in the bureaucracy. After all, Dr Close had commissioned the PEAG and was acutely aware that its truth-telling and counter-narrative was at odds with that of the bureaucracy which, by 2017, had placed increased emphasis on NAPLAN and on new accountabilities designed for greater principal compliance.

That I was a member of the 2015–2016 Public Education Advisory Group (PEAG) – established by Dr Close and chaired by Emeritus Professor Alan Reid AM – is an indication of how advocacy can work to create adhesion around a political idea held in common. This particular example was initiated by SASPA, along with its strategic partners SAPPa and the Pre-school Directors' Association, and the local branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU–SA). Together, our alliance lobbied Ministers of Education throughout 2014 and 2015 for a forum designed to strengthen the 'publicness' of public education. Our cause can be described as having three components. First and foremost, our coalition was concerned by the negative impact of having a non-educator leading the DfE bureaucracy, applying new managerial principles and practices, and effectively consigning our schools and centres to a 'franchise' role within the 'parent company'. This particular CE, for example, was fond

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<sup>10</sup> These videos are warehoused in SASPA's You Tube channel. See: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPb5bvnMoV9vLESPuJMhVH\\_TcveQpsX-S](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPb5bvnMoV9vLESPuJMhVH_TcveQpsX-S)

of describing the competition between private and public education sectors as being very much a Qantas versus Virgin scenario. From my point of view, I thought – little wonder that we had come to see that the bureaucracy now resembled a corporation. Second, we saw that South Australia’s schooling landscape had become an education marketplace: the product of decades of neoliberal inflected policy and of new managerialism, together with the recalibration of school funding ratios by the Abbott–Turnbull–Morrison Liberal Governments which had benefited the Catholic and independent sectors<sup>11</sup>. The need to choose the ‘best’ secondary school had become a right, and whilst this had led some parents to conclude the choice was between private and public, it was just as apparent that parents were bypassing their local public school to choose a ‘better’ one within the public system. McDonald et al (2023) described these ‘preferred public schools’ as archipelagos where “the hierarchies long evident between sectors (were) now evident between schools in the same system” (p. 16). Third, the DfE had been recently expanded to incorporate various functions of Child Protection and Allied Health, and our collective advocacy was concerned that the bureaucracy’s main purpose – to provide a compulsory, universal and secular education accessible to all South Australians – would be overwhelmed by the professional interests of these new inclusions.<sup>12</sup> In short, a strong and clear statement about public education, one which provided a value proposition to the community but also to the agency, was seen by our coalition as a necessary first step in addressing these contextual factors. The next step was to broaden school and system performance measures to reflect the difference we were making with what we valued,

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<sup>11</sup> The Commonwealth Government’s current funding ratio setting is 80:20, where 80% flows to the Catholic and Independent school sectors and 20% flows to the Public Education sector. This is explained at: <https://www.education.gov.au/how-are-schools-funded-australia>

<sup>12</sup> The inclusion of Child Protection, for example, would become problematic for the Weatherill Labor government which, following the recommendations from Commissioner Nyland’s report, *The Life They Deserve* (2016), would decide to decouple it from DfE during 2016/2017.

i.e., the six characteristics of public education: quality, equity, diversity and cohesion, collaboration and trust, community, and democracy.

By 2015–2016, the DfE had already taken strides towards a quantitative data-driven approach to principal and school accountability. Here, NAPLAN results were being interpreted as indicators of school and principal success and, with the recent introduction of *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (see Chapter 7), the leaders of schools and pre-schools within a defined geographical cluster (i.e., The Partnership) were being held to account collectively for the group's data relating to student attendance, NAPLAN, and school completion. My notes indicate that at its April and June 2016 meetings, the PEAG discussed multiple measures of success for student and system performance consistent with the six characteristics of public education it had generated<sup>13</sup>. Regrettably, our suggestions were not taken up by the bureaucracy. By July 2016, the DfE had a new Chief Executive whose first order of business was to uncouple Child Protection and Allied Health from the agency. Once this was achieved, he was able to focus predominantly on education (circa 2017), where his approach was to seek advice from McKinsey and Company as to how a system's performance could be shifted from 'good to great' (see Chapter 8).

The political agency work I undertook as SASPA President relating to PEAG consisted of two fundamental strategies:

- *A commitment to taking a collective approach.* In the ecosystem of public education – SASPA, SAPP, PDA and the AEU-SA – are not always allies; however, with this political project our unity was unwavering.

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of these multiple success measures included: increased % of students from low-SES families, go on to higher and further education (Equity); students are assessed on the general capabilities in the curriculum, as well as subject-based assessment, and reporting is on student progress as well as reaching performance standards, thereby making South Australia's the most holistic assessment system in the nation (Innovation).

- *A determination and persistence to never give up.* Whilst our collective petitioning of Minister Rankine, during 2014 and early 2015, had been unsuccessful, her replacement, Minister Close, had required little convincing. In fact, Dr Close's leadership on this policy direction was inspirational, with PEAG members willingly becoming her champions. On reflection, I was one of her most enthusiastic supporters. Where it matched that of SASPA, I used every opportunity I could to push her agenda in the various meetings I had with members of the DfE's senior executive, assuming – wrongly as it turned out – that she and the bureaucracy would be walking the same path.

Whilst these strategies were largely successful, a few of my tactics as SASPA President were not.

The hard line I took (together with my SAPPA, PDA and AEU-SA colleagues) in arguing against DfE being formally represented on the PEAG may have contributed to a deepening of the 'us and them' mentality. This 'us and them' mentality was already apparent following an 8:00am 8<sup>th</sup> April 2015 meeting with the DfE's Chief Executive where I was informed that he had sought advice in relation to terminating my appointment to DfE, only to discover that it was not within his powers.<sup>14</sup> It had been a lack of trust in the directions being taken by this DfE CE that had been a contributing factor behind our coalition's lobby for the PEAG's formation. It was not surprising that there was similar distrust towards SASPA (and SAPPA, PDA and AEU-SA) from the CE's office given that the PEAG narrative, if supported by the DfE, would require considerable changes to the managerial approach he had adopted.

Another failed tactic was to assume that the Minister's endorsement of the PEAG and its work would curry favour with the bureaucracy. The more traction I was getting with

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<sup>14</sup> The April 8<sup>th</sup> meeting was called because the CE had taken great offence at media comments I had made, and of a view I had expressed to Minister Close regarding his suitability to lead her ambitious agenda for public education. Whilst this CE and I eventually found a way to work together, it required the Minister's direct involvement, which I took to be a demonstration of the regard she had for SASPA and its political agency.

the Minister on SASPA's policy-related interests (e.g., her support for the *Doing Schooling Differently in the Northern Suburbs* project) the more resistance I was getting from senior bureaucrats (who were being asked to divert funds to support the project). Lastly, the tactic of rejecting the DfE advice about which school leaders should be profiled in the videos SASPA and SAPPa were to produce in support of the public education statement, further exacerbated the 'us and them' scenario. However, being told by a DfE senior executive that principal X should be profiled rather than principal Y on the basis that their school's NAPLAN results were better was anathema to me, not because a school's NAPLAN results are unimportant but, rather, because they should never be all-important. The responsibilities of a school principal are extensive, and the leadership skills they draw upon are wide-ranging. That one's success or failure as a principal could be reduced to a school's NAPLAN performance is not only dangerously reductive and simplistic, but also foolishly risky in terms of the misinformation it might circulate and the professional harm it might cause. Yet, by 2017, this was the NAPLAN-obsessed direction the bureaucracy had taken. This was most evident in the extent to which NAPLAN results had become the DfE's instrument for judging principal performance.

The PEAG provided a truth-telling function to the Minister and constructed a much needed counter-narrative to that being advanced through the neoliberal policy regime and managerial practices of the education bureaucracy. This resistance effort was an important one but, with a change of government less than a year after its launch, any currency the *Public Education in South Australia* foundation statement had garnered was soon lost. That SASPA continued to champion the statement was evidence of the Association's 'critical attitude' at a time when the bureaucracy's new regime of truth was being implemented (i.e., the McKinsey and Company's plan for DfE to move from 'good' to 'great' which is discussed in Chapter 8).

## 2.5 Counter-conduct

It was December 2016 and our national board, ASPA, was meeting in Brisbane. As was the custom, the local president invited that state's Director-General of Education (DG) to an informal breakfast meeting with ASPA directors. At that time, Dr Jim Waterston was the head of Queensland Education and one of the few DGs in Australia who had once been a school principal. In the discussion that transpired, Dr Waterston was blunt in his assessment of ASPA specifically and of principal associations in general. He reminded us of the context that DGs like him were government appointments and, therefore, obligated to follow the direction of government. On occasion, according to Dr Waterston, this meant DGs had to action policy and directions they would rather not. In such circumstances, he claimed that ASPA and other principal associations had an important role to play in the interest of the profession, and that was to resist or contest harmful education reforms (because DGs could not). In Dr Waterston's view, ASPA was having no impact in disrupting those features of the Commonwealth's education agenda that needed to be resisted or contested. We (i.e., ASPA) were not, as he remarked, on 'their radar'. Despite a few bruised egos, these home truths were exactly what ASPA needed to hear. This was the impetus for ASPA to develop a sharper focus for its policy advocacy and to establish our counter-conduct by challenging the status quo and pitching the need for a new education narrative in Australia.

Two ASPA products directly resulted from our considered response to Dr Waterston's critique. First, we commissioned the ASPA monograph, *Beyond Certainty: a Process for Thinking About Futures for Australian Education* (Reid, 2018) as a vehicle to help the profession navigate the Commonwealth's neoliberal education policy settings and to suggest ways for our association to respectfully challenge these. This monograph,



which positioned the broad purposes for schooling as the foundation for a new education narrative in Australia, was distributed to Education Ministers, Education DGs or CEs, to ASPA Board members (and the affiliated Boards in states and territories) and was available for public download from the ASPA website. Second, we hosted a symposium, ‘The Future of Australian Education: Educators Shaping Public Discourse and Policy Direction’, in Canberra (March 2019). This was an attempt to unify the profession to speak with one voice in contesting those aspects of education policy that were sector blind. The symposium comprised 100 delegates from the nation’s various principal associations (across the three sectors – Public, Catholic and Independent) and a small group of potential allies (academics, parent organisations and media commentators). All delegates received a copy of *Beyond Certainty* and its author, Professor Alan Reid, provided the proceeding’s key provocation, ‘Does Australian Education Need a New Narrative?’.

The symposium concluded with a joint statement, *The Commitment* (see Appendix C), issued by the presidents of the four national principal associations<sup>15</sup>. The statement’s penultimate paragraph spoke to a commitment “to be recognised within the political process and to shape public debate”. Its final paragraph declared that “we stand together in our profession and are determined to inform the future of Australian education” (p. 1). *The Commitment* (2019) was both an act of symbolic leadership and a call to action. The statement also served a practical purpose: to illustrate the need for the profession to have a unified voice and, by doing so, to form a body to provide this, the Coalition of Australian Principals (CAP).

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<sup>15</sup> The four associations which issued The Commitment statement were: the Australian Secondary Principals’ Association (ASPA), the Australian Primary Principals’ Association (APPA), the Catholic Secondary Principals Australia (CaSPA), and the Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA). CAP now has a fifth member, Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA).

Both the monograph and the symposium were designed by ASPA to resist the narrow standardised agenda that Commonwealth governments had set, and that State and Territory governments had followed. The monograph provided a counter-narrative to the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (Gonski et al., 2018) and the symposium delivered a unified body of principal associations, CAP, which subsequently became a vehicle for counter-conduct on all educational policy matters of interest (except school funding). ASPA now had a well-researched statement it could stand behind and, following the March 2019 symposium, a statement our CAP associates could also endorse.

That nothing of great consequence changed at the Commonwealth government level<sup>16</sup> because of the ASPA monograph, the ASPA symposium's call-to-action and the formation of the CAP, is an indication that the neoliberalising policy regime we find ourselves in is unlikely to be disrupted by a series of gestures. Australia's education system is an established hegemonic order (see Reid, 2020), sustained by its various technologies for compliance (e.g., Australian Curriculum, My School, NAPLAN and PISA), the effects of which include the subjugation of school principals. It is not enough, therefore, for principal associations to challenge these norms: they must develop tactics that will lead to their replacement. Here professional associations could, and should, consider Apple (2015) and his nine suggestions for scholar/academic activists, one of which is to consider frameworks which emphasise "the space in which more progressive and counter-hegemonic actions can, or do, go on" (p. 178). If principal associations are to play a role in interrupting the neoliberalising policy regime, that role

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<sup>16</sup> It is inconclusive but with the release of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (Berry et al., 2019) we did celebrate the expansion of the Commonwealth's goals for schooling to include "all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and informed members of the community" (p. 6).

will require more than their advocacy: the consideration of a more activist role may be what is needed.

## 2.6 Governmentality

In July 2016 there was a change of DfE CE. At the request of the new CE, the SASPA Board provided suggestions to him as to which bureaucratic settings needed to change to enable principals to better lead their schools. One of these was to improve the ratio of Education Directors<sup>17</sup> (EDs) to school principals so that the challenge and support school leaders needed to grow and develop could be provided. The SASPA Board believed that the ability for EDs to do such capacity building work was limited by the sheer volume of line management reports each one was handling (i.e., this supervision ranged from 60 to 90 site leaders). By increasing the number of Education Directors from twenty to thirty, the SASPA Board argued that the number of their reports would be reduced by one-third and, consequently, this saving would equate to the time required to attend to the professional growth needs of their principals.

The SASPA Board felt a sense of validation when it was announced that the 2017 school year would commence with an expanded number of Education Directors (i.e., the thirty for which SASPA had advocated) and, following a request from the ED work group, thirty Principal Consultants (i.e., a newly conceived position designed to support the work of EDs). But, as the old adage goes, be careful what you wish for. This new support around the principal – an Education Director with more time and now with the assistance of a Principal Consultant – became the foundation of what would soon become the Local Education Team (LET). Within the *From Good to Great: Towards a*

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<sup>17</sup> Education Directors are the middle-tier leadership group in the DfE with line-management responsibility for school principals.

*Worldclass System* strategy (2018–2022), the LET was an important instrument in the bureaucracy's governance apparatus. It was the LET which provided the surveillance (i.e., school visits now included classroom observations) and the compliance (i.e., monitoring the principal's take-up of system initiatives). These functions had not been evident in previous incarnations of the DfE's middle tier (i.e., the work group between the bureaucracy and the principal), nor had these behaviours been requested by principals in their advocacy for a better and more balanced power relationship between the ED and the Principal. Since 2015, Education Directors had been executive appointments, and their performance measures were designed to satisfy the bureaucracy's agenda. The tensions which formed from this change to the ED—principal relationship / bureaucracy—school relationship have been well documented in the work of Dolan (2020b) whose mixed methods research was conducted with the funding support of SASPA, SAPPa and the University of South Australia<sup>18</sup>.

One could argue that SASPA's strategy to have the DfE's CE expand the number of Education Directors was successful. I look upon it as an abject failure. Instead of improving the ED—principal relationship for professional growth, the decision enabled the relationship to become more transactional and power laden. This is because SASPA's advocacy focused on an expansion of the number of Education Directors, assuming that any time this action created would be invested in the professional support and growth of principals. Instead, the CE could argue that he had supported SASPA's claim for an increased number of Education Directors, albeit to serve his own interest in increased principal accountability (as a necessary pre-condition for the new DfE system improvement model designed by McKinsey and Company). With the implementation of the strategy, *From Good to Great: Towards a Worldclass System*,

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<sup>18</sup> This research is another example of 'truth telling' by principal associations.

principals were consigned to working within an apparatus of compliance and surveillance. Here they were being judged on how invested they were seen to be in the system's improvement agenda by EDs whose positional power had increased considerably under this new strategy. In 2021, my final year with SASPA, most of my member complaints related to either the bullying of principals by EDs or the unprofessional conduct (i.e., bias and nepotism) of the ED during principal merit selection processes. It had become so farcical in some patches of the state that I was told by a DfE Senior Executive that Principal X could not be appointed to school Y because his take-up of the DfE's newly developed curriculum materials in his current school 'lacked enthusiasm'. Ironically these materials were never mandated, having been introduced by the CE as an 'optional' resource for schools to consider.

This 'misfire' in SASPA's advocacy for improved power relations between Education Directors and principals is an example of Foucault's notion of governmentality and how principals were now to be governed. Instead of the challenge and support model for professional growth that had existed in previous models of middle-tier leadership within DfE, this increase in Education Directors and an expansion to their team (the formation of the Local Education Team) became a technology for control and surveillance. It created a persistent problem for the way in which SASPA conducted its political work with the DfE. From 2017, most of the individual member complaints I handled related to tensions arising from this ED—principal relationship. A cross-section of SASPA Board members had a similar complaint. Yet, the DfE senior executive remained impervious to the allegations of bias, bullying, harassment, incompetence and nepotism levelled against a number of Education Directors. They were an important technology in the governmentality apparatus and, as I was reminded on more than one

occasion by the DfE CE and members of his senior executive, EDs were simply doing their jobs so that my members (principals) did their jobs.<sup>19</sup>

## **2.7 Conduct of the Conduct**

The quandary for SASPA members is in belonging to two seemingly competing bodies. On one hand they are members of the bureaucracy which employs them, and on the other hand they are members of a principal association which performs political work in their professional interests. Looking at this tension through the lens of an association president, I have witnessed principals present one view to a SASPA meeting only to discover later they provided quite the opposite view to a DfE meeting or directly to the DfE's CE. My observation of such behaviour has led me to conclude that the bureaucracy's power to impact a principal's career makes any direct resistance to DfE directions and/or policies too dangerous for some school leaders, even those operating within the protection of the SASPA Board.

In my seven years as SASPA president I saw this behaviour materialise at the Board level in two discrete ways. First and foremost, there were members of the SASPA Board who were not explicit enough with the DfE CE about whether the opinion they were providing (often at his request) was a personal one (perhaps in the interests of her/his school) or whether their outlook was based on a SASPA-agreed view. This led to these CEs concluding that the personal opinion of a principal on the SASPA Board equated to the Board's opinion. Second, there was the behaviour of some Board members who, having perceived damage to their own reputation (usually following a negative reaction from the DfE CE to a SASPA Board decision), would respond out of

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<sup>19</sup> The validity of my criticisms were never questioned. As I discovered from my meetings with the Minister for Education, similar concerns had been raised with his office.

self-interest and thereby forsake the interest of the collective. Since the former will be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, I will use this chapter to expand upon the latter.

The December 2018 meeting of the SASPA Board directed me to write a letter to the DfE CE which outlined our concerns about how some of the Department's Human Resource policies and procedures were hindering principals in their various attempts to ensure quality teaching in every classroom. This letter was perceived to be the last option left to us, having spent the previous three years trying to negotiate improvements. The Board's obvious frustration with the lack of progress led them to direct me to carbon copy the Minister for Education into this correspondence. This produced a vexatious response from the CE who, at the first public gathering of principals for the 2019 school year, the SACE Merit Ceremony, let one of SASPA's Board members know how annoyed he was with my letter (and the fact that it had been sent to the Minister). The nature of this conversation was relayed to me by the Board member concerned, who added the suggestion that we (the two of us and perhaps a couple of other Board members) should meet with the CE to re-establish a respectful, professional relationship. Reluctantly I agreed to participate. Here, my reluctance originated from how differently I read the situation. As the letter's author, I had anticipated that the inclusion of the Minister in its readership would produce an angry response from the CE. After all, we were not simply letting the Minister know as a courtesy, we were letting him know that we were fed up with the status quo and that we wanted him to be kept informed about the DfE response to our policy interests. Tactically, it was an attempt to lever DfE action by applying pressure on two fronts. If our concerns and ideas for improvement could be ignored, deflected and resisted for three years, then perhaps some political pressure might produce the considered response we were seeking?

On Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2019, a SASPA Board delegation met with the DfE CE, his Executive Director, People and Culture (the division responsible for Human Resource policy) and the Director, External Relations (who was often the intermediary between the CE's office and SASPA). Whilst the purpose for the meeting had been framed as an opportunity to clear the air and work towards restoring a respectful relationship between SASPA and the CE, it was soon apparent to me that two members of this four person SASPA delegation were there to restore their own reputations regardless of what the Board had collectively decided. For almost an hour, I watched transfixed as two of my colleagues resorted to shameless sycophancy, saying everything they possibly could to distance themselves from the Board's decision to send the letter to the CE (and to the Minister) and to re-establish themselves as strong and loyal supporters of the CE's leadership. That they needed to do so, I cannot say. Both enjoyed a good reputation amongst their peers and within their school communities but, if you want to progress through the ranks of an education bureaucracy – one that encourages affirmation and expects compliance – perhaps you do have to ingratiate yourself for self-preservation?

Whilst the meeting did not derail completely SASPA's project to have DfE reform its human resource policies, it did put me in an unenviable position. Six days prior to the February 14<sup>th</sup> meeting with the CE, the SASPA Board had met for the first time since it issued the December 2018 letter. At this meeting it unanimously endorsed the use of a consultant to work with me to build a case for HR reform: one that would be compelling to the bureaucracy. That the approved consultant had once been the Acting Executive Director, People and Culture, was a strategic decision. Now that decision had become an albatross around my neck because, as the CE pointed out during his meeting with the SASPA delegation, there was irony in the Board using a consultant who contributed to the very decisions that had produced the problems we wanted to



see solved. Regardless of the CE's disaffirming perspective, our consultant's knowledge of how the bureaucracy worked (or did not work), and the various pressure points for policy action, proved invaluable to SASPA's cause.

For me, the biggest lesson from this incident was just how easily the bureaucracy's control apparatus – i.e., reward or reproach – could influence the professional behaviours of some of our most experienced and confident principals. What might it do to the less experienced? And what did it mean for the internal design of principal associations and how they might do political work effectively in a bureaucratic culture of compliance?

My inclusion of this example of the conflict generated by the SASPA Board's decision to go over the CE's head to the Minister opens up three areas of interest. First is the vulnerability of DfE CEs and the conditions of their employment within government<sup>20</sup>. This came through strongly in the ethnographic data (examined in Chapter 5) where all four DfE CEs indicated that their attitudes and behaviours were formed by their relationship with the government. Second is the independence of the principal association to liaise and advocate directly with the Government and with the Opposition as well as with the bureaucracy. That said, as this particular example reveals, one had better be prepared for the fall-out when one of the parties feels threatened. Third is how vulnerable principal associations are to the duality of their members' experience. On one hand, Board members are expected to honour and uphold the decisions of the constituted group. On the other hand, they are school principals operating within a bureaucracy where agreement and compliance is rewarded, and dissonance and

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<sup>20</sup> The SASPA Board's December 2018 letter to the CE had been sent a few months ahead of his contract review with the Marshall Government. There is some likelihood that the CE's response to the letter might have been influenced by the uncertainty of his professional future.

defiance are reproached. It is a duality that warrants further examination, and this is taken up in Chapter 10 which examines the limitations and possibilities for expanding the political agency of principal associations.

## 2.8 My Present

Consistent with Garland (2014), I began this short history of my present with a 'diagnosis'. Here, the statement of my contemporary problem was described as

the more managerially DfE acted, the more constrained SASPA's political agency became.

Discussion of four vignettes from my political work as SASPA President revealed an abridged trajectory (see Figure 2 below).

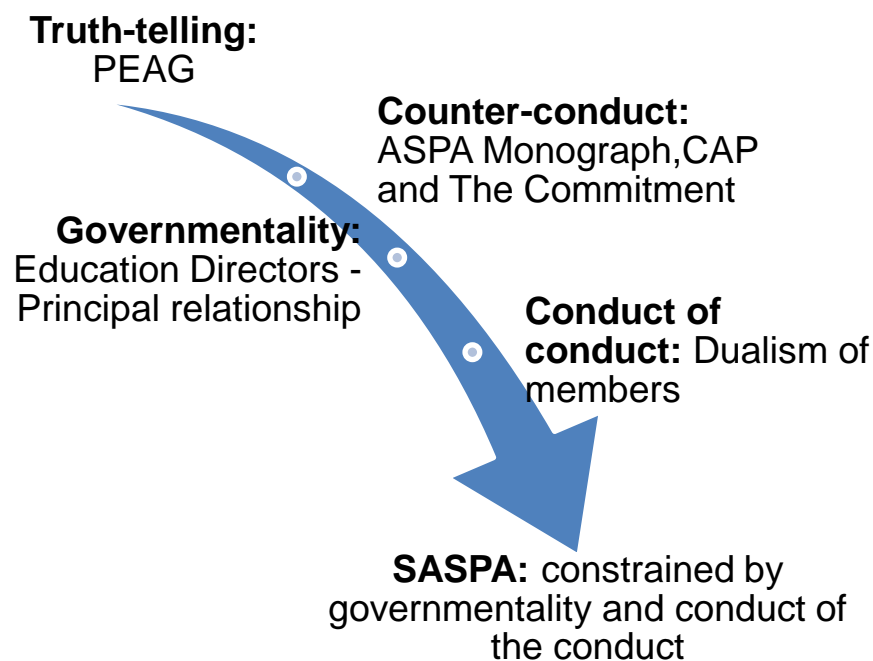


Figure 2: The trajectory of the history of my present

In 2015-2016 there was a level of empowerment provided by Minister Close in support of the PEAG activity, although this work was in stark contrast to the directions the

bureaucracy was taking. During 2017-2019, my ASPA colleagues and I acted with counter-conduct when we used the research we had commissioned from Professor Reid AM to pitch the idea of a new education narrative for Australia: one that would reflect a commitment to the broad purposes of schooling. Despite harnessing the passion of the nation's principal associations behind the idea of us having a more active role in policy making (as reflected in *The Commitment* statement – see Appendix C) both major political parties failed to take up this idea and the notion of the broad purposes of schooling providing the foundation for a new education narrative (see Reid, 2018). Meanwhile, in the South Australian context, from 2017 – 2020 my political work on behalf of SASPA became constrained by the direction of the bureaucracy's From Good to Great reform and, in particular, by the new managerial practices which accompanied it. One of its effects was a weakening of the SASPA Board's advocacy after some of its members became conflicted. On one hand, these members needed to be seen by the DfE Chief Executive as compliant whilst, on the other hand, they were keen to exercise their professional agency and have me, as SASPA President, agitate DfE for policy changes (and to include the Minister for Education as leverage). This dilemma of dualism (i.e., the principal as employee and the principal as active member of the profession) has most likely been apparent since principal associations were first formed but it was now elevated by the effect of new managerial practices on the relationship principals had with the bureaucracy and with their Education Director.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a selective account of my work history as SASPA President so that practical details about how a principal association progresses its policy interests through political work could be documented. The four episodes taken from my SASPA presidency and ASPA vice-presidency provide examples of how I operated proactively

with government; disrupted and resisted government and bureaucracy agendas; provided advocacy within a bureaucratic culture of control and compliance; and managed the internal politics of an association of conflicted peers. Collectively, these episodes show the complexity of the policy terrain where principal associations do their political work.

Written as a history of my present, the diagnosis I made of my current problem was that the bureaucracy had constrained the political agency of principal associations. In Chapter 5, I discuss the key constraining factors experienced through my SASPA work history as findings from my autoethnographic data, i.e., the relational proximities between the association and other education stakeholders; the dualism of SASPA members; and the effects of a neoliberalising policy regime. Beyond revealing the political work of principal associations, the main purpose of this history of my present has been “to show the historical conditions of existence upon which present-day practices depend”(Garland, 2014, p. 373).

At the very time that principal associations needed to use their political agency to contest the neoliberalising policy regime of competition, standardisation and test-based accountability, the South Australian education bureaucracy instituted a suite of technologies that provided the apparatus to reinforce ‘truths’ to which principals identified their obligation to ‘submit’. Here, principals were subjects of unquestioned compliance, the corollary of which is that the political agency of their principal association was weakened.

## **3. NEOLIBERAL REFORM: THE GERM EFFECT**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This study focuses on how principal associations are engaged in public policy contests during neoliberal times. Since the political work of principal associations is absent in the literature, my approach has been to establish how South Australia's public principals have been constituted as subjects by various forms of accountability and then to determine how this rendering has shaped SASPA – DfE policy engagement (1995–2020). To understand how this research contributes to policy sociology, my thesis now turns to the theories and debates that underpin it.

The knowledge I pursued was informed by the literature of neoliberalism, new managerialism and performativity. Taking a case study approach, the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)<sup>21</sup> is used to illustrate how these theories and practices coalesce and function as a global strategy for increased competition, standardisation and test-based accountability.

### **3.2 Neoliberalism**

Foucault (2008) in his lecture series, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, provided a genealogy of governmentality which included analyses of neoliberalism. Here, Foucault concluded that “the market is no longer a principle of government’s self-limitation; it is a principle turned against it. It is a sort of permanent economic tribunal confronting government” (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 247). Put another way, the state no longer defined and

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<sup>21</sup> Sahlberg (2012) is credited with having ascribed the metaphoric acronym GERM to explain the infectious spreading of the Global Education Reform Movement.

supervised the freedom of the market; rather, the market itself had become the organising and regulatory principle of the state.

In its simplest form, neoliberalism is a policy framework “marked by a shift from Keynesian welfarism towards a political agenda favouring the unfettered operations of markets” (Larner, 2000, p. 6). Springer, Birch and MacLeavy (2016) saw neoliberalism as the “political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasise market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility” (p. 2). Both views emphasise how neoliberalism places the importance of economics ahead of politics and social policy. Giroux (2005) saw that this effect of neoliberalism on social policy was enabled by its discourse which had made “democracy ... synonymous with free markets” (p. 9). Lingard, Hayes and Mills (2002) observed how, “education was once part of broad social policy... Now it is increasingly a subject of economic policy” (p. 6). With the implementation of the “neoliberal project”, Connell (2013) noted that institutional arrangements were made by every country under neoliberal control (p. 100). These institutional arrangements impacted services, including the education sector, “rendering them *market-like* or *business-like*” (Davies, 2016, p. xiv italics added). Stephen Ball, in an interview with Remi Kneyber (2015) proposed that there are two types of neoliberalism:

neoliberalism with a big ‘N’, that focuses on the economization of social life and the creation of new opportunities for profit, and neoliberalism with a small ‘n’, through the reconfiguring of relationships between the governing and the governed, power and knowledge and sovereignty and territoriality (p. 39).

Adopting Ball’s terminology, my thesis is largely concerned with the small ‘n’ definition where “modes of governance, and regulatory relations” have been utilised “in order to stabilize neoliberalism” (p. 39).

### **3.2.1 Hegemonic Credentials**

Whilst my interest in neoliberalism is in its effects on public education policy, its origins are important in establishing its hegemonic credentials. In 1947 Friedrich Hayek formed the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) which is credited by many as being the birth of neoliberal ideology (see Davies, 2016; De Lissovoy, 2017; Dean, 2012; Rose & Miller, 2010; Savage, 2017; Turner, 2007). Turner (2007) described the MPS as a diverse gathering of 38 scholars “drawn together by a sense of crisis to discuss the intellectual revival of liberalism” (p. 76). The crisis she was referring to was the “constellation of threats” (p. 79) to liberal values and individual freedoms posed by the failure of ‘collectivism’ in its various forms; e.g., Keynesian economics and the welfare state, Roosevelt’s New Deal, and the totalitarianism of Germany and the USSR.

In her analysis of the MPS and its statement of aims, Turner (2007) concluded that its intention “was not merely to revive liberalism as a credible creed, but also to reinvent it as a coherent philosophy for the twentieth century” (p. 78). Whilst the MPS had no interest in creating a new political orthodoxy, the society’s network did provide a counter ideology to ‘collectivism’ – i.e., neoliberalism – which, as a source of ideas and inspiration, strongly influenced the 1980s politics of Western industrialised democracies, particularly Margaret Thatcher’s Great Britain and Ronald Reagan’s USA. In terms of realigning education policy to reflect neoliberal ideals, the key directional shifts were represented by Reagan’s *A Nation at Risk* (NCOEIE, 1983) and Thatcher’s *Education Reform Act 1988* (see Powell & Edwards, 2005). The starting premise for these reforms was that the perceived decline in educational standards put the international competitiveness of the USA and British economies at risk. By entangling education standards with economic competitiveness in this way, these two

seminal reforms established a neoliberalising policy template which other nations, including Australia, followed.

### **3.2.2 Contesting Neoliberal Hegemony**

My research is interested in contesting neoliberal inflected education policy but, given the enduring nature of its hegemony, the challenge is not to be underestimated. Since the Reagan and Thatcher era, the advance of neoliberalism has been contested but, beyond momentary disruptions, no specific contestation has proved successful. As Cahill (2011) noted, there have been pivotal moments when elements of neoliberalism have been wound back – e.g., the 2006–2007 trade union campaign against industrial relations deregulation in Australia – but such contests have not managed to end its hegemony (pp. 488-489). Arguing that it is time for opponents of neoliberalism to move away from a defensive strategy to a transformative one, Cahill (2011) suggested that the global financial crisis of 2007 (and various other calamities since) created the conditions for alternatives to be legitimated, and the opportunities to highlight its socially destructive tendencies (p. 489). It is somewhat ironic then, that following this century’s biggest global calamity, the COVID-19 pandemic (2021–2023), no viable alternative to neoliberal ideology has emerged. It is as if Keynesian welfare measures are invoked on a temporary basis and, when the crisis is averted, it is back-to-business as normal. Perhaps Aalbers (2013) was correct when he observed that, even if there is an acceptance that the ideology of neoliberalism has failed, “neoliberal practice is alive and kicking” because “it thrives on presenting existing socioeconomic conditions as failing and neoliberalism as the best solution” (p. 1083). This reasoning is apparent in two of the South Australian public education reforms considered in this thesis, *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015-2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System* (2019 – 2022). Both policy solutions were introduced



under new managerial leadership and were borrowed from elsewhere; with the former appropriated from the police force and the latter adopted from the McKinsey and Company global toolbox for school system improvement. In justifying these reforms, the two respective DfE chief executives presented the case of education failing by using the state's poor standing nationally in NAPLAN and blaming educators for these results. The claim I make here is that these reforms firmly belong to the neoliberal policy tradition and, as I discuss in Chapters 7 and 8, both approaches significantly changed how principals were constituted and how principal associations were engaged in policy work.

Neoliberalism, perhaps because of it not being a distinct political movement (e.g., there is no 'neoliberal political party'), "can become an uneven process of governmental or regulatory development" (Dean, 2012, p. 151). Dean's observation is a cautionary one and has implications for how I represent neoliberalism in my discussion of education policy, since the 'unevenness' to which he refers is implicated by geography and politics: geography, because the nature and manifestation of the neoliberal project varies across Western democracies and has been accentuated by globalism, the impact of which is evident in how participation in the Organisation for Economic Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has grown from thirty countries (in 2000) to ninety (in 2020); politics, because the neoliberal project is 'politically agnostic'. In Australia, for example, the principles of neoliberalism and its discourse have been as prevalent in the progressive Labor governments of Hawke, Keating, Rudd, Gillard and Albanese, as they have been in the conservative Liberal-National coalition governments of Howard, Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison. This is an observation consistent with MacDonald et al. (2023) who, in their policy overview of public education in Australia since the 1970s, claimed there had been "a consistent trajectory towards a market agenda" (p. 307).

The feature of neoliberalism that is most relevant to this study is the entanglement of education standards with economic competitiveness. It is this move, in particular, that has seen the broad purposes of schooling reduced to a fundamental purpose, i.e., the preparation of young people for labour market participation. This entanglement of education and economics, then, forms the ideological through-line that has shaped the key policy agenda impacting the scope of my research; that is, the various attitudes towards principal accountability across three major periods of reform in South Australia's system of public education and how this has affected SASPA—DfE policy engagement.

### **3.3 The Technologies of Neoliberal Reform**

Recognising the vastness of the literature traversing the neoliberal-inflected terrain of public education policy, I followed the advice of Lather (1999) and made my review “situated, partial and perspectival” (p. 3). To achieve this ambition, I chose to use the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) as a short case study, where the various technologies of neoliberal reform (after Ball, 2016a) – competition and choice, new managerialism and performativity – coalesced. Ball's (2016a) argument was that these technologies do not just change what we [educators] do, “they also change who we are, how we think about what we do, how we relate to one another, how we decide what is important and what is acceptable” (p. 1050). In Foucauldian terms, these technologies act as instruments for subjection – i.e., how we are normalised and regulated, and subjectivation – i.e., how we shape our subjectivity within these norms and regulations (see Burchell et al., 1991; Dean, 2002; Foucault et al., 2010; Lemke, 2011; Lorenzini, 2016a).

Returning now to my reworking of Ball's (2016a) assertion, neoliberalism is discussed here as both the ideological foundation for the commodification and marketisation of

education policy, and as the basis for a form of governmentality – that is, “a wide range of control techniques that makes subjects governable” (Madsen, 2014, p. 814) – where the technologies of management and performance are found. Much of this treatment focuses on discussing the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) as a “neoliberal ideological hegemonic project” (Springer, 2012, p. 136), one where Ball’s (2016a) notions of competition and choice, new managerialism and performativity, coalesce to form a global strategy. Here my motivation for using GERM as a case study is redolent of Apple (2015) and his “Gramscian-inspired project that is ... ‘understanding and interrupting the Right’” (p. 174). Apple argued, “that if you want to counter the Right’s hegemonic project look very carefully at how they became hegemonic. What did they do? How did they do it?” (p. 174). If principal associations and others are to challenge neoliberal policy regimes, it follows that an understanding of the GERM, what it does and how it does it, is a necessary first step.

### ***3.3.1 The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)***

According to Ball (2016a) the technology of “the market consists of competition and choice” (p. 1049). In Australia, competition is expressed through standardisation (i.e., NAPLAN nationally and PISA internationally) and choice is framed by a school funding regimen that sees considerable public funding invested in the Catholic and Independent schooling sectors<sup>22</sup>. As MacDonald et al (2023) note, standardisation and parental choice “are driven by market imperatives of economic efficiency and competition” and these “are indicative of how global policy agendas have variously

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<sup>22</sup> At the time of writing this thesis, the Commonwealth Government’s funding ratio setting was 80:20, where 80% flowed to the Catholic and Independent school sectors and 20% flowed to the Public Education sector. This is explained at: <https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools>

informed and shaped Australian federal education policies” (p. 319). Here, the global policy agendas being referred to are those set by the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD).

The OECD is an international organisation with the stated goal of shaping “policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and wellbeing for all” (OECD, 2023, no page number). A key component of its approach to policy improvement is ‘international standard-setting’. For the schooling sector, this standard-setting project is led by the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, which operates the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA is designed to enable the evaluation of educational systems by measuring the performance of 15-year-old students on mathematics, science and reading. The impact of PISA on educational policy has been extensive and is widely documented (Feniger & Lefstein, 2014; Gillis, Polesel, & Wu, 2016; Sahlberg, 2016; Schleicher & Zoido, 2016; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Zhao, 2020). In my local context, for example, PISA has directly informed and influenced the various policy settings within the DfE’s strategy for South Australia to move from “good to great” so as to become “a world class system” (Persse, 2018). Discussed in Chapter 8 of this thesis, this local strategy relies on standardisation (i.e., NAPLAN) and on competition and comparison (i.e., PISA and McKinsey and Company’s universal scale), and is strengthened by new managerial practices which have expanded principal accountabilities and increased principal compliance. This local reform is redolent of the Global Education Reform Movement.

To emphasise the harmful and infectious spread of this Global Education Reform Movement, Sahlberg (2012) ascribed the metaphoric acronym, GERM (no page number, paragraph 5). Essentially, the GERM presents neoliberalism as “an ideological hegemonic project” where there is an adherence to neoliberal concepts and

ideas which are “maintained by *elite actors* and *dominant groups*” (Springer, 2012, p. 136, italics added). The ‘dominant groups’ within the GERM which have applied ‘neoliberal concepts and ideas’ most influentially are the OECD, its Directorate for Education and Skills which administers PISA, and The World Bank. The ‘elite actors’ include the OECD’s Director for Education and Skills, Dr Andreas Schleicher (2017), who claimed that “PISA shows what is possible in education and it helps countries to see themselves in the mirror of student performance and educational possibilities in other countries” (p. 1). Here, Schleicher is referencing the importance of global competition in education based on standardised test scores and how aspirational nations can learn from the high performing systems of others.

### **3.3.2 GERM’s Elite Actors and Dominant Groups**

Whilst the neoliberal concepts and ideas within the GERM are advanced by several ‘elite actors’ including Schleicher, I will limit my discussion here to the influence of Professor (now Sir) Michael Barber. The first PISA test for reading, mathematical and scientific literacy was issued in 2000. Shortly afterwards, Professor Barber (2001), writing as the head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit of the United Kingdom’s Department for Education and Employment, made a case for governments and education systems to scale up their school effectiveness and improvement research to include international comparisons. A key feature of his argument was that education is “demonstrably an investment in the future economic health of a society” (Barber, 2001, p. 214), a claim he drew from the World Bank’s 1998 Annual Report. Further referencing this same report and, specifically, its categorisation of education systems across the world, Barber made the point that even OECD and East Asian countries with “mature systems” had problems of “inefficiency and inequality” (p. 223). The fact that no nation had ‘gotten education right’ was a judgement used by Barber (2001) to

justify his encouragement for countries to move beyond a local, state or national perspective and seek an international or global perspective, an undertaking which he suggested was “the challenge for the next decade” (p. 213). By emphasising that, “successful education reform in a handful of countries is not enough: it must be global” (2001, p. 217), Barber essentially argued the need for a global education reform movement.

Whilst the origin of the GERM is the OECD, other international organisations such as the World Bank, McKinsey and Company, and Pearson are amongst its ‘dominant groups’. Here, Barber’s role as an ‘elite actor’ was amplified by his unique relationship within and across these groups. Having sided with The World Bank and its case for global education reform in the aforementioned paper, Barber later became the Head of Global Education Practice at McKinsey from 2006 to 2011, where he co-authored *How the world’s best-performing schools come out on top* (2007) and *How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better* (2011). These texts argued the case, first made by The World Bank’s Education Sector Strategy Report 1999 (as cited in Barber, 2001), that each nation’s education system could be categorised according to performance across a range of variables including teaching, leadership, management, evaluation measures and high expectations. Similarly, the McKinsey claim was that they could classify the performance of school systems as poor, fair, good, great or excellent by applying their Universal Scale (Mourshed et al., 2011, p. 117). This scale was derived by applying the statistical thinking of Hanushek and Woessmann<sup>23</sup> (2010) to the results of twenty sample school systems, thereby evaluating performance and using the relativities to establish benchmarks. According

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<sup>23</sup> Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) work from human capital theory where education is seen to play a role in economic well-being. By tackling the issue of measurement, they claim their work shows the relationship between the quality of schools and the skills-growth of students (p. 171).

to Mourshed and Barber (2011), the process for developing the scale consisted of a series of calibrations that addressed the variances between multiple assessment types (i.e., PISA, TIMSS<sup>24</sup>, PIRLS<sup>25</sup> and NAEP<sup>26</sup>); between different ages and school years; and between the different years these tests were conducted. The resultant scale classified a system's performance and calculated to a one "schoolyear equivalent, or 38 Universal Scale points" the "improvement gap" – that is, "the improvement required for a system to progress from one performance level to the next" (p. 117). With the knowledge acquired from this process, McKinsey claimed to be able to fashion a contextualised improvement strategy for a school system to address its improvement gaps based on the effectiveness of interventions adopted by high performing countries. This is of particular relevance to my study given that South Australia's DfE became one of McKinsey's corporate clients in 2018–19. The nature of the DfE's work with McKinsey and Company is the subject of my Chapter 8, *From Collective Surveillance to Bureaucratic Compliance*.

Returning to my focus on 'elite actors', in 2011 Barber transitioned from McKinsey to Pearson where he became Chief Education Adviser until 2017. Whilst at Pearson, Barber launched *The Learning Curve* (see Barber & Ozga, 2014) which was designed to use the analysis of quantitative data such as PISA, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) to distil lessons learnt about how best to achieve improved learning outcomes and to then encourage systems to purchase the expertise of Pearson to undertake similar reform. Considered by Hogan, Lingard and Sellar (2015)

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<sup>24</sup> Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

<sup>25</sup> Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

<sup>26</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress (USA)

to be an example of Pearson using its capacity to leverage and analyse data for its own commercial benefit, they assigned the term 'edu-business' to describe such work; that is, a company "increasingly able to constitute policy problems" for which they "are able to profit through selling policy solutions" (p. 7). Such a description also fits with the nature of McKinsey and Company's work in the schooling sector.

The GERM, then, whilst emanating from the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills, is best described as a symbiotic alliance of international organisations or 'dominant groups' facilitated by 'elite actors' such as Sir Michael Barber: symbiotic, in that the interests of its various members, the 'consultocracy' (e.g., McKinsey and Company), the 'edu-business' (e.g., Pearson) and the 'philanthropist' (e.g., The World Bank), are each served by GERM, together with the interests of the 'host' organisation (i.e., the OECD) and its various member nations (including Australia). The GERM presents, then, as the embodiment of an 'ideological hegemonic project' in education, where an adherence to neoliberal concepts and ideas is not only maintained by elite actors and dominant groups but is further enabled by the exponential growth of participating nations in the PISA project (i.e., 43 countries in 2000 and 80 countries in 2022).

If principal associations want to challenge the status quo it means interrupting the GERM and its effects. ASPA prepared the ground for such a project when it commissioned *Beyond Certainty: A Process for Thinking About Futures for Australian Education* (Reid, 2018) and endorsed its Recommendation 19:

That ASPA advocates publicly, and to the federal government, for a review of PISA, which investigates the reliability and validity of the tests and their impact on Australian education (Reid, 2018, p. 89).



That such a review has not occurred is not a surprise, but it does suggest the need to consider other tactics. Returning to Apple (2015) and his “Gramscian-inspired project” of “understanding and interrupting the Right” (p. 174): if the GERM has become hegemonic through the efforts of elite actors and dominant groups then who will be the elite actors and dominant groups to counter that hegemony?

### ***3.3.3 Data, Comparison and Competition***

Understandably, the GERM has its critics (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2017; Lingard & Lewis, 2017; Pereyra, Kotthoff, & Cowen, 2011; Reid, 2020; Sahlberg, 2012, 2016, 2023; Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Sjøberg, 2015; Zhao, 2018, 2020). Broadly, these critics argue that the GERM prioritises test scores and narrows academic outcomes at the expense of a holistic, well-rounded education. They also understand that teacher and principal accountability measures have become tied to these narrow measures of student performance, and that this has had a subjugating effect on how teachers and principals see themselves.

GERM fosters international competition by the creation of data and using data in comparative ways. Biesta (2019) referred to this as the global educational measurement industry (GEMI), where the problematic impact of PISA was that: it promoted a questionable definition of good education; it used a questionable methodology (with the focus on the comparison of countries and systems); it was based on a logic of competition (e.g. league tables); and was driven by the fear of being left behind (p. 663). These GERM symptoms loom large in Australia’s approach to education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

According to Lingard and Lewis (2017), Australia joined the OECD in 1971 and has participated in all PISA-testing iterations since they commenced in 2000 (p. 7). By

contrast to other countries such as the USA, “Australia oversamples for PISA so that comparative test scores for all states and territories are also available in addition to a ‘national’ score” (Lingard & Lewis, 2017, p. 7). The decision to do so has contributed to a discourse where education is now understood as a competitive venture between Australian states and territories, in addition to the international comparisons made possible by the publication of PISA league tables. The importance of global competition in education based on standardised test scores and how aspirational nations can learn from the high performing systems of others is reflected in comments made by Andreas Schleicher (2017), the Director for Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at the OECD.

In today’s world, the yardsticks for success in education are no longer national standards alone, but increasingly the performance of the most successful education systems internationally. PISA can be a powerful instrument for educational research, policy and practice by allowing education systems to look at themselves in the light of intended, implemented and achieved policies elsewhere... Most importantly, by providing an opportunity for policy makers and practitioners to look beyond the experiences that are evident in their own systems and thus to reflect on some of the paradigms and beliefs underlying these, they hold out the promise to facilitate educational improvement. (Schleicher, 2017, p. 129)

Schleicher’s comments are consistent with the GERM discourses and are redolent of its larger purpose. But that larger purpose, as Sahlberg (2023) noted, is to provide “antidotes” to the “infections it has been spreading globally” (p. 7).

In Australia, the reliance on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data and its comparative use has provided a form of ‘national governance’ for education policy. According to the NAPLAN website, its program is “the measure through which governments, education authorities, schools and the community can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes” (ACARA, 2023, no page number). Whilst many principals and teachers would take exception to such a claim, the reality is that Australia’s educational

policy landscape is now dominated by the standardised testing regimen of NAPLAN. For example, NAPLAN is the key measure or ‘output’ used by the Australian Government’s Productivity Commission<sup>27</sup> in its determination of whether the schooling sector is delivering value for money (i.e., value relative to the Commonwealth’s funding ‘input’). In its review of the 2019–2023 National School Reform Agreement, the Productivity Commission reported that between 2018 and 2022, “national reading and numeracy testing of years 3, 5, 7, 9 generally worsened” (Commonwealth, 2023, p. 8). This is somewhat problematic given that NAPLAN is the product of the very ‘policy borrowing’ advocated by Schleicher (2017). The high stakes literacy and numeracy testing regimens operating in the United Kingdom and in New York city (USA) were adapted by the Rudd Government in 2008 to form NAPLAN (a nationwide literacy and numeracy testing system) and My School (a navigable website accessible by parents wanting to make school comparisons based on data including NAPLAN). It was the introduction of My School in 2010 that Niesche (2015) argued “officially signalled the open message of high stakes testing as the prime steering mechanism of school systems in Australia” (pp. 136-137). Yet, by their own measures – NAPLAN (nationally) and PISA (internationally) – the Australian neoliberal education project has failed. My position on this is consistent with Reid (2020) who recognised that:

Judged by its own miserable measures of educational outcomes it has failed, if the outcry – by the very people who promote the current agenda – following the release of NAPLAN and PISA results is any guide. The irony is that, even as the same people complain that standards are declining, they not only fail to recognise their role in this outcome, but offer more of the same to solve the problems for which they are responsible (p. 49).

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<sup>27</sup> That education is a matter for the Australian Government’s Productivity Commission is indicative of the neoliberal project’s interest in aligning social policy to economic policy.

The corollary to Reid's observation is that opponents of the neoliberalising policy regime, including principal associations, cannot expect the regime to die by its own hand.

### ***GERM Control***

These neoliberal reforms emphasised competition and choice within the market, and comparative performance within and across the nation's education systems. That they were adopted from other OECD countries supports Schleicher's argument that educational improvement is facilitated through examining what was intended, implemented and achieved elsewhere (2017, p. 129). But, as Lingard (2010) noted: "... effective policy borrowing must be accompanied by policy learning which takes account of research on the effects of the policy that will be borrowed in the source system, learning from that and then applying that knowledge to the borrowing system through careful consideration of national and local histories, cultures and so on" (p. 132). That this 'policy learning' did not occur prior to NAPLAN and My School being imposed on Australia's schooling sector, shows the underlying risk associated with the GERM logic: that is, aspirational nations are encouraged to adopt and adapt the policies and practices thought to be helping the highest PISA achieving countries. But, using NAPLAN as an example, neither Great Britain nor the United States were in the PISA Top 10 in 2008, so could not be legitimately considered 'high achieving'.

As an 'ideological hegemonic project', the GERM projects the idea that education will be improved by increased competition; standardisation; emphases on literacy, numeracy, science and mathematics; test-based accountability (Sahlberg, 2016) and the privatisation of public education (Sahlberg, 2023). This is consistent with the notion that data drive performance, and those responsible for that performance must be held to account. Here, the PISA is used by the GERM's 'elite actors' (including Sir Michael

Barber and Andreas Schleicher) and 'dominant groups' (including the OECD, the World Bank and McKinsey and Company) to govern global education policy. This is something taken up by Pereyra, Kotthoff and Cowen (2011) who noted that PISA has become "a form of international and transnational governance" which, "as a disciplinary technology", aims "to govern the twenty-first century" (p. 3).

Returning here to Ball (2016a), the arrangements of competition and choice have shaped the market technology of neoliberal reform, and shifted the meaning of education from "a public to a private good, from a service to a commodity" (p. 1049). Arguing that this is part of a neoliberal 'modernisation' of the state, Ball (2016a) observes how the state has become "a contractor, funder, target-setter, benchmarker and monitor... more technocratic and less democratic" (p. 1049). It follows that these technocratic conditions established the need for the technologies of new managerialism and performativity.

### **3.3.4 The Technologies of Neoliberal Reform**

According to Ball (2016a) the technology of management "is a delivery system for change, a method for reculturing education organisations" (p. 1049) and the technology of performance is understood as "performativity"<sup>28</sup>, where "effort, values, purposes and self-understanding" become relatable through "measures and comparisons of output" (p. 1053). In the ecology of Australia's public education system, the technology of management is experienced as new managerialism, and the technology of performance is recognised as a set of externally applied accountabilities. Together, new managerialism and principal accountability have functioned as

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<sup>28</sup> In his earlier writing, Ball (1998, p. 201) attributed the term 'performativity' to his raiding of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (first published in 1979 and translated into English in 1986).

apparatus for the control and compliance of school leaders working within neoliberalising policy regimes.

### ***New Managerialism***

A consistent reading from the literatures associated with neoliberal reform by Ball (2016a), Lingard (2016), Lynch (2014b) and Reid (2020), is that education as a public good has been undermined by new managerialism<sup>29</sup>. With a sharp focus “on performance management, the range and depth of statistical and comparative data on which analyses can be based, and the centralization of the management of school, teacher and pupil achievement” (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003, p. 31), new managerialism has eroded principal autonomy. This is a view shared by Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012), who argued that new managerialism was a political project, one where the technologies of control are used to challenge “established practices among professionals, not least of which is professional autonomy” (p. 5).

The principles and practices of new managerialism, thought to have emerged from the New Labour’s<sup>30</sup> modernisation of the public sector in the United Kingdom, most likely evolved from the New Public Management (NPM) of the previous decade. Yeatman (1994) saw that NPM was essentially a 1980s response to “increased social and cultural complexity; increased uncertainty; and increased democratic expectations of government and the design and delivery of services” (p. 289). For Clarke, Gewirtz and McLaughlin (2000), NPM was characterised by:

- attention to outputs and performance rather than inputs;

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<sup>29</sup> Neoliberalism and new managerialism are interrelated but distinct concepts. If neoliberalism is the political and economic ideology advocating for free markets, deregulation, privatisation, and minimal state intervention, then new managerialism is the management philosophy focused on introducing private-sector practices into public and nonprofit sectors by emphasising efficiency, performance metrics, accountability, and a results-oriented approach to governance and institutional operation.

<sup>30</sup> The governments of Tony Blair (1997-2007) and Gordon Brown (2007-2010).

- organizations being viewed as chains of low-trust relationships, linked by contracts or contractual-type processes;
- breaking down large-scale organizations and using competition to enable 'exit' or 'choice' by service users;
- decentralization of budgetary and personal authority to line managers (p. 6).

In considering this explanation of NPM in terms of the public education sector, one can see how the 1990s movement to self-managing schools (SMS) was conceived. Here, the adoption of principal autonomy and the adherence to performance measures were located within a neoliberalising policy regime which commodified and marketised schooling.

According to Lynch et al. (2012), another key function of new managerial reform was “to curb the power of professionals in public sector organizations” (p. 5). This limiting of professional power was enacted through the technologies of surveillance and performance management. Paradoxically, “while professionals needed to be controlled, their assistance was vital for realizing the new managerial project” (p. 5). It is within this paradox that the need to reconstitute public service leadership and senior management is revealed. In light of this, new managerialism has been an important neoliberal reform technology to consider in my examination of how South Australia’s public school principals were constituted from 1995–2020, and how this rendering effected SASPA—DfE policy engagement.

### ***Performativity***

In the work of Ball (1998, 2001, 2003, 2016a), the term ‘performativity’<sup>31</sup> is used to highlight the ways in which educational policies and measures actively shape the practices and behaviours of educators and schools, often with unintended and

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<sup>31</sup> My working definition for ‘performativity’ is: the institutional processes and evaluative systems through which actions, judgments, and representations are aligned to specific standards, classifications, and targets.

sometimes detrimental consequences for the quality and purpose of education. Ball (2016a) considered performativity to be a key technology in the apparatus of neoliberal reform (pp. 1052-1054). Here, educational policies become performative acts because they not only describe what should be done, they actively influence what is done. For example, policies introduce measures to which teachers and schools feel compelled to adhere, often altering their behaviour and practice to meet these criteria. Performativity often involves the imposition of targets, metrics and performance indicators. Educators and schools are judged and evaluated based on how well they meet these predefined criteria, which can lead to a focus on achieving these targets at the expense of other educational goals. Chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis reveal examples of this experience in the South Australian context.

As a technology for neoliberal reform in education, performativity promotes a competitive systemic culture where schools and educators are compared based on their ability to meet performance targets. Such competition can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and a teaching-to-the-test mentality. With regard to the latter, educators can feel compelled to prioritise teaching methods and content more likely to boost test scores, potentially neglecting broader aspects of schooling such as critical thinking, creativity and social development.

In this “performative society” (Ball, 2000, p. 16) we find ourselves in, accountability seems to have become more than an instrument within the apparatus of the system. Rather, having been presented as a remedy for the loss of public trust, accountability seems to constitute the system itself. Ranson (2003) noted how this “generated perverse unintended consequences” (p. 459) which, in the context of public education, included the strengthening of the bureaucracy’s power relations over school principals.



### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has considered the theories and debates related to my interest in the effects of neoliberalising policy regimes on how principals are constituted and how this rendering constrains the political work of principal associations. I have situated this problem within the literatures which critique the GERM and its technologies of reform, new managerial practices and performativity. I now turn my attention to the matter of research design and the various decisions pertaining to methodology and method.

## 4. RESEARCH DESIGN

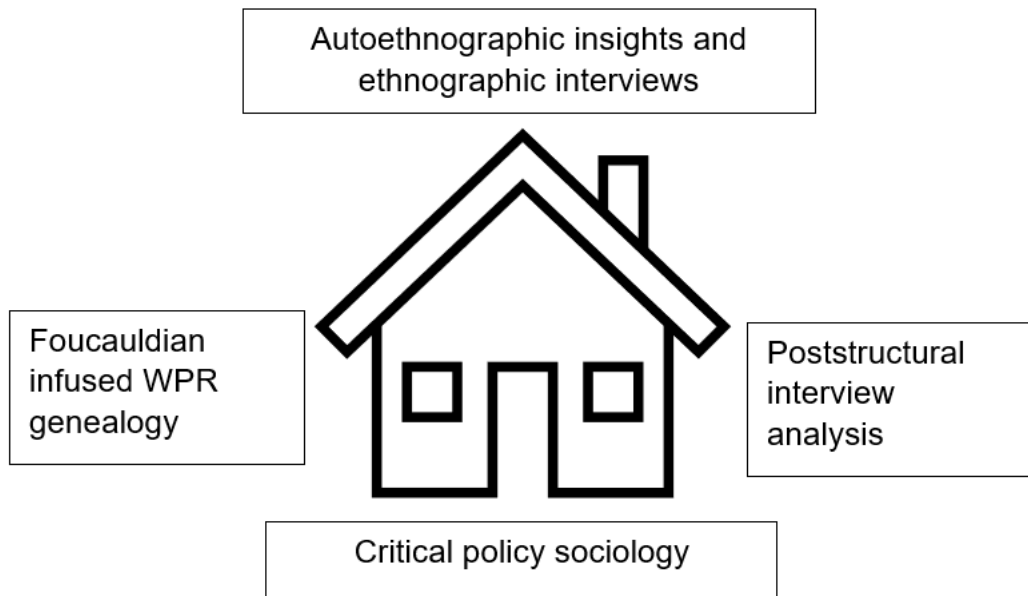
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### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I defend the relationship between the knowledge I have been pursuing and producing through research, and the theoretical underpinnings and practical choices made in formulating its production. To do this, I outline the scope of my research and justify how the decisions regarding my methodological approach were appropriate for the research questions and for the academic field of inquiry they occupy. Details of the research methods used, including the specific steps taken to identify, collect and analyse the data, are documented. Before concluding the chapter, I acknowledge some limitations related to my choice of methodology and discuss various ethical considerations associated with this research.

### 4.2 Research Design

Following Su, Nixon and Adamson (2010), my quest for understanding “involves the construction of ideas in a framework” (p. 86). By accepting their use of the construction metaphor, and by expanding upon it, my research framework can be imagined as a house – one which has *critical policy sociology* as its epistemological foundations; a *Foucauldian infused genealogy* framed by Bacchi’s (2009) WPR framework as its methodological walls; various *autoethnographic insights* and *ethnographic interviews* with four DfE Chief Executives and with four SASPA Presidents as its roof; and *poststructural interview analysis* as its doors and windows.



**Figure 3: Research design as a construction of ideas forming a framework**

In building such a framework around the conceptual focus of my research, I sought to achieve a balance between “feeling one’s way” and settling on “what feels to be the most appropriate route” (Su et al., 2010, p. 87). The choices I made between these two navigable points recognised that research methodology “grows out of this theory and conceptualisation, and does not precede or proceed without it” (Walker & Thomson, 2010, p. 28). Therefore, whilst I am concerned in this chapter with research design – what I did in my research and why I did it – the decisions I made during my research journey recognised the ongoing adjustments which occurred between acquiring new knowledge and locating where that knowledge best resided theoretically.

#### **4.2.1 Research Scope**

This thesis explores how the profession’s constituted voice is included or excluded from public policy contests during neoliberal times, and what this might mean for the

political work of principal associations in the future. Specifically, it sought to answer a question in three parts:

- (i) What is the problem represented to be in the various positions taken on principal accountability policy within the *Partnerships 21* (1999-2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015-2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019-2022) reforms?
- (ii) How have principals been constituted because of these policy representations?
- (iii) How has this rendering impacted the capacity of principal associations (i.e., the organised and collective voice of principals) to engage the bureaucracy in productive processes for improving public education policy?

Here, my aim was to identify the issues that were constituted as ‘problems’ in the policy positions the bureaucracy took regarding principal accountability and to examine the implications and effects of these on principal subjectivity and the political work of principal associations.

### **4.3 Field of Inquiry**

What I was pursuing and producing through this research relied upon a critical approach to reading education policy. This located my research in the field of policy sociology which, according to Regmi (2017), is a “critical approach to understanding the social and political dynamics of educational policy” (p. 71). It was concerned, therefore, with how educational policies are shaped, how they are implemented, and how they affect the lived experiences of individuals, institutions, and communities. As an important area of research in education, policy sociology helps to identify and understand the social, cultural, and political forces that shape educational policy. It also

provides insights into how educational policies are implemented, and into the various stakeholders involved in the process. Scholarly contributions, particularly those made by Bourdieu and Foucault, have significantly informed the traditions of policy sociology.

### ***4.3.1 Bourdieu and Foucault***

Those who have written about the influence of Pierre Bourdieu (including Atkinson, 2011; Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor, 2005; Rawolle & Lingard, 2008; Reay, 2006; Swartz, 2003; Thomson, 2010) have suggested that his notion of 'field' is crucial to explore how educational policy texts "circulate without their context" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 3) so that when policy texts are transferred from one country to another, they do so without their 'field' of production. Bourdieu argued that the field of production is the social and cultural environment within which a policy text was written, and this environment impacts how the policy text is interpreted and applied. He argued that policy texts should be seen as a product of the field in which they were produced and should be read with an understanding of the field in which they are used. This is particularly significant when considering the implications of educational policy texts, which are often global in their reach and influence. As I highlighted in my discussion of GERM in Chapter 3, this is important in the current context of increasing globalisation and the influence of international organisations such as the OECD.

The policy sociology tradition is also informed by Foucault's notion of "governmentality" (2007, p. 115); that is, the ways in which power and knowledge are used to shape and control individuals, groups, and societies. Governmentality is the idea that governments, institutions, and organisations use certain techniques to govern the behaviour and subjectivity of their citizens. These techniques include the use of laws, regulations, policies, and practices to create specific outcomes. Governmentality is related to policy sociology in that it examines how power and knowledge are used to

shape and govern individuals, groups, and societies through the enactment of policies. Policy sociology seeks to understand the complex relationship between politics, policies, and society, and how this relationship shapes our lives. By examining how power and knowledge are used to shape policy and our lives, policy sociologists seek to understand the implications of policies for society, and how to address policies that are unjust or oppressive. Foucault's notion of governmentality has been influential in policy sociology, as it provides a framework for understanding the relationship between power and knowledge, and how they shape policy and our lives.

In relation to policy sociology, governmentality is seen as a crucial notion in understanding how neoliberal principles are embedded in policy discourses. Those who have written about Michel Foucault's influence, including Bacchi (2010), Ball (2000), Colebatch (2006), Ozga (1999), Savage et al (2021) and Sellar and Lingard (2013), have emphasised how policy is a form of discourse which shapes the subjectivity of individuals. More specifically, Foucault (1982b) used the term 'subjectification' to explain how we are increasingly governed by the hegemonic, political, and discursive practices of others. Being governed in such ways forms what Foucault called "regimes of truth"; that is, "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and functioning of statements" which are linked to the "systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and the effects of power which it induces and which redirect it" (Lorenzini, 2015, p. 1). These "regimes of truth" are what Ball (1993) drew upon to inform his analysis of policy, one where Foucauldian conceptions of discourse and 'discursive formations' were used. The scope of my research suggested that a discursive approach be taken, one where policy was treated explicitly as discourse. Consequently, the work of Ball (1993) provided a foundation for thinking about the analytical features of my research methodology.

### **4.3.2 'Critical' Policy Sociology**

I was attracted to claims made by Ozga (2019) that critical policy sociology expresses “the explicit concern that the underlying assumptions that shaped how a ‘problem’ was conceptualised and how ‘solutions’ were selected (and who did the defining and selection) needed to be subjected to critical scrutiny” (p. 294). Since my research explores how institutions make policy and how power relations are experienced within the process, undertaking a critical policy sociology seemed an appropriate decision to make. It was advantageous that this decision supported my interest in the various political adhesions and entanglements between actors and activists over policy, and in what Grace (1995) described as “the complexity of those relations” (p. 3). The “epistemic edge” (Clarke, Bainton, Lendvai, & Stubbs, 2015, p. 196) being sought by my deciding upon a critical policy sociology relates to policy as a form of knowledge production which, from my focus on the twenty-five years from 1995-2020, advances the notion of asymmetrical power relations forged by new managerialist practices such as performativity. It is within this tension that I located the contested terrain of policy being investigated. That there is struggle within this terrain is a claim supported by Lingard and Ozga (2007) who understood that education policy contests are a “struggle over meaning, resources and power” (p. 66).

By locating my research in the field of ‘critical policy sociology’, I am affirming how it seeks to address both “the politics of education policy” and “education policy as politics” (Lingard & Ozga, 2007, p. 3). Previously, Ozga (1987) described ‘policy sociology’ as a methodology “rooted in the social science tradition, historically informed and drawing on qualitative and illuminative techniques” (p. 144). As she later explained, the inclusion of the term ‘critical’ to the theory of policy sociology conveyed “the importance of challenging received wisdom and asking fundamental questions

about institutions, and social and power relations, in combination with an approach to theory that interrogates its standpoint in space and time” (2019, p. 294). My research is situated in ‘critical policy sociology’, this field of knowledge to which Ozga refers, because it asks questions about the social and power relations of policy making – i.e., *the politics of education policy* – and it interrogates the contextual features of place and time in which policy was made – i.e., *education policy as politics*.

My decision to undertake a genealogy was designed to attend to the ‘context’ and ‘contingency’ of policy making, two terms that Ozga (1987) believed were of utmost importance in policy sociology. According to Ozga, the concept of context refers to “the broader social, economic and political environment”, while the concept of contingency refers to “the specific circumstances that characterise the particular case being studied” (p. 149). In my research, I drew upon the concepts of context and contingency to examine how ‘the politics of education policy’ and ‘education policy as politics’ are shaped by the historical, cultural, and political contexts of a given place and time. I also employed an analysis of discourse to understand how education policy is shaped and contested by different actors. My genealogy, then, was designed to capture the complexity of policy making and to provide an understanding of both the politics of education policy and education policy as politics.

My study explores three directional policy shifts in South Australia’s public education settings – (i) *Partnerships 21* (2000–2002); (ii) *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015–2022), and (iii) *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System* (2019–2022) – not only to bring into focus *policy as text* and *policy as discourse* interpretations, but also to investigate the relationship between those who make policy and those who seek to influence how policy is made. The scope of the investigation, therefore, expanded beyond the macro environment in which policy is conceived and



formed (in this case, by education bureaucracies), to the micro situation in which school principals, who are authorised to enact policy and who subsequently experience its impact, but who then utilise their constitutive body (in this case, principal associations) to advocate for its improvement.

### ***Policy Effects***

With regard to the role context plays in critical policy analysis, I turned to the work of Stephen Ball (1993, 1997). For Ball (1993), the policy realm is messy, not only because of the arenas of action impacting upon it but also because of its various effects; that is, the impact on a range of practices and structures, and of organisational cultures and the patterns of relationships within them. This is at odds with Ozga's (1990) criticism that, within some policy sociology approaches, a view of policy making had been generated which emphasised "*ad hocery*, serendipidity, muddle and negotiation" (p. 360 - italics is in the original). Ball's (1993) argument that "we cannot rule out certain forms and conceptions of social action simply because they seem awkward, or theoretically challenging or difficult" (p. 10) is ostensibly the basis for the position he took on policy complexity. This position invokes Ball's (1993) introduction of *policy trajectories* as a means of analysing policy where context plays an increasingly significant role. Here, Ball's use of context is multi-faceted – "the context of influence, the context of policy text production and the context(s) of practice" (1993, p. 16) – and it is multi-dimensional – in that "each context involves struggle and compromise and *ad hocery*" (p. 16 - italics in the original). I am in broad agreement with Ball's *policy trajectory* approach as it preserves the traditional perspectives of *policy as text* and *policy as discourse* but suggests that these be contrasted with *policy effects* (the processes and outcomes of policy) in a 'cross-sectional' and 'contextual' analysis which traces "policy formulation, struggle and response from within the state itself through to the various recipients of policy" (1993, p. 16). The policy trajectory approach

can also be used to explain the successes and failures of different policy initiatives, and to trace the paths taken by different actors in the policy process. By examining the interactions between different actors and the policymaking processes, it is possible to identify patterns of influence and to understand how different actors have shaped the outcomes of policy decisions. This type of analysis is particularly helpful when accounting for the interests of different stakeholders. I credit Ball's (1993) thinking for my decision to undertake a Foucauldian infused WPR genealogy which is discussed later in this chapter.

In summary, the knowledge I have been pursuing and producing about the implications of increased compliance on principal identity and the effects on the political work of principal associations relies upon taking a critical stance to reading education policy. In the traditions of Ball (1993) and Ozga (1990), this locates my research in the field of critical policy sociology. To satisfy the scope of this research I selected a methodology that critiqued policy through an historical lens (i.e., genealogy) and adapted a set of theoretical tools designed to problematise policy and its effects (i.e., WPR).

#### **4.4 Using Bacchi**

The scope of this research suggested that a discursive approach be taken, one where policy was treated explicitly as discourse. Since my policy interest is in the subjugating effects of accountability regimes on principals, I drew upon the work of Bacchi (2009, 2012, 2022); specifically, her treatment of policy as problematisations rather than as problems. This treatment challenges the notion of policy as problem-solving and, instead, focuses on the 'problems' policies produce through representation. Here, the emphasis is on how policy represents a problem and how this representation produces all sorts of effects. According to Bacchi (2012), "governing takes place through problematizations, emphasizing the importance of subjecting them to critical scrutiny

and pointing to the possible deleterious effects they set in operation” (p. 7). This policy as problematisation approach informed the method chosen for analysing ethnographic data obtained from interviews with SASPA presidents and DfE chief executives. Here, the differences between the various positions taken on principal accountability policy and how these have constituted principals, have been contrasted with the variance in the capacity of principal associations to engage the bureaucracy in productive processes for improving public education policy. This juxtaposition was examined across the contested terrain of three principal accountability regimes over a 25-year period through a genealogy which used Bacchi’s WPR framework (2009) as its theoretical foundation. My genealogy reveals that, with each successive reform, the bureaucracy strengthened its domination in power relations and attempts to control school principals through technologies. Despite this (or, perhaps, because of this), some school leaders, at least to some extent, actively contested and resisted this subjugation through the political work of SASPA and other principal associations. Some did not, largely as a result of increasingly invasive and all-encompassing technologies of governance, which operated in an environment of increasing risk for principals in winning their jobs. Resistance and compliance has limitations and possibilities for the political work of principal associations, and this warranted closer examination.

#### ***4.4.1 The WPR Approach***

According to Bacchi (2012), the WPR approach is based on the idea that what “we say we want to do about something indicates what we think needs to change and hence how we constitute the ‘problem’” (p. 4). Bacchi argued that “it is possible to take any policy proposal and to ‘work backwards’ to deduce how it produces a ‘problem’” (p. 4) which she then suggested can be “opened up and studied to gain access to the implicit

system in which we find ourselves" (p. 5). Bacchi's point is that we ought not determine a specific stance or a 'pro' or 'con' position but rather explore "the system of limits and exclusions we practice without knowing it" (Foucault interviewed in Simon, 1971, p. 198). By standing back from what we take-for-granted to determine how practices have come to be, it is possible to detect patterns in representations of problems, revealing as Bacchi (2009) claimed, that "(w)e are governed through the ways in which problems are presented" (p. 8).

### ***Policy as Problem***

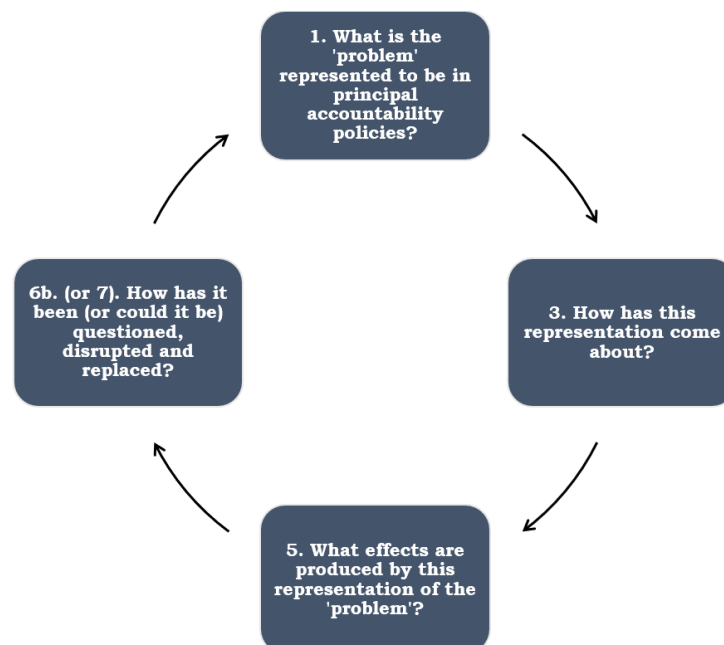
By using WPR to interrogate processes of problematisation, my thesis foregrounds the ways in which three different policy positions taken by the bureaucracy on principal accountability each gave form to a 'problem'. For *Partnerships 21* (P21), 'the problem' was how a bureaucracy committed to devolution could retain its control of schools. The policy solution was to enmesh school accountability with principal autonomy. For *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (PPRP), the 'problem' was how to accelerate school improvement in a system that was now governed through *Local Education Partnerships*. The policy solution was to compel this geographic cluster of schools and pre-schools to perform collective surveillance; take responsibility for the improvement of each other's performance data, and to account for the effects of their leadership to the DfE's senior executive. For the *From Good to Great* (FGTG) reform, the 'problem' was how to accelerate school improvement so that the system could move from 482 (good) to 530 (great) on the McKinsey and Company's universal scale. The policy solution was to install an accountability apparatus to control each school's improvement targets, plans for improvement, strategies for teaching literacy and numeracy, and monitoring and reviewing school (principal) performance.

### ***How Principals Were Constituted***

The knowledge that emerged from this process related to how principals had been constituted differently because of these policy representations, how the ‘truths’ resulting from the policy representations, created conditions for principals to constitute themselves as more compliant, and how this rendering impacted the political work of principal associations. With regard to P21, I use Chapter 6 to examine how principals were constituted by DfE’s policy of enmeshing accountability with autonomy, and how they constituted themselves. In Chapter 7, the introduction and consolidation of a collective form of principal accountability, the PPRP, is examined. With regard to the FG TG reform, my Chapter 8 discussion explains how principals were obligated to accept a further reduction to their autonomy and to comply with new accountabilities framed by the Quality Schools Improvement Plan (SIP) model.

### ***Processing Policy Problematisations***

Earlier in this chapter I outlined a question in three parts which my research was designed to answer.



**Figure 4: How the steps in the WPR framework have been adapted for this project.**

Here, I use Figure 4 (above) to guide a discussion about how my adaptation of the WPR framework provided a means for answering that three-part question. Bacchi's (2009) WPR framework was a deliberate attempt to dampen the enthusiasm "in education and public policy for 'problem solving'" (p. vii), instead, concentrating on "problem *questioning*" (p. vii - italics in original), where processes of problematisation in policy discourse are emphasised and initiated by asking 'what's the problem represented to be?'.

### ***Problem Representation***

The first part of my research question pertained to the problem representation within the principal accountability positions in three systemic reforms: *Partnerships 21* (1999–2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015–2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019–2022). To interrogate these different positions, the first of Bacchi's WPR questions was adopted and adapted to read – *What's the 'problem' represented to be in principal accountability policies?* My decision not to explicitly include the second WPR question for my project was in recognition that, in my discussion of Question 1 in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I surfaced various assumptions which underlay the DfE's representation of the 'problem'. The third WPR question – *How has this representation come about?* – links directly to how I approached policy genealogy. Knowledge of how the problem representations have come about and why they have changed over time establishes a trajectory which my study draws upon when considering possibilities for the future.

### ***Effects of this Representation***

The second part of my research question pertained to the effects of these policy representations on how principals have been constituted and how they constituted themselves. Here, the fifth WPR question – *What effects are produced by this*

*representation of the 'problem'?* – was invoked. My discussion of these effects includes subjectification or the ways in which particular subjects – principals and principal associations – are constituted and how they constitute themselves. This discussion established a bridge to the third part of my research question which relates to the impact this rendering has had on the capacity of principal associations (i.e., the organised and collective voice of principals) to engage the bureaucracy in productive processes for improving public education policy. My discussion in response to the sixth questions (6a and 6b) explores how and where the various representations of the problem have been produced and legitimised, and how they have been contested. By using the WPR framework in this way, the possibility of opposition and resistance remains open. And, without explicitly invoking the fourth WPR question, which considers what is left unproblematic by the representation of the problem and what silences it might contain, my discussion in response to the sixth questions implicitly incorporated this into that terrain.

The three key policy reforms I chose to examine in my genealogy were all system-wide strategies that compounded school and principal accountabilities. The two most recent policy shifts narrowed the focus of those accountabilities to standardised test results and school completion rates. If there is a point in public education where accountability evolves into compliance then, by 2020, South Australia may well have reached it. Here, the *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System* reform adopted a model for school improvement where each school's targets represented their contribution to the agency's capacity to attain 530 on the McKinsey and Company universal scale. Essentially, this model for school improvement put an additional accountability on principals' compliance; one which put constitutive professional bodies, such as principal associations, at odds with the employing authority of its members.

In summary, the WPR framework strongly supported my aim to identify the issues that were constituted as ‘problems’ in the policy positions the bureaucracy took regarding principal accountability, and it guided my examination of the implications and effects of these problematisations on principal subjectivity and the political work of principal associations.

#### **4.4.2 Bacchi and Foucault**

The WPR framework conceived by Bacchi (2009) was informed by Foucault’s thinking on governmentality and problematisation. Here, governmentality is understood as the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 1982b, p. 220); that is, the direction or guidance given for behaviour and action. Dean (2002) saw the study of governmentality as “an investigation of the means, techniques and instruments” by which the ends “of governments are to be realised” (p. 119) but also “the forms of subjectivity and agency” produced by these “rationalities and technologies of government” (p. 120). As Colebatch (2002) noted, “the concern with how ‘techniques of the self’ interact with ‘structures of domination’” shifts the question “from ‘how does the government govern us?’ to ‘how do we govern ourselves?’” (p. 425). This understanding is advanced by my research which not only investigated those who make policy but also considered those whose conduct is shaped by such policy.

Foucault’s comments about problematisation are also of significance to this research for two main reasons. First, they deflate the notion of policy being the solving of systemic problems – a doctrine adopted by new managerialist bureaucracies and evident in how they control the ‘policy cycle’. Second, as the mode of reasoning behind “a certain institutional practice” or “a certain apparatus of knowledge” (Foucault, 1977, p. 257), they become a means for understanding the power dynamics which shape our lives. As Webb (2014) noted, it “seeks explanations about the ways thinking is



practiced and produced” (p. 368). Problematisation also underpins the WPR work of Bacchi (2009) which, when applied to my reading of policy texts and of transcripts from ethnographic interviews, provided me with some understandings of context – i.e., the various difficulties, possibilities, responses, intentions, and enactments – behind three DfE principal accountability projects.

## 4.5 A Foucauldian Infused WPR Genealogy

A genealogy considers the social and historical context of a given idea, with the aim being to trace the history that has led to its “emergence” (Foucault, 1984). Foucault’s genealogies included *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (2020) and *The Use of Pleasure: the History of Sexuality* (1985). Lorenzini (2023b) described Foucauldian genealogies as being characterised by “problematisation” and “possibilisation” (p. 4): problematisation because the aim of Foucault’s genealogies is to make “our beliefs, concepts, and practices *problematic* again, thus ‘facilitating’ the task of transforming them” (p. 4, italics in the original); and possibilisation because they also aim “to create actual conditions for thinking and acting differently” (p. 5). The idea of a “possibilising genealogy” is relevant to this thesis, where my Chapter 10 discusses a range of resistance tactics for principal associations to consider as the means ‘for thinking and acting differently’.

There are four reasons why a Foucauldian infused WPR genealogical study makes sense for such a thesis. First, the work of policy genealogy is to trace the historico-philosophical development of policy to better understand its current form (i.e., the historical knowledge of struggles). Second, a policy genealogy is interested in policy contests – i.e., the power relations that have shaped policy – and in the various tactics deployed by antagonists in that struggle. Third, there is a possibilising dimension to genealogy, as Lorenzini (2023a) described, that includes “the elaboration and practice

of concrete forms of counter-conduct in the present” (pp. 104-105). Fourth, to reveal how power relations are embedded in the policy discourse of the period, a genealogy includes discursive analysis (i.e., Foucault’s method for critically analysing language and discourse).

The idea of my using a Foucauldian infused WPR genealogy was introduced conceptually in Chapter 2 when I provided a brief history of my present using Garland (2014). Here my contemporary problem of a managerial-centric DfE that constrained SASPA’s political agency was explored. My genealogy is found in Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 where I examine DfE principal accountability policy settings and policy texts across three periods of significant reform (i.e., P21, PPRP and FGTG). My motivation is to understand how principals were constituted by these accountabilities and how this rendering affected how SASPA was engaged by the DfE in policy development. Such an undertaking reinforces the importance of discursive analysis (as method) and subjectivity (as policy effect).

#### ***4.5.1 Bacchi and Discursive Analysis***

With regard to power relations being embedded in the policy discourse of the period, I was guided by Carol Bacchi (2009) and her WPR framework, which is consistent with Foucault’s thinking since it takes a genealogical approach and incorporates discursive analysis to reveal both the contested and the political. The questions within the WPR framework encourage the researcher to critically interrogate public policy by challenging its purpose(s) and its production; its effects and its representations; and its assumptions and its silences. As a tool for examining policy, WPR takes the position that policy meanings are contestable and contested and, since there is no singular perception of a policy issue, the processes of making policy and of arguing for policy are essentially political. For my part, the use of WPR provided a platform for examining

the discursive apparatuses of various principal accountability regimens and how these expanded the conditions for bureaucratic control and regulation, and how principals – in their organised and collective form – found ways to contest and resist these conditions.

#### **4.5.2 Foucault and Subjectivity**

For Foucault, subjectivity was explored through the concepts of subjection (i.e., entities being shaped by power relations, dominant discourses and social norms) and subjectivation (i.e., entities shaping their own subjectivity and identity through the practices of self-formation and self-care). These were discussed by Foucault in his 1980-81 lecture series, *Subjectivity and Truth* (Foucault et al., 2017) – as part of an examination of the technologies of the self – and in the 1982-83 lecture series, *The Government of Self and Others* (Foucault et al., 2010) – as part of an examination of governmentality.

Understanding that individuals are not passive objects of power, the distinction Foucault made between subjection and subjectivation highlights the active role that individuals play in shaping their own subjectivity and emphasises the importance of agency and resistance in the face of dominant power relations and discourses. As a feature of his enduring interest in power and knowledge, subjectivation was Foucault's recognition of empowerment: one where individuals take control of their own lives and create their own identities. In this thesis, I am interested in subjection, i.e., how principals were constituted by accountability models introduced by DfE across three reform periods, as well as how they constituted themselves and I am interested in subjectivation, i.e., how principals, either individually or in their collective form, adopted

a 'critical attitude' and acted with resistance tactics, such as counter-conduct and truth-telling.

In summary, to pursue knowledge about how South Australia's principals were constituted and constituted themselves by increased accountabilities, and about how this rendering altered SASPA's political agency with DfE, I assembled a Foucauldian infused WPR genealogy as my research methodology. This decision equipped me with a set of tools to answer my research question where three discrete data sets were being drawn upon: (i) interviews with four SASPA presidents and four DfE chief executives, (ii) autoethnographic insights from documents generated from my work as SASPA President, and (iii) DfE principal accountability policy settings and policy texts across three periods of reform. My discussion now shifts to the nature of research and the relationship between the researcher and the data.

## **4.6 Making SASPA-DFE Policy Engagement Visible**

Given the focus of my thesis was on the contested terrain of policy, I relied on qualitative methods to make that "world visible" so as to develop a deep and interpretive understanding of experiences "in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003, pp. 4-5). Acknowledging that such methods emphasise the socially constructed nature of the practice(s) being examined meant that I must accept that my inquiry is value-laden (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003, p. 13). This presented various ethical and methodological dilemmas which are addressed in Section 4.5 of this chapter.

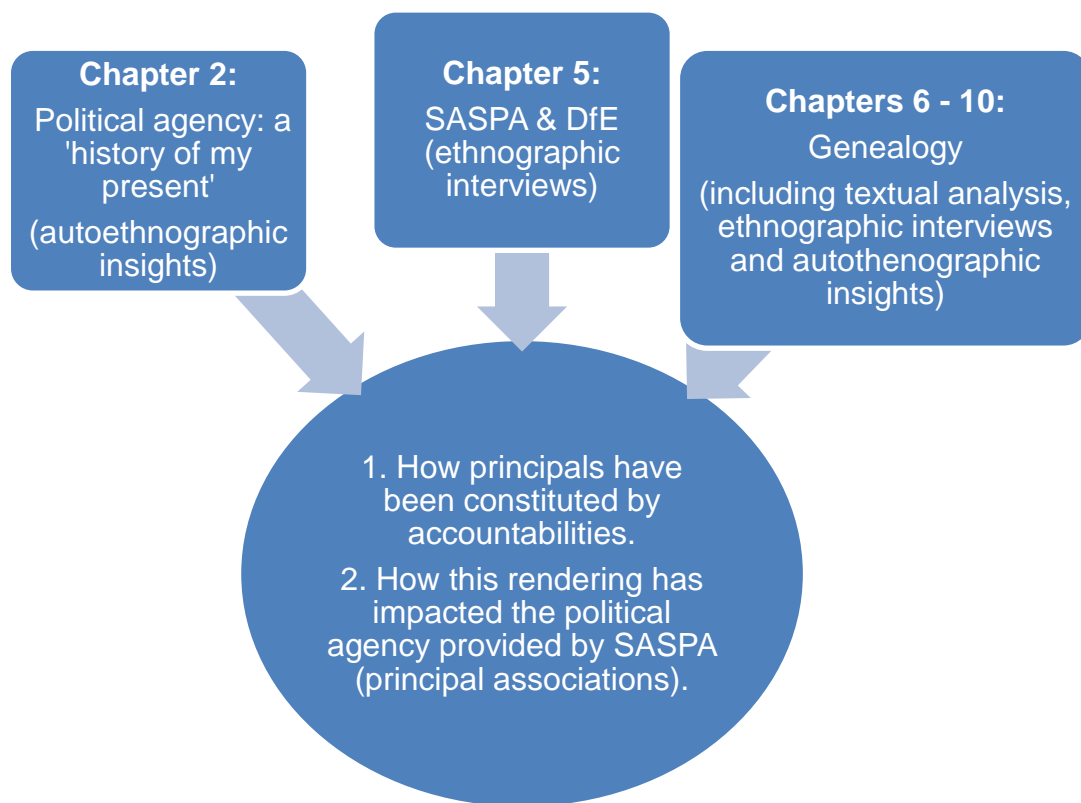
### **4.6.1 Local Memories**

Whilst a genealogical examination of principal accountability policies is one way of knowing about how the identities of principals and principal associations are

constituted, it is also important to establish contextual and cultural knowledge, or to consider those “local memories” (Kelly, 1994, p. 22) to which Foucault alluded. Accepting that “we interview to find out what we do not know and cannot know” (Hockey & Forsey, 2020, p. 71), the cultural knowledge I elicited from four DfE chief executives and four SASPA presidents enriched my research. Since no documented research exists pertaining to how policy contests are experienced by those fulfilling these two adversarial roles, adopting an interview approach seemed the most feasible way for me to develop an understanding of the forces at play over an extended period (i.e., 25 years). My choice, then, of including an ethnographic component in my Foucauldian infused WPR genealogy, supported the idea that to understand the juncture between those who make policy and those who advocate for its improvement, it is necessary to “get inside the ‘messy and ecological’ practices” (Thomson, 2001, p. 16) and engage with the various adhesions, conflicts, entanglements, and tensions evident in the enduring DfE – SASPA relationship.

#### ***4.6.2 Data Trail***

To satisfy the complexity and scope of my inquiry I was compelled to develop a data trail which consisted of three interdependent sources, as represented in Figure 5 below.



**Figure 5: My methods for 'knowing'**

First, there was a short 'history of my present' located in Chapter 2 which connected the political work of SASPA under my presidency to the notion of genealogy. This inclusion was necessary to substantiate the political agency credentials of principal associations, particularly since there is an absence of such work in the literature, but it also introduced the importance of autoethnographic insights as data to this thesis. Since I worked as either a principal or as SASPA president through the three DfE reform periods examined by this thesis, additional autoethnographic insights are found in Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. These insights are drawn from my work journals, documents I have authored, speeches I have given, communiques to members, monthly e-Bulletins and annual reports.

Second, there was the ethnographic data collected from interviews with four SASPA presidents and four DfE chief executives. These data, which form the substance of the

discussion in Chapter 5, established: (a) the nature of my inquiry as critical policy sociology, (b) sharpened my research question, (c) provided findings, and (d) influenced decisions about subsequent methodological directions. Together, my autoethnographic insights and ethnographic interview data represent knowledge sourced from lived experience.

Third, there were the various policy texts and other documents pertaining to DfE's principal accountability regimes from three different reform periods. It is the discursive analysis and discussion of these materials which form the foundation to my policy genealogy, which is found in Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. Together, these five chapters establish how different attitudes towards principal accountability have changed the way principals are constituted and how these renderings have affected the political work of principal associations.

### ***4.6.3 Ethnographic Interviews***

My use of interviews as a research technique took me into the realm of guided subjective experiences, which I acknowledge opens me up to criticism regarding potential partiality as the researcher. However, the advantages of using such an approach – i.e., accessing first-hand knowledge and information; establishing participant attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and values; and identifying the nature of the DfE and SASPA relationship – go some way towards dispelling such criticism. When it came to the selection of interview participants, I made a judgement that each interviewee could provide insights into some of the key public education policy domains within the 1995 – 2020 timeframe and, most notably, share their own unique experience of how DfE and SASPA engaged over policy.

My study is a departure from classic ethnographies which are based on field work where the researcher assumes the role of observer to better understand what individuals and/or groups of people are doing. Here, I was guided by Hockey and Forsey (2020) who claimed that “we do not...have to observe them to know about them, people are very capable of ‘showing’ us at least some of the intricacies of their lives through what they tell us” (p. 84). My deliberate use of the term ‘ethnographically informed’, reflected my determination to have my research remain open to the emergent possibilities of such a method since it has the potential to contradict dominant discourses and create different conceptions of the bureaucracy—principal association relationship. This is a distinction Radin (2000) made when she said that there is a ‘disconnect’ between the accounts of policy work found in the instructional texts and the accounts drawn from practice (p. 183). For this purpose, my research draws upon stories and experiences of the heads of principal associations and education bureaucracies to gain an understanding of their relationship within the contested terrain of policy. Further, I mined data from various documented sources including memoranda, communiques and websites. Reading through these data, I established patterns, themes, and emerging narratives. Here, I deliberately analysed the data to distinguish any discrepancies or inconsistencies between what was referenced in the official accounts and what was said in the interviews. This approach enabled a more detailed understanding of the bureaucracy—principal association relationship. It also provided insights into the power dynamics between the actors involved in the policy process and understandings about the motivations behind their actions. Furthermore, it encouraged me to investigate the potential impacts of the relationship on the actors and the wider policy process. Finally, this approach enabled me to gain a better understanding of the bureaucracy—principal association relationship more broadly, and how it might be improved in the future.



By utilising the stories and experiences of the actors in the policy process, I gained a better understanding of the complexities of the relationship and the potential power dynamics between the actors. Here, it is important to acknowledge the risk of bias that comes with any research relying on first-hand accounts, knowing that countless others, when asked about their experience of the same policy moment, would most likely provide different insights. This potential for bias was compounded by the knowledge that I am implicated in this study: (i) as an insider (i.e., a member of the SASPA/DfE policy-interested community being researched), and (ii) as an outsider (i.e., a researcher investigating the various adhesions, conflicts, entanglements, and tensions evident within the SASPA/DfE policy-interested relationship). As a methodological and ethical issue, this matter is discussed later in this chapter (i.e., 4.8.1).

#### ***4.6.4 Reconciling Ethnography and Genealogy***

It is not standard practice for researchers to include ethnography when undertaking a genealogy. On a theoretical footing, I was reliant upon the thinking of Tamboukou and Ball (2003) for justifying an approach where ethnography and genealogy were combined (p. 3). Whilst acknowledging that ethnography belongs more to the modernist tradition and genealogy to the postmodern, Tamboukou and Ball saw that they “share several orientations and points of reference” and that this enabled a “theoretical affinity” to form (p. 3). In particular, each methodological tradition adopts “a context-bound critical perspective”, points “to the limits of dominant power/knowledge regimes”, recovers “excluded subjects and silenced voices” and restores “the political dimension of research” (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, pp. 3-4). For my part, this combination of the ethnographic with the genealogical seemed the only way forward, given the complexity of researching the political agency of principal associations (through the lens of lived experience, i.e., ethnography and

autoethnography) and of how their members had been constituted by accountabilities (through a genealogy).

The inclusion in my genealogy of reflections on the lived experience of policy actors enriched the critique, rather than detracted from it. Here, representations from “the silent” (Tamboukou, 2008, p. 114) were given a voice and treated as discursive subjects. When juxtaposed with the official discourse of the times, these representations allowed a genealogy to form which stripped away “the veils that cover people’s practices” (Tamboukou, 2008, p. 103).

#### ***4.6.5 Autoethnographic Insights***

Located in Chapter 2, my discussion of four events selected from my SASPA presidency provided some insights into the political work of principal associations. Here, my method was autoethnographic. Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach where the researcher uses self-reflection and storytelling to explore their cultural context and the experiences they have had with it. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) describe autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (p. 1). In accordance with this definition, the main purpose for including autoethnographic insights in this thesis was to reveal the political work of principal associations and to prosecute the argument that my seven-year SASPA presidency afforded me a rich and detailed understanding of the policy-interested relationship between SASPA and the DfE. This relationship was a complex, political one which I revealed with the support of data accessed from my work journals, reports I have authored, speeches I have given, monthly e-Bulletins, Board communiques and annual reports from my 7-years as SASPA President. Analysis of these data was undoubtedly influenced by my personal beliefs and values. Whilst I discuss partiality

later in this chapter, I mention it here to acknowledge the impossibility of an impartial account and to suggest that some balance to potential bias was countered in the ethnographic interviews given by other SASPA presidents and by DfE chief executives. These ethnographic accounts and my autoethnographic insights are woven into the genealogy section of this thesis.

## **4.7 Analysis of data**

My analysis of my ethnographic interview data acknowledged a “window into the meaning-making processes in the lifeworld” and the potential “to assess and understand institutional power discourses” (Souto-Manning, 2012 p. 162). Here, my ambitions consisted of three ideas. First, would my empirical data offer any new or more productive ways for principal associations to challenge the neoliberalising policy regimes of the bureaucracy? Second, would they identify those moments when the DfE—SASPA policy relationship was productive? Third, would it reveal a set of strategies and tactics for effective political agency?

Recognising that it would be inappropriate to have a standard technical analysis for researching a phenomenon as complex as the participation of principal associations in the contested terrain of policy, I developed an approach to analysis which consisted of two phases. Phase one was aimed at answering the first part of my original research question: *How is the profession’s constituted voice included or excluded from public education policy contests during neoliberal times?* This phase combined thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012) and poststructural interview analysis devised by Bacchi and Bonham (2016). Here, a range of patterns and themes emerged which formed my findings, but which also indicated the need for my line of inquiry to be expanded. Phase two used the findings from Phase one to answer the second part

of my original research question: *What does having this knowledge mean for the political work of principal associations in the future?*

#### **4.7.1 Poststructural Interview Analysis**

According to Bacchi and Bonham (2016), poststructural interview analysis makes it possible to treat interview transcripts as texts. The procedure to deal with these texts involves a form of “de-personalisation” or, to put it more positively, a form of politicisation of “personhood” (p. 115). Such an approach shows little concern for trying to understand why the interviewee says what s/he says or analysing the kind of ‘subject’ an interviewee has become. Rather, poststructural interview analysis is interested in mapping the kinds of ‘subject’ it is possible to become. A major purpose of the analysis is to consider the kinds of ‘subjects’ produced within interview settings, while also reflecting on how subject status can be questioned and disrupted. The poststructural approach to interviewing involves a form of discourse analysis, with a focus on the ways people use language to construct their identities and to make sense of the world. It is important to note that this approach does not focus on the ‘truth’ of what is being said, but rather on the ways in which language and discourse are used to create meaning. Here, each interviewee’s ‘truth’ is a way of recognising them as political ‘subjects’. Accordingly, this poststructural approach includes a critical examination of the power dynamics of interviewing, and the ways in which these dynamics shape the interviews. In other words, the poststructural approach is concerned with how interviewing is used to construct a particular kind of ‘subject’ and how this ‘subject’ is constrained by the power dynamics at play.

My empirical data were sourced from interviews with policy owners (i.e., education chief executives) and policy advocates (i.e., principal association presidents). My idea for these interviews was to reveal the variations in the SASPA—DfE relationship over

a twenty-five year period, and to locate the stories of policy acceptance, collaboration, compliance, contestation, and resistance. Here, the importance of lived experience was brought into the frame, as each interviewee provided reflections on “how systems level change might frame the construction of local knowledge, and how local knowledge might in turn provide a perspective on the knowledge claims underpinning system-wide initiatives” (Lingard & Gale, 2007 p.18). This was an important step towards building the case for how the DfE—SASPA relationship impacted the political agency of principal associations (which I introduced in Chapter 2 using autoethnographic insights) and how principals were constituted by the bureaucracy’s expanded accountability regime (which I explore through genealogy in Chapters 6–9). For analysis purposes, I treated my interviewees and myself as discursive subjects. Whilst I relied upon Bacchi and Bonham (2016) for a set of analytic tools to apply to interview transcripts, one that drew upon the notion of problematisation and complemented the WPR framework I had selected for analysing policy discourse, I found that these tools needed to be extended by practical steps borrowed from a thematic approach to analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

#### ***4.7.2 Reading Transcripts Two Ways***

My reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts was undertaken in two different ways and for two purposes. The first approach I used was to read the material chronologically; that meant sequencing the material based on the tenures of interviewees across the period 1995-2020. Here, my interest was in developing an understanding of different eras. The second approach I used was to re-read the material according to position: first, the SASPA transcripts, then the DfE transcripts. This established a policy advocate—policy owner perspective. Beyond a familiarisation with the data, this reading and re-reading process produced my own annotations which

were matched to trails of colour-coded highlighter pens. These notations generated seventeen insights related to my original research question about the inclusion or exclusion of principal association voice in public education contests. These included: 'us and them', 'one voice or multiple voices', 'consensus/dissensus', 'inside or outside the tent', 'positional power versus relational power', 'codesign of policy', 'DfE CE, SASPA President and Minister for Education interface', 'surveillance and compliance', 'schools as the problem', 'trust and distrust', and 'SASPA's independence'. My use of poststructural interview analysis (PIA) as a method for interrogating data enabled my reading of these transcripts to reveal power differentials. The four most useful processes within the seven which constitute the Bacchi and Bonham (2016) PIA method were: (i) noting what was said; (ii) producing genealogies of what was said; (iii) highlighting key discursive practices, and (iv) analysing what was said (pp. 115-118). These became tools for my creation of short summaries for each of the eight transcripts, and for the more substantial overviews I constructed of my two reading perspectives, i.e., the chronological and the positional. These summaries or overviews were an important step towards identifying themes.

### ***4.7.3 Establishing Themes***

In agreeing with Braun and Clarke (2012) that "we generate or construct themes rather than discover them" (p. 63), the choices I made next consisted of forming clusters from the aforementioned insights based on unifying features. For example, 'inside or outside the tent', 'us and them', 'trust and distrust', 'consensus and dissensus', and 'positional power versus relational power' each gave voice to the adversarial nature of the SASPA—DfE relationship and, consequently, formed a cluster or a domain. During this step in the data analysis process, I labelled this as a domain because it was recognisably the most dominant of the three clusters. The other clusters focussed on

principal associations being 'one voice or multiple voices' and 'public education as a problem to be fixed'.

Of my seventeen insights, only two failed to form a cluster. One was the 'DfE CE, SASPA President, and Minister for Education interface' which I suggest elsewhere in this study is fertile ground for a study of its own. Every one of the eight interviewees touched on their relationship with Education Ministers. For all four DfE CEs, their comments invariably went to their appointment by Education Ministers and to key policy tasks they were given in their tenures. On the flipside, some SASPA presidents indicated how their relationship with Education Ministers sometimes complicated their relationship with the DfE CE. Nevertheless, there were no other insights within the seventeen established from my readings which suggested a cluster could be formed around this troika idea. The other insight which failed to form a cluster was 'codesign of policy'. This was mentioned explicitly by two SASPA presidents and hinted at by a third. Since it speaks more to an ambition than it does to a realisation, it has not been an insight pursued by my research. However, when my study looks to the future in Chapter 10, the 'codesign of policy' makes a brief reappearance.

In thematic terms, I settled on three. First and foremost was the domain 'inside and outside the tent'. In subsequent re-reading of the transcripts, and further use of PIA analysis, this theme was broken into four sub-themes, i.e., adhesion, conflict, entanglement and tension. This is a matter I discuss in detail in Chapter 5 since it played a pivotal role in my decision to expand the nature of my inquiry. The two other themes of principal associations being 'one voice or multiple voices' and 'public education as a problem to be fixed' are discussed in this study but neither necessitated a move to identify sub-themes.

In summary, the analysis of my ethnographic interview data was a bespoke process where elements of PIA and thematic analysis were utilised. The formation of one major theme (with four sub themes) and two minor themes provided a frame for telling the story of my data. But what it also established was that ethnographic data alone would not be sufficient to reveal what I wanted to know in an inquiry that was expanded to include a consideration of the DfE—principal—SASPA relationship.

#### **4.7.4 Policy Limits**

The knowledge I pursued through this research is concerned with the struggle principal associations endure in seeking to have their policy interests served. To make this research manageable I recognised that I would need to apply a limit to the period being studied (e.g., 1995–2020). This timeframe was selected for two reasons. First, I was interested in having ethnographic accounts from DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents whose tenure preceded South Australia’s local management reform, *Partnerships 21* (1999-2002). A starting point of 1995 was feasible, but it only became viable through the willingness of both CE-7 and Pres-2 to participate. By their doing so, a contrast between late 20<sup>th</sup> century education policy contests and those of the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was made possible. Second, the 1995–2020 period produced significant systemic changes to public education. Understanding that governments and their bureaucracies use public policy for the management of change, I recognised that the various stories of adhesion, conflict, entanglement, and tension beginning to materialise from ethnographic accounts would need to be juxtaposed against the change contexts that produced “rules, opinions and advice on how to behave as one should” (Foucault, 1992, p. 12). The three change contexts that provided such a juxtaposition are: (i) *Partnerships 21* (2000–2002); (ii) *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015–2022), and (iii) *From Good to Great: Towards a*



*World-Class System* (2019–2022). These three reforms represent policy shifts away from principal autonomy and professional trust towards increased levels of principal compliance and accountability.

#### **4.7.5 Analysing Policy**

Elsewhere in this chapter (see 4.3), I discussed the use of Bacchi (2009) and my adaptation of her WPR framework. That discussion introduced the steps from the WPR framework that I had decided to use and explained how the models for accountability introduced by three discrete, major DfE reforms would be examined. The organisation of that discussion reflected the structure and flow of the WPR framework: beginning with the processing of policy problematisations, considering how the representations of these problems provide insights into how we are governed, and then examining the effects of these representations on the subjectivities of the governed. This recognises how WPR provides “a structure, script and system for...analysis”, one that “is transparent and affords examination of the relationship between discourse and...power, ideologies, institutions, social identities...etc.” (Tawell & McCluskey, 2021, p. 2).

In this process, the policy texts I examined – i.e., *P21 and the Quality Improvement and Accountability Framework* (QIAF), *Building a High Performing System and Partnership Performance Review Panels* (PPRP), and *From Good to Great* (FGTG) and *Quality School Improvement Planning* (SIP) – are treated discursively. Instead of looking forensically at what these policy documents say as texts, I have been preoccupied with what these reforms and accountability models did (and what they did not do) as instruments of the bureaucracy. Why, for example, did DfE introduce diagnostic test data as a measure of school performance in its P21 reform? What could they have done instead? By agreeing to this new and narrowly-focused accountability,

how did school principals constitute themselves? Here I am underlining the Foucauldian nature of the WPR approach where policy texts not only produce meaning, they also produce “*particular kinds of objects and subjects upon whom and through which particular relations of power are realised*” (Graham, 2013, p. 671, italics in original).

This discussion of data analysis for this ‘ethnographically informed’ component of my study has highlighted the importance of PIA and the WPR framework in revealing power relations and subjectivities in the DfE—SASPA policy engagement relationship.

## **4.8 Methodological and Ethical Considerations**

In achieving validity and reliability for this research study and the data from which it is drawn, I have worked (i) to achieve agreement between different parts of the data (i.e., asking the same interview questions of SASPA presidents as I did of DfE chief executives); (ii) to ensure findings were justified (i.e., considering various perspectives in my discussion of first-hand accounts); (iii) to bring fidelity to the contextual features of the three principal accountability reforms being examined; and (iv) to manage my ‘insider’ status.

### ***4.8.1 Managing Insider Status***

In choosing to use a qualitative research methodology, I needed to accept that I was unable to claim objectivity as a researcher. Consequently, the challenge was how best to manage subjectivities and the potential of my insider status in a study which was interested in how people made sense of their world and how they interpreted and experienced different events.

Essentially there were three sources of potential partiality from my insider status which entered the arena of this study: (i) that which arose from the interviewees who provided reflections; (ii) that which arose from the interviewee—researcher relationship, and (iii) that which arose from my position as researcher (including the content of the questions I provided). These have been managed by the transparency of my discussion of the data – i.e., what was said, who said it, and what the circumstances were that may have contributed to what was said. Importantly, I deliberately worked to provide reflexive commentary at key intervals of my discussion which, as Watt (2007) observed, facilitates “understanding of both the phenomenon under study and the research process itself” (p. 82). This is of particular significance when addressing a fourth source: that is, my being implicated in the study as an ‘insider’ (where I was a subject of the research) and as an ‘outsider’ (where I was the researcher examining the very phenomena to which I belonged). My taking a reflexive approach – “this process of continual and deep self-examination” (Dodgson, 2019, p. 221) – provided a deliberate strategy to address issues of reliability. The nature of this ‘self-examination’ included being explicit about beliefs (political and professional), power differentials, emotional responses to participants, and theoretical orientations. It also included a regular self-monitoring for how partiality and beliefs borne from personal experiences might be impacting the research. This approach invariably introduced into the discussion the similarities and differences between me as a subject of the research (i.e., insider) and me as the researcher (i.e., outsider).

Acknowledging the above, this ‘insider status’ afforded me an advantage for researching this field that should not be ignored. As a principal for fourteen years and a SASPA president for seven years, I have been as close to the various 1995–2020 policy related actions being researched as anyone. This ‘inside view’ provides a unique insight into this genealogical inquiry.

### ***4.8.2 Managing Assumptions***

In keeping with how my insider status has been managed in this thesis, I have applied the same reflexive approach to manage assumptions. For example, an assumption I made in undertaking this research was that the task of creating effective public policy is best achieved when policy makers and policy advocates work together on the enterprise. If Ball (1994) was correct and policy “is what is enacted as well as what is intended” (p. 10) it follows that those who enact public education policy, such as school principals, should be regarded as a useful resource at the initiation or creation phase, as well as during implementation. Further to this, Bacchi (2012) argued that “every policy is a prescriptive text, setting out a practice that relies on a particular problematisation” (p. 4). Who better, then, to have as a voice in how public education problems are represented prior to policy solutions being formed than school principals and, in their collective and organised form, principal associations? But, if as Bacchi (2009) suggested “(w)e are governed through the ways in which problems are presented” (p. 8), the absence of principal voice in the representation of public education policy problems is an acceptance that the bureaucracy knows best.

### ***4.8.3 Managing Ethical Considerations***

To facilitate high ethical standards in my research, I ensured that:

- approval for my research methodology from Flinders University was sought and provided,
- all participants received documentation explaining the purpose of my research and their role within it,
- reassurance was provided to participants that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the process and after the completion of my thesis,
- each participant signed a permission form,
- transcripts of interviews were coded so that no participant could be identified,
- all transcripts and voice recordings were secured safely in a locked filing cabinet for storage.

As a courtesy to participants, I shared progress towards the completion of the thesis at timely intervals. By doing so, I provided an indication of how reflections from them assisted in my forming key directions. My research participants had all been actors in the contested space of South Australia's education policy formation and settlement processes from 1995–2020. Some had been activists for policy change, and some had been owners and custodians of education policy. Whilst the active experience of all eight participants was now behind them, each was prepared to share their wisdom as a contribution towards my making the case for how education policy formation and settlement could be recast in the future. Importantly, the interview process was entirely voluntary and, in keeping with my ethics approval (see Appendix C), data confidentiality was strictly maintained, and the anonymity of participants was provided by applying a code to transcripts and file management. The coding exercise assigned a number (1 – 8) which represented the sequence in which subjects were interviewed, alongside a contracted form of their positional title as either Education Department Chief Executive (CE) or SASPA President (Pres). Since I was the only one who knew the sequence of interviews – which were undertaken over a six-month period – I am confident that I have maintained data integrity and security. Further discussion of how I managed these methodological and ethical issues is undertaken *in situ* elsewhere in my study.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

The main function of this chapter has been to describe the methodology I used to address the broad aim of my research and to find answers to my inquiry question. Upon the foundations of a critical policy sociology, this thesis crafts a Foucauldian infused WPR genealogy, one that analyses policy texts and policy discourses central to three decisive policy shifts in principal accountability in South Australia's DfE system. By including an ethnographically informed component, I expanded the methodology so

that the reflections of education chief executives and principal association presidents could be incorporated. That decision enabled the analysis of policy to take account of the lived experience of those who make policy and those who seek to influence both the nature of policy and the means by which it is made.

My study now turns its attention to my data trail and, in particular, the collection and analysis of ethnographic interview data. The next chapter discusses the emergence of patterns and themes before sharing some findings. These findings from the analysis of ethnographic interview data framed the main discussion of my thesis which is found in Chapter 2 (autoethnographic insights providing a history of my present) and in Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 (a genealogy spanning 1995–2020).

## **5. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

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### **5.1 Introduction**

The focus of this chapter is the collection of ethnographic data and analysis of the interview transcripts. This was an undertaking that satisfied my preliminary research questions.

1. How had the voice of principal associations (SASPA) been included or excluded from public education policy contests during neoliberal times?
2. What did having this knowledge mean for the political work of principal associations in the future?

My method for analysing the interview transcripts predominantly followed an approach developed by Bacchi and Bonham (2016), i.e., poststructural interview analysis (PIA), but was also informed by readings of poststructural thinkers (Foucault and Mouffe) and policy sociologists (Ball and Gale). However, as this chapter outlines, the analysis of this empirical data necessitated an expansion of my original inquiry. To satisfy the complexity and scope of my expanded inquiry I was compelled to develop a data trail which consisted of three interdependent sources: ethnographic interviews, an autoethnographic account of the 'history of my present' (Chapter 2), and a Foucauldian infused WPR genealogy (Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

### **5.2 Empirical Data**

My empirical data were sourced from interviews with policy owners (i.e., education chief executives) and policy advocates (i.e., principal association presidents). My idea for these interviews was to reveal the variations in the SASPA–DfE relationship over a twenty-five year period, and to locate the stories of policy acceptance, collaboration, compliance, contestation, and resistance. Here, the importance of lived experience was brought into the frame, as each interviewee provided reflections on “how systems

level change might frame the construction of local knowledge, and how local knowledge might in turn provide a perspective on the knowledge claims underpinning system-wide initiatives” (Lingard & Gale, 2007 p.18). This was an important step towards building the case for how the SASPA–DfE relationship impacted the political agency of principal associations (which I initially explored through autoethnography in Chapter 2) and how principals were constituted by the bureaucracy’s expanded accountability regime (which I explore through genealogy in Chapters 6–10As).

Before discussing the collection of my empirical data and its analysis, it is important to acknowledge how my decision to focus on the period 1995–2020 impacted the decisions as to who was interviewed. As noted in 4.7.4, I was particularly interested in having ethnographic accounts from DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents whose tenure preceded South Australia’s local management reform, *Partnerships 21* (2000-2002). 1995 as a starting point was feasible, but only through the willingness of both CE-7 and Pres-2 to participate. By their doing so, a contrast between late 20<sup>th</sup> century education policy contests and those of the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was made possible. Following that decision, however, I recognised that the reflections provided by the remaining SASPA presidents and DfE chief executives were not fixed to corresponding time periods. Whilst there was no direct alignment in the tenures of these interviewees, there were enough intersections between them for me to surface a reliable set of themes, sub-themes, patterns, and trends from the analysis of data.

### **5.3 Data Collection**

My broad research interest was to understand the contested terrain of public education policy in neoliberal times through the lens of those who make it (the bureaucracy) and those who advocate for its improvement (principal associations). Consistent with this aim, my interviews were an exercise in drawing out depictions of the complexity of the



space inhabited by these policy actors, so as to establish an understanding of how and why the DfE–SASPA relationship varied across a twenty-five year period.

In sharing my ethnographic findings here, I have chosen to represent each participant by the same assignation I used for data collection and data security purposes. Hereafter, the four SASPA presidents will be referred to as Pres-1, Pres-2, Pres-6, and Pres-8, and the four Education Department chief executives will be referred to as CE-3, CE-4, CE-5, and CE-7. By doing so, I am confident that the identities of all eight participants will remain anonymous to the majority of readers. However, there will be a handful of senior educators in South Australia whose knowledge of the period 1995–2020 is so detailed that, should they speculate as to the identity of the participants, their predictions may be entirely accurate, although not corroborated. The interviews with four DfE chief executives and four SASPA presidents were conducted over a seven-month period from June to December 2020. Given that most of the interview participants were reflecting on their past careers, I recognised that the passing of time enabled them to exhibit greater freedom in what could be said and what remained ‘off limits’. Understandably, the two participants interviewed during their tenure exhibited greater caution particularly with regard to any commentary related to the Minister for Education and/or the government of the day.

The duration of interviews varied from 32 minutes to 80 minutes, and the transcripts ranged from 4100 words to 8000 words.

**Table 1: Ethnographic interviews**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Interview Details</b>		
	<b>Date</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Transcript</b>
SASPA Pres-1	June 2020	78 minutes	6500 words
SASPA Pres-2	August 2020	80 minutes	6800 words
DfE CE-3	September 2020	32 minutes	4100 words
DfE CE-4	September 2020	40 minutes	4500 words
DfE CE-5	October 2020	40 minutes	4500 words
SASPA Pres-6	November 2020	60 minutes	6300 words
DfE CE-7	November 2020	59 minutes	8000 words
SASPA Pres-8	December 2020	62 minutes	7800 words

The questions asked of participants were deliberately of the same order and direction (see Appendix A – DfE Chief Executive questions and SASPA President questions) and focused on the nature of the professional relationship between DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents and how this impacted policy contests. My familiarity with each of the interviewees and with the era we were discussing meant that I had foreknowledge. This allowed me to perform two key functions during the interviews that bridged the data collection—data analysis divide. First, it encouraged and equipped me to explore the various avoidances and silences when they occurred. Second, it enabled me to evaluate the interview material ‘in progress’. This was consistent with Cohen et al. (2017) and the notion that in qualitative research “data analysis commences during the data-collection process” (p. 315). The making sense of the data as it was being collected was helpful in noting patterns and identifying themes, ahead of my interpreting key features of the data in their transcribed forms.

## 5.4 Data Analysis

In Chapter 4, I explained that I developed a two phased approach to the analysis of interview transcripts. Phase one was aimed at answering the first part of my original research question: *How is the profession's constituted voice included or excluded from public education policy contests during neoliberal times?* Phase two used the findings from Phase one to answer the second part of my original research question: *What does having this knowledge mean for the political work of principal associations in the future?*

### 5.4.1 Phase One: Inclusion or Exclusion

This first phase of data analysis involved two deliberately different ways of reading the transcripts. The first reading was as a chronological sequence – that is, according to when each of the interviewees held office – to establish whether there were any time-related trends over the twenty-five year period. This produced two key understandings. First, it identified that the 1995–1999 period was characterised by high levels of trust between DfE and SASPA, so much so that the DfE commissioned the then SASPA president to produce research on local school management for the mutual benefit of principal associations and the Education Department. Second, it identified the significance of the 2013–2020 period when SASPA presidents were contesting policy with DfE chief executives who had solid management credentials but not in education. As the researcher, I began to describe this period as ‘the age of correction’ because, according to these chief executives, “it was educators who had gotten us into this mess”<sup>32</sup>. What emerged from this first reading of the transcripts was a disparity

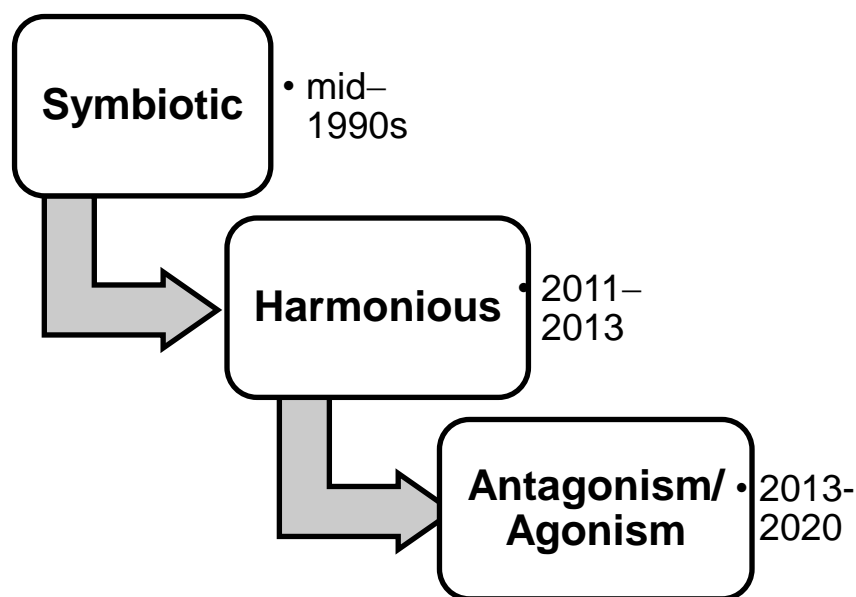
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<sup>32</sup> My work diaries as SASPA President indicate that phrases such as this were uttered by DfE CEs in public and private meetings on more than one occasion.

between how the constitutive voice of principals had been recognised and engaged by Education Department chief executives with an educational background compared to those with a bureaucratic background. It is not insignificant that, in the 2013–2020 period, the DfE’s principal accountability regime was expanded, a narrowing of success measures occurred, and a culture of compliance and performativity was established (something I expand upon in Chapters 7 and 8). In this particular era, it was apparent that education had become ‘a problem to be fixed’ and, increasingly, the ‘fixing’ was being undertaken by those whose professional experiences sat outside of education. This approach was consistent with new managerial practices being applied to education and is redolent of the GERM and neoliberalising policy regimes discussed in Chapter 3.

The second reading of the transcripts was undertaken through the positional lens – that is, an examination of transcripts from DfE chief executives to establish any patterns and themes, and then doing the same for SASPA presidents. Here I asked the question: *What comparisons or contrasts of interest emerge with regards to (i) access, (ii) engagement, (iii) policy tensions, (iv) wisdom (of hindsight)?* Access was deemed to be of little significance given all eight interviewees indicated that regular meetings were held, varying from monthly to once per term, and with wide ranging agendas. What did emerge as a thread for further analysis was the relative value of these meetings, with some DfE chief executives and some SASPA presidents questioning their usefulness. For example, SASPA Pres-6 noted that “there was rarely an agenda from the CE where he wanted our advice on something”. Similarly, DfE-3 acknowledged that he came from “an embedded point of view” and this meant he questioned “the value of organisations, such as principal associations”. In this treatment of transcripts read on a positional basis, a major pattern did form out of responses given to questions on engagement and policy tensions. From this reading

of the data, the understanding emerged that policy is made by those “inside the tent” (Thrupp, 2018, p. 132), and that this registered as the inclusion or exclusion of principal associations by bureaucracies whose use of power relations varied across the 1995–2020 period. Essentially what was found inside this pattern from the data were three discrete periods for how the policy terrain was being worked – a symbiotic phase (mid–1990s), a harmonious phase (2011–2013), and an agonistic/antagonistic<sup>33</sup> phase (2013–2020). This is represented by Figure 6 (below).



**Figure 6: Phases of policy engagement between the principal association and education bureaucracy<sup>34</sup>**

These first two readings established that there were moments across the twenty-five year period where SASPA was actively included in policy thinking and making, but there were also moments when it was excluded or had its voice diminished in the

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<sup>33</sup> Here the term antagonistic refers to a relationship where there is conflict or hostility, and agonistic refers to one based on ongoing debate and struggle.

<sup>34</sup> The absence of any empirical data from corresponding SASPA and DfE leaders explains the gap between 1999 and 2010. However, having read an article by former CE, Mr Steve Marshall (2007) reflecting on his work, it was clear that his intention was for the DfE to function with a culture of inquiry where school principals and senior bureaucrats worked locally on educational and organisational problems worth solving.

stakeholder mix. But what was the nature of these inclusions and exclusions? It was here that I used the technique of poststructural interview analysis devised by Bacchi and Bonham (2016) where the transcripts were treated more as texts. This was an important step and was chiefly responsible for my being able to depersonalise what had been said and heard at interview. This encouraged me to grapple with the implications of the ‘political’ rather than the ‘personal’ dimensions of contested policy and provided a safeguard for treating disconfirming and confirming comments dispassionately.

### ***Poststructural Interview Analysis***

Consistent with the problematising nature of the Bacchi (2009) WPR framework, poststructural interview analysis (PIA) encourages researchers to engage in the productive and political practices of interrogating and theorising. Here, analysis becomes a powerful tool for understanding how policies are created and enforced and, in particular, how language, power, and social norms inform policy development.

The neoliberalising policy regimes and the bureaucracy’s adoption of new managerialist practices became clearly evident when I applied the Bacchi and Bonham (2016) technique to the transcripts of DfE CEs and SASPA presidents. Here, the trend towards an asymmetrical approach to policy design and its formation led to my revisiting the policy trajectory work of Ball (1993) and Gale (1999). Consequently, I sought to create a more nuanced lens for revealing the power differential in the DfE–SASPA relationship and of the context-dependency of this relationship and its effects. Here, I was encouraged by an observation made by Foucault (1982b) that a “reform is never anything but the result of a process in which there is conflict, confrontation, struggle, resistance” (p. 34). But my re-reading of the inclusion–exclusion material extracted from the eight original transcripts revealed that,

whilst all four of these concepts were evident, they spoke predominantly to the more volatile or antagonistic elements of the SASPA—DfE relationship. What about the symbiotic and harmonious moments? What about the agonistic nature of the relationship? Here, my reading of Mouffe (1999, 2009, 2014a) and of agonism<sup>35</sup> more generally (Lowndes & Paxton, 2018; Tambakaki, 2014; Wenman, 2013) provided descriptions of the complex relationships that exist between various actors within a ‘political system’. Based on this, I developed three additional descriptors – i.e., adhesion, entanglement and tension – to assist with the categorisation of knowledge which I recognised as sitting outside of the well-established notion of conflict.

This system supported a more sophisticated way of looking at SASPA’s inclusion (moments of adhesion) and SASPA’s exclusion (moments of conflict) but also captured the subtleties of the SASPA–DfE relationship such as entanglement (where the relationship became ambiguous or confused) and tension (where the relationship presented as a dilemma). The application of this new coding and unitising system enabled the patterns which had formed from the data to graduate to themes.

### ***Unintended Findings***

Before discussing my themes and sub-themes, it is important to acknowledge that in the process of analysing data there are always unintended findings. For example, my second reading approach revealed that principal associations are sometimes one voice and at other times multiple voices, with unity and difference being both a strength and a weakness, as expressed by SASPA presidents. Tellingly, those DfE chief executives interviewed (without an education background) indicated that they often sought and followed the policy advice of individual principals, even though these

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<sup>35</sup> Agonism is an approach to political theory which recognises the importance of conflict and debate as essential elements to politics.

discussions were framed by an employer—employee power differential. On those occasions where the advice of individual principals differed from that provided by principal associations, it was invariably the latter’s advice that was discounted.

Many individuals spoke to me and advised that they were not of the same view that had been expressed to me (by SASPA presidents), but also within the room with the executive that didn’t agree with those sorts of views. So, as with any sort of representative group, you obviously have those who are very much aligned to the group’s view, and you’ll have a number of people who’ll align themselves to a different view.” (DfE CE-3)

Dolan’s (2020a) concept of a “paradox of system membership” (p. 129) such as this, means some school principals present compliance to the system whilst exploring opportunities to challenge it safely. On one hand, principals want to project back to their line managers visible support for the system that employs them. On the other hand, these same principals want to have the system recognise their professional and policy interests which are often expressed more assertively by the collective voice of their principal association. Herein lies the paradox that SASPA presidents identified when interviewed by me – an individual principal might express a supportive view on policy back to the bureaucracy, only to hold an unfavourable view on the same policy within the professional safety provided by their principal association. The effect of this paradox for SASPA presidents has meant that their capacity to leverage policy improvement has been weakened by what at least two DfE chief executives interpreted as an apparent lack of constituent support.

These two unintended findings related to the way principal voice was heard by DfE as either a single constitutive voice or as set of multiple, individual voices. This notion, together with what emerged from the thematic analysis of the data (i.e., inside or outside the tent), provided the material for what was processed in Phase two – an examination into useful strategies and tactics for the political agency of principal associations in the future.



## **5.4.2 Inside or Outside the Tent?**

In Chapter 2, I introduced Thrupp's (2018) "To Be In the Tent or to Abandon It?" which discussed the response of principal associations to New Zealand's *Investing in Educational Success* policy. Some associations chose to work "inside the tent" with government to try to make the policy work, whilst others "abandoned the tent" as an act of resistance (pp. 137-138). I refer again to the idea of working 'inside the tent' because it was the main domain that emerged from the Phase one analysis of interview transcripts.

### ***Inside the Tent***

All four SASPA presidents indicated that there were times when they worked inside the tent or, at least, 'the annex'. For SASPA Pres-2 it occurred when DfE CE-7 asked for a discussion paper to be developed by a coalition of principal associations on what local school management might mean in a South Australian context. SASPA Pres-6 indicated that, whilst "we weren't in the tent" with the DfE CE, we were "in the annex with DfE executive directors". SASPA Pres-8 recognised that DfE CE-4 "was a remarkable breath of fresh air" and was far more inclusive of principal associations and their contribution to public education than his predecessor. SASPA Pres-1 noted that, upon taking on the role, DfE CE-5 requested a documented briefing from SASPA on "the levers for improving the system". Of the five main ideas SASPA put forward, only one was taken up, i.e., an expansion to the number of Education Directors (middle-tier leaders) to better service the organisational and professional needs of school principals.

Of the four DfE chief executives interviewed, three indicated that they wanted SASPA (and other principal associations) inside the tent. For DfE CE-7 it was the recognition that he should "use the talent from within the service". He went on to reflect that this

inclusion of principal associations was “one of the things that I could have been criticised for”, because I took “more of a collegial approach...less hierarchical”. In his discussion of the two SASPA presidents with whom he worked, CE-7 indicated that “they were both fierce about fairness”, a comment which I have interpreted as meaning a strong commitment to social justice.

In his reflections, DfE CE-4 saw the inclusion of principal associations as an element of his overall brief to repair the relationships between schools and the centre. As CE-4 recalled, “The Education Minister felt that...there was an increasing disconnect between the centre and schools, and he was looking for someone to...rebuild and reenergise”. CE-4 maintained that his wanting SASPA inside the tent, “was absolutely central to the kind of re-engagement I’d been brought in to promote”. To this end, CE-4 welcomed SASPA’s “strong interest in 21<sup>st</sup> C learning” and, more generally, the difference in professional engagement displayed by principal associations in comparison to the industrial attitude adopted by the AEU.

For his part, DfE CE-5 saw the professional engagement of principal associations as important but determined that such engagement should be orchestrated within a newly created Education Department directorate, External Relations. Acknowledging that SASPA’s inclusion in the policy tent had been “well-intentioned but imperfect”, CE-5 indicated that, “sometimes I feel we’re in the same tent. Sometimes I feel like we’re in adjoining tents. Sometimes we’re on opposite ends of the campground”. My interpretation of this comment was that being ‘inside the tent’ for this CE meant SASPA being of the same mind as the DfE. Consequently, I understood that being at ‘opposite ends of the campground’ meant SASPA having opposing views to the DfE. This expansion of the ‘inside the tent’ metaphor by DfE CE-5 is now taken up by my

discussion of the occasions when SASPA presidents recognised that they were engaging with the bureaucracy from 'outside the tent'.

### ***Outside the Tent***

Contrary to other chief executives interviewed, CE-3 expressed a distrust of principal associations which I have interpreted as his positioning SASPA 'outside the tent'.

As Chief Executive, you'd probably always maintain some suspicions as to what a group of school leaders motives were. What were they representing?...Was it a group that was actually genuinely representing better outcomes for young people? Or was it about a resource grant, where they wanted to get more money..." (DfE CE-3)

All four SASPA presidents indicated that there were times when they worked outside the tent. For SASPA Pres-2 it occurred when a career bureaucrat became the DfE CE and "we were no longer managed by people who worked in schools". According to Pres-2, "we (principals) did not see ourselves as corporate" so the various attempts by senior bureaucrats to insist "you (principals) are part of Flinders Street, you're part of management" was recognised as a veiled attempt to "diffuse the power (of) principals and schools". Here, there was a scepticism of "public sector management" that was rooted in the knowledge that DfE CE's were now "accountable to the minister upwards as opposed to accountable to some more amorphous public" (SASPA Pres-2).

SASPA Pres-6, who had indicated "that we weren't in the tent", understood the inside or outside positioning as a manifestation of "...bureaucracy where the department was the centre". As a researcher, I interpreted this comment as meaning the bureaucracy's importance was now greater than schools (i.e., students, teachers and principals). This was a reversal of the Freedom and Authority in the Schools memorandum (Jones, 1970) where the centre had empowered principals and their school communities. SASPA Pres-6 explained that "there was always a strong sense of we (the

bureaucracy) have the power”, and that the SASPA—DfE relationship had to be kept at “arm’s length” because “you’re (SASPA) an external stakeholder in all of this”. He expanded upon this by stating that “the thing that mattered most was the use of coercive power (by the bureaucracy) ... they were manipulative”. This sense of there being an ‘us and them’ mentality was consistent across the reflections of all four SASPA presidents.

For SASPA Pres-8, much of the ‘outside the tent’ work was how policy was being made. “The government announced policies and asked (or directed) the department to make it happen” (Pres-8). This consigned SASPA and other principal associations to an outside the tent role arguing against an approach that had left “people in schools – teachers and leaders – fed up with being told what to do” (Pres-8). This was not dissimilar to an observation made by SASPA Pres-1 that having to advocate for improved policy and system direction through the External Relations directorate had meant that access to shaping the big policy moves of the period – the *From Good to Great* reform and its policy apparatus of Quality School Improvement Planning, Local Education Teams and Stages of Improvement reports – was impossible. The policy agenda had already been set by McKinsey and Company and “we (SASPA) might disrupt what they were trying to achieve” (Pres-1).

Having career bureaucrats leading public education meant the nature of engagement with principal associations changed.

They talk about engagement, but our experience has been about compliance and control...So it becomes a very closed conversation that doesn’t reflect any interest in exploring, in expansive terms, the broad purposes of schooling and the deeper interests of educators.... (SASPA Pres-1)

SASPA Pres-1 went on to explain how a key feature of SASPA working outside the tent was the facilitation of research that challenged the neoliberal policy directions DfE

was taking. In 2018, SASPA undertook its own research which captured principal concerns about the From Good to Great strategy. This was unfavourably received by the DfE CE and members of his senior executive and may well have constituted one of those occasions when SASPA and DfE found themselves in tents “on opposite ends of the campground” (CE-5). During 2019–2020, SASPA, SAPPa and University of SA jointly funded a study into the experience of school principals working within the From Good to Great strategy. *Paradox in the Lives and Work of School Principals* (Dolan, 2020b), identified seven tensions experienced by South Australia’s school leaders working within DfE’s new managerial practices. These included: “the tension between centrally developed measures of school success and the positive achievements of my school” and “the tension between external accountabilities applied to me and my work and my need to act autonomously as a school leader” (p. 6). According to SASPA Pres-1, “The Dolan report has been discredited by the CE who sees it as Associations making trouble for him”. As a researcher I interpreted this comment to mean that the presentation of any research that challenged the DfE’s agenda and modus operandi was a further demonstration of SASPA being ‘outside the tent’.

### ***Inside or Outside?***

Using Thrupp (2018) and the idea that policy is made by those ‘inside the tent’ is analogous to the assumption I shared in Chapter 1: that public education policy is best made when its owners (the bureaucracy) work together with its users (school principals, in their collective and constituted form). Here, working together should not be thought of simply as consultation but, rather, the early inclusion of principal associations in the policy development process: that is, the purpose, scope and direction for change, and the identification of problems that new or revised policy should address.

That said, Thrupp (2018) used the term ‘inside the tent’ as a description of alignment. His discussion focused on how one principal association chose to be ‘inside the tent’ so as to negotiate improvements to New Zealand’s *Investing in Educational Success* policy, whereas others chose to critique it from ‘outside the tent’ as an act of resistance. The distinction here is the tactical use by principal associations of taking either the ‘inside the tent’ or the ‘outside the tent’ approach. Whilst three of the four SASPA presidents interviewed identified occasions when they worked productively with the DfE from inside the tent, all four also found themselves working from outside the tent. Mostly these instances seemed more to do with circumstance – i.e., a change of DfE CE or a shift in the attitude of the bureaucracy towards principal associations – than with tactics. However, the use of external research such as *Paradox in the Lives and Work of School Principals* (Dolan, 2020b) was tactical and registered as ‘outside the tent’. SASPA Pres-8 also observed how the production of research that “showed things in different ways” could be used to suggest “ways forward for them (DfE)”.

### **5.4.3 Phase Two: Identifying Future Possibilities**

My selection of poststructural interview analysis (PIA) as a method for interrogating data was encouraged by the argument that it is a powerful tool for understanding how policies are settled and enacted, and for developing strategies to challenge and change them. It is a method that draws heavily upon Foucault’s notions of *discursive practices* (i.e., the ways in which language is used to construct and maintain power regimes including the regulation of social norms) and *regimes of truth* (i.e., truth is contingent and is shaped by the power dynamics and discursive formations of a given historical moment). Since my empirical data was sourced on wanting to know more about the variations in the SASPA—DfE relationship, a process for analysing transcripts that revealed power differentials was needed.

The analysis of my empirical data explains how the SASPA—DfE relationship varied from working together ‘inside the tent’ to working as adversaries ‘outside the tent’. This is represented in Table 2 (below).

<b>Broad Themes:</b>	<b>Sub-Themes:</b>
Inside the Tent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adhesions</li> </ul>
Outside the Tent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflicts</li> <li>• Entanglements</li> <li>• Tensions</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Broad Themes and Sub-Themes Relationship**

What, about these variations, is helpful to imagining the possibilities for the SASPA-DfE relationship in the future? The discussion of this Phase two data analysis is explored in the next section of this chapter (see 5.5 below) where I discuss what emerged as sub-themes from further analysis of the broad theme of inside or outside the tent. Procedurally this is consistent with my method where Phase two was always designed to commence after findings had emerged from Phase one.

## **5.5 Adhesions, Conflicts, Entanglements and Tensions**

My selection of poststructural interview analysis (PIA) as a method for interrogating data was encouraged by the argument that it is a powerful tool for understanding how policies are settled and enacted, and for developing strategies to challenge and change them. It is a method that draws heavily upon Foucault’s notions of *discursive practices* (i.e., the ways in which language is used to construct and maintain power regimes including the regulation of social norms) and *regimes of truth* (i.e., truth is contingent and is shaped by the power dynamics and discursive formations of a given historical moment). Since my empirical data was sourced on wanting to know more

about the variations in the SASPA—DfE relationship, a process for analysing transcripts that revealed power differentials was needed.

In establishing the sub-themes of adhesion, conflict, entanglement and tensions from the major theme of ‘inside or outside the tent’, the four most useful processes within the seven which constitute the Bacchi and Bonham (2016) PIA method were: (i) noting what was said; (ii) producing genealogies of what was said; (iii) highlighting key discursive practices, and (iv) analysing what was said (pp. 115-118). Through this method I was able to establish the trajectory in the DfE—SASPA relationship (from symbiotic, to harmonious, to antagonistic and agonistic in Figure 6) and identify the norms regulating this relationship (the various methods of facilitating SASPA’s inclusion and exclusion). As useful as this was as an exercise, PIA was even more constructive for revealing what was said within the pattern-formed version of the transcripts when the original transcripts were ‘sliced’ according to an inclusion—exclusion reading and then ‘diced’ to reveal adhesions, conflicts, entanglements and tensions. Here, the two most useful PIA processes became: (i) interrogating the production of ‘subjects’, and (ii) exploring transformative potential (pp. 118-119). As becomes apparent in the discussion which follows, this analysis produced insights into issues of SASPA’s *subjection* (the association being constituted by its submission to DfE), but it also suggested possibilities for SASPA’s *subjectivation* (the association being constituted by its refusal to submit and by forging a new and unconstrained identity). These understandings are congruent with Lowndes and Paxton (2018) who stated that “institutions shape behaviour” but those institutions “are constructed (and endlessly revised) by humans” (p. 703). It is within this process of subjectivation, where SASPA’s acts of refusal and resistance to neoliberal discourse (and the positional power behind it), that insight is offered into future approaches to political agency.



### **5.5.1 Adhesions**

Where reflections from DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents showed common goals and common interests, these were coded as adhesions. This was a term I borrowed from Lowndes and Paxton (2018) who used it to describe a form of the “ongoing collective contest that seeps across institutional boundaries” (p. 705). Within this collective contest, adhesion forms through what is held in common, whereas entanglement (see below), another term taken from Lowndes and Paxton (2018), is the constant constitution and reconstitution of individuals and groups based on the nature of engagement (p. 705).

Examples of adhesion between SASPA and the DfE included a common interest in Local School Management (LSM) and a futures-oriented approach to secondary schooling. With regards to the principal associations preparing a paper on LSM for the bureaucracy’s consideration, SASPA Pres-2 stated, “We proposed it because we anticipated that this was the next move that the department was going to make”. On the subject of secondary schools taking a more futures-orientation, DfE CE-4 noted, “One of the things I really welcomed was that there was a strong interest in 21<sup>st</sup> C learning, and that was something I respected SASPA for greatly”.

That these were the only examples in the data suggested two things. First, these were examples located in the pre-2013 era which, as I have mentioned elsewhere, was characterised by a more cohesive relationship between DfE and SASPA. Second, in interviews with the policy actors from the 2013–2020 era, discussions focused more on DfE—SASPA differences (i.e., hereby referred to as conflicts, entanglements and tensions). This is the direction interviewees took with their reflections, remembering that the same questions were asked of participating DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents.

## 5.5.2 Conflicts

As with adhesions, there were only a small number of examples which represented conflict. The notion of conflict I use here is one of ‘antagonism’ which emerged from my reading the literature of agonistic democracy (including Connolly, 2002; Deveaux, 1999; Hansen & Sonnichsen, 2014; Honig, 1993; Koutsouris, Stentiford, Benham-Clarke, & Hall, 2021; Mouffe, 1999; Tambakaki, 2014; Wenman, 2013). The term ‘agonism’ derives from the Greek ‘agon’ meaning “strenuous struggle, a combat, a competition” (Dictionary, 2023). The concept has been used as a way of thinking about human relations, specifically suggesting a difficult process of negotiation. Foucault (1982b) described agonism as a “permanent provocation” whilst antagonism, he observed, was “a face to face confrontation that paralyses both sides” (p. 792). Belgian theorist and academic, Chantal Mouffe (2014b), in differentiating agonism from antagonism, argued that in an agonistic confrontation “the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate” (p. 150). Mouffe’s (1999) theory of “agonistic pluralism” asserted how, in political terms, one’s aim should be to transform an “antagonism” into an “agonism” (p. 755). In advocating this approach, Mouffe recognised that the key challenges for democracy were its capacity to accommodate dissensus and to welcome divergence and debate. It is this dissensus, where the differences between the plurality of interests in a contest remain unresolved, that was identified for follow-up and discussion during my coding of the transcripts. Whilst most coding referenced an agonistic tension (see 5.5.4), there were three accounts which were labelled ‘conflict’ in recognition of the times when the DfE—SASPA relationship became antagonistic.

One example was SASPA Pres-1 who indicated that there was ongoing conflict over the DfE’s use of McKinsey and Company’s publication, *How the world’s most improved*

*systems keep getting better* (Mourshed et al., 2011) as a guide to the improvement of South Australia's public education system. This conflict commenced in 2015 and was still unresolved in 2020, despite the DfE's implementation of various 'evidence-based' strategies which stemmed from it, most notably the *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System* initiative (see Chapter 8). According to the transcript of SASPA Pres-1, one of the key issues preventing any resolution was the DfE's preoccupation with it being "evidence-based...so it can't be disputed". SASPA Pres-1 had formed the view that DfE's interest in the work of McKinsey and Company was almost exclusively geared to improving NAPLAN results. It started with

Chief Executive X looking at McKinsey and looking at NAPLAN results and being fairly one-dimensional in his assessment of why South Australia's results varied so much from the results on the eastern seaboard. (SASPA Pres -1).

This intensive focus on NAPLAN and the improvement of the system's performance made it difficult for SASPA to get traction with DfE on its policy interests. This was not helped when the SASPA monthly e-Bulletin was being forensically read by the DfE senior executive for "anything critical of standardised testing or of the evidence-base being used by the bureaucracy...I would get an email or a text message or a 'please explain'" (SASPA Pres-1). This enduring conflict is an important example of the dilemma principal associations face in contesting neoliberal-inflected policy. Whilst the SASPA-Pres 1 maintained dissensus<sup>36</sup>, the DfE senior executive were observing that principals had enacted the policy so behaved towards the Association as if the issue had been settled.

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<sup>36</sup> Here the term dissensus refers to the notion of different views coexisting in opposition to each other.

Another example of conflict was provided by SASPA Pres-6 and relates to the independence of principal associations. Recounting a situation where *The Advertiser* (South Australia's daily newspaper) published an article critical of the DfE's funding model, Pres-6 noted how vexed it had made the DfE CE and the state's Minister for Education. The CE contacted the SASPA president.

I got a phone call from (him). And he basically...screamed over the phone to me. And, half an hour later he was bidding me farewell, and I can still recall saying, X, 'This conversation hasn't finished.' And it was essentially about the autonomy and the independence of the association, and the voice of secondary principals. (SASPA Pres-6)

At a subsequent face-to-face meeting, a similar tone was adopted by the Minister of Education. The conflict documented here is about the independence of principal associations to express views that are critical of either the Government, the bureaucracy or both. This remains an enduring dispute in the SASPA—DfE relationship where, on one hand chief executives such as DfE CE-5 could say, "I do see SASPA as independent. It was independent when I got here, and it remains independent now". But, on the other hand, SASPA Pres-1 could claim, that:

we (SASPA and SAPP) are trying to have both the government, and the opposition, guarantee our funding so that chief executives like Y and Z can't just come in and use the withdrawal of funding as a threat to silence a legally-constituted professional body.

### **5.5.3 Entanglements**

As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, for Lowndes and Paxton (2018), 'entanglement' was the constant constitution and reconstitution of individuals and groups based on the nature of their experience in policy engagement (p. 705). It is here that the relationship between policy opponents becomes confused and unclear. This might be because of various ambiguities, or it might be that the relationship is in flux.

Although few in number, the instances of entanglement in the SASPA—DfE relationship are worth noting. One of these relates to DfE CE-3 who was unable to distinguish between principal associations and trade unions. He questioned, therefore, whether principal associations had a role to play.

Have they (principal associations) got a place in modern, contemporary leadership and management? I'm not sure... If you look at all professionals' thinking, whether it is the legal profession, medical profession, aviation, generally speaking, the more senior representatives of those industries generally have associations to try and influence the lobby on particular reforms, improvements or policy development. (DfE CE-3)

The inference, here, of course, was that SASPA and other principal associations should learn from the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and other professional bodies as to how to lobby for change. Invariably the SASPA—DfE relationship during the tenure of this CE was constantly being renegotiated because of ongoing confusion over the purposes of principal associations within the education stakeholder ecosystem. A tactic used by SASPA Pres-8 to compensate for this misread was to “understand the way he (CE-3) phrased things” and then “phrased whatever I wanted to talk about back to him in that language or in that way of thinking”. This was indicative of the attempts of SASPA Pres-1 to negotiate with new managerial career bureaucrats. As he noted, “When public education policy is in the hands of non-educators...it is absolutely imperative that you bring them along with you...I know it sounds ridiculous...but, unless the CE can see something in it for them...it is very difficult for our Association to get any traction” (Pres-1).

The power differential between DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents was considered by most SASPA interviewees to be a contributing factor in the extent to which the work of policy improvement progressed. SASPA Pres-8's indication that “he (the chief executive) may have positional power” but “I have representational

responsibility and, so, I can't weaken at the knees", registers as a power entanglement, by which I mean that SASPA—DfE relationships were invariably constituted and reconstituted by how each considered the other. SASPA Pres-8, whose tenure straddled two very different DfE chief executives, saw that, "there is this massive dump of what went before and then something new is rolled out as the next best thing". This also registers as an entanglement but one of an institutional nature where the two organisations, the bureaucracy and the principal association, undergo rapid change from one leader to the next and need to reestablish the relationship on a new footing, albeit with the need to move on from previous policy interests.

Perhaps the most confused and entangled example of the SASPA—DfE relationship was found in the transcript of DfE CE-5 where the establishment of the External Relations directorate was explained.

I found engagement across the whole stakeholder landscape to be...Haphazard isn't the right term, but I felt like I was trying to do it in a really retail kind of way...In creating the external relations directorate...I was trying to get a more consistent and repeatable and high quality rhythm and cadence to engagement...It was just a way of...joining the dots...I could roll from a meeting with SASPA around leadership pipeline, move a week later into a meeting with SAPPa about leadership pipeline, into a meeting with the AEU about leadership pipeline...What I was finding was a level of drive-bys. (DfE CE-5)

The formation of the External Relations directorate essentially reconstituted the SASPA—DfE relationship. On one hand it addressed the DfE Chief Executive's need to manage stakeholder engagement. On the other hand, it suggested that principal associations had suddenly become external to the system of public education. As SASPA Pres-1 indicated:

Their talk has been about engagement, but our experience has been about compliance and control...it becomes a very closed conversation that doesn't show an interest in...exploring the deeper interests of educators.

One of the side-effects to SASPA being treated as an ‘external relation’ was that whilst its access to DfE was increased (Pres-1 indicated monthly meetings were held with its Director), its interests were steered towards policy revision and away from the new reform agenda of From Good to Great.

Lastly, the issue of whether a principal association’s political work registers with the bureaucracy as one voice or as multiple voices is an example of entanglement. As revealed earlier in this chapter, DfE CE-3 indicated that “with any sort of representative group, you obviously have those who are very much aligned to the group’s view, and you’ll have a number of people who’ll align themselves to a different view”. SASPA Pres-1 recognised that, during his tenure, DfE CE-3 and CE-5 would sometimes choose the advice sought from individual principals rather than SASPA’s advice gathered from a cross-section of its membership or from formal discussions by the Board.

What bothered me, was that this individual principal to Chief Executive advice most likely followed traditional employee—employer power relations, whereas SASPA’s advice, formed mostly by a collective, was provided to the agency without fear or favour. (Pres-1)

Given that truth-telling is an important tactic in the political work of principal associations, the effect of this ‘entanglement’ was to weaken SASPA’s influence.

#### **5.5.4 Tensions**

The data category labelled ‘tensions’ represented the moments in the SASPA—DfE relationship where dilemmas had formed. These dilemmas included coercion and resistance, distrust and trust, and an ‘us and them’ mentality. In this sense, the transcripts provided an array of identity-based, power-laden tensions that presented more as agonistic than antagonistic. My interviewees presented as adversarial: each party acknowledged the other as legitimate but recognised that enduring differences

existed in the policy spaces they each held in common. In such situations, according to Mouffe (2014a), agonism allows dissent to remain open, and welcomes divergence and debate. The PIA process of Bacchi and Bonham (2016) was helpful here in “interrogating the production of ‘subjects’” (p. 118), which enabled contextual factors to be identified where an agonistic relationship was maintained. This agonistic relationship is now considered through an atomised version of power-laden tensions, i.e., coercion and resistance, distrust and trust, and an ‘us and them’ mentality.

### ***Coercion and Resistance***

I have discussed how some DfE chief executives used coercion to control the political work of SASPA (see Chapter 2) and, later in this study, I explore how some SASPA presidents adopted resistance tactics to distance the profession from the major neoliberal reforms of DfE which included the PPRP (Chapter 7) and the FG TG strategy (Chapter 8).

This tension between coercion and resistance is captured in the transcripts of SASPA presidents. For example, SASPA Pres-1 explained how “a delegation from the SASPA Board (presenting a survey report) met with the CE and DfE senior executives, and the CE’s only interest was for (the delegation) to provide the names of the principals who had been quoted in the report as speaking out against the From Good to Great strategy”. Here, the survey report was itself an act of resistance, where the data collected from principals aired concerns about the directions DfE was taking on the advice of McKinsey and Company. Whilst the response from the CE was not coercive, it was accusatory.

SASPA Pres-6 was explicit about the bureaucracy’s “use of coercive power” which was “sometimes manipulative”. However, this president was also clear “that the informational power, the expertise is out there in schools” (Pres-6). As researcher, I



interpreted this comment to mean that any coercion or manipulation used by the DfE would be countered, to some extent, by the wisdom of school leaders. This interpretation is consistent with Dolan (2020b) whose study of school principals identified “the tension between the need to oppose or resist centralised policy demands and the personal risks involved in such opposition and resistance” (p. 6).

SASPA Pres-8 explained how DfE adopted its own form of resistance to the views of SASPA.

I remember going to meetings with the curriculum directorate, led by the curriculum director of that time, (name withheld)...And, she would have a cast of thousands from her directorate there...And there would be 20 or 30 people...in the room, discussing something...The chance of that ever being productive was about Buckley’s and none. (Pres-8)

Here, the DfE resistance tactic was inertia; that is, listening (to the concerns and ideas of the field) with the intention of taking no action. A similar view was expressed by other SASPA presidents including Pres-1 who stipulated that access to the CE and DfE senior executives was high but that this did not correlate “to (their) acting on SASPA’s policy interests”.<sup>37</sup> Used internally with members and outwardly when advocating reform to the bureaucracy and to government, SASPA’s publication of these policy interests were received by the CE, initially at least, as confrontational.

...one of the things that we have done is to publish our priority work for 2019–2021 to show that we are serious and committed...You know...This is what we are going after...But, it has created a sort of combativeness in terms of the current CE’s perspective. (Pres-1)

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<sup>37</sup> From 2019, the SASPA Board’s policy interests – which included addressing issues of inequity and using Secondary Networks to leverage system-wide improvements to SACE results – were published annually.

As a researcher, I interpreted this comment as meaning that the CE held the view that principal associations should not have priority work beyond the scope of the system's own priorities which, at the time, consisted of the FGTG strategy and its apparatus of SolR, SIP, the LET and Literacy and Numeracy Guidebooks (see Chapter 8).

### ***Distrust and Trust***

Whilst trust and distrust was a sub-theme to emerge from my data analysis, there was a time when it was 'trust—trust'. SASPA Pres-2 reflected on how DfE CE-7 "was one of us, in a sense" because "he had an education background" and he had been a headmaster during Alby Jones's leadership of the system. "It was Alby who made the big move to trust the school principals more with the Freedom and Authority memorandum" (Pres-2). DfE CE-7 also indicated his trust of SASPA and SAPPAs presidents and how it had followed naturally from the way he "had been connected to principal groups when a District Inspector of schools". CE-7 explained that "it wasn't like I was subverting the formal structure; however, I just wanted to know that there were other ways of getting views about how things were working; and those groups (SASPA and SAPPAs) tended to say what needed to be said". So, in a trust—trust environment, truth-telling by principal associations was actively sought and valued by the bureaucracy.

In the twelve years between DfE CE-7's end of tenure and the appointment of DfE CE-4 there were three DfE chief executives appointed and three acting chief executives. When the Hon. Jay Weatherill was appointed as Minister for Education in 2010, his appointment of a chief executive looked to repair the disconnect between the bureaucracy and schools.

One of the things I had heard quite a lot about was that it had been some time since there had been a CE who took a professional view of the system and the engagement with school principals. (DfE CE-4)

As a researcher, CE-4's comments seemed redolent of a decline in bureaucracy—principal—principal association relations. However, as an early career principal during the CE tenure of Mr Steve Marshall (2002–2006), I had inside knowledge of his attempt to engage school leaders in a culture of inquiry approach to school improvement<sup>38</sup>. That said, in my experience as a school leader, neither his predecessor nor his successor actively engaged the profession. Here, my own recollection supports DfE CE-4's comment (above) and his being recruited as “someone to offer a professional service to a service that he (Minister Weatherill) felt had suffered from a lack of...educational leadership” (CE-4).

Ironically, given Minister Weatherill's positive intervention in the appointment of CE-4, the increasing role of government on education policy was a factor which contributed to distrust in the bureaucracy—principal association relationship. As SASPA Pres-8 indicated, “I don't know whether schools are now seen as the most important thing, I think government is”. SASPA Pres-6 commented that, within the bureaucracy, “chief executives are the only employee of the government...There is a direct line of sight from a minister to a chief executive...and it's a delicate dance”. It was this ‘delicate dance’ that Pres-6 saw as contributing to the Department's use of “coercive power...sometimes manipulative...and, in day-to-day activities, regulatory power”. SASPA Pres-2 called this increasing role of government the “ministerialisation” of public education, where “forms of new public management were instituted” and the chief executive was “accountable to the minister upwards”. SASPA Pres-1, having observed DfE CE-5 survive a change of government, suggested that “there must be some ‘game playing’ in the relationship between chief executives and

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<sup>38</sup> In 2004, Marshall asked Professor Alan Reid (University of SA) to author a paper, *A Culture of Inquiry*, which was used by District Directors (middle-tier DfE leaders) and school principals to undertake research geared to district and school-based improvement.

governments...you know...a CE looking effective but not branding oneself too much politically”.

On the occasions when the Minister of the day was explicit about the value of principal associations, a trust—trust relationship between the bureaucracy and SASPA was more possible. For example, DfE CE-4 saw that, “Minister Weatherill and his policy advisors were very open to the engagement on a very open and direct level with SAPP and SASPA”. However, during the tenure of SASPA Pres-1, productive relationships with Labor and Liberal ministers were developed and maintained but this did not always translate well to the CE—SASPA relationship which he described as “turbulent”. Expanding on this, SASPA Pres-1 recounted how one CE told him that “I have tried everything I could possibly do to sack you...and discovered that I couldn’t”. When pressed for detail, SASPA Pres-1 concluded that the distrust of this CE (and of his successor) often stemmed from their reactions to comments in the media that were perceived as oppositional to or critical of DfE. This distrust sometimes unravelled into threats by the CE to withdraw SASPA’s funding support (see Chapter 2). As researcher, I see how a Chief Executive’s sensitivity about perceived criticism in the media reflects the stress placed on the Minister—CE—SASPA president relationship. On one hand, principal associations are considered independent of government and the bureaucracy but, on the other hand, governments are likely to consider a criticism of one of their agencies by an ‘independent body’ as a potential threat to re-election. To some extent, SASPA Pres-1 affirmed this view.

Quite early in my tenure the SASPA Board adopted a well-researched position that South Australia should place Year 7 students in secondary schools, consistent with other Australian states. The Minister for Education, Dr Susan Close, did not favour that position. When the Opposition made Year 7 into High School a significant part of its election platform, the media made much of this political difference during the eighteen or so months leading up to the 2018 election. On one occasion, I was meant to be meeting with the DfE CE only to be told by him that the Minister’s Office were unhappy with comments I had made to *The Advertiser*, and I had better get over there and have them retract it before its publication. That SASPA’s

research was referenced throughout the article published the following day caused a falling out with the Minister. Thankfully, it was short lived. (Pres-1)

In describing the circumstances behind how they became the DfE chief executive, three of my interviewees indicated that they were political appointments and the fourth, although appointed through a recruitment process, had political support. All four clearly stated that they worked for the Education Minister. DfE CE-7 was explicit that “you try to please Ministers”. The tenures of DfE CE-3 and DfE CE-5 commenced after decisions the Government made in response to two Royal Commissions. CE-3 was drafted to head DfE as a response to the DeBelle Inquiry Report<sup>39</sup> (2014) and CE-5 was moved into education to enact the recommendations of the Nyland Report (2016)<sup>40</sup>. Reflecting on his first six months in the DfE role, CE-5 observed that, “95% of every available hour was spent on Families SA and child protection”. It was during these three years of the bureaucracy’s on-going troubles with child protection issues that the coalition of SASPA, SAPP, PDA and AEU successfully lobbied Education Ministers to establish the Public Education Advisory Group (see Chapter 2).

### ***Us and Them***

Related to issues of trust and distrust was this idea that the adversarial nature of the educator—bureaucracy relationship constituted an ‘us and them’ mentality. SASPA Pres-2, reflecting on the appointment of a career bureaucrat to the role of Chief Executive, observed that:

... a lot of people saw him (the CE) as the new management... coming in as the corporate professional... There is always that kind of suspicion of non-school

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<sup>39</sup> In 2014, QC Bruce DeBelle issued his report of the Independent Education Inquiry he undertook in 2012–2013. This report is located at [https://www.education.sa.gov.au/docs/ce-office/debelle\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.education.sa.gov.au/docs/ce-office/debelle_report_final.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> In August 2016, the Hon. Margaret Nyland issued her report, *The Life They Deserve*, from the Royal Commission she conducted into Child Protection Systems. The report is located at <https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/documents/report/child-protection-systems-royal-commission-report.pdf>

people, and it heightens the 'us and them' mentality... We (SASPA presidents) didn't see ourselves as corporate. (SASPA Pres-2)

From a DfE perspective, CE-5 saw the 'us and them' struggle as indicative of educators' resistance to bureaucratic change.

I feel like there is a lot of romanticising of the old days and simpler times... I feel there is an historic tension which is a resistance to change... sometimes the very problems that we're trying to sort out were actually created (by educators) in the past." (DfE CE-5)

This 'us and them' struggle between the profession and the bureaucracy is mentioned in my Chapter 3 discussion of new managerial practices. Here, I am reminded by Lynch et al. (2012) that one of the objectives of new public management is "to curb the power of professionals in public sector organizations" (p. 5). SASPA Pres-1 saw the 'us and them' scenario as akin to a game.

At times we play offense by trying to have the DfE adopt one of SASPA's priority policy interests. Mostly, the DfE response is to stonewall. Then, at other times it is us on defence, digging our heels in over a new DfE direction or strategy that takes us further away from the profession's interests. It can be exhausting. (SASPA Pres-1)

The adversarial nature of the SASPA—DfE relationship is understood through tensions such as 'us and them', 'distrust and trust', and 'coercion and resistance'. Whilst such tensions have been evident across the period 1995–2020 they have been most evident during times when the bureaucracy has been at its most managerial, which includes the most recent era of 2013–2020.

Whilst this Phase two analysis of the four sub-themes of adhesion, conflict, entanglement and tension produced increased clarity about SASPA's political work 'inside and outside the tent', and it identified various tactics that were deployed, it fell short of my ambition to reveal future possibilities. This understanding necessitated an expansion to my inquiry.

## **5.6 Understandings – Empirical Data**

What emerged from the analysis of my empirical data was that across the 25-year spread in the tenures of these SASPA presidents and DfE chief executives there were times of considerable trust between the profession and the bureaucracy. Adhesions had formed around common purposes such as the notion that, if South Australia was to have a system of local school management, its variant should be informed by the profession (i.e., a coalition of principal associations, led by SASPA's president). But the more managerialist the practices of the bureaucracy, and the more politicised the office of the DfE chief executive, the SASPA—DfE relationship deteriorated into one which reflected an 'us and them' mentality. Despite SASPA's ambition of 'codesign ahead of consultation', and of being 'inside the tent' and shaping public education policy together with the DfE, that objective was interrupted by various conflicts, entanglements and tensions. Here, the contests were invariably linked to GERM-related policy (e.g., the From Good to Great reform) and new managerialist practices (e.g., performativity).

### **5.6.1 Reliability**

In the period 1995–2020 there were eight SASPA presidents (four of whom were interviewed) and there were seven DfE chief executives appointed (four of whom were interviewed). The selection of these office bearers was based on availability. For example, of the seven DfE chief executives, one was deceased, two now resided interstate (and for whom I had no contact details), and the remaining four were accessible to me and, when asked, agreed to participate. By contrast, three of the five SASPA presidents who served this century were easily located and, when asked, agreed to participate. When choosing a fourth SASPA president, I was keen to locate one who had served in the mid or late 1990s. That I was able to find such an

interviewee enabled me to make a contrast between the pre-local school management years (1995–1998) and the post-local school management era (1999–2020).

As a sample, interviewing 50% of SASPA presidents and 57% of DfE chief executives is within the range of reliability. Might different results have emerged if I had interviewed all fifteen office bearers across the years 1995–2020? Undoubtedly. With this understanding, the results of my empirical data must be considered a generalisation; albeit formed from a reliable sample size.

### **5.6.2 *The Elephant in the Room***

Whilst my data analysis produced knowledge about the SASPA—DfE relationship, it also revealed an ‘elephant in the room’. If clarity into the SASPA—DfE relationship over policy was to be established, the principal needed to be introduced into the frame. This was because the policy contests in the SASPA—DfE relationship were invariably impacted by the dual identity of the principal. That is, the principal as DfE employee and the principal as a policy concerned member of SASPA needed to be understood. So, locating knowledge about this relationship, where the demands on the principal from the bureaucracy (constituted as the employer) were in conflict with the obligations of the principal as an educational professional (and, therefore, not constituted as an employee), presented me with a way of understanding the nature of education policy contests, the reasons they are needed, and how the professional interest interacts with the bureaucratic interest. This facilitated the move to design a research question for knowing more about the DfE—school principal—SASPA multilateral relationship. My revised question, in three parts, became:

- What is the problem represented to be in the various positions taken on principal accountability policy within the *Partnerships 21* (1999–2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015–2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019–2022) reforms?



- How have principals been constituted because of these policy representations?
- How has this rendering impacted the capacity of principal associations (i.e., the organised and collective voice of principals) to engage the bureaucracy in productive processes for improving public education policy?

Understandably, this expanded line of inquiry demanded that I find other ways of knowing.

### **5.6.3 Some Other Ways of Knowing**

The focus of Chapter 5 has been the collection and analysis of the ethnographic component of my data trail. This process, which occurred early on in my study, established key themes and understandings but also demonstrated the need to sharpen my line of inquiry and to find other ways of knowing about the DfE—principal relationship, and about the SASPA—DfE relationship (and how this might have been affected by how principals had been constituted by the DfE).

One approach I took was to use autoethnography (see Chapter 2) as a means of writing a ‘history of my present’. Building from this history of the present, my other approach was to assemble a policy genealogy (see Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10) where the focus was on how principals were constituted by DfE approaches to accountability.

## **5.7 Understandings – Autoethnography**

In Chapter 2, I commenced the short history of my present with a ‘diagnosis’, consistent with Garland (2014). Here, the statement of my contemporary problem was described as *the more managerial DfE acted, the more constrained SASPA’s political agency became*. Expanding upon this diagnosis, the key constraining factors I identified through my autoethnographic reflections were:

- the *relational proximities* between the association and other education stakeholders, and between the association and the government (and its opposition) and the bureaucracy
- the *dilemma of dualism* of SASPA members (i.e., members of the profession and employees of the bureaucracy), and its management by the association
- *the neoliberalising policy regime* (and the adherence to it by governments and bureaucracies).

Drawing upon Foucault's notion of "regimes of truth", I now consider each of these constraining factors as "complex interactions between truth and power within the procedures that are used to govern human beings" (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 39).

### **5.7.1 Relational Proximities**

Despite proclaiming to be independent, with their reliance upon government funding (administered by education bureaucracies), principal associations (including SASPA) are never truly independent. This means that the political agency sought by principal associations is compromised on those occasions when it is perceived that they 'bite the hand that feeds them'. As a constraining factor, this problem presented itself on two occasions during my 7-year SASPA presidency and with two different DfE chief executives. Understanding it only ever as a bureaucratic threat, since neither the government of the day nor its opposition showed any interest in withdrawing support for the 'independent' work of principal associations, its effect was to restrain SASPA's political work by jeopardising the association's business operations and the livelihoods of those within its small workforce. The lesson, here, is that principal associations may actually be better off politically without government funding, particularly where that funding is tied to the president's salary and conditions. This would see principal associations become truly member-funded professional organisations again, on the understanding that this was how most originated.

The other relational proximity that needs to be referenced is between principal associations (e.g., SASPA and SAPP) and other educational stakeholders (e.g.,

teacher unions and universities). This is relevant because, if the neoliberal hegemonic project is to be interrupted as Apple (2015) suggests, the education community needs to be willing to build alliances across some of the substantive differences that exist within it (p. 179). Although I provided a positive example of how education stakeholders joined together to work with Minister Close on the statement, *Public Education in South Australia* (Reid, 2017), the neoliberalising policy regime remained unchallenged. South Australia possessed an outstanding rationale for a socially-just public education underpinned by six characteristics: Quality, Equity, Diversity and Cohesion, Collaboration and Trust, Community, and Democracy (p. 5) but, within 18 months, the DfE had launched the McKinsey and Company strategy, *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (FGTG). An educational stakeholder alliance had worked well on a specific time-bound project, but it had failed to establish its counter-hegemonic credentials. To this end, there was an attempt by a sub-group from the Public Education Advisory Group (PEAG) – including the presidents of the AEU-SA, SAPPa and SASPA – to work together as a coalition to host a June 2018 symposium which planned to draw upon the work of academics (local and interstate) to challenge the McKinsey and Company research behind FGTG and, by doing so, discredit the DfE strategy. The idea was aborted after the SASPA Executive (a sub-group of the SASPA Board) withdrew their support for my involvement on the basis that it would undermine the Board's relationship with DfE. With one of its partners abandoning the coalition's idea, the June 2018 symposium was aborted. The SASPA Executive had based its decision upon the risk of reputational damage. Its concern related to its members belonging to DfE (as employees) as well as belonging to SASPA (as principal peers acting as professional associates). This dualism was another constraining factor.

### **5.7.2 The Dilemma of Dualism**

According to Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart (2016) dualism is, “(t)he existence of opposite poles, dichotomies, binary relationships that are able to create tensions, but can be separated” (p. 5). The dilemma of dualism for educators presents itself as the interdependence of belonging both to a profession (with a set of established norms and values) and to an agency which employs them (also with a set of established norms and values, but not always congruent with those of the profession, and with the added control over individuals that employment bestows). Importantly, the relationships between these opposite poles are “not necessarily incompatible or mutually exclusive” (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 9) but they can be constraining.

During my SASPA presidency the dilemma of dualism was a constraining factor. The two critical moments recounted in Chapter 2, where decisions made by the SASPA Board were compromised by concerns related to members putting their employment interests ahead of their concerns about the profession, were not isolated incidents. Earlier in this chapter (see **Coercion and Resistance**) I included a reflection made by SASPA Pres-1 about a meeting of a SASPA delegation with the DfE CE and members of his senior executive. SASPA Pres-1 shared how two experienced principal members of his delegation quickly changed from being critics of the FGTG strategy to being its supporters, after the DfE chief executive became increasingly annoyed by the negative comments made by anonymous principals in SASPA’s survey report. Here was another example of how important it can be for the principal employee to be seen by her/his employer as loyal and supportive, despite any professional concerns she/he might have shared in principal association forums. This problem of dualism became more pronounced once the bureaucracy used its FGTG strategy to exert greater control and compliance over its principals (see Chapter 8). Considering that principals

in other Australian states are permanent appointments to the principal classification, dualism might be a problem unique to South Australia. Certainly, South Australia's 1989 Curriculum Guarantee<sup>41</sup> decision to stop any further permanent appointments to the principal classification made it more dangerous for tenured principals to resist the bureaucracy. Using Foucault's notion of 'regimes of truth' as a tool, the principal's dilemma of dualism makes it easier for the bureaucracy to 'conduct the conduct' of its principals who are more likely to accept control than refuse it, working from the knowledge that it is the bureaucracy which decides on principal appointments.

### ***5.7.3 Neoliberalising Policy Regime***

Clearly a key constraining factor experienced through my SASPA work history was the adherence to a neoliberalising policy regime by government and by its bureaucracy. Whilst this issue is a central feature of my genealogy chapters which follow, it is important that I make two key points based on my analysis of my autoethnographic contribution in Chapter 2.

First, the neoliberalising policy regime we find ourselves in is unlikely to be disrupted by a series of gestures, e.g., an ASPA monograph, an ASPA symposium, and the formation of the CAP. Australia's education system is an established hegemonic order (see Reid, 2020), sustained by its various technologies for compliance (e.g., Australian Curriculum, My School, NAPLAN and PISA), the effects of which include the subjugation of school principals. It is not enough, therefore, for principal associations to challenge these norms; they must develop tactics that will lead to their replacement. Here professional associations could, and should, consider Apple (2015) and his nine

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<sup>41</sup> This document is located at <https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/items/4e8b7757-ce71-5ef1-813d-d8684f99761c>

suggestions for scholar/academic activists, one of which is to consider frameworks which emphasise “the space in which more progressive and counter-hegemonic actions can, or do, go on” (p. 178). It is here that activists might find ways to interrupt the neoliberalising policy regime.

Second, SASPA’s adoption of *Beyond Certainty: a Process for Thinking About Futures for Australian Education* (Reid, 2018) in its professional growth program for deputy principals and assistant principals, known as *Unleashing Your Leadership Potential* (UYLP), may have suggested a productive way forward. Here, UYLP was being used as a vehicle for promulgating a counter-narrative to the transactional leadership model the DfE was engineering through its compliance agenda. However, as much as South Australia’s next generation of principals were influenced by Reid’s (2018) counter-narrative, SASPA’s failure to disrupt the new managerial practices DfE was using to achieve compliance, meant that these young leaders outwardly had to embrace the FGTG reform (i.e., the antithesis of *Beyond Certainty*) if they wanted to be a principal. This constraining factor illustrated how the combination of neoliberal inflected policy (FGTG) and new managerial practices (compliance and performativity) are entwined. For principal associations to interrupt the neoliberal regime we find ourselves in, our target cannot solely be its hegemony, it must also be the means by which that hegemony’s dominance is enabled and sustained.

## **5.8 Towards a Genealogy**

Together, the understandings from my autoethnography (Chapter 2) and my ethnographic interviews (Chapter 5) provide three insights.

- (i) The SASPA—DfE relationship experienced some periods of adhesion where policy was made together ‘inside the tent’ but, for the most part, policy differences (expressed as conflicts, entanglements and tensions) were contested ‘outside the tent’.

- (ii) The SASPA—DfE relationship was predominantly contested outside the tent during the 2013–2020 period (i.e., adherence to new managerial practices).
- (iii) The dilemma of dualism, where SASPA members not only belonged to the Association but also to the bureaucracy’s workforce, made SASPA’s political work more complex during the periods when DfE adhered to new managerialist practices.

These insights result from my analysis of ‘lived experience’ data, i.e., my own and that of other SASPA presidents, together with four DfE chief executives. Whilst lived experience provides insight into the SASPA—DfE relationship and, specifically, how the Association’s political work has been either encouraged or ignored, it does not illuminate the relationship between various policy constraints on principal’s work and how principal associations are invariably shaped by such a rendering. To produce knowledge of such a praxis I now move to introduce my final way of knowing, i.e., policy genealogy.

### **5.8.1 Genealogy**

Within the field of policy sociology, genealogy is an accepted research methodology that traces the historical development and evolution of policies, institutions, and ideas. Its function is to reveal the underlying power dynamics that shape those objects. My decision to use genealogy was to trace the historical development of principal accountability approaches across three major DfE reforms and, by so doing, to reveal how principals were constituted by the nature and scale of these approaches (see Chapters, 6, 7 and 8). Whether this rendering has constrained the capacity of principal associations to challenge the neoliberalising policy regime becomes the focus of my Chapter 9 discussion. My genealogy concludes in Chapter 10 where a possibilising dimension is introduced and used to suggest plausible possibilities for principal associations to expand their political work in the future.

## 5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the moves I made in my study which related to data, their analysis and the emergence of understandings. The main focus was the collection of ethnographic data sourced from four DfE chief executives and four SASPA presidents and analysis of the interview transcripts. It was this process, which occurred early on in my study, that established the themes of 'inside the tent' and 'outside the tent', and generated my understanding that: the more managerialist the practices of the bureaucracy, and the more politicised the office of the DfE chief executive, the more likely it was for the SASPA's political work to be conducted from 'outside the tent'.

But it was what these 48,000 words of transcribed interview material did not tell me that necessitated an expansion of my research inquiry. I needed to know more about the tactical nature of education policy contests, the reasons they were needed, and how the professional interest interacted with the bureaucratic interest or disrupted it. This meant revising my research question again and expanding my methods beyond ethnographic data so that knowledge could be produced about the political work of principal associations through an understanding of the multilateral relationship between DfE, school principals, and SASPA. Here, the school principal has shared 'membership'.

To satisfy the complexity and scope of my revised inquiry I was compelled to find other ways of knowing. Consequently, my data trail was expanded to include an autoethnographic account of the 'history of my present' (located in Chapter 2) and a Foucauldian genealogy (located in Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9). Two of the three insights from my brief autoethnography built upon findings already established from the analysis of ethnographic interview transcripts. However, a third insight, which I described as the 'dilemma of dualism', suggested the need for me to further investigate



the effects of principals having a shared 'membership' of SASPA and the DfE. Principals belong to the bureaucracy (as an DfE employee) and also choose to belong to a professional network (SASPA and other principal associations). What happens when principals are constituted through the accountabilities established and monitored by the bureaucracy? How does such a rendering, then, affect how principal associations are engaged by the bureaucracy in policy contests?

Using genealogy as my third and final method, Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 reveal how principals were constituted by the DfE's expansion of its accountability technologies and the effect this rendering had on the political work of principal associations. Here my data consist of DfE policies and other related documents, SASPA materials (including annual reports, Board communiques, discussion papers, e-Bulletins to members and survey reports), and further use of autoethnographic reflections (including details from my work journals) and of the ethnographic interview transcripts. These are "rich' data" geared to providing a "sufficiently revealing, varied and full picture of the phenomenon, participants and settings" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 318).

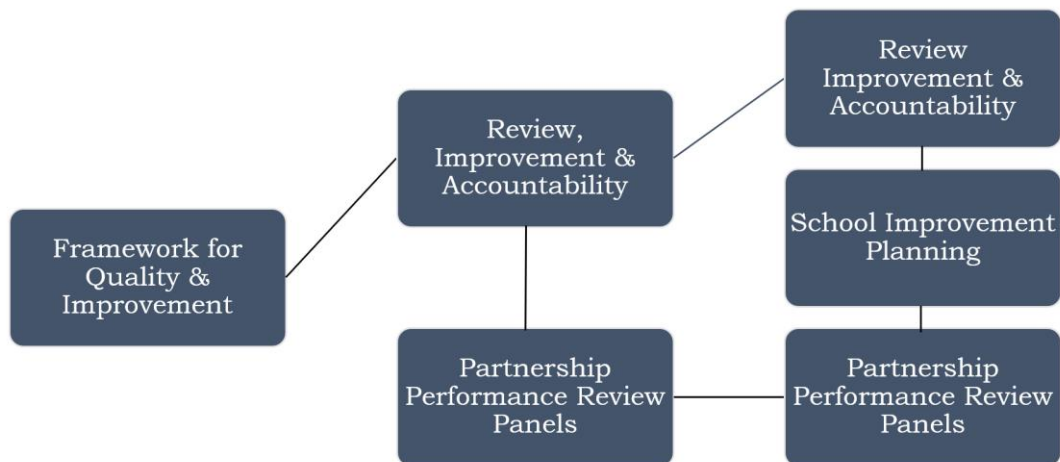
## 6. FROM AGENCY TO AUTONOMY

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### 6.1 Genealogy Outline

This chapter opens a five-chapter sequence (Chapter 6: From Agency to Autonomy, Chapter 7: From Autonomy to Collective Surveillance, Chapter 8: From Collective Surveillance to Bureaucratic Compliance, Chapter 9: SASPA’s Political Agency, and Chapter 10: Possibilising) which comprises the genealogy section of my thesis. Here, genealogy is understood as “a narrative describing how a certain belief, concept, value, or practice came about” (Lorenzini, 2020, p. 1), where the concept explained is how principals constitute themselves and have been constituted by the various accountability models embedded within three system-wide reforms – *Partnerships 21*, *Partnership Performance Review Panels* and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System*. My interest is in how this rendering has constrained the political work of principal associations and what can be conceived as a possibilising future.

Figure 7 (below) graphically represents the policy terrain to be covered by this genealogy. The accountability approaches adopted by the three aforementioned system-wide reforms are denoted, and the diagonal and horizontal lines between these approaches show a program’s continuity whilst the vertical lines illustrate how two of the reforms used multiple methods.



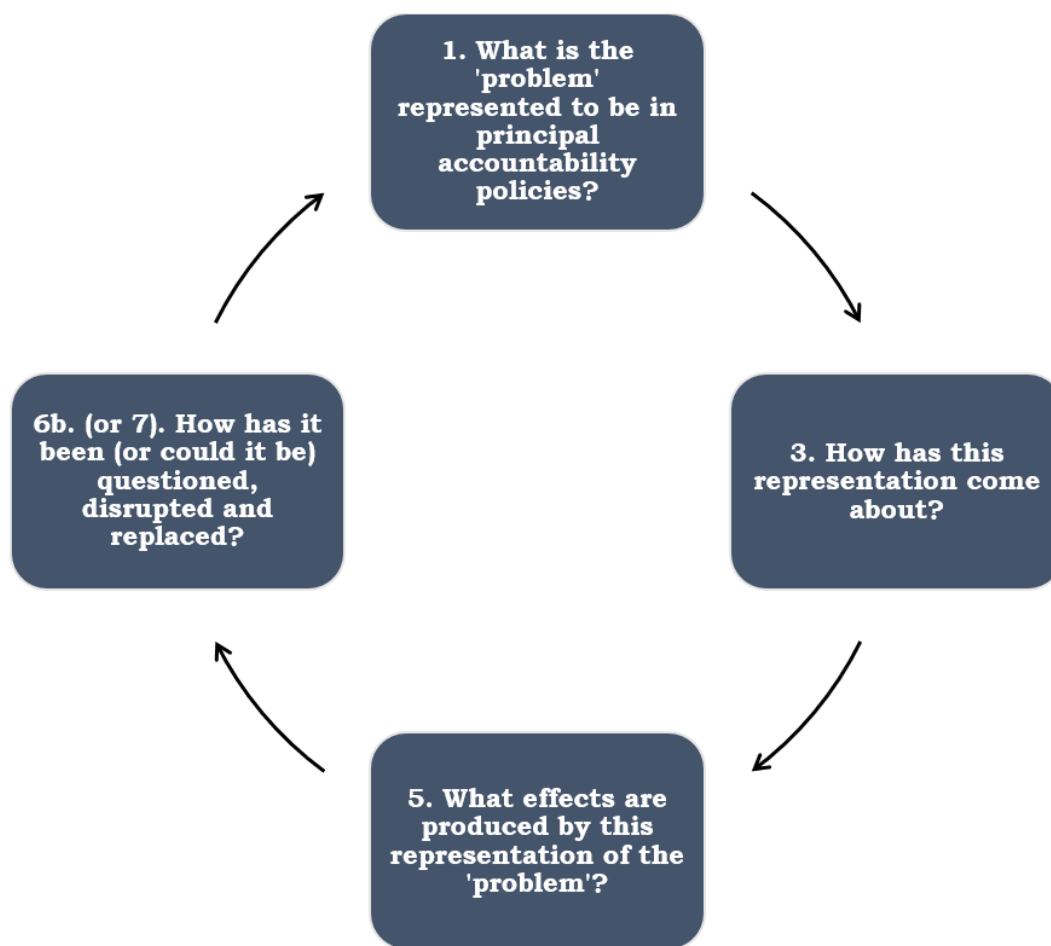
**Figure 7: The DfE expansion of principal accountability**

In composing this genealogy, I applied Bacchi’s WPR framework to the task of analysing the bureaucracy’s principal accountability models by reflecting on the ‘problems’ such policy positions were thought to represent and ‘solve’. Here, the first WPR question – What is the problem represented to be? – is understood as being fundamental to any such analysis, and the third and fifth questions – How has this problem come about? and What effects are produced by this representation of the problem? – are considered axiomatic for taking a genealogical approach.

In relation to how principals have been constituted by these models and then, in proposing some options for expanding the political work of principal associations pursuant to this rendering, I use the WPR framework’s final question – i.e., How could this representation of the problem be questioned, disrupted and replaced? Originally conceived as Question 6b, the self-problematisation associated with making this move was subsequently described by Bacchi (2021) as the “seventh step” (p. 11). Importantly, this conclusive step encouraged me to consider the plausibility of the

various possibilities I advanced. Such an approach is consistent with Lorenzini (2023a) who argued that genealogy has a “possibilising dimension”, one which is generated through a sense of “ethico-political commitment” to “struggle against the subjugating effects of the governmental mechanisms and regimes of truth that still permeate our lives” (pp. 118-119).

There is also potential here for some “futuring”, which Gunter and Fitzgerald (2008) described as “trajectories of possible developments ... linked from past to present to future” where “positions can be taken on how and why change needs to be taken” (p. 6). The inclusion of Bacchi’s seventh step established a theoretical basis for me to explore various possibilities for principal associations interested in expanding their political work. Since WPR takes the position that policy meanings are contestable and contested and, since there is no singular perception of a policy issue, the process of making policy and arguing for policy is a political one. This is consistent with the thinking of Foucault (1982a) who claimed that “a reform is never anything but the result of a process in which there is conflict, confrontation, struggle, resistance...” (p. 34). And so, it is within this contested terrain of reform that principal associations engage politically with the education bureaucracy.



**Figure 4: The adaptation of the WPR framework used in this thesis.**

Across this genealogy section my discussion follows a consistent format. I begin each chapter by establishing context. This involves locating each model of principal accountability within the bureaucracy’s wider reform agenda and the times which spawned it; thereby discursively storying their inter-relationship. My adaptation of the WPR framework is then invoked as an abridged four-step sequence (see Figure 4 above) where principal accountability is problematised; that is, following Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), there is an interrogation of “how ‘problems’ are represented or constituted” within these models of accountability and “how they have come to be represented in this fashion” (p. 39).

Empirical data from interviews with four former DfE chief executives and four former SASPA presidents is interspersed throughout this discussion. Such an inclusion reveals a unique “cultural knowledge” (Spradley, 1980) about the systems, structures and relationships which form policy in a “terrain of contestation” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 149). Analysis of this empirical data, and of documents generated by the bureaucracy and the principal association at the time, establishes what Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) refer to as the “discursive practices” (p. 174) attached to the policy terrain of principal accountability. It is here that various “regimes of truth” – “the complex *interaction* between truth and power within the procedures that are used to govern human beings” (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 7, italics in original) – are uncovered. Before each chapter is concluded, a summary is provided: one which goes beyond the synthesis of what has preceded it to establish the key links to the chapter which follows. For the purpose of this chapter, I now use this aforementioned structure to document my reading of principal accountability within the Partnerships 21 reform and of its constituting effects on principals and principal associations.

## **6.2 Context for Partnerships 21**

Understanding that governments and their bureaucracies use new public policy for the management of change, Chapter 6 considers one of the biggest changes the DfE has undertaken – the adoption of local school management. Referred to as Partnerships 21 (P21), this initiative devolved certain functions and powers to the school community and to its principal. Here, my main interest is in how this strategy introduced a systematised approach to principal accountability, i.e., the *Quality Improvement and Accountability Framework* (QIAF). This framework was thought to be a necessary step in managing the risks associated with providing increased autonomy to principals and schools. Before using my adaptation of Bacchi’s WPR framework to analyse the QIAF

and P21, there are two historical factors which predated these reforms but were essential to establish the context. The first was the delegated authority bestowed upon school leaders in 1970 by the bureaucracy's Director-General, Dr Alby Jones. The second was the 1989 decision by the bureaucracy, then headed by Dr Ken Boston, to desist from making principal appointments permanent via a centrally controlled procedure; instead, principals were to be appointed locally by Regional Directors to a defined tenure which was applicable to both their classification and their school destination. The delegated authority principals had been given in 1970 along with the security of permanency, was now subject to the professional judgment of those who line-managed or supervised them (i.e., at various times these were either Regional Directors, District Directors, or Education Directors explained in further detail later).

### ***6.2.1 Freedom and Authority in the Schools***

P21 heralded a pivotal directional change for South Australia's public education system because it challenged the devolution narrative established in *Freedom and Authority in the Schools* (Jones, 1970). That ground-breaking memorandum issued by the Director-General of Education, Dr Alby Jones, affirmed the school leader's "professional freedom and delegated authority" (p. 1) and, in so doing, signalled a devolution of power from the bureaucracy to the school. This transference of authority was designed to encourage innovation and "departures from tradition" where the motive was "to meet more effectively the needs of students" (p. 1). The logic for such a direction was that the school leader was much better placed to know their students than the bureaucracy, giving primacy to key educational and organisational decisions being made at the local level. This was also an argument *for* local school management when introduced.

A codicil to the memorandum, *Freedom and Authority in the Schools: A Postscript* (Jones, 1977), was issued seven years later as Dr Jones handed over to his successor, Mr John Steinle. Importantly, it reaffirmed the original memorandum's intent, i.e., to propose "a model of a school based on student-centred learning, on cooperative planning, and on flexibility of the total school process" (p. 1). It also reminded school leaders that the memorandum "did not prescribe a formal structure for the model, recognising that the required bases can be achieved in different ways" (p. 1). Since schools served different communities, each school's context invariably shaped how student needs were best met. Importantly, this postscript recognised that several bureaucratic settings needed to change in support of increased school leader autonomy and in recognition of the considerable contextual differences between South Australia's schools. These bureaucratic settings included improved central and regional provision of buildings, equipment, and quality staff to schools, and increased the authority of school leaders over the use of funds targeted to schools. This need for the State's education bureaucracy to further improve how it served schools in this devolved model remained the subject of some DfE—SASPA debate in the ensuing years.

### **6.2.2 Permanency Lost**

In 1970, Dr Jones had written his memorandum to headmasters (sic). It was not until the end of the 1970s that females were appointed to the 'headmaster' role, which became a catalyst for changing the nomenclature to that of 'principal'. Up until 1989, South Australia's public school principals, and headmasters before them, had been appointed to their classification permanently. From 1989 onwards, new principals were appointed by tenure (initially for five years) to their role classification and to their school destination. This nascent group of tenured principals became beholden to the



bureaucracy for either reappointment to the same school or appointment to another school. Failure to win another tenure meant the individual resumed employment at their previous substantive classification. For tenured principals, keeping the job became as important as doing the job. This change in how the bureaucracy recruited, selected, placed, and either retained or ‘discarded’ its principals was a significant factor across the twenty-five years of this study (1995–2020)<sup>42</sup>.

As substantive principals retired, the percentage of tenured principals increased exponentially. The effects of this change to employment conditions were threefold.

First, they increased the agency’s power over its principals since reappointment was intrinsically linked to how the bureaucracy viewed the individual. Understandably, anxieties associated with how the bureaucracy used this power were heightened during periods of major system-wide reform, including the three which comprise this policy genealogy: (i) Partnerships 21 (1999–2002); (ii) Partnership Performance Review Panels (2015–2022), and (iii) From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System (2019–2022).

Second, the change meant that survival for principals was tied to the various accountability agendas established by the bureaucracy. As Thomson (1998) observed, changes in the management of the public sector meant principals became “subject to a common framework of corporate performativity and accounting” (no page number). It was during this time that principals (such as me) were encouraged to ‘manage up’ to

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<sup>42</sup> All promotion lists – principals, deputy principals and seniors – ceased at the end of 1988. From 1989 all vacant school leadership positions were filled by merit and for a defined tenure.

ensure that our superiors were kept well-informed about the value of our work relative to the priorities of the bureaucracy.

Third, the change eroded the intent of the Freedom and Authority in the Schools (Jones, 1970) memorandum: i.e., an encouragement for South Australia's principals to innovate and contextualise schooling for their local community. Since school-based reform and innovation require "some loosening of controls" (Thomson, 1998, no page number), the uncertainty of their employment and more top-down and bureaucratic approaches from the Education Department meant principals were more likely to be rewarded professionally by being 'effective and compliant' *implementers* of policy defined at a distance, rather than being innovative policy developers *responding to contextual needs* (the original intent of the memorandum).

With the erosion of the freedom and authority provided to them in the 1970's, principals in 1990's South Australia became interested in the on-going debate about 'self-managing schools'. Of considerable interest was the promise of increased principal autonomy but, rather than becoming the means for reclaiming what had been eroded, the principal autonomy favoured by the South Australian variant of self-managing schools brought with it a reliance on accountability. Over the last twenty five years, this linking of autonomy to accountability has become a fixture in the bureaucracy—school principal relationship, and it has substantially changed how the principal is constituted and how they constitute themselves.

### **6.3 Partnerships 21**

Described as "a strategy for moving the South Australian education and care system forward into a more cohesive and coordinated system of local management" (Kilvert, 2001, p. 1), P21 was launched by the Premier, the Hon. John Olsen, in April 1999 with

implementation commencing in January 2000. Unlike the Victorian model which compelled all schools into a self-managing model, South Australia's approach was to coax, encourage and persuade its schools to take-up local management voluntarily. Implementation was an 'opt-in' arrangement, incentivised by additional funding and a 'no-worse-off-guarantee' in regard to school funding. However, as SASPA Pres-6 observed, "P21 was a Liberal Government initiative, and there was considerable pressure from within the education bureaucracy to ensure a high proportion of its schools took it up".

Generally understood as a strategy that would increase principal autonomy (particularly with regard to resource management), P21 included the introduction of a framework for quality improvement and accountability which brought with it higher levels of principal accountability. These new autonomies and accountabilities are best understood through an overview of the various changes to principals' work initiated by P21.

- Developing a Partnerships Plan (i.e., a three-year strategic plan incorporating staffing and facilities planning).
- Agreeing on a Services Agreement between the school and the state office (i.e., a formal commitment of resources for one year, and a projected allocation for the following two years).
- Producing an Annual Operational Plan (i.e., a plan to show how resources were to be allocated to strategic priorities).
- Submitting an Annual Report (i.e., an account of the school's work relational to its Partnerships Plan, Services Agreement and Annual Operational Plan).
- Participating in External Monitoring (i.e., annual data sets including Basic Skills Test results and SACE results, and site reviews undertaken triennially).
- Developing Internal Monitoring procedures (i.e., schools required to examine progress made against strategic objectives outlined in the Annual Operational Plan and Partnerships Plan).
- Using the Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework to progress students' learning.

On one hand, school principals were provided with a range of freedoms and flexibilities related to resources which were enshrined in the Partnerships Plan (strategic), Services Agreement (revenue) and Annual Plan (expenditure). On the other hand, increased accountabilities materialised in the form of External Monitoring (desktop audits and site visits) and the provision of an Annual Report (submitted to the District Director who had line management responsibility for the principal).

To shape this reform package, Dr Kilvert, who was the head of the P21 Taskforce, adopted eight guiding principles – building on success, improved learning outcomes, partnerships, fairness, maximising the local, accountability, efficiency, and transparency (Kilvert, 2001, pp. 2-4). Here, transparency referred to serving the local community's strategic interests (through its Governing Council) and assuring quality by keeping them informed of the school's progress (through the availability of an Annual Report).

The P21 reform consisted of key changes to school governance, school accountability, monitoring and evaluation of school performance, the setting of strategic directions, formulation of local policies, and the adoption of the Quality Improvement and Accountability framework (QIAF). Seen as enablers for the South Australian variant of self-managing schools, discretionary powers relating to aspects of financial management and human resource management were also devolved to the school. These discretionary powers fell short of the capacity for school principals to fill all staff vacancies on merit, although some positions in some schools, were able to be filled by retailing some of those teachers who were 'on contract' for one year, to three year contracts. As accountabilities increased, and principals felt added pressure from the bureaucracy, the issue of open selection and positions filled by merit became an enduring contested policy space for SASPA and the DfE over the next decade. As

SASPA Pres-6 recalled, “SASPA had been interested in principals having greater autonomy in the recruitment and selection of staff, but P21 did not deliver on this. Instead, it made bureaucratic changes to enable P21 schools to fill at least 50% of their vacancies by School Choice.”<sup>43</sup> Here I am reminded of Gale (1999) and how the conditions for the next policy contest are established in the stakeholder differences apparent at its settlement (p. 401), a notion I revisit in Chapters 9 and 10 of this genealogy.

## 6.4 Problematising P21 and the QIAF

The first task in applying Bacchi’s WPR method to policy analysis, that of asking what the problem is represented to be, is essentially a clarifying exercise (2009, p. 2). It is here that the most “basic proposition” in the policy, and the forms of “commonsense” contained within it, are revealed (p. 3). With respect to P21, the basic proposition was that principal autonomy was a good thing, but autonomy without accountability was not. If, on one hand, increased local authority and resource flexibility were being provided, then, on the other hand, the bureaucracy needed a technology to manage the risk of schools having these additional powers and adhering to government or departmental policy which might be different from school contextual needs, supported by principal autonomy (as in the *Freedom and Authority Memorandum*). That technology was the QIAF. This suggests that the ‘problem’ being constituted by the bureaucracy was that accountability was necessary if autonomies were introduced and also that principals could not be trusted with autonomy as they might prioritise school

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43 When local school management became mandatory in 2002, teacher positions which had been advertised on tenure became permanent.

needs (as the Jones memorandum had introduced) rather than the needs of government or the bureaucracy as expressed through policy.

Whilst my interest is in the principal accountability aspects of P21, I agree with Bacchi (2009) that problem representations “‘nest’ or are embedded one within the other” (p. 21). It is unproductive to consider the QIAF without considering its relationship to P21 and, in particular, the neoliberal character of that reform. In my analysis of this nexus between P21 and the QIAF, the policy problem is represented as having three interwoven ideas consistent with neoliberal education policy, i.e., school improvement, principal autonomy, and school accountability. Here, the policy logic is: (a) the quality of schooling needs to improve to meet the challenges of the economy and its labour market needs; (b) student results will improve if principals have greater autonomy; and (c) principal autonomy is controlled by the bureaucracy expanding its remit to hold principals to account to the government or departmental policy. To this end, the QIAF promised to “enhance student performance, ensure accountability, and assure quality” (P21-Taskforce, 1999, pp. 2-3). Whilst claims of improved results are commonplace amongst education systems advocating a local school management approach (see Levačić, 1998) there is, as MacDonald and others (2023) have reminded us, “no compelling body of evidence directly linking school autonomy to school improvement” (p. 308).

#### **6.4.1 Devolution**

The rhetoric of P21 promoted the idea that public schooling was a ‘partnership’ between the bureaucracy (at the macro level) and the school principal and the school’s Governing Council (at the micro level). Here, the bureaucracy shifted some of its authority to the local and community level (strategic planning and resource flexibility) but invariably retained key aspects at the central level (funding model, human resource

policy, and accountability settings) and at the district level (principal selection and accountability). But, as Fullan and Watson (2000) suggested, this retention of key organisational aspects by the bureaucracy is a major failing of decentralised schooling models (p. 453). In other words, in devolving its system, the bureaucracy struggles with what to let go. Suggett (2015) acknowledged this understanding when she suggested that when governments moved to decentralise schooling, the role and responsibilities of the bureaucracy were never redrawn. Perhaps Smyth (1993) said it best when he concluded that from his many years of studying schools the one thing he had learned “is that educational systems are about acquiring more power, not giving it away” (p. 1).

Whilst the rhetoric of P21 was ‘partnership’, the reality was that P21 established a “regime of truth” (Foucault et al., 2014, p. 93) where “the conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 1982b, p. 220) now appeared as a shared undertaking. Within this regime of truth, school principals were encouraged to accept that the increased accountabilities embodied in the QIAF – i.e., internal and external monitoring and the production of an annual report – were warranted, since various freedoms and flexibilities related to resources were now being provided and the provision of resources was more clearly linked to achievement improvement of students. But, as Smyth (1993) noted, educational systems are inherently political and power-oriented, and principals are not always aware of the implications these have on their work.

### ***Principal Accountability***

On face-value, school principals may not have considered the QIAF to be radically different to previous accountability regimens in South Australia, such as the version overseen by the Education Review Unit (ERU). Formed in 1990, the ERU considered school performance through four domains of practice and school functioning – i.e., teaching and learning; organisation and management; ethos and culture; equal

opportunities and social justice. The ERU's approach to accountability was participatory – i.e., the principal was a member of the panel evaluating her or his school, – and emancipatory – i.e., social justice and equal opportunity formed one of the four domains of school functioning and practice under review.

By 1999 and the launch of P21, principal autonomy had been expanded to include resource flexibility, that is, the authority to determine how school funds (allocated by formula in a 'global budget') would be expended. With the introduction of the QIAF, accountability was realigned from being a review of effective practices (as had been the ERU approach) to being the monitoring of performance or outputs (based on narrow, centrally determined quantitative measures). What was easily measured – i.e., Basic Skills Tests, SACE results, and assigned Profile levels – was now externally monitored and verified. Unlike the ERU approach, the QIAF model of accountability largely ignored issues of social justice and equal opportunity which had been a focus of the previous decade, instead emphasising results-based performance and placing increased value on what was easily measured externally. Subsequent school accountability schemes in South Australia have all required measures of school performance, and these measures have increasingly relied upon the results of standardised testing. If the solution being constituted by the bureaucracy in its P21 reform was that accountability was necessary if autonomies were introduced, then the 'problem' being constituted by the QIAF was that if autonomous principals were not controlled, as efficiently as possible, the 'freedom' to respond to contextual needs (as per Jones memorandum) might not align with departmental direction. The bureaucratic norms being established through P21 and the QIAF – i.e., Service Agreement, Annual Operational Plan, Annual Report and External Monitoring – made principals more 'governable' rather than increasing their capacity to respond to contextual needs. Here,



the bureaucracy was able to “conduct the conduct” (Lorenzini, 2016b, p. 7) of principals by regulating what was valued within this new system of local school management.

Whilst the inter-relationship of school improvement, principal autonomy and school accountability within P21 and the QIAF established new norms which made principals more governable, this policy regimen was not entirely of South Australia’s making. In moving to Bacchi’s (2009) third question - *How have these representations of the problem come about?* – I now examine P21 as a local adaptation of local school management and the QIAF as a bureaucratic move for increased control within a devolved system.

## **6.5 Why LSM, Autonomy and Accountability?**

Bacchi (2009) described her third question as having two objectives: (i) to reflect on the specific developments and decisions associated with the representations of the problem, and (ii) to explore the various influences which shaped the problem (pp. 10-11). It is here that genealogy takes hold and enables the “twists and turns” to be recognised rather than assuming policy to be a product of “‘natural’ evolution” (p. 10). In understanding that a conceptual bond between South Australia’s P21 and the QIAF had been formed by the interdependence of the school improvement, principal autonomy and accountability agendas, I now examine how these core ideas developed and consider the influences which enabled them to take hold.

### **6.5.1 Self-Managing Schools**

P21 was South Australia’s version of the self-managing schools (SMS) model which was conceived from the neoliberal narrative that the quality of schooling needed to improve if the challenges of the economy and its labour market needs were to be met. So, what characterises a SMS model?

A self-managing school is a school in a system of education where there has been significant and consistent decentralization to the school level of authority to make decisions related to the allocation of resources. This decentralization is administrative rather than political, with decisions at the school level being made within a framework of local, state or national policies and guidelines. The school remains accountable to a central authority for the manner in which resources are allocated. (Caldwell, 1992, p. 2)

Caldwell's definition emphasised the relationship between the allocation of resources and an accountability for how those resources were used. By placing an increased emphasis on the economics of education, the SMS reveals itself as a key neoliberal strategy. At the micro-level this meant autonomous public education principals effectively became business leaders and entrepreneurs or, as Smyth (1993) suggested, "mini chief executives" (p. 8). At the macro-level, the self-managing school initiative facilitated the commodification and marketisation of public education, ostensibly recasting parents and students as consumers (Reid, 2022, p. 10). The global expansion of the SMS model was most apparent during the 1990s when, as Caldwell (1992) noted, countries looked for policy responses to the OECD's concerns about the falling standards of education which were issued in its 1987 *Quality of Schooling* report (see Caldwell, 1992, p. 4). Here, the OECD's concern was consistent with the neoliberal narrative already established by the policies of Reagan and Thatcher, where education standards had become emmeshed with economic competitiveness. Subsequently, most liberal democracies, including Australia, committed to the school (and system) improvement agenda and to a model of schooling described inter-changeably as self-managing schools or local school management (in Australia), school-based management (in Canada), local management of schools (in England) or site-based management (in the USA). Smyth (2011) noted that whilst the self-managing school reform was "inextricably adopted around the world", it was done so in the "absence of a proper evidence base", the effect

of which was to “virtually dismantle public education” and “privatise it without public debate or proper scrutiny” (p. 91).

In Australia, the resolve to create a system of self-managing schools was led by the state of Victoria and the Kennett Government. Shortly after its 1992 election victory it launched its *Schools of the Future* program (see Townsend, 1996), effectively compelling all public schools in Victoria to adopt a SMS model from January 1994. The SMS model gave Victorian public schools greater autonomy in decision-making and increased responsibility for their own governance. Under this model, schools were required to develop a school plan and were given the power to set their own school policy, budget, staff and resources. Schools were also given the authority to manage their own finances and to employ the staff they needed to meet their objectives. The Kennett Government argued that the SMS model would improve school performance and student achievement by allowing schools to be more responsive to local needs and circumstances. The government also argued that it would provide greater accountability for public spending, as it shifted the responsibility for funding decisions from the state to the local schools. In the years that followed, the SMS model was adapted and adopted by other states in Australia, with South Australia’s variant, P21, launched in 1999. According to Townsend (1996) the implementation of Victoria’s *School of the Future* policy aspired to produce: “improved student outcomes; improved decision-making; improved management and leadership; improved quality of teaching; a curriculum that responds to both state, and local, needs; and a more efficient use of resources” (p. 172). In his analysis as to whether these claims materialised, Townsend (1996) concluded that:

On balance there must be some concern for schooling under a self-managing system. None of the areas where improvement might be expected has completely fulfilled expectations... The use of a market-oriented, user-pays system of public education may lead to a situation in which those with the least ability to contribute to the education of their children are likely to fall further behind (p. 191).

These early concerns about social injustice subsequently manifested as a deep-seated and widespread concern about serious inequities in Australia's contemporary education provision (see Bonnor, Kidson, Piccoli, Sahlberg, & Wilson, 2021; Lingard, Sellar, & Savage, 2014; Reid, 2020; Smyth, 2011; Wilkinson, Niesche, & Eacott, 2018). In reflecting on the introduction of Victoria's SMS model, Niesche and Thomson (2016) claimed that "the discourse at the time revolved around notions of economic rationalism, devolution, and accountability" (p. 198). Further to this, Victoria's devolution model re-emphasised a hierarchical approach to leadership for the pursuit of organisational goals more-so than educational ones. Such an approach to devolution was fundamentally different to South Australia's 1970s early attempt which had emphasised how the bureaucracy needed to step back and provide the enabling conditions for innovation so that school leaders could meet the needs of their students more effectively.

In the seven years that transpired between the implementation of Victoria's SMS initiative and the launch of P21, South Australia's principal associations and the bureaucracy took a considered approach to local management. Whilst they recognised its inevitability, they also understood the need for it to be nuanced to the South Australian context. In reflecting on this period, SASPA Pres-2 explained how it was the principal associations which initiated the thinking about preferred possibilities for local school management.

We proposed it (the development of a position paper) because we anticipated that this was the next move that the department was going to make... It was taken to the senior executive of the department, and I know that Jim Giles, the Director of Curriculum, argued that the department had nothing to lose by giving us (the principal associations) the money and seeing what we came up with. So, it was very much our initiative... The department actually paid for me to have some release time to work with the other association presidents to try and develop a position paper on local management. (SASPA Pres-2)

Here, principal associations were motivated by the recognition that, unlike other Australian states and territories, South Australia had a considered approach to school autonomy and provision of the conditions for innovative practice in schools which had evolved since the *Freedom and Authority* (1970) memorandum. For example, SA already had school councils which understood their role as collaborating with principals for the good of the school community. The interest of the principal associations was deliberate and strategic. Seeing the inevitability that South Australia would follow its eastern states counterparts and implement a version of self-managing schools, their proposal of models for the bureaucracy to consider enabled them to indicate the need to protect those autonomies, such as control over the curriculum. For its part, the bureaucracy recognised an advantage in having the peak professional bodies for principals researching this terrain. As DfE CE-7 explained, principal association heads provided “ways of thinking differently” to the bureaucracy and involving them in this project aligned with “my whole view about school systems and using the talent that’s within it”. Despite this recognition, the bureaucracy “did not do anything with what we did”, but “it kind of slowed school management for quite some time” (SASPA Pres-2). By the time P21 was conceived, the DfE had adopted an approach that was more like Victoria’s and “not in the spirit that the associations had proposed” (SASPA Pres-2). Although the P21 reform was not what principal associations had wanted, the process by which they were engaged in developing ideas and possibilities for local school management was respectful and timely. It is noteworthy that this level of professional regard and trust between the bureaucracy and SASPA was not apparent in the development of subsequent reforms such as *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (see Chapter 7) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (see Chapter 8). More so than P21, these two more recent reforms embodied the new managerialism described by Lynch et al (2012) as “outputs over inputs, measured in terms of

performance indicators”; the breaking down of “large-scale organizations into smaller units”; and “the redefinition of knowledge and who is empowered to act” (p. 4).

The SMS model has been controversial in Australia. Supporters (see Caldwell, 1992, 2016; Suggett, 2015) have argued that it has given schools greater autonomy, enabling them to tailor their educational programs to meet their local needs. Critics (see MacDonald, Keddie, Blackmore, et al., 2023; Niesche & Thomson, 2016; Smyth, 1993, 2011) have argued that the model has led to increased bureaucratic control and has not been effective in improving student achievement. Where there is some agreement is with the design of the SMS model, and an understanding that wherever autonomy goes accountability follows (see Caldwell, 1992; Smyth, 1993).

This is consistent with my own conclusions using Bacchi (2009), where the basic proposition of the QIAF was that it was an apparatus designed by the bureaucracy to have principals (and their school’s Governing Council) reveal the impact strategic planning and resource flexibility was having on student results. The commonsense of this was that principal autonomy and principal accountability were now inextricably linked. This change indicated a major shift away from the professional trust and agency afforded principals by Director-General, Dr Alby Jones (1970, 1977), whose confidence in having the key educational and organisational decisions being made at the local level was such that, other than the continuation of a superintendent support and supervision model, no new accountability measures need be imposed.

### ***6.5.2 Principal Autonomy and Accountability***

Within the neoliberal project’s school improvement agenda, principal autonomy and school accountability are enmeshed. According to SASPA Pres-6, this interrelationship

was apparent with the introduction of the P21 reform, where “the idea was that if you increased the authority and responsibilities of the principal, you had to hold them to account”. Here the suggestion is that accountability functions as a technology for control to compensate the bureaucracy for any reduction in control produced by the policies of devolution and principal autonomy. Accountability and its various instruments, including performance data, enable the bureaucracy to continue to govern schools and shape the conduct of individuals and groups. Consistent with the principles of new managerialism, the introduction of the QIAF in 2000 marked the beginning of the bureaucracy’s enduring interest in “governing through numbers” (Rose, 1991, p. 693).

An OECD study, *School autonomy and accountability: Are they related to student performance?* published in 2011 sought to demonstrate the interrelationship between principal autonomy, accountability and school improvement. It claimed that “PISA results suggest that, when autonomy and accountability are intelligently combined, they tend to be associated with better student performance” (OECD, 2011, p. 1). Further into the study the claim is made that “school autonomy in allocating resources tends to be associated with good performance in those education systems where most schools post achievement data publicly” (p. 4). These conclusions align to the neoliberal policy logic which underpins local school management reforms: that is, principal autonomy and accountability are inherently linked, they form a through-line to school (and system) improvement, and the sharing of performance data empowers the public to make informed choices and effectively controls principals through numbers. However, detailed analysis of this 2011 OECD study by Bogotch (2014) indicated that “no clear or meaningful relationship between autonomy, accountability and student performance was established” (p. 318).

I use this example to illustrate the two sides to the school improvement, autonomy, accountability debate and to reaffirm some background as to how they have formed. As documented in Chapter 3, it has been the GERM (primarily the OECD and the World Bank) that has propagated the school and system improvement agenda, argued for the technologies of autonomy and accountability, and claimed that there is merit in evaluating education systems through standardised testing measures (i.e., PISA). The various critics of the GERM, including Pereyra et al (2011), Reid (2020), Sahlberg (2012, 2016), Sellar and Lingard (2013) and Zhao (2018, 2020), have argued that it distorts the purposes of education, stifles innovation, over-simplifies schooling, and narrows the curriculum. On one hand, the OECD espouses PISA by drawing upon “a closed loop of knowledge that justifies and reaffirms the logic upon which it is based” (Reid, 2020, p. 25). This provides a level of certainty that governments undoubtedly find reassuring. By contrast, peer reviewed research which questions this ‘certainty’ and which recognises the complexity and nuance of the work of schools and school systems is likely to be under-appreciated by governments. This goes some way towards explaining why school improvement remains the dominant educational narrative in Australia, and is increasingly sustained by the GERM where policy positions related to school improvement, principal autonomy and accountability spread infectiously from country to country and, as McKay (2018) observed, are “eerily similar, though in vastly different contexts” (p. 25). Local school management reforms, including P21, are underpinned by an array of “accountability and choice policies”, and are invariably proposed by policy-makers as “a panacea for school and system improvement” (MacDonald, Keddie, Blackmore, et al., 2023, p. 308). The logic is that student results will improve if principals have greater autonomy and if systems have increased capacity to hold principals to account. This was affirmed by Eacott et al (2022) who noted how “localising school management has proven to be a persuasive



approach for governments and systems looking to capitalise on the influence of leadership on school outcomes” (p. 1). The flipside to this, as Smyth (2011) observed, was that it was also a way for governments and bureaucracies to distance themselves from failing schools.

## **6.6 The Truth Regimes of P21 and QIAF**

The presumption that some problem representations produce difficulty or harm is inherent in Bacchi’s (2009) fifth question – *What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?* In relation to P21 and the QIAF, I am interested in various subjection and subjectification effects that principal autonomy and school accountability had on principals, along with how this rendering constrained the political work performed by principal associations (SASPA). Here, subjection refers to how the policy practices of P21 and the QIAF established “repertoires of conduct” (Rose, 1999, p. 43) that shaped the behaviour and inclinations of principals, and subjectivation refers to any refusal or resistance that individual principals might have offered. This is in keeping with Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) who claimed that “policies are involved in shaping what it is possible for people to become” (p. 50); that is, by normalising practices, policies make ‘subjects’ more ‘governable’. The opportunity now arises to explore further Foucault’s notion of “regimes of truth” (Foucault et al., 2014, p. 94) as my explanatory tool for this section, to guide my discussion of the issues of conduct and subjectification for P21 principals.

Foucault’s thinking about regimes of truth was linked to his work on knowledge, power and subjectivity, but related most specifically to his later work on government and governmentality. According to Foucault (1982b) “a relationship of power” is “a mode of action upon actions” (p. 791). These actions upon actions are central to his notion of a regime of truth which, as Foucault (2014) explained, “is the set of processes and

institutions by which, under certain conditions and with certain effects, individuals are bound and obliged to make well-defined truth acts” (p. 94). Here, a truth regime is understood as a mechanism through which power operates, but it is a power dynamic that directly affects how subjectivities are constructed and regulated. It follows that what is accepted by individuals (school principals) as being true is shaped by discursive practices, including those associated with institutions (education bureaucracies) and their policies.

Lorenzini (2015) understood Foucault’s regime of truth to be “indexed to subjectivity” (p. 5) in that it shapes the ways individuals perceive themselves and their identities. This constitution of self by the individual, as Lorenzini (2023a) argued, arises as a response to the ‘therefore’ moment prior to any decision to submit (or not) to a truth obligation (p. 38). Within Foucault’s notion of truth regimes, Lorenzini (2023a) contended that individuals give the ‘truth’ the right and the power to govern one’s conduct and the conduct of others (p. 38). However, since this action is an individual’s choice, it is equally feasible for the ‘truth’ to be refused or resisted. Understanding this, and in accepting P21 and QIAF as a regime of truth, most principals submitted to the truth obligation.

By choosing to use the notion of truth regimes as an explanatory tool, I am declaring my interest in revealing the ways in which policy change is used ‘coercively’ by the bureaucracy to control its principals and to reconstitute their work through the processes of principals constituting themselves as principals. This is consistent with Foucault (in Foucault et al., 2014) who explained that “the coercive force of the truth resides within truth itself” but it also resides in “the coercion of the non-true or the coercion and constraint of the unverifiable” (p. 95). On one hand, the acceptance of truth obliges us to act but, on the other hand, we can be obligated to act even in the

absence of truth or with an indifference to it. For example, where there is ambiguity, individuals and groups can be 'compelled' to act by authorities and institutions whose policy narratives manipulate what passes for truth. This is where subjugation is to be found. And, from my analysis, there are five subjugating effects that autonomy (P21) and accountability (the QIAF) had on principals.

### ***6.6.1 Accountability and Autonomy Enmeshed***

The QIAF was 'discursively storied' by P21 meaning that accountability became enmeshed with autonomy. Here, the first 'truth obligation' for P21 principals to accept was the bureaucracy's claim that student performance would be enhanced through local school management (P21-Taskforce, 1999, pp. 2-3). This claim had and has been long contested, with Townsend (1996) concluding that it was an assertion "based on opinion rather than hard data" (p. 171). Even though principals might not have trusted the claim, the level of autonomy that local management provided acted as an inducement. As Smyth (2011) observed, the SMS model of schooling presented principals with "a way of re-claiming control over the day-to-day running of the school, uninhibited by intrusive and distant external control" (p. 102). However, the bureaucracy still found ways to constrain principals, and it did this primarily through its accountability model.

### ***6.6.2 Diagnostic Data as Performance Outputs***

The QIAF changed how principals experienced accountability, from a review of effective practices (as had been the ERU approach) to a monitoring of performance (based on outputs determined by the bureaucracy and expressed in quantitative measures). Unlike the ERU's procedure, the QIAF model of accountability ignored issues of social justice and equal opportunity, instead emphasising results-based

performance and placing increased value on what was easily measured. Subsequent school accountability schemes in South Australia have all been designed to measure school performance, and the adopted measures have increasingly relied upon the results of standardised testing. The subjugating effect here is that P21 principals were compelled to accept the bureaucracy's push for diagnostic data, such as the results from the Basic Skills Test (the precursor to NAPLAN), to be construed as an indicator of school performance. This "truth obligation" (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 34) consigned principals to a path where the importance of standardised data sets assumed greater relevance than the profession might otherwise have given it.<sup>44</sup>

### ***6.6.3 Demonstrating Corporate Commitment***

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, permanent principals were a diminishing group at the time of the P21 reform, with a growing number of principals – myself included – being appointed by tenure. This nascent group of principals was vulnerable in the system's hierarchical arrangement and, consequently, keeping the job became a persistent consideration. For the bureaucracy, the QIAF and its performance measures might have been conceived as a means of assuring quality, but it was experienced by principals as a technology for controlling them at a time of increased autonomy. Particularly for tenured principals, playing the accountability game effectively enhanced one's prospects of either keeping the job or demonstrating one's suitability for winning a better one. Here, accountability acted as a "game of truth" (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 37) within a regime of truth where a defined set of rules formed by policy and convention made it practical for principals to submit. Any professional doubts principals

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<sup>44</sup> Here, I am reminded of warnings issued by various academics including Stoll & Fink (1996) who argued that we (the profession) needed to find ways to measure what we valued or, by default, accept that what was easily measured would become what was valued.

might have had about the validity of performance measures were tempered by the need to demonstrate corporate commitment as a step towards keeping the job.

#### **6.6.4 Competition and Choice**

In keeping with the neoliberal design features of the SMS model, P21 consigned principals to a business leader role where a more entrepreneurial approach to leadership was encouraged. With increased autonomy and control over a global budget, principals assumed a mini-CEO role at the local level, albeit operating within a marketised system of public education. Here, the increased responsibilities for P21 principals were mitigated by the perceived freedom and funding flexibility to drive innovation locally. But this version of autonomy contributed to a more competitive inclination where one's school assumed greater importance than the assemblage of schools which constituted 'public education'. Within this truth regime, principals served the interests of the market and its adherence to competition and choice, where public education was customised to function more like private education. As Smyth (2011) noted, centralised public education systems were replaced with a model of "stand-alone franchised schools operating within the largely hollowed-out husk of state-provided education" (p. 99). Being constituted in this way also meant that principals became more isolated from each other since local management emphasised the individual's struggle rather than that of the collective.

#### **6.6.5 Ethical Dilemma**

Consistent with observations made by Niesche and Thomson (2016), this corporate, entrepreneurial subjectivity assumed by P21 principals saw school leadership ruled by discourses of "school effectiveness and improvement" and "increasingly robbed of its educative purpose" (p. 203). It is this fracture between educational purpose and

corporate function that brings me to how the truth regimes of QIAF and P21 consigned principals to the persistent dilemma of having to resolve one's obligations to the profession with one's obligations to the bureaucracy. The concepts of local management, performance-based accountability, entrepreneurial leadership and corporate responsibility might all make sense in a private sector governed by the principles of new managerialism, but does it follow that they make sense to public education leaders? It is in these moments of significant ethical difference – e.g., where the demands of the bureaucracy (as the employer) are in conflict with the obligations of the principal as an education professional (rather than as an employee) – that education policy should be contested, and where the political work of principal associations should be performed.

In exchange for gaining more autonomy, the bureaucracy in the P21 era required its principals to accept increased accountability within a neoliberal narrative nested within the regime of truth. It suggested that autonomy and accountability were enablers for improved student performance, even though there was no compelling research to demonstrate this claim. In the design of its accountability model, the QIAF, the bureaucracy introduced the notion that diagnostic data could (and should) be used as a performance measure and established the norm that principals must place great value on what was easily measured. Because the careers of most principals were now contingent upon their appointment or reappointment by the bureaucracy's regional agent, the District Director, the function of school accountability assumed a greater performative purpose. Reward for principals within the system was now tied to exhibiting the various corporate attitudes and actions consistent with the bureaucracy's agenda. Amongst these was the notion that the principal was now a mini-CEO managing a complex organisation (i.e., a school) but with increased resource flexibility to drive local innovation. Principals were now entrepreneurs, and their schools were

marketised to the extent that competition for enrolments was no longer a public versus private exercise but, increasingly, a public versus public one. As Macdonald et al (2023) suggested, public education became a tiered system where the “hierarchies long evident between sectors” became “evident between schools in the same system” (p. 16).

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This chapter located the P21 reform within the national and international trends toward school-based management. To understand the constitutive effects of P21 on school principals, I invoked my adaptation of the WPR framework and found that, in exchange for more autonomy from the bureaucracy, principals accepted increased accountability. In the design of the *Quality Improvement and Accountability Framework*, the bureaucracy established new norms for how principal and school performance was to be understood; these included the use of diagnostic data (Basic Skills Test) and the completion of an Annual Report which documented the school’s progress in relation to the priorities and targets set in the Annual Operational Plan. Accountability now assumed a greater performative purpose and became tied to principal reward within the bureaucracy. With the introduction of P21, the principal was now considered a ‘mini-CEO’ managing a complex organisation (i.e., school) but with the capacity to use flexible resources to innovate. Principals had become entrepreneurs, but with the bureaucracy externally monitoring their performance annually and evaluating and verifying this triennially.

In the following chapter, I explore the effects an additional accountability (the Partnership Performance Review Panel) had on how principals were constituted. By considering these effects alongside those of P21, I start to formulate my thinking about trajectories. Here, I am interested in the trajectory taken by the bureaucracy to expand

its principal accountability regimen; the trajectory emerging for how principals were constituted by these accountabilities; and the trajectory for how constrained the political work of SASPA and other principal associations had become.



# 7. FROM AUTONOMY TO COLLECTIVE SURVEILLANCE

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## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter is the second in a five-chapter sequence which comprises the policy genealogy section of my thesis. In the previous chapter I examined how P21, in exchange for providing principals with more autonomy, consigned school principals to an increased level of accountability through the introduction of the QIAF. It was this accountability model which introduced the notion that data harvested from standardised diagnostic testing, in this case the Basic Skills Test, could be used as a school performance measure. Also, since this standardised test data focused solely on literacy and numeracy, it implied that these skills were of more importance than others thereby constituting a de facto curriculum hierarchy. Since the careers of most principals were now contingent upon their appointment or reappointment by the District Director, the function of school accountability now assumed a greater performative purpose.

Chapter 7 is another genealogical move, one that is devoted to the *Partnership Performance Review Panel* (2015-2022) reform and its notion of collective accountability. Here, I explain how principals were constituted by this additional accountability before going on to discuss how this rendering constrained the political work of principal associations. My discussion in this chapter follows the common format established in the previous chapter. Beginning by establishing context, I locate the *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (PPRP) model of collective accountability within the bureaucracy's wider reform agenda, *Building a High Performing System*. I then invoke my abridged four-step adaptation of the WPR framework. The chapter

concludes with a summary that combines the findings from Chapter 6 with those from Chapter 7, as per my commitment to developing a genealogy.

## **7.2 Context for Partnership Performance Review Panels**

As background necessary to my explanation and analysis of *Partnership Performance Review Panels* there are three contextual factors related to public education in South Australia that are introduced here – i.e., Local Management, External School Reviews, and Local Partnerships – and one national development, i.e., AITSL principal standards.

### **7.2.1 AITSL Principal Standards**

A national architecture has long been established to act in the interests of the Commonwealth Government (and the Education Council, its partnership with states and territories). It currently consists of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority<sup>45</sup> (ACARA), the Australian Education Research Organisation<sup>46</sup> (AERO), Education Services Australia<sup>47</sup> (ESA), and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership<sup>48</sup> (AITSL). Since 2011, AITSL has provided a set of professional standards for teachers and for school principals. The Principal Standards (and Profiles), for example, are organised by *professional practice* (i.e., leading teaching and learning, developing self and others, leading improvement, innovation and change, leading the management of the school, and engaging and working the school community); by *leadership requirements* (i.e., vision and values, knowledge and

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<sup>45</sup> See <https://www.acara.edu.au/>

<sup>46</sup> See <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/>

<sup>47</sup> See <https://www.esa.edu.au/>

<sup>48</sup> See <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/>

understanding, and personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills) and by *leadership emphasis* (i.e., operational, relational, strategic and systemic). Together, the Principal Standards and Profiles constitute one rendering of a principal's work.

The relevance of the AITSL Principal Standards to this chapter is in the DfE's use of them as the basis for the recruitment and selection of school leaders and, subsequently, as key performance indicators within the principal appraisal process. By transposing these nationally agreed standards into its local model, the DfE established its new proxy for principal quality, but within a few years this notion of quality was challenged internally, first by the introduction of *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (PPRP) and, later, by the *From Good to Great* (FGTG) strategy. Both of these reforms placed greater emphasis on the principal's improvement of NAPLAN results than on their performance against the AITSL standards.

## **7.2.2 Local Management**

In-between 2002 and 2015, the DfE had four different chief executives<sup>49</sup>, it changed its middle-tier administration model three times, and it introduced three different school accountability programs. In political terms, these were the Labor years. Yet, despite the stability of the Rann and Weatherill governments during this period, the education portfolio was managed by five different ministers.

The Partnerships 21 reform discussed in Chapter 6 was a Liberal Government initiative. Following the Labor Party's election win of March 2002, a new chief executive for the education department, Mr Steve Marshall<sup>50</sup>, was appointed. Marshall (2007)

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<sup>49</sup> On page xiv of this thesis a chronology is provided. Whilst its focus is the various moves on autonomy and accountability across the decades, the chronology does give an indication of flux in the chief executive position.

<sup>50</sup> According to SASPA Pres-8, "Steve Marshal was someone who valued school leaders, consulted and worked with us".

claimed that his two key priorities were “to build a single model of local management and to place the learner at the centre of the reform” (p. 542). So, whilst many of P21’s innovations remained—including the QIAF, the Governing Council and the Global Budget—the official badging of the P21 program was discarded. A key feature of the bureaucracy under Marshall’s leadership was a rethink of the middle-tier of administration which functioned between State Office and the schools, i.e., ‘the district’. According to Marshall (2007), district effectiveness was based on four key components: “leadership is a key, vision is a driver, relationships are the glue that binds teams of people together, and learning enables them to work innovatively and interdependently” (p. 552). Within these navigation points, the role of the District Director was to build a learning culture within their district, provide guidance and support for site leaders, and contribute to the mutual accountability and synergy of the entire organisation (pp. 552-553) Marshall’s investment in a district model which focused on developing a learning culture is a significant contextual factor, one which will become more apparent later in the chapter when I contrast it with the Partnership model and its culture of compliance.

### **7.2.3 External School Reviews**

With regard to the Marshall bureaucracy’s moves on accountability, the QIAF was replaced in 2006 by the *Department’s Improvement and Accountability Framework* (DIAF). The biggest differences between these two frameworks were the inclusion in the DIAF of overt managerialist discourse and practices such as ‘continuous improvement’ and ‘making data count’, and the notion of specific ‘standards’ superseding the more nebulous idea of ‘quality’ that had been the bedrock of the QIAF. In both the QIAF and DIAF models of school improvement and accountability, external reviews of schools were undertaken by District Directors (whose responsibilities

included the performance supervision of principals). In 2014, this approach changed fundamentally when, under a newly appointed chief executive, the DfE created the *Review, Improvement and Accountability* (RIA) directorate. The establishment of this directorate signified the increased importance of external school reviews within the system and the necessity for them to be coordinated centrally by a designated team of reviewers. Under the RIA directorate's reforms, external reviews were scheduled every three years, but schools deemed to be under-performing were placed on a 'one-year-return' program where the school's principal needed to demonstrate how, within a 12-month period, the identified areas for improvement had been addressed to the satisfaction of the bureaucracy. This new approach to school reviews also introduced a requirement for the external evaluation team's report to be posted on the school's website<sup>51</sup>.

#### **7.2.4 Local Education Partnerships**

Within the *Partnerships 21* reform, the term partnership was used explicitly to emphasise a school's relationship with its community. The school's governance responsibilities were shared through a constituted governing body which comprised elected parents, student, staff, and local community representatives. This was important because decision making at the local policy level was seen as shared by the school's various stakeholder interests. However, in 2014 the DfE appropriated the term partnership for a new endeavour—i.e., to describe the relationship between geographical clusters of schools (secondary and primary) and early childhood centres—the Local Education Partnership.

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<sup>51</sup> So that schools could effectively be compared to each other, the bureaucracy originally wanted reviews to be scored on a scale of 1 to 5, and for this score to be assigned as part of the external review report. This notion was abandoned following significant resistance from SASPA and other associations.

Prior to 2014, there had been a range of different administration models for providing a middle-tier of networked support between State Office and the bureaucracy's schools and centres, i.e., Areas (1980s), Districts (1995 – 2008) and Regions (2009 – 2013). In 2014, the Education Department's regional model of school supervision and support was abandoned in favour of a less resource-hungry second tier of bureaucracy, 'The Local Education Partnership'. In this newly configured model, sixty geographically based partnerships were established across the state, with each partnership consisting of between 3 (Kangaroo Island) and 22 sites (Southeast Coast & Vines), depending on the remoteness or population density of their location. One of the issues for secondary principals was that most partnerships had only the one high school, which made collaboration between secondary leaders within different partnerships, difficult<sup>52</sup>.

Under the regional model, nine Regional Directors and eighteen Assistant Regional Directors shared responsibility for supporting the state's 830 schools and centres. The transition from the regional model to the new partnership model saw all regional executive roles decommissioned and, in their place, twenty Education Directors were appointed, with each appointee taking responsibility for three partnerships (i.e., oversight responsibility for 30 – 60 schools and centres). Functioning within a form of "contrived collegiality" (A. Hargreaves, 1994, p. 191) and clearly operating in the "age of accountability" (Datnow, 2011, p. 148), each local partnership was expected to create a Partnership Plan which outlined how key outcomes relating to literacy, numeracy and student engagement would be improved across the pre-school, primary school and secondary school membership. From 2015, each partnership had its

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<sup>52</sup> SASPA provided strong and persistent feedback to the DfE that the isolation of secondary schools in the majority of partnerships was a weakness of this middle-tier administration model and that one of its consequences would be to increase the workload of secondary school principals who would need to find other ways to collaborate and network.

performance reviewed annually against this plan in a closed session chaired by members of the Education Department's senior executive. It is to these Partnership Performance Review Panels (2015–2022) that I now turn.

### **7.3 Partnership Performance Review Panels**

On 16<sup>th</sup> February 2015, the business improvement plan for public education, *Building a High Performing System* (which included a framework for the Review of Partnership Performance), was launched by the Chief Executive at the Department's Leaders Day.

The documented purposes of reviewing partnership performance were to:

- engage site leaders in a facilitated evidence-based discussion of the progress sites and partnerships were making in improving outcomes for children and young people
- identify successful approaches that could be shared across the system
- identify areas for collaborative action and sustained improvement (2015b, p. 4).

To inform the performance review process, five guiding principles were stipulated: (i) alignment with the DfE strategic plan; (ii) a focus on approved standards; (iii) collaborative use of data; (iv) improvement as a two-way process; (v) a focus on action (2015b, p. 4). Each review was to be “based around a performance review report” designed to enable preschool directors, school principals and DfE executive leaders “to engage in a data-driven discussion on progress and outcomes” (2015b, p. 5). Key data sets at the centre of these reviews included attendance, behaviour management (suspensions and exclusions), finances, NAPLAN participation and results, SACE completion rates, and percentage of passing grades. Essentially, these were the measures DfE would now use as proxies for school quality.

In the first instance, most reviews were chaired by the DfE's Chief Education Officer (2015–2016) but, when this role was made redundant in 2017, the Executive Director Partnerships, Schools and Pre-schools, and the Executive Director Learning

Improvement either chaired or co-chaired the reviews (2017–2022). The line of questioning for these reviews was:

- What is the data telling us about performance?
- What is driving the performance?
- What is the Partnership doing/planning to do to improve performance?
- What are the agreed actions? (2015b, p. 10)

Secondary principals reporting within SASPA committee meetings and dedicated forums claimed that, at the request of Education Directors, responses to these questions were being formally rehearsed by partnerships prior to their Review Panel date. From 2015 to 2022, the behaviour of DfE’s corporate leadership (Executive Director and Education Director level) indicated that this work was ‘high stakes’. This seemed at odds with the view of secondary principals who saw the external review<sup>53</sup> of schools as being much more relevant and useful. The fact that there were now two external reviews of schooling – one at the school level (DECD, 2015a) and the other at the local education partnership level (DECD, 2015b) – indicated how significant principal accountability was within the *Building a High Performing System* strategy (DECD, 2014).

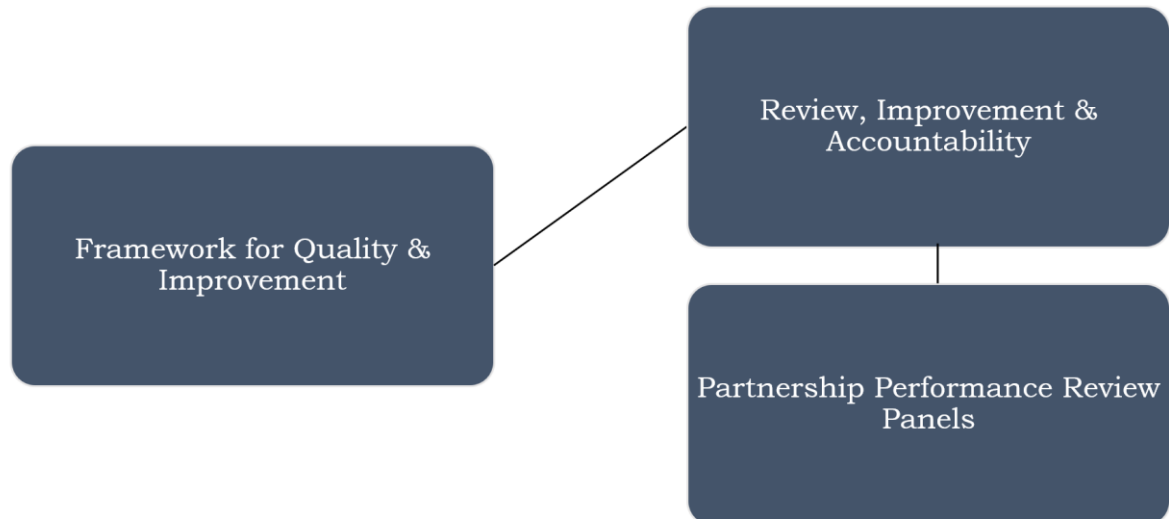
Figure 8 (below) illustrates the expanded accountabilities of principals. Although the external school reviews undertaken by the *Review, Improvement and Accountability* (RIA) directorate were more robust than anything attempted under the QIAF model, they were similar in that the school exercised some control over the scope of the review, negotiated or otherwise. In contrast, the additional accountability process, the PPRP, used a templated approach where the bureaucracy controlled the data

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<sup>53</sup> In February 2015 the DfE released its *External School Review Framework – Supporting schools to raise student achievement and sustain high performance* (DECD, 2015a) This accountability framework replaced the DIAF which in 2006 had superseded the QIAF. There was a sense of continuity between each of these site-based accountability frameworks in that all three focused on the improvement work undertaken by the school as demonstrated through annual self-reviews (initiated by the principal) and periodic external reviews (initiated by the bureaucracy).



(provided to each school a week before the review panel session) and the line of questioning to be taken (listed on the review panel agenda).



**Figure 8: PPRP is introduced as an additional accountability**

Tellingly, the policy for performance reviews of partnerships had not been generated by its education organisational stream, rather, it was produced by the newly created Business Intelligence Unit and owned by the new division that spawned it, the Office for Strategy and Performance. The use of the term ‘business’ underlined the bureaucracy’s new managerial orientation, and the Office for Strategy and Performance denoted the centrality school data would have within the *Building a High Performing System* strategy. This formation of a new unit within a new division also illustrated the importance the Chief Executive placed on restructuring the bureaucracy so that corporate resources could be better aligned to its new priority work (i.e., improving key data sets).

For 25 years, whether it was the External Review Unit (ERU), the *Quality Improvement and Accountability Framework* (QIAF), the *Department’s Improvement and*

*Accountability Framework* (DIAF), or the *Review, Improvement and Accountability* (RIA) directorate, South Australia's public school leaders had become accustomed to some form of external review of schools, but the introduction in 2015 of the PPRP signified a shift towards principals being held to account for their corporate responsibility; that is, the local education partnership and its plan for collectively lifting student performance data.

## **7.4 Problematising the PPRP**

Bacchi (in Bletsas & Beasley, 2012) makes the point that WPR is a tool “to facilitate critical interrogation of public policies” and that, in this analysis, we are reading policies “with an eye to discerning how the ‘problem’ is represented” (p. 21). The first task in applying Bacchi's WPR method to policy analysis “assists in clarifying the implicit problem representation within a specific policy or policy proposal” (p. 22). It is here, according to Bacchi (2009) that the most “basic proposition” in the policy, and the forms of “commonsense” contained within it, are revealed (p. 3).

From my perspective as the SASPA president at the time, the ‘problems’ the Department appeared to be ‘solving’ with the introduction of the PPRP were: (i) site leaders’ strategic engagement with data and its use; (ii) collaboration across early childhood, primary and secondary settings; (iii) improved school and pre-school performance, and (iv) site leaders’ learning from others within the partnership. This suggests that the design of the PPRP model was as much about the professional growth of school leaders as it was about improving performance, but in practice this was a reform where the bureaucracy's surveillance of principals’ work was significantly

increased. As a privileged observer<sup>54</sup> of two of these ‘data discussions’ led by the bureaucracy’s senior executives, I formed the view that they appeared to be designed to create pressure for 830 principal and pre-school directors to comply with their new collective accountabilities.

Following Bacchi (2009), my analysis of the PPRP suggests that its basic propositions were: (i) the proxy for school (and principal) quality was easily measured external performance data, (ii) the local education partnership provided an efficiency for the bureaucracy’s senior executive to exercise control over the interpretation of improvement of that performance data, and (iii) the structured conversations about data (in front of one’s peers) was an effective measure for the DfE’s senior executive to reinforce the system’s priorities to all site leaders and to inculcate them with a sense of ‘corporate belonging’ through a disciplinary process. These propositions indicate that principals were considered by the bureaucracy to be part of the ‘problem’. For example, the assumption within the design of the PPRP was that, once challenged in camera by a member of the bureaucracy’s senior executive, principals would be driven to improve their school’s data. This suggests that the ‘problem’ being constituted by the bureaucracy was that an additional layer of principal accountability – beyond the long-standing commitment to annual reports and the external review of schools – was necessary for principals to improve performance data (i.e., student attendance, NAPLAN results and SACE completion). Essentially the new norms established by the PPRP reform created processes with the effect of making principals more governable collectively. This was achieved through setting the local education partnership the task of collectively meeting the system’s demands for improvement and then using the

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<sup>54</sup> In May 2016 I was invited to observe two PPRPs. Ironically, I attended with a handful of principal aspirants who indicated to me that, “if this is what you have to do to be a principal, you can count me out”.

senior executive of the bureaucracy to check that this was being done. Here, I am reminded of Foucault's thinking about surveillance and, in particular, how he used Jeremy Bentham's notion of a panopticon to explain how we come to surveil ourselves once we accept that we are under persistent scrutiny (see Wood, 2003, p. 235). The DfE, by making the PPRP a checking mechanism to be dreaded and by having Education Directors rehearse the partnership prior to the panel session, conditioned its principals to 'do what they were told' regarding the improvement of student attendance, NAPLAN results, and SACE completion rates.

The PPRP reform also intensified the performative nature of the relationship between the bureaucracy's middle-tier administrator (i.e., the Education Director) and school principals. Not only were principals reliant upon Education Directors for reappointment to their current school or appointment to another school, but Education Directors were reliant on the good opinion of the bureaucracy's senior executive to remain in their roles. From the DfE chief executive to the senior executive; from the senior executive to the Education Directors; and from the Education Directors to the school principals, performance reviews were data based. For the bureaucrats, that data was tied to key performance indicators. For secondary principals, that data was tied to lifting NAPLAN achievement and SACE completion. Ball (2000) describes performativity as a culture or system that "employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change". From 2015, performativity cascaded through all levels of the DfE organisation. The new managerialism evident in the approach taken by the bureaucracy was consistent with Lynch's (2014b) description of how the complexities of a large educational system are reduced "to issues of governance and regulation" where the functions of schools are shifted from "being centres of learning to service-delivery operations with productivity targets" (p. 2).

The Chief Executive during this period had strong system administration credentials but they had been forged in the era of new managerialism and in contexts outside of education. He had quickly formed the view that the DfE needed “a shake-up” because there was “a looseness of policy development, accountability, communication and professional development” (DfE CE-3). His assessment was that there “had been significant slippage in the quality of education in Australia, and that we were starting to fall behind other countries” (DfE CE-3). This was a view shaped primarily by PISA results but also gleaned “through business studies” (DfE CE-3). It was acknowledged at the Department’s Leaders Day in February 2015 that the idea for the PPRP reform was owned by the Chief Executive, who had experience with a similar approach to performance in his previous career.

The PPRP reform was data-centric, where what was easily externally measured was what was valued. It was consistent, also, with the principles and practices of new managerialism and performativity. For a measure that sought greater control over the work of school principals, it should not be surprising that the origin of the PPRP practice was law enforcement. Typically this “policy borrowing” (see Lingard, 2010) occurs within an industry or within a professional field but, with the DfE’s PPRP, what had been considered effective in policing was now being appropriated and applied to an education context. The hierarchical nature of the data conversations might have been a good fit within the field of law enforcement, as might the narrow performance measures, but the comparisons made between schools and school leaders in these PPRP data conversations seemed counter-intuitive to the collegiality and collaboration being asked for within the local partnership. Nonetheless, what was apparent from this collective form of performativity was a sense of ‘corporateness’. Here principals, inculcated into the bureaucracy’s preoccupation with data reports from Business Intelligence, started to equate success in a professional sense with a good panel

review. The flipside to this was that a poor performance by a principal in a PPRP session, in front of their Education Director and the DfE's senior executive, meant that one's career prospects were somewhat diminished. This was an understanding I reached from my years as SASPA president (2015–2021) where DfE senior executives would openly discuss a principal as being effective or ineffective based on their experiences at PPRPs. Comments such as "Principal X is not across her/his data" or "Principal Y is not very corporate" became commonplace.

## **7.5 Why Collective Accountability?**

According to Bacchi (2022), question 3 of her WPR framework "uses genealogy to draw attention to the battles that take place over knowledge" (p. 10). Here WPR thinking is "extended to understand the role of policies, in the production of 'subjects', 'objects' and 'places'" (p. 5). Expanding upon this, Bacchi (2022) observed how "problem representations set in train certain processes of subjectification, making 'subjects' of specific kinds, and helping to make the population 'governable'" (p. 6). Acknowledging that a key problem representation of South Australia's model for collective accountability was that school principals needed to be made more 'governable', I now examine how this core idea developed and consider the various influences which shaped it. Here my discussion focuses on new managerialism, policy borrowing and performativity, before reintroducing my use of regimes of truth.

### ***7.5.1 Practising New Managerialism***

According to Lynch (2014a), "new managerialism represents the organisational arm of neoliberalism" (p. 1). By this she meant that it is "the mode of governance designed to realise the neoliberal project" (p. 1) whereby the public sector is transformed to be more like the private sector. Here Lynch sees that the "values of efficiency and

productivity” apparent in the latter are applied to “the regulation” of the former (p. 1). The key characteristics of new managerialism include “an emphasis on outputs over inputs; the close monitoring of employee performance and the encouragement of self-monitoring through the widespread use of performance indicators, rankings, league tables and performance management” (p. 1). It is somewhat eerie how these listed attributes are all evident in the PPRP model of collective accountability.

As discussed in Chapter 6, South Australia’s education bureaucracy had taken some steps down the path of new managerialism with the introduction of P21. By 2014, with a chief executive at the helm whose public administration background was in essential services other than education, DfE was further transformed along new managerial lines. This was evident in its business improvement plan, *Building a High Performing System* (DECD, 2014), which outlined thirteen change priorities, three of which specifically addressed issues of performance and accountability. The purpose of the plan was “business improvement” and the thirteen change priorities read as a series of transactional steps towards “the development of a modern, sustainable and customer-centric organisation” (DECD, 2014, p. 3). The language adopted here was that of the private sector. Within this discourse, education was no longer referred to as a service but rather as a business, and schools now worked with customers instead of students. As SASPA Pres-1 reflected, “this was the era when the bureaucracy became the ‘parent company’, treating its schools as ‘franchises’ and its principals as ‘franchisees’”.

One of the motivations for the business improvement plan, *Building a High Performing System*, was DfE CE-3’s observation that the department was a “quite dysfunctional organisation”, one that “needed rapid acceleration” given that it had lost “10 or 15 years of traction ... for being recognised ... as a high performing public education system”.

Implicit in these observations was CE-3's opinion that principal associations such as SASPA, "hadn't woken up to the idea that this (the department) organisation needed some rapid improvement". Essentially, CE-3's opinion constituted SASPA as being part of the 'problem' and, therefore, considered them to be ill-equipped to contribute to any shaping of the 'solution'. CE-3 conceded that he "very much came from an embedded point of view" which questioned "the value of organisations such as associations" and recognised that he was "doubtful ... as to whether the many associations ... could actually serve a purpose to complement the achievement and growth agenda (of the department)". Alongside this observation, CE-3 also recognised that his public administration background meant that he was used to an "internally policy generating organisation" and had little involvement in including "government or community or its stakeholders in the development of policy". His reflections explain how, having had a new managerial approach in his previous executive leadership experiences, he recognised the failings of the DfE bureaucracy in those terms and so conceived an organisational turnaround that was project-oriented (i.e., thirteen change priorities = thirteen change projects to be overseen by thirteen change teams). Whilst school principals were encouraged to seek membership on these change teams, the reality was that the bureaucracy had already set the directions and established the rationale, so the role of the change teams was to recommend how "business processes" and "the department's structures, policies, processes and practices" (DECD, 2014, p. 13) could best be aligned. For principals operating within a local education partnership construct, this new managerial approach would see their work linked explicitly to corporate priorities and monitored closely through data conversations led by the bureaucracy's senior executive.



### **7.5.2 Policy Borrowing**

The notion of “policy borrowing” (Lingard, 2010, p. 132), as discussed in Chapter 3, is encouraged by the intergovernmental governance provided by organisations such as the OECD (see Sellar & Lingard, 2013) and is a common approach within the GERM (see Sahlberg, 2016). Prevalent in the education sectors of Western democracies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the USA, it is a policy effect exercise, and one that has produced testing regimes and accountability systems that “seem eerily similar, though in vastly different contexts” (McKay, 2018, p. 25). According to Portnoi (2016), “common motivations and rationales for policy borrowing and lending include the desire to adopt recognized global trends (e.g., standardized testing in schools) and to gain legitimacy at the time of a regime change by bringing in initiatives from elsewhere” (p. 148). The Self-Managed School (SMS) model of education, which I discussed in Chapter 6, is an example of the adoption of a global trend, albeit one that failed to demonstrate ‘policy learning’. This absence of ‘learning before borrowing’ is a position well-argued by Lingard (2010) who notes that it is “policy learning, not inert borrowing from elsewhere” that is needed (p. 144). The PPRP represented a case of policy borrowing on two counts. It was cross-national because South Australia borrowed its local education partnerships approach to school improvement from the *Self-Improving School-led System* (SISS) introduced into England in 2010. It was cross-sectoral because the education sector, now led by a CE with bureaucratic leadership experience in two other essential services, borrowed from one of these sectors an effective forum-based accountability model with which he was familiar.

### ***Local Education Partnerships***

The local education partnerships model for organising schools had already been conceptualised and promoted by CE-3's predecessor. England's *Self-Improving School-led System* (SISS) had been shaped by the work of David Hargreaves, specifically his *Creating a Self-Improving School System* (2010) and *Leading a Self-Improving School System* (2011). The SISS model was considered to be an evolutionary step forward from the Self-Managing School (SMS) model that had taken hold in England two decades beforehand. Hargreaves (2010) argued that increased decentralisation provided school systems with an opportunity to become "self-improving" by building on the experience of schools that had been "working in partnerships and networks of many kinds" (p. 3). Amongst the four building blocks of this "self-improving system" were "clusters of schools (the structure)" and the cultural element of a "local solutions approach" (p. 3), both of which became core elements of South Australia's local education partnerships model.

During his 26 months in the role, CE-4 developed a Birth – Year 12 strategy, *Brighter Futures*, which marked the beginning of a new expanded agency: one that was formed by amalgamating early childhood education and school-based education with Families SA and allied health services. Joined together as a response to a political decision, this new Birth – Year 12 agency (the Department for Education and Child Development) needed to consider how it would be best organised. This included the form its middle-tier administration should take.

From 2009 the bureaucracy's middle-tier administration had been 'regional'; that is, there were nine geographically formed regions each led by a Director and most supported by one or more Assistant Directors. However, with the emergence of this new Birth – Year 12 agency, regions were considered redundant. In their stead, the

organisation of schools and services was reconceptualised during 2013 as clustered 'partnerships', and fully implemented by the beginning of 2014. Although the theory for these partnerships was drawn from the thinking of David Hargreaves (2010; 2011) and how it shaped England's SISS model, the practical rationale for partnerships in a South Australian context was that they would better facilitate the joining-up and integration of the various locally-based early childhood, schooling, and allied health services than the regional model. If there had been 'policy learning' before 'policy borrowing', South Australia's bureaucracy might have contemplated why David Hargreaves (2010; 2011) had emphasised the importance of naturally-occurring school networks or school clusters, rather than forcing principals to collaborate on the basis of a geography. It was this geographical clustering that created isolation for most secondary principals because 38% of the DfE partnerships had only one high school member.

### ***A Collective Accountability Model***

Although the partnerships model was borrowed from England's SISS, the *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (PPRP) reform was not. The SISS did have an accountability regimen, which was to use the network for formative accountability (in support of improving the capacity of its member schools to undertake rigorous self-review practices) and continue to rely on the OFSTED inspections of individual schools for the summative accountability. From a collective accountability perspective, the SISS model was geared to have school improvement practices "professionally owned" by the network so that, upon inspection by OFSTED, all schools within the network would perform well (see Gilbert, 2012, pp. 21-23). Instead, the PPRP approach to accountability was borrowed from law enforcement. Locally, SAPOL (South Australian Police) had been using a forum approach to accountability whereby superintendents based in a geographical base or division were questioned in relation to key data sets and performance targets.

DfE CE-3, who introduced the PPRP model at Leaders' Day in February 2015, had experienced the equivalent approach to collective accountability in one of his previous bureaucratic leadership experiences. Had 'policy learning' occurred ahead of 'policy borrowing' in this instance, the DfE bureaucracy might have formed the view that the relationships between cause and effect were far more conclusive in law enforcement than in schooling and therefore more likely to make data conversation forums more relevant than in the education sector. They might have noted, also, the hierarchical nature of administering law enforcement compared to the flatter management style that had been the tradition in education.

### ***7.5.3 Performativity***

In Chapter 3 the literature of school accountability is discussed as "performativity"; that is, "performances which serve as measures of productivity or output or displays of 'quality' or moments of 'promotion' or inspection" (Ball, 2000, p. 1). My contention is that the PPRP initiative represents a contemporary example of performativity: one where the forced collegiality of a cluster of school principals and early childhood leaders is manipulated by the DfE's senior executive to effect greater bureaucratic control. Understanding that it is a matter of "who controls the field of judgement" (Ball, 2001, p. 210) that also controls how we begin to see ourselves differently, the PPRP ritual enabled the bureaucracy to remake what it meant to be a school principal. Part of this was the effect of 'mirroring'. Principals, having observed the efforts made by senior education executives to interrogate site-specific and partnership data, equated this with what they should also be doing, and so began to replicate this methodology back in their schools. This validated the bureaucracy, since the design of the PPRP reform included an interest in having school leaders place greater emphasis on performance data in their sites. It served the professional interests of principals who

understood that leadership was now all about the data, and who were reliant upon the good opinion of Education Directors and the DfE's senior executive for their reappointment. However, by making it all about the data, the DfE's senior executive established a competitive environment: one where school principals and early childhood leaders experienced a range of emotional responses including pride, guilt, shame, and envy, based on how their site data were perceived within the group. Here, 'winners' and 'losers' were established by the trending of the data and the extent to which principals demonstrated their commitment to 'continuous improvement'. What was interesting to me as SASPA President was how conditioned some members of the SASPA Board had become to this narrow way of thinking, referring to their peers as 'effective' or 'ineffective' based on their data.

The PPRP ritual placed an emphasis on collective accountability and so this constituted the school principal as part of the 'we'. In this local partnership 'we' have established a plan, 'we' have set performance targets, and 'we' have agreed on actions, and 'we' are monitoring our progress, and so forth. In the PPRP data discussions, this 'we' operated on two levels. First, the identity of the school principal was collectivised as a member of the local partnership. Second, the identity of the school principal was being corporatised. The PPRP represented high stakes, as demonstrated by the Chief Education Officer's commitment to its facilitation. Every person in the PPRP discussion room was a part of the DfE 'we' and, through the cadence of these rituals, either knowingly or unwittingly, principals were being orchestrated to belong more and more to the corporate 'we'. This was reinforced through the insistence by most Education Directors for their school and site leaders to formally rehearse the 'we' in the lead-up to the PPRP. In its document issued to school principals, *Feedback on 2015 Partnership Performance Reviews*, DfE provided a range of affirming comments from unnamed principals including the observation that

“the process demanded time but brought cohesion and reaffirmed connectedness” (DECD, 2015b, p. 1).

#### ***7.5.4 The PPRP Truth Regime***

My decision to use the notion of truth regimes as an explanatory tool for this genealogy was discussed in Chapter 6. There, the subjugating effects of the P21 autonomies and the QIAF accountabilities on principals included: making diagnostic test-based data a measure of school quality; encouraging the playing of the accountability game to enhance one’s job prospects; serving the interests of the market and its adherence to competition and choice; consigning principals to an ongoing dilemma of choosing between one’s obligations to the profession and one’s obligations to the bureaucracy. These subjugating effects had reconstituted the work of principals, and all remained apparent throughout the period of the PPRP reform (2015–2022). However, given the collective nature of this new instrument for principal accountability, the work of the principal was further reconstituted. I use truth regimes, here, to explain how the bureaucracy exploited the adoption of the PPRP policy to introduce more subjugating effects on the principal and in so doing, created the conditions for principals to see themselves as part of an integrated performative network. As Rose (1992) suggested, new subjectivities emerged from practices where “we act upon ourselves and one another in order to make us particular kinds of beings” (p. 161). By increasing the surveillance of principal’s work, by strengthening the connection between principal’s work and the bureaucracy’s ambitions, and by encouraging principals to rehearse their performance, the PPRP created the conditions for principals to recognise themselves differently or as Rose (1992) described it, they related to “the nature of the present in which we are” (p. 161). The PPRP, together with the residual objects of previous iterations of accountability (i.e., the external review of schools and the writing of an

annual report), had the cumulative effect of situating the principal within a “flow of performativities” (Ball, 2000, p. 2); that is, being continuously accountable and “being judged in different ways, by different means, through different agents” (p. 2). As a result of PPRP, principals were constituted in the performative networks and constituted themselves as more governable and compliant.

### ***Subjugation of Principals***

In Chapter 6, I identified five factors which changed how principals were constituted because of P21 and QIAF: i.e., having autonomy enmeshed with accountability, accepting diagnostic data as a performance measure, needing to exhibit a corporate commitment, grappling with the effects of competition and choice, and experiencing the dilemma of dualism. Through the PPRP era these subjugating effects endured and, in most cases, were extended. For principals, the PPRP truth obligation was that the data was all important, so the commitment individual principals had to make in the ‘therefore’ moment (see Lorenzini, 2023a) was to either submit to this narrow version of what mattered in schools or to refuse it. For most it was submission, since their status depended on it and this acceptance meant principal conduct was governed primarily by numbers. By playing the “game of truth”<sup>55</sup> (e.g., NAPLAN preoccupation, data walls<sup>56</sup>, data interrogations, performative behaviour) within a truth regime where data matters most, principals chose to constitute themselves as good corporate members. Essentially, principals allowed themselves to be subjugated by the techniques of control the PPRP had imposed upon them.

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<sup>55</sup> Lorenzini (2023a) explains the distinction between “games and regimes of truth” as one between “the epistemic acceptance of a truth claim and the practical submission to that claim” (p. 38). One can accept the truth “at the level of the game of truth” by following its rules, but “submission to the truth (giving the truth the right and power to govern one’s...conduct) must be addressed” at the level of “the regime of truth” (p. 38).

<sup>56</sup> The data wall is a visual display of key data sets (often adorning the walls of a staff room) and used primarily to encourage collective accountability.

First, there was how this new data regime operated as a disciplinary mechanism: one where the tenured principal was reliant upon the good regard of the bureaucracy for their next tenure. Second, there was the normalisation of a data-driven attitude established by the DfE senior executive and promulgated by Education Directors. Third, there was the emphasis on collective leadership behaviours practised through the local education partnership and tested within PPRP forums. By allowing themselves to be subjugated in these ways, principals had unwittingly agreed to constrained autonomy. As Dolan and Mader (2024) note, “mock empowerment, conferred on principals from above” was “accompanied by the authoritative gaze of supervisors more concerned with systemic requirements for alignment and conformity” (p. 171).

In summary, principals were already subjugated by having autonomy enmeshed with accountability, accepting diagnostic data as a performance measure, needing to exhibit a corporate commitment, grappling with the effects of competition and choice, and experiencing the dilemma of dualism, but the additional accountabilities introduced through the PPRP reform now meant that the work of principals was governed essentially by numbers.

### ***Principal Resistance***

Understandably, not all principals made the same choices in relation to the bureaucracy’s PPRP regime of truth, so individual principals constituted themselves differently. Resistance can take various forms, from direct challenges to norms and institutions to more subtle acts of subversion and counter-discourse. That the PPRP was a forum exercise meant that it was difficult for principals to challenge its norms openly. Even the PPRP rehearsals facilitated by Education Directors were difficult to subvert, and yet some principals took “career limiting” (Dolan, 2020b, p. 33) risks such



as ‘pushing back’ and ‘truth telling’. One system-wide act of resistance undertaken by the majority of secondary principals was their commitment to sustain their secondary school networks<sup>57</sup> which were antithetical to the notion of the Birth—Year 12 local education partnerships, particularly after the introduction of the PPRP. This was realised during my on-going discussions as SASPA President with the DfE’s Chief Education Officer (who chaired most of the PPRPs) about the complex co-existence of Local Education Partnerships and Secondary Networks. My advice on the matter was consolidated in a briefing dated 11<sup>th</sup> August 2015, which outlined SASPA’s grievance that the implementation of Local Education Partnerships had failed to address “the issue of achieving growth and stretch across the secondary education landscape” (Mader, 2015, p. 1). The briefing also raised the problem of competing interests such as “school autonomy and collaborative responsibility” and questioned whether we (DfE and the profession) were comfortable with “this direction and its trajectory” (p. 1).

## 7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has located the PPRP initiative within the principles of the GERM where the idea of a good education had been questionably reduced to a narrowly defined, narrowly measured, outcomes focused education. To understand the constitutive effects of PPRP on school principals, I invoked my adaptation of the WPR framework and found that, in exchange for corporate approval, most principals accepted diminished autonomy and increased accountability. In the design of the PPRP, the bureaucracy established new norms for how principal, school and partnership performance was to be understood: these included an emphasis on contrived

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<sup>57</sup> Regionally-based secondary networks had been formed across South Australia as a support to the *Ready, Set, Go* strategy which was launched in 1997. They were considered essential to the provision of vocational education and training in schools but, for many networks, they became the basis for ongoing collaboration on senior secondary and middle years projects.

collegiality (Local Education Partnership), a preoccupation with data, and a flow of performativities where a forum interrogation of data was now added to the existing accountability rituals of Annual Reports and External School Reviews. Accountability had assumed an even greater performative purpose than had been the case under P21 and had become more strongly tied to principal reward within the bureaucracy. With the introduction of the PPRP, the principal was now considered a corporate member, part of a bureaucracy consumed by an interest in improving the data sets it prescribed. Although this increased surveillance and additional level of accountability diminished the principal's autonomy, the new managerial practices adopted by the bureaucracy, including changes to the role of its middle-tier of leadership, the Education Director, limited the capacity of individual principals to push back.

In the following chapter, I explore the effects on how principals were constituted with the addition of another accountability, i.e., the *Quality School Improvement Plan* and the apparatus supporting the *From Good to Great* reform. By considering these effects alongside those of P21 and the PPRP, I continue to formulate my thinking about trajectories. Here, I am interested in the trajectory taken by the bureaucracy to expand its catalogue of accountability approaches; the trajectory emerging for how principals were constituted (and constituted themselves) by these accountabilities; and the trajectory for how constrained the political work of SASPA and other principal associations had become.

## 8. FROM COLLECTIVE SURVEILLANCE TO BUREAUCRATIC COMPLIANCE

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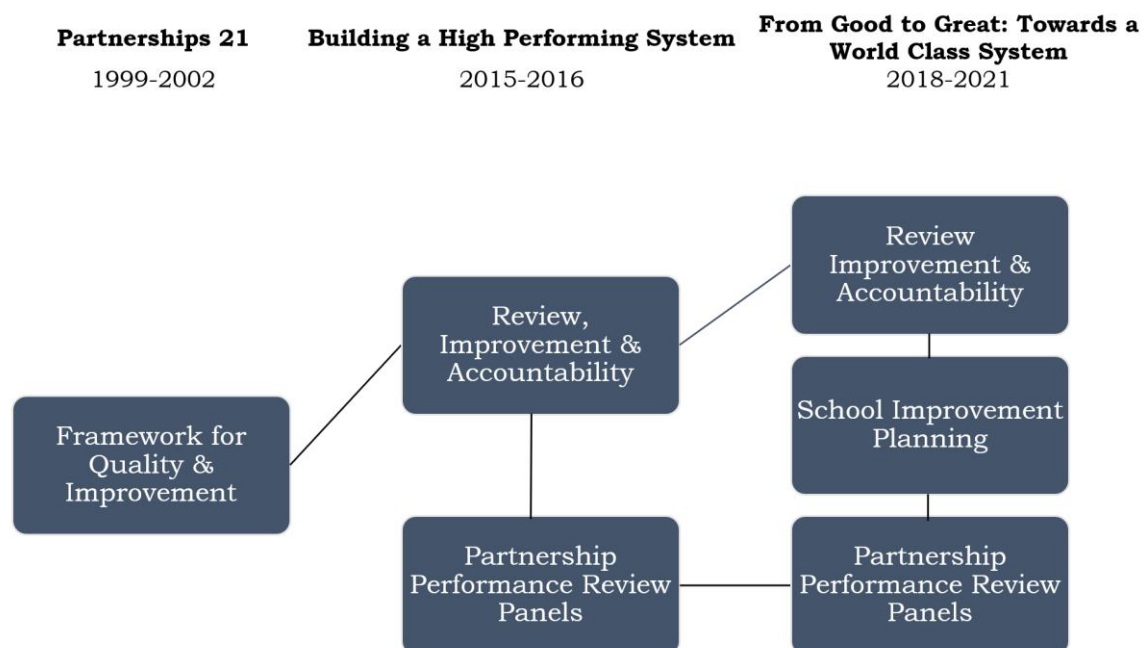
### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter is the third in a five-chapter sequence which comprises the genealogy section of my thesis. In Chapter 6, I examined the QIAF model of school accountability nested within the P21 reform and identified how it consigned principals to an autonomy enmeshed with accountability and to a new proxy for quality within school improvement; i.e., the use of diagnostic standardised test data as a performance measure. Chapter 7 storied how the introduction and consolidation of a collective form of principal accountability, the PPRP, not only forced a model of collegiality on principal, but also consigned them to diminished autonomy and to new flows of performativities which created the conditions for principals to be constituted, and to constitute themselves, as corporate subjects.

In this chapter, I explain how principals were obligated to comply with new accountabilities framed by the *Quality Schools Improvement Plan* (SIP) model which nested within the apparatus for improvement in the *From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System* (FGTG) strategy. This was a public education reform designed by private consultancy firms McKinsey and Company and Learning First, and it signalled how outsourced knowledge was now valued more than the professional knowledge provided by principal associations and others.

Together, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 illustrate how the bureaucracy expanded its appetite for accountability as an instrument to effect greater control over principals. Figure 9 (below) depicts the various accountability models operating within the three reforms examined by this thesis, i.e., P21 (1999–2002), *Building a High Performing System*

(2015–2016), and *From Good to Great* (2018–2021). Whilst the external review of schools (see QIAF and RIA) is a feature common to all three reform periods, additional accountabilities were introduced for the *Building a High Performing System* era (i.e., PPRP), and the *From Good to Great strategy* (i.e., SIP). The effect of adding these additional instruments of accountability was to reconstitute the work of principals as ‘corporate’; that is, serving the ambitions of the bureaucracy and, more specifically, narrowing the purposes of school leadership to the improvement of performance data (i.e., NAPLAN results and SACE completion rates). At the same time as principals became less autonomous and more compliant, the bureaucracy’s interest in the professional knowledge provided by principal associations waned. Instead, the DfE sought the advice of external consultants, most notably McKinsey and Company.



**Figure 9: Reforms and Accountabilities**

My Chapter 8 discussion follows the common format established at the beginning of this genealogy. I begin the chapter by establishing context. This involves locating the SIP model of principal accountability within the bureaucracy’s wider reform agenda and the various factors which shaped it, thereby discursively storying their inter-

relationship. My adaptation of the WPR framework is then invoked as an abridged four-step sequence where the FGTG reform and its SIP model are problematised. Empirical data from interviews with DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents, together with documents generated by DfE and SASPA at the time (2018–2021), establish the discursive practices attached to the policy terrain of principal accountability. It is here where the bureaucracy's regimes of truth are uncovered, and principal responses to truth obligations are explained. Before concluding this chapter, a comprehensive summary is provided: one that not only underlines the key points made within Chapter 8, but which also synthesises the cumulative findings from the first three chapters of this genealogy. Here, a trajectory is revealed which illustrates how principals have become less autonomous with each successive reform and, subsequently, more subjugated by the bureaucracy.

## **8.2 The Context for 'From Good to Great'**

Before using my adaptation of Bacchi's WPR framework to analyse the *School Improvement Plan* (SIP) and its role within the apparatus for the FGTG reform, there are two historical developments which informed this context. First, following advice from Justice Margaret Nyland (in June 2016), the head of the Royal Commission into Child Protection Systems, the Weatherill Government decoupled Family Services and allied health functions from the Department of Education and Child Development they had established in 2013. This decoupling was activated by a change of Chief Executive and, in the reorganisation which followed, an External Relations directorate was formed to manage various stakeholders within the education ecosystem (which now included principal associations). Second, as with his predecessor, the new Chief Executive was a well credentialled senior bureaucrat but with no background in education. To address the perceived shortcomings in the Department's functions he

relied upon the advice provided by external consultancies, most notably McKinsey and Company.

In 2018, the DfE CE created a new division named Strategic Policy and External Relations. Within this division, the External Relations directorate was designed to manage the DfE's relationship with various interest groups and stakeholders outside of the agency. Such groups included the other schooling sectors (Catholic and Independent), the senior secondary authority (the SACE Board), the various universities (including Flinders University, the University of Adelaide and the University of SA), the teachers' union (the AEU-SA), the various principal associations (e.g., SASPA), the school leaders' legal fund (SASSLA), and a range of not-for-profit organisations (e.g., Youth Opportunities). SASPA became one of the organisations considered as 'external'.

### ***8.2.1 External Relations***

In the process of setting up the Strategic Policy and External Relations directorate, SASPA was considered 'external' to the DfE. It was a decision that reflected a new departmental logic; that is, what could not be controlled by the Department's senior executive was 'external'. Its immediate impact was that SASPA was to be managed in four ways.

First, there were attempts to manipulate the SASPA president (and the SASPA Board) to follow key strategic settings developed by the DfE's senior executive and, at times, to make explicit the association's support for these strategies (albeit, sometimes the result of coercion).

Second, there was a change to how the voice of principals was included in key policy forums. Alongside principal association representation there were principals hand-picked by the DfE who could be relied upon to follow the corporate line.

Third, allied to this was the External Relations directorate's enthusiasm for encouraging other DfE units to consult with principal associations on policy changes. Although well-meaning, this act created a flurry of consultation activity around minor changes to a plethora of DfE policies, whilst principal association involvement in major DfE reform settings such as the *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* strategy was discouraged. Perversely, this push to have principal association involvement in minor policy considerations created a distrust of the External Relations directorate by other DfE divisions who saw its work as meddling.

Fourth, there was an attempt to control SASPA's messaging. Here, SASPA's monthly e-bulletins and other communiques to members were read forensically by the CE (and other members of the DfE senior executive) and, where it was deemed that I had been overtly critical as SASPA President, I was summarily rebuked. Similarly, the SASPA Chat-list was monitored by DfE executives and, despite it being a forum for members to raise issues with other members, it became clear that it was also a way for DfE to identify those principals openly critical of the bureaucracy. The effect of this surveillance was to shut down transparent debate amongst the membership for fear of DfE repercussions. I mention these communication issues, and the subsequent threat by successive CEs to withdraw DfE's funding support to SASPA because, in a healthy democracy, a counter-narrative that has the backing of a profession's constitutive voice should not effectively be 'cancelled'. The bureaucracy's management of SASPA (and other principal associations) through its External Relations directorate suggests that it was determined to control the constitutive voice of the profession.

Returning to Foucault's notion of 'regimes of truth' and, in particular, Lorenzini's (2023a) discussion, governmental powers invariably seek the authority to conduct our conduct through our submission—"explicitly or implicitly, voluntarily or involuntarily, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly"—to the 'truth' offered to us (p. 39). It is our acceptance (as opposed to our resistance) of this that enables us to be governed compliantly. Lorenzini (2023a) refers to this as the "ethico-political relevance of the 'therefore' that links the 'it is true' to the 'I submit'" (p. 40). Accordingly, it is the individual's actualisation of the 'therefore' that makes this a dilemma of subjectivity.

As Lorenzini (2023a) explains, "every regime of truth ultimately requires individuals to constitute themselves as subjects in relation to it" (p. 40). Hence, this process of 'subject-constitution' relies on the individual's acceptance (i.e., subjection) or refusal (i.e., subjectivation) of the 'truth obligation'. For Lorenzini (2023a) the "ethico-political dimension" of "Foucault's political history of truth" is located in the "complex dynamics of subjection and subjectivation" (p. 41). This 'ethico-political dimension' is at the core of how principal associations work, how bureaucracies work, and how each adjusts to the workings of the other.

The DfE's External Relations directorate was created to manage the cacophony of stakeholder voices, including principal associations, at a time when the bureaucracy's senior executive was taking its advice on strategy and system improvement from McKinsey and Company<sup>58</sup>. Presented as being the intermediary between education stakeholders and the DfE's senior executive, the External Relations directorate

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<sup>58</sup> In various forums, including visits to the SASPA Board, the DfE chief executive referred to the McKinsey advice as "the single source of truth".



became the go-between in the DfE CE's attempts to constrain the political work of SASPA and my efforts as SASPA president to refuse or comply with these constraints. Here, my failure to comply, at times, with the conditions established by the bureaucracy meant that there was, on my part, no submission, no acceptance of the 'bureaucratic truth'. But, when the bureaucracy introduced coercive measures including the threat to withdraw funding support to SASPA, the SASPA Board's commitment wavered. It was here that SASPA's subjection occurred, and the bureaucracy understood that it had found another way to govern the profession's constitutive voice.

### **8.2.2 Consultancy**

For the most part, the FGTG strategy was the product of the work of McKinsey and Company. According to Gunter, Hall and Mills (2015), this reliance of public administrations on consultants for knowledge production embodied "the emergence of the 'consultocracy'" (p. 518). Using the United Kingdom's New Labor (1997–2010) period as an example, Gunter and her colleagues explained how the 'consultocracy' functioned as external actors who used "trade knowledge, expertise and experience" for "impact on structures, systems and organisational goals" (p. 519). Keeping faith with the neoliberal project, this outsourcing of aspects of its public service to the private sector enabled bureaucracies to weave new managerialism practices into public administration. For Gunter and Mills (2017), it was this interconnection between the corporate world and educational policy that signified "the growth of privatisation, as well as the blending of economics with social reform strategies" (p. 19). Any trust, therefore, in the capacity of educators to improve the service to which they belonged was sidelined by the perceived problem-solving skills and business acumen of the consultant. This approach rendered educators victims of "knowledge politics" (Gunter & Mills, 2017, p. 105) where the knowledge service provided by the consultant—i.e.,

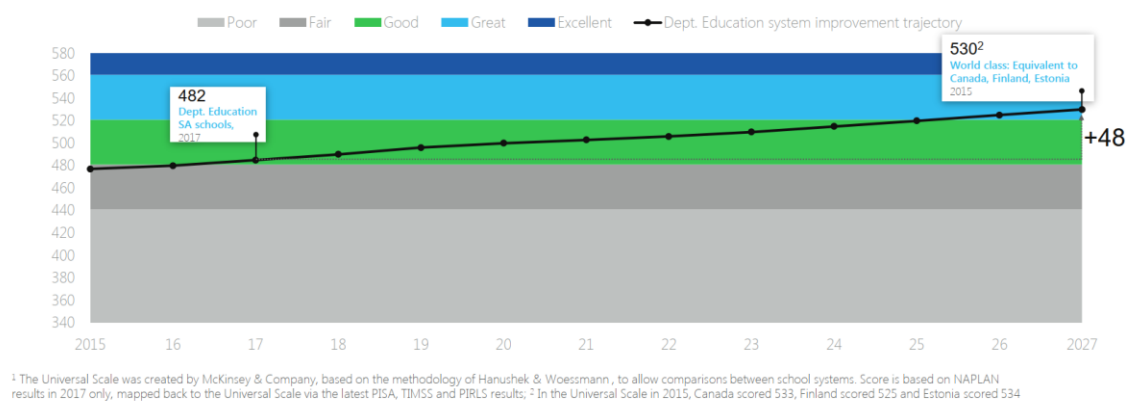
policy and technical solutions—bypassed the political advocacy provided by collective bodies within the profession, such as principal associations.

A similar view is offered by Ball (2016a) with his observations about the various neoliberal incursions realised “by a set of very powerful and persuasive agents and organisations, including the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development” (pp. 1047-1048). The OECD’s incursion into education is germane to South Australia and its FGTG reform. As discussed in Chapter 3, it was the OECD that commenced a triennial global testing regimen in 2000, the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA), thereby planting the seed from which the GERM has flourished. According to the PISA website, 42 countries participated in the 2000 test but by 2022 this had more than doubled to 90. One of the claims made by PISA was that it “can highlight differences in performance and identify the characteristics of students, schools and education systems that perform well” (OECD, 2019, p. 24). It was this claim pertaining to system performance that is the subject of this chapter, since it established one of the preconditions for South Australia’s FGTG strategy; that was, if the characteristics of education systems with high PISA scores are identifiable, then, according to McKinsey and Company (see Mourshed et al., 2011), they are transferable to other contexts. It was DfE’s “PISA envy” (Thomson, Lingard, & Wrigley, 2012, p. 2) that was behind the agency’s interest in partnering with McKinsey and Company.

Whilst the basis for South Australia’s FGTG reform can be traced back to the OECD and its PISA triennial testing, the architecture for this strategy belongs to McKinsey and Company. In 2009 McKinsey and Company published its findings from an education roundtable in Singapore, *Shaping the Future: How Good Education Systems Can Become Great in the Decade Ahead*. Through this, and subsequent publications,

including *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* (Mourshed et al., 2011), McKinsey and Company's education consultancy arm made the claim that, by producing a Universal Scale they were able to classify a school system's performance as poor, fair, good, or great (p. 117). It is this claim, and the accompanying strategy to shift system performance from one classification to the next, that saw South Australia's DfE express an interest in the work of McKinsey and Company. In 2018, they were contracted to design a 10-year strategy for system improvement, one that would engineer DfE's movement on the Universal Scale<sup>59</sup> from Good (i.e., 482 in 2017) to Great (i.e., 530 in 2027).

## To become world-class we need to accelerate at a greater rate



**Figure 1: The Universal Scale and the DfE ambition (Persse, 2019)**

As discussed in Chapter 1, Figure 1 (above) was used at the DfE Leaders' Day in February 2019 to explain the trajectory South Australia would need to take to move from 'good' to 'great'. On the McKinsey and Company's universal scale, public education in South Australia had been assigned a numerical value of 482. This meant

<sup>59</sup> According to McKinsey and Company, the baseline scores on the Universal Scale are categorised as Poor (< 440); Fair (440 - 480); Good (480 - 520); Great (520 - 560).

that it was rated as a good system but, as previously noted, to be considered great a rating of 530 on the universal scale would need to be attained.

### **8.3 From Good to Great: Towards a World-Class System**

In *The Review of Global Best Practice*, research commissioned by the DfE, Learning First CEO Dr Ben Jensen (2017) endorsed the McKinsey and Company's *From Good to Great* strategy, arguing that it was legitimate from an 'evidence-base'. His review concluded that the strategy was effective for organisations in different industries and contexts. It mentioned that the strategy was successful in helping firms accelerate growth, improve customer service, and build strong teams. The review also highlighted the importance of developing a culture of innovation, as well as having a clear vision and mission. Additionally, the review noted that implementing the strategy required commitment from all levels of the organisation, as well as strong leadership. Finally, the review concluded that the *Good to Great* strategies must be tailored to the needs of each organisation and its context.

Jensen's (2017) endorsement of the strategy was released internally within the DfE in December 2017. Throughout 2018 the DfE's senior executive worked intensively with McKinsey and Company to develop a strategy unique to South Australia's context and needs. This journey was documented by McKinsey and Company (2021) in *Improving schools: Reflections from education leaders in South Australia*. In the age of the 'consultocracy' this is an example of "knowledge exchange" (Gunter & Mills, 2017), i.e., a form of quid pro quo between the client and the consultant. Here, the client (in this case DfE) provided an endorsement of the consultant's work (in this case McKinsey and Company) and the consultant, as author of the publication, provided an endorsement of the client's work. This type of validation is symptomatic of the way "edu-business" (Lingard & Sellar, 2013b, p. 270) works, where the policy solution being

sold by the consultant is critiqued favourably by those who purchased it. The mirage formed by this feedback loop is that the certainty for educational improvement sought by governments has been delivered. This example is also indicative of what Lingard and Sellar (2013b) described as the “private/public relationships in the new global policy cycle in education” (p. 274).

The DfE Chief Executive explained that FGTG was a strategic plan which “outlines why we have set unapologetically high expectations for every child and young person’s growth and achievement and how we plan to raise the standard of public education across all of South Australia from good to great” (DfE, 2019b, foreword). The FGTG reform had six priorities. For this thesis, the discussion is limited to the *Accountability and Support* priority. This is the priority that was dedicated to introducing an additional school improvement program, one which encompassed a further narrowing of accountability measures and one which was informed directly by McKinsey and Company’s universal scale and the concept of moving from *Good to Great*.

The *Accountability and Support* priority called for a new ‘accountability framework’<sup>60</sup>, one which would be used to measure school performance and to guide the targeted allocation of resources for improvement. This was to be implemented in two distinct stages. First, the framework was to be developed with the emphasis on clearly defining the goals and expectations that schools would need to meet (e.g., the *Quality School Improvement Plan*). Second, a system was to be put in place which enabled these goals to be tracked, and systemic resources allocated accordingly (e.g., the *School Improvement Dashboard*, the *Guidebooks for Literacy and Numeracy*, and the *Orbis-professional learning academy*). The framework was designed to focus on student

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<sup>60</sup> This was an additional accountability framework since the enduring accountabilities of the Annual Report and External School Reviews were retained, along with the PPRP.

growth over time and to measure the rate of student progress. This was to be done by looking at student achievement data across a number of categories, such as NAPLAN results, SACE completion rates and student engagement. The framework also set out a system of 'evidence-based' interventions which were to be put in place in order to help schools achieve their targets. These interventions included targeted professional learning and development for teachers, additional support for students who were falling behind, and increased collaboration between schools. Overall, the bureaucracy claimed that the FGTG reform was designed to ensure that all schools in South Australia were held accountable to a high standard of performance and had the resources they needed to achieve their targets.

We set ourselves a 10-year ambition to be world class and to get there every child, in every class, in every school needs to achieve growth at a greater rate than ever before. This growth is vital in ensuring that children and young people have the best opportunities. (CE, DfE Communique, 31<sup>st</sup> August 2018)

The focus on student growth (albeit, measured by NAPLAN results) and the development of an additional accountability framework was intended to ensure that all students had access to the highest quality of education, regardless of their circumstances. By introducing a system which tracked progress and provided targeted support for schools, the FGTG reform aimed to move South Australia's education system from 'Good' to 'Great' on the universal scale.

Nested within the FGTG reform, the *Accountability and Support* priority encouraged the bureaucracy's development of various technologies designed to maintain the focus of principals on the improvement of performance data in their schools. This *Accountability and Support* apparatus included a *Stages of Improvement Report* (SoIR), the *Quality School Improvement Planning* (SIP), *Literacy and Numeracy Guidebooks*, the *School Improvement Dashboard*, and the *Orbis professional learning academy*.

## **8.4 An Apparatus for Control**

In the FGTG strategy, this conduct of the conduct (by DfE) of others (i.e., school principals) was undertaken through a range of interdependent technologies, as listed in the previous paragraph, which essentially formed an apparatus. This apparatus compelled DfE principals to submit. But, as Foucault (1982b) reminded us, “(p)ower is exercised only over free subjects and only insofar as they are free” (p. 790), so there was always a choice for South Australia’s principals to submit to the FGTG truth obligation or to refuse it. Since submission equated mostly to professional reward whilst resistance was met with reproach, the vast majority of principals outwardly accepted the FGTG truth regime. But what did this acceptance mean for principals and how they were constituted?

### ***8.4.1 Stages of Improvement Report***

A key design principle of the FGTG reform was that McKinsey and Company could plot a system’s performance on the universal scale and, from this baseline, could develop a strategy to shift the system from one stage of performance to the next. This was a macro concept, but the DfE was able to adapt it and create a micro version of it with its *Stages of Improvement Report (SoIR)*. Early in 2018, every DfE school received an SoIR which provided their baseline data and assigned an improvement classification (as a micro version of the universal scale). Instead of referencing the McKinsey and Company’s scale of poor, fair, good, great and excellent, the SoIR applied an action oriented rating to the benchmarking of its schools, i.e., build foundations, shift gears, stretch, maintain momentum, and inspire. This benchmarking was calculated using performance and trajectory measures. Here, performance was described as:

a measure of whole of school educational outcomes calculated for each calendar year ... a combination of NAPLAN for all year levels, and SACE completion and grades data for year 12 (DfE, 2018, p. 2).

Trajectory was described as whether “the school’s performance measure is improving, staying the same, or decreasing over a 3-year period” (DfE, 2018, p. 2). As a starting point for the FGTG strategy, the SoIR established that the bureaucracy’s interest in schools and school leadership was now narrowed to NAPLAN and SACE data, and the trajectory these results were taking. The strategy outlined to school principals was: “Stages of Improvement placement is a key step in enabling a differentiated approach to school improvement being adopted across the system, with each school understanding and focusing on the key priorities for their stage” (DfE, 2018, p. 3).

Effectively the SoIR established the relationship between the system’s ambition (of moving from ‘good’ to ‘great’) and the challenge for each school to contribute to that ambition being realised at the micro level (for example, moving from ‘stretch’ to ‘maintain momentum’). Based on discussions at SASPA Board and Committee meetings, the response from principals to this report was overwhelmingly negative. There were two main reasons for this response. First, the benchmarking of school performance appeared to produce a distribution that equated to the level of disadvantage within a school’s community. For example, more low-SES schools needed to ‘shift gears’ and more high-SES schools needed to ‘inspire’. Second, the secrecy around this report made school leaders suspicious of it. Principals were instructed not to share the report or their benchmarked level with others (although many did). In what appeared to be an exercise in caution, the report was handed to principals by their Education Director so that the SoIR could be explained and so that assurances could be given about how this was a helpful instrument and not an exercise in labelling or rating DfE schools. Perhaps because of this poor reception, the SoIR



was never reissued (although it continued to be used internally by the DfE System Performance division).

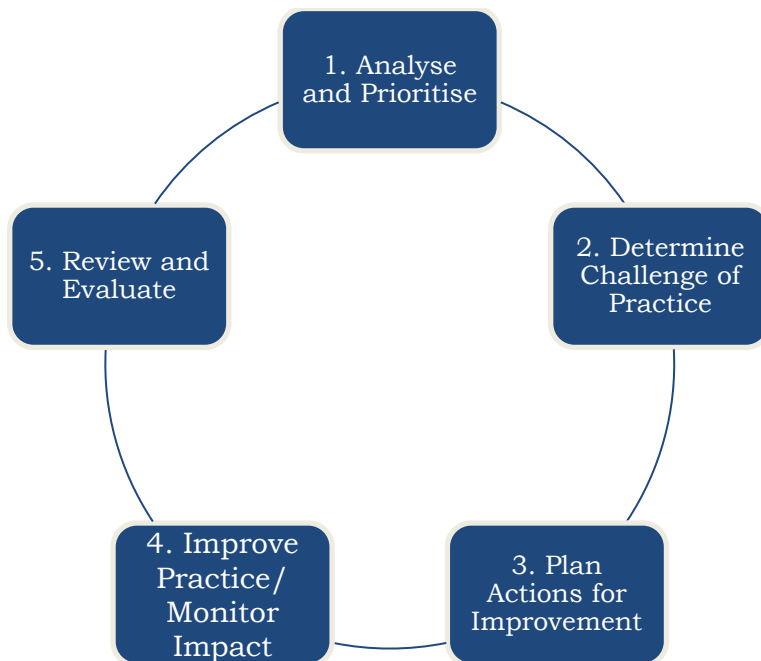
As SASPA President, my observation was that the *Stages of Improvement Report* had three effects on principals. First, there was a deeper realisation that school leadership now equated solely to improving NAPLAN and SACE results. Second, there was an acceptance that school performance was now inseparable from principal performance. Third, there was an increasing awareness of the sway that Education Directors now had over directing principal action. The other technologies within the FGTG apparatus amplified and augmented these effects as to the ways in which principals were constituted.

#### **8.4.2 Quality School Improvement Planning (SIP)**

In 2017, *Learning First* CEO Dr Ben Jensen had been commissioned to write *The Review of Global Best Practice* which endorsed the work of McKinsey and Company. That review concluded that the FGTG strategies must be tailored to the needs of each organisation and to its context. To this end, Jensen worked with the DfE in 2018 and designed its standardised approach to school improvement planning. This took the form of a policy and procedure which was released as the *Handbook for quality school improvement planning* (DfE, 2019a). It described the school improvement plan as “the ‘engine’ for school improvement” with an “improvement cycle that provides a common process for continuous improvement across the system, informed by evidence of student learning and best-practice strategies for achieving growth” (DfE, 2019a, p. 3). Here, the ‘evidence-base’ included Professor John Hattie’s works, *Teachers Make a Difference: What is The Research Evidence?* (2003) and *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to Achievement* (2008) and two of Dr Jensen’s co-authored commissioned papers from his Grattan Institute days, *Not So Elementary:*

*Primary School Teacher Quality in Top-Performing Systems* (Jensen, Roberts-Hull, Magee, & Ginnivan, 2016) and *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems, Australian Edition* (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016). Conveniently overlooking that “knowledge about the relationships between actions and consequences can only ever provide us with possibilities, never certainties” (Biesta, 2010), the DfE bureaucracy used the ‘evidence-based’ mantra which emerged from its *Handbook for quality school improvement planning* as a means to shut down alternative thinking about effective pedagogy. For example, the high impact teaching strategies promoted in Hattie’s 2008 research provided ‘certainty’ because they established for the bureaucracy ‘what works’.

Although his effect-size work had been uncritically examined by Hattie, he had become a de facto “guru” (Eacott, 2017, p. 414), and his research satisfied the need for governments and bureaucracies to have certainty, but this ‘certainty’ stripped principals of their reflective practice and professional judgement. No longer the “reflective agents” who could “make up their own minds” and “act on the basis of their insights, preferences and conclusions” (Biesta, 2014, pp. 20-21), principals were consigned by the bureaucracy to follow the ‘evidence-based’ prescription for improvement found in DfE produced handbooks and guidebooks.



**Figure 10: The DfE's school improvement planning cycle**

The *Handbook for quality school improvement planning* featured a prescriptive approach related to the improvement cycle. Figure 10 (above) shows that the cycle followed a similar path to the 'plan, act, do, reflect' cycle familiar to most of South Australia's educators. What was fundamentally different for school principals was that the first two phases – i.e., analyse and prioritise, and determine a challenge of practice —had to be decided in concert with the Education Director. Here, the bureaucracy's assertions for what needed to happen to lift performance data in individual schools was to be followed. This increased authority of the Education Director to intervene in the work of principals was supported by what became known as the *Local Education Team*.

### ***Local Education Team***

The FGTG strategy followed the policy logic that better school performances come from a sharper focus on systemic priorities. The strategy was based on McKinsey's "Seven S" framework, which suggests that successful organisations focus on seven interdependent elements: Strategy, Structure, Systems, Shared Values, Style, Staff

and Skills. The idea was that all seven elements must be in alignment and working together to create a successful organisation. In order to move FGTG, McKinsey argued that organisations should focus on the three key elements of strategy, structure, and systems. The strategy element involved setting a clear and focused direction, while the structure element required an organisation to have an organisational architecture that supported the strategy. To ensure that this happened, the role of the Education Director was changed to improve the “line of sight”<sup>61</sup> between the bureaucracy and schools. This refocus also produced an expansion of the Education Director’s team which was now referred to as the *Local Education Team* (LET).

The DfE school improvement planning cycle had five phases and, despite it being the work of schools, the experience of principals was that the LET became actively involved in each one. First, the LET interpreted the system’s data for the school and focused attention on the results for literacy and numeracy and SACE completion. Second, the Education Director not only approved the school principal’s targets, challenge of practice and plan for improvement but, where necessary, insisted on amendments<sup>62</sup>. Third, ostensibly to check that DfE *Literacy and Numeracy guidebooks* were being used to focus teachers’ work, school visits performed by the LET now included classroom observations. Fourth, Education Directors now had access to the same *School Improvement Dashboard* information as principals. This produced a surveillance function that in some cases went beyond the identification of data trends

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<sup>61</sup> The DfE CE and his senior executive made the terminology “line of sight” commonplace.

<sup>62</sup> One secondary principal (and SASPA Board member) claimed that his Education Director asked him to change his school’s planned priority work and challenge of practice on six occasions.

and the review of impact, to include judgements about principal performance and the need for the LET to intervene at the school level.

### ***Literacy and Numeracy Guidebooks***

The Literacy and Numeracy Guidebooks were the Curriculum and Learning Division's contribution to the FGTG strategy. For each of the Stages of Improvement, a bespoke guidebook had been prepared to support principals in their work with teachers to progress student performance from one stage to the next. If, for example, a school had been categorised by the SoIR exercise as needing to 'shift gears', the effective use of these guidebooks would support the school to achieve 'stretch' status (the next category up). The policy logic here was that the best way to improve the state's NAPLAN results was to standardise approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy. Integrated into the FGTG strategy, the guidebooks were the bureaucracy's curriculum support for schools to meet their literacy and numeracy targets (a key component of the SIP), to move from one Stage of Improvement to the next, and to satisfy the Local Education Team that each principal, by advocating the use of these materials in her/his school, had accepted the regime of truth behind this reform.

Curiously, although it was an expectation from the LET that principals engage teaching staff with the guidebook resources, it was not a strategy mandated from the top. On more than one occasion the DfE Chief Executive, as a visitor at SASPA Board meetings, affirmed the understanding that these materials were not mandatory. That the take up of these resources was very high revealed the extent to which Education Directors and *Local Education Teams* controlled the work of school principals.

### ***School Improvement Dashboard***

The *School Improvement Dashboard* brought together existing and new metrics with the expectation that principals would use these data to help refine planning and tactics for improvement. Well-versed in the system's use of data-driven reform from their experience with *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (PPRP), principals now had performance data at their fingertips but so too did their Education Director. One of the consequences of this shared desktop information was that surveillance was now assumed to be the norm, much like the Panopticon effect in prisons as discussed by Foucault (2020) in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (pp. 455-470). Here, Foucault's point was that prisoners acted as if they were being surveilled from the Panopticon, even if they were not. The effect of this surveillance in DfE schools was that principal autonomy was being constrained by the Education Director and the potential intervention of the *Local Education Team*.

Perhaps the most contentious feature of the *School Improvement Dashboard* was the introduction of a new metric, the Climate Survey results. The survey, administered to school staff annually by the DfE People and Culture division, was an attempt to capture data pertaining to organisational culture. The contention was in its leadership measure and the ambiguity relating to whether the survey harvested staff opinion of the school's leadership or of the bureaucracy's leadership. That it measured staff opinion of the school's leadership was only made clear after some Education Directors began to challenge principals over the survey results. In some cases, these confrontations turned nasty, with one experienced principal taking a week's leave in response to the vexatious behaviour exhibited by the ED. Beyond the use of the data as a 'stick', concerns raised at the SASPA Board level were twofold. First was the insistence by the DfE People and Culture division that the survey be issued directly to staff without any explanation delivered by the school principal of the survey's purpose and the

intended use of its results. This decision intensified the issue of whose leadership was being evaluated. Second was the interpretation some Education Directors were placing on leadership results. With regard to the latter, once it had been established that the survey targeted the school's leadership and not the bureaucracy's, it should have been anticipated that there would be groups of teachers frustrated by the top-down changes to classroom practice demanded by the FGTG reform who would view any leadership—the school's or the bureaucracy's—with a degree of contempt. The effect of this was that principals now understood the full extent of the lopsided accountability<sup>63</sup> attached to this reform. Compelled by DfE to implement the FGTG strategy, it was ironic that principals became the target of the Climate Survey rather than the bureaucracy.

### ***Orbis: A Professional Learning Academy***

In 2018 the DfE launched a new professional learning academy, *Orbis*. It was located in the same building as the SASPA Office, so for 4 years I saw first-hand much of its work. First, its professional learning programs were provided by industry partners from the University of Melbourne and from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Second, its suite of programs focused on literacy, numeracy and instructional leadership (provided by the University of Melbourne) and leadership for school excellence (provided by the Harvard Graduate School of Education). All of these programs had a selective entry process, and all were designed with the FGTG reform in mind. The effect this had on principals was that the only valued professional development programs were those facilitated by *Orbis* and delivered by their industry partners.

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<sup>63</sup> In this thesis, the term 'lopsided accountability' is used to describe how principals had now become responsible for the bureaucracy's own 'good to great' performance.

In summary, the FGTG apparatus formed by the *Literacy and Numeracy Guidebooks*, the *Local Education Team*, *Quality School Improvement Planning*, *Orbis Professional Learning Academy*, the *School Improvement Dashboard*, and the *Stages of Improvement Report* enabled the DfE to conduct the conduct of its school principals.

Its effects included: (i) a deeper realisation that school leadership now equated solely to improving NAPLAN and SACE results; (ii) a recognition that school performance was inseparable from principal performance; (iii) a sense that Education Directors now had increased sway over directing the actions of principals; (iv) principal autonomy had been constrained by the increased authority of the *Local Education Team*; (v) a lopsided notion of accountability had been produced once the system's improvement targets ('good' to 'great') became paramount; and (vi) the proxy for principal performance (and, essentially, for principal obedience to the FGTG's regime of truth) was improved NAPLAN growth. The new norms established by the SIP accountability apparatus within the FGTG strategy had made school principals much more governable.

## **8.5 Problematising FGTG and the SIP**

In following Bacchi (2009), my analysis of the nesting of the SIP within the FGTG strategy suggests that there were four basic propositions. First, there was 'data envy'. This had developed from South Australia's position relative to other states on league tables based on NAPLAN results, and Australia's position relative to other OECD countries in PISA tables.<sup>64</sup> According to Lingard and Sellar (2013a) these standardised testing regimes created "catalyst data"; that is, data and indicators that have pressured

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<sup>64</sup> The overall 2016 NAPLAN results indicated that SA was ranked 6th behind ACT, NSW, Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria, but ahead of Tasmania and the Northern Territory. The 2015 PISA results placed Australia equal 10th in science, equal 12th in reading and equal 20th in mathematics.



governments and policy-makers to respond, and to formulate and action change (p. 651). Second, the state's standardised test-based data needed to be improved and the FGTG solution was that bureaucratic control would have to be increased over all stages of school improvement (i.e., prioritising, planning, acting and reviewing). The SIP—with its handbook, its stages of improvement, and its templates—was the instrument to focus this school improvement work, and the quality control apparatus was the *Local Education Team* (LET), headed by the Education Director. Third, it was literacy and numeracy results that had to be improved, and the FGTG reform insisted that an 'evidence-based' approach for its teaching needed to be adopted and then implemented in all schools and classrooms. Here, each school's performance data and trajectory were used to identify their stage of improvement (i.e., build foundation, shift gear, stretch, maintain momentum and inspire) and guidebooks for literacy and numeracy—matched to these stages of improvement—were issued to schools along with the LET's direction to principals for their use. Fourth, since the state's poor NAPLAN results had been the work of educators, the time had come for non-educators such as *Learning First* and McKinsey and Company to serve the interests of the DfE Chief Executive and provide advice on an 'evidence-based' strategy for system lift.

Together, the first three of these problem representations—i.e., data envy, the need for the bureaucracy to control all stages of school improvement, and 'evidence-based' approaches to literacy and numeracy teaching—acted as regimes of inspection and quality control. Here, principal autonomy was constrained, and school accountability was lopsided (i.e., heavily weighted towards the system's ambition to achieve the McKinsey defined performance stage of 'great'). The fourth of these problem representations—i.e., a reliance on external consultants and 'policy borrowing'—indicated the bureaucracy's diminished trust in the knowledge and wisdom provided by the collective voice of the profession, including SASPA.

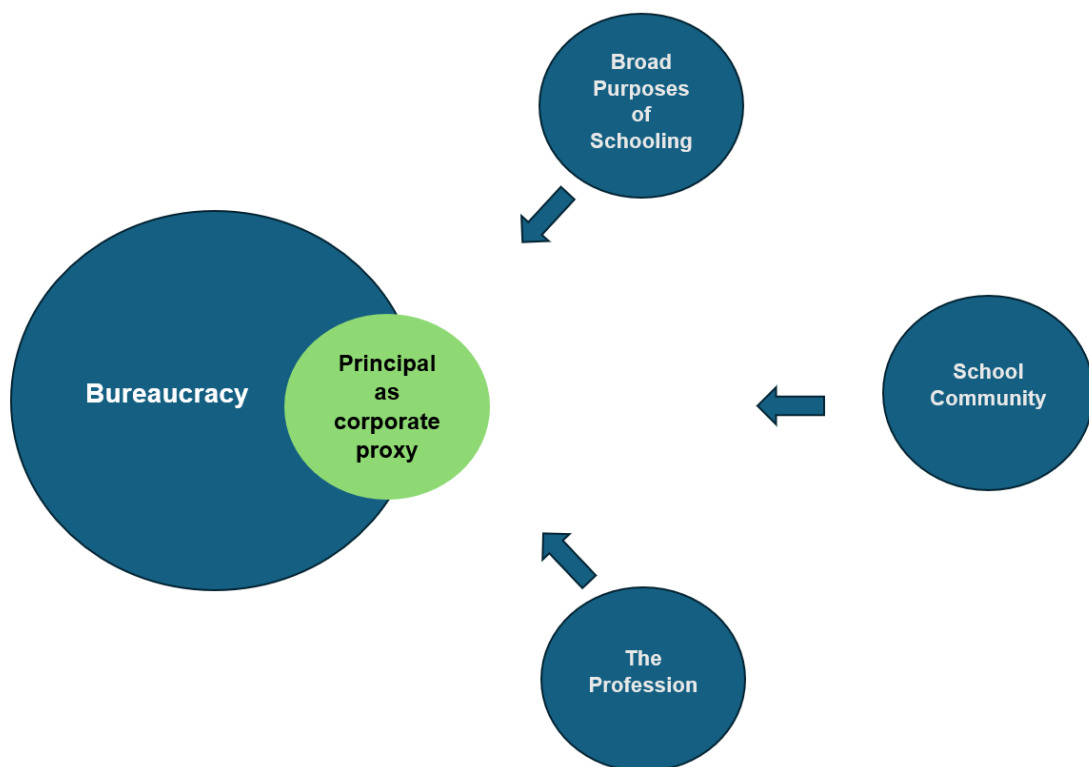
### **8.5.1 Principal Autonomy or Principals Being Governed?**

In *The Politics of the Truth* (1997) Foucault claimed that there was an art between “being governed and that of not being quite so governed” (p. 57). By this he meant that there was a range of ways of being (institutionally) governed between being completely governed and not being governed at all. Foucault claimed that these intermediary forms of governmentality were both “strategic and tactical” (p. 57). Such forms of governmentality, he explained, were “not just a matter of laws, regulations, or the exercise of power” (p. 57). Instead, they involved a range of techniques and technologies that enabled individuals to shape their own conduct and actions in ways that benefited them. Here, Foucault was highlighting the importance of self-governance where individuals chose to become more autonomous and self-determining and, therefore, established more control over their own lives. In this thesis, the notion of self-governance equates to the idea of principal autonomy but with the implementation of the FG TG strategy, autonomy was disturbingly constrained.

Having once led the nation with its idea of principal authority and empowerment (circa 1970), South Australia’s public-school principals now found that they were more governed by the bureaucracy than ever before. Here, an assembly of accountabilities comprising the Annual Report, an External School Review, *Partnership Performance Review Panels*, and the *Quality School Improvement Plan* (SIP), together with a suite of new managerial practices, now governed their practice. Instead of behaving as reflective educational practitioners leading an improved schooling agenda with professional judgement, South Australia’s public education principals constituted themselves to be the bureaucracy’s instrument for enacting a prescriptive approach to improved performance data results. The FG TG reform reflected the type of quality control promoted by the GERM where the push for “a narrow and technicist definition

of educational quality” meant schools (and school principals) had “little room for manoeuvre in this complex field” (Säfström & Biesta, 2023, p. 2).

Figure 11 (below) depicts the public education principal as having to respect the four main interests and responsibilities which shape their work: the purposes of education, the school and its community, belonging to a profession, and being an employee of the bureaucracy. It is an attempt to graphically explain what happens when the principal becomes so governed by the bureaucracy that they act as its proxy, regardless of how it affects these other interests and responsibilities. In a broader sense, it is a depiction of what happens when a neoliberalising policy regime reshapes what it means to be a school principal.



**Figure 11: The principal constituted as a corporate proxy.**

**Purposes:** Biesta (2020) argued that the three broad purposes of schooling were *qualification* (i.e., the transmission of knowledge and skills), *socialisation* (i.e., the

representation of cultures, traditions, and practices) and *subjectivisation* (i.e., enhancing the capacity and capability of the individual) and “those involved in the design and enactment of education — including policymakers and teachers — should always engage with the question of what their efforts seek to bring about in each domain” (p. 92, italics in original). But as Figure 11 illustrates, the FGTG principal is driven further away from expressing the full range of these purposes by the DfE’s insistence that what matters most is ‘qualification’ and in its narrowest form (the knowledge and skills of literacy and numeracy).

***The Profession:*** As I indicated in Chapter 2, one of the political functions of principal associations is to defend the attitudes, behaviours, norms, practices and values of the profession in the challenges they make to the neoliberalising policy regime (or to the managerial method of administering a bureaucracy). Schools, because they are meant to enrich the lives of children and young adults through this focus on *qualification, socialisation* and *subjectivisation*, must be served by teachers and school leaders who act in accordance with the various attitudes, beliefs, ethics, habits, and values consistent with one’s having a professional resolve to uphold the purposes of schooling. For example, schooling is an inclusive enterprise because the profession upholds its belief that all young people can learn regardless of their background. But what happens if members of the profession abandon such a belief? With so much pressure from the DfE bureaucracy to improve their school’s NAPLAN results and SACE completion rates, I observed (as SASPA President) some FGTG principals disenroll students whose results were ‘holding the school back’. For some, it seemed more agreeable to be valued for improved performance data than it was to impose limits on young people’s participation in education.

***The School and its Community:*** Under Partnerships 21, principals were expected to work with the school community as partners in the enterprise of schooling. The Governing Council, for example, approved the key directions for the school (its vision and its strategic plan) and monitored its performance annually (which was documented in the Annual Report). The P21 principal had to consult the school community and apply democratic principles to a range of strategic and practical purposes including vision setting, dress code, school fees and school hours. Several principals established school—community feedback loops beyond the annual survey (which formed an important part of the Annual Report) and actively sought the opinion of parents and the wider community. But as Figure 11 illustrates, the FGTG principal was driven further away from engagement with the school community on strategic matters. School improvement was no longer a joint enterprise of the principal and the Governing Council<sup>65</sup>. Instead, the FGTG principal had an obligation to satisfy her/his Education Director that the bureaucracy’s literacy and numeracy targets would be met and that guidebooks would be utilised as a resource for ‘evidence-based’ teaching practices.

## **8.6 The FGTG Truth Regime**

My decision to use the notion of truth regimes as an explanatory tool for this genealogy was introduced in Chapter 6 and expanded upon in Chapter 7. In summary, the subjugating effects of the P21 autonomies and the QIAF accountabilities on principals remained throughout the period of the PPRP, and included: making diagnostic test-based data a measure of school quality; encouraging the playing of the accountability game to enhance one’s job prospects; serving the interests of the market and its adherence to competition and choice; consigning them to an ongoing dilemma of

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<sup>65</sup> This became evident with the implementation of the SIP where the two signatories were Principal and Education Director (not Principal and Governing Council Chairperson).

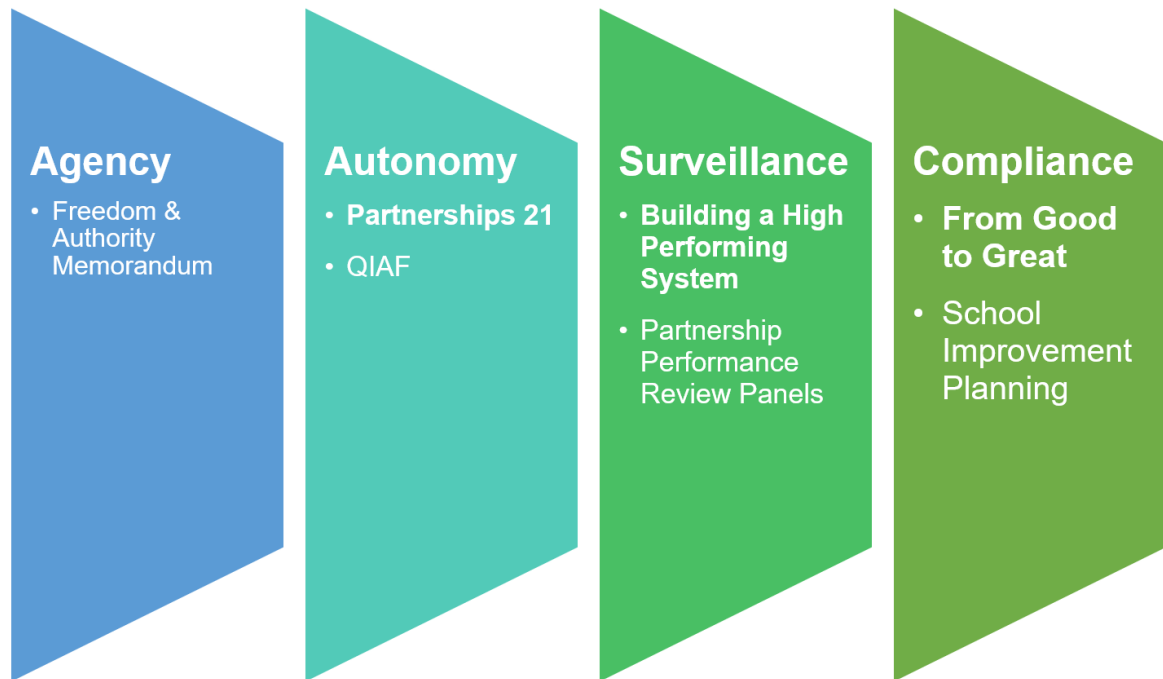
choosing between one's obligations to the profession and one's obligations to the bureaucracy. The work of the principal was further reconstituted by the collective and performative nature of principal accountability in its PPRP form. By increasing the surveillance of principal's work, by strengthening the connection between principal's work and the bureaucracy's ambitions, and by encouraging principals to rehearse their performance, the PPRP created the conditions for principals to be more compliant. For the duration of the FGTG reform all of these subjugating effects on principals' work remained, but some were increased.

Principal acceptance of the truth regime of FGTG meant that they became bureaucratized and corporatized; that is, subjected to the same performative norms as the Education Directors who supervised and surveilled their work. This regime of inspection and quality control obligated principals to follow a templated approach to school improvement: one where Education Directors monitored and approved the principal's engagement with the strategy from the identification of priorities for improvement, through to establishing the challenges of practice and targets, and then monitoring the school's progress ahead of its evaluation and review. Any resistance to this truth obligation was covert because school improvement was now directly linked to the system's improvement, where the basis for moving from 'good' (i.e., 482) to 'great' (i.e., 530) on the universal scale was a school's NAPLAN results and SACE completion rates. Here, principal acceptance of the FGTG truth regime had divested principals of their autonomy.

## **8.7 The Autonomy – Accountability Trajectory**

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 comprised a section of my genealogy which focused on how South Australia's public-school principals were constituted by the accountability models imposed on them by the DfE. Principals, once empowered by the agency provided by

the *Freedom and Authority in the Schools* memorandum (Jones, 1970), were promised autonomy by Partnerships 21, only to see this limited by the successive DfE reforms of Building a High Performing System and From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System. This trajectory from agency to compliance is depicted graphically in Figure 12 below.



**Figure 12: From Agency to Compliance**

These limits to principal autonomy were achieved largely through the additional accountabilities applied to the principal's work by the bureaucracy. The P21 principal was accountable to the bureaucracy for her/his school's results (i.e., Basic Skills Test and SACE). The *Building a High Performing System* principal was accountable to the bureaucracy for her/his school's results (i.e., NAPLAN and SACE) but also for these performance measures across the *Local Education Partnership*. The FGTTG principal was accountable to the bureaucracy for her/his school's results (i.e., NAPLAN and SACE) and for these results across the *Local Education Partnership*, but also for meeting the literacy and numeracy targets set by DfE and for the use of the SIP process

for improvement (including drawing upon the *Literacy and Numeracy guidebook* resources). In short, the *P21* principal had a school responsibility, the *Building a High Performing System* principal had a Local Education Partnership responsibility, and the *FGTG* principal had a system or corporate responsibility.

In revealing this trajectory, from Principal Agency to Compliance, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 have also considered how this rendering constrained the political work of principal associations. The very neoliberal project that principal associations needed to contest was the same project that had subjugated their principal members. The actions of these subjugated principals (as DfE employees) worked to satisfy the neoliberal project, yet, as education professionals (and active SASPA members), many remained furtively critical of the work they needed to perform. It was this paradox that constrained SASPA's capacity to work politically, a matter which is taken up in the next chapter.

## **8.8 Conclusion**

This chapter located the FGTG strategy within the principles of the neoliberalising policy regime and new managerialism where the idea of a good education had been questionably reduced to a narrowly defined, narrowly measured, outcomes focused education. To understand the constitutive effects of FGTG on school principals, I invoked my adaptation of the WPR framework and found that, in exchange for corporate approval, principals accepted diminished autonomy, increased accountability, and an even narrower focus of performance measures. In the design of the FGTG strategy, the bureaucracy established new norms for how principal, school and system performance was to be understood; these included a preoccupation with data, and a flow of performativities where an apparatus around Quality School Improvement Planning was now added to the existing accountability rituals of Annual Reports, External School Reviews and Partnership Performance Review Panels.



Accountability had assumed an even greater performative purpose than had been the case under P21 and the PPRP and had become more strongly tied to principal reward within the bureaucracy. With the introduction of the FGTG strategy, the principal was now considered a corporate member, part of a bureaucracy consumed by an interest in improving the data sets it prescribed. Although this increased surveillance and additional level of accountability diminished the principal's autonomy, the new managerial practices adopted by the bureaucracy, which included increased power transference to the role of its middle-tier of leadership (i.e., Education Director), diminished the capacity of individual principals to push back.

With principals constituted by the bureaucracy and constituting themselves as corporate members, the political work of principal associations was constrained by an enduring difference with the bureaucracy over what was meant by 'autonomy' and by the detrimental effects an obsession with NAPLAN-linked accountability was having on the futures-focused inclination of secondary schooling<sup>66</sup>. Impervious to the various resistance tactics attempted by SASPA, these ideological differences endured for the duration of my presidency.

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<sup>66</sup> This futures-focused inclination was at the centre of SASPA's professional learning program, *Unleashing Your Leadership Potential*, where the modules utilised the thinking of Lee Crockett, Valerie Hannon, Sir Ken Robinson and Professor Yong Zhao.

## **9. SASPA'S POLITICAL AGENCY**

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### **9.1 Introduction**

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 examined how principals were constituted by three accountability moves the DfE made within its P21, PPRP and FGTG reforms. My genealogy continues here but with a focus on the constraining effects these reforms had on SASPA's political work. This chapter's discussion traces how SASPA's political agency was both empowered and constrained during the period of autonomy and accountability principals experienced under Partnerships 21, but became increasingly limited by the effects on principal subjectivities of DfE's surveillance (PPRP) and compliance (FGTG) agendas.

### **9.2 SASPA's Political Agency and P21**

For South Australia's public education principals, it was Partnerships 21 that enmeshed accountability with autonomy. During this period of local school management, nominally 1999 – 2013 (although local management continues now but rarely described as such, as it is assumed to be 'the way' things are done) SASPA's political agency was both empowered and constrained.

#### ***9.2.1 Empowering Factors***

In Chapter 6, I explained how SASPA, and other principal associations, were supported by the bureaucracy to develop a research paper on local school management and suggest how it might work in the South Australian context. Here, the motivation was a strategic one, on the understanding that if Victoria had adopted the SMS model it was only a matter of time before South Australia had something similar. That the DfE chose to trust and empower the principal associations to lead the

discussion on this reform was commendable but, in the five-or-so years between the SASPA-led research into local school management and the introduction of P21, the formative thinking done by principal associations was no longer obvious. As Pres-2 explained, “there were some people ticked off” that the P21 model had landed much closer to the Victorian SMS model, and that the head of the Taskforce implementing P21 had formerly been a SASPA principal and a member of its executive at the time the association’s position paper had been written. Although originally empowered by the bureaucracy to make the running on the direction of this policy, the principal associations were now constrained by the Olsen Government’s decision that South Australia’s P21 would closely resemble Victoria’s *Schools of the Future* program.

### **9.2.2 Constraining Factors**

Initially, there were three constraining factors that flowed directly from P21. First, the voice of the associations had received a good hearing on local management and would now have to accept the Government’s decision. Second, in broad terms, association members were captivated by the possibilities provided by increased autonomy. As Pres-6 observed, “SASPA had been interested in principals having greater autonomy” and P21 delivered by shifting the focus to “managing matters locally”. Third, the ‘opt in’ implementation approach used by the P21 Taskforce meant that for a few years some schools were P21 schools and others were ‘non-P21’ schools. Consequently, the SASPA membership was initially divided along these lines, and the only real position of unity the association could achieve on the matter was to keep the bureaucracy to its word that opting in to P21 was entirely a voluntary decision.

Other constraints emerged from changes made to P21. Although most of its policy elements survived the March 2002 election of a Labor Government, the original P21 badging of the program was relatively short-lived (1999 – 2002). For SASPA and its

membership, the effects of local management, performance-based accountability, entrepreneurial leadership and corporate responsibility endured. Together these effects made the political work of principal associations more difficult. There were two specific decisions, in particular, which further constrained the political work of principal associations during the local management era. First, there was the decision by the new government at the time to make local management mandatory. Second, there was the persistent tension between SASPA and the bureaucracy over what principal autonomy should mean. There was another aspect, of course, which constrained principal associations and that was the residual effect of the 1989 decision to limit principals' tenure. With the adoption of the QIAF in P21, accountability now became a demonstration of performance to keep one's job for those principals who were tenured, the number of which continued to grow.

### ***Mandatory Local School Management***

As mentioned elsewhere, principals had been told in 1999 that the local decision by schools to enter the P21 program was voluntary. As SASPA Pres-6 observed,

P21 was a Liberal Government initiative and there was considerable pressure from within the education bureaucracy to ensure a high proportion of its schools took it up. The 'no-worse off guarantee' was policy, and an incentive that particularly attracted schools that appeared to be better off.

However, not all schools took-up the offer which left the bureaucracy with a split system. On one hand P21 schools had greater community involvement through a Governing Council and increased expenditure flexibility with the provision of a Global Budget. On the other hand, non-P21 schools retained a School Council and had expenditure tied to revenue through a School Grant system. There were other differences, also, such as the capacity for P21 schools to fill 50% of teacher vacancies via School Choice (i.e., a restricted pool of eligible applicants). That a school's decision to enter P21 was both a local and voluntary one did matter. Whilst the majority of

schools joined voluntarily, others deeply resisted. This created a problem after the Australian Labor Party won the March 2002 election, and the Rann Government dispensed with the Liberal's P21 badging but retained a commitment to local management. Rather than continue with the voluntary take-up arrangement, the Labor Government made local management mandatory for all schools, meaning that what had previously been a choice, now became an obligation.

For SASPA and other principal associations, this decision marked the beginning of political intervention into the operations of South Australia's public schools. On one hand, local management was meant to increase the autonomy of the principal and of the school–community partnership forged by the functions of the Governing Council. On the other hand, the decision for local management had been taken out of the hands of some principals and school communities and made mandatory by the government. For the bureaucracy, a continuation of a 'split system' was untenable and would have been deemed discriminatory towards some schools on the basis of how P21 schools were better funded compared to non-P21 schools. Nevertheless, this political intervention constrained the political work of principal associations because it challenged what was meant by local school management and principal autonomy. This was particularly apparent in SASPA's contesting the bureaucracy's teacher recruitment and selection policies in the period 2002–2020.

### ***The Merit Selection Skirmishes***

The introduction of P21 constrained South Australia's principal associations by the way principal autonomy was now understood. The autonomy provided within P21 came with a set of new accountabilities which included a Partnerships Plan (3-year), an Annual Operational Plan (1-year), a Services Agreement, an Annual Report, the external monitoring and verification of results (Basic Skills Test and SACE), and a

triennial review of the school (by the Office of Review). As principals became more responsible for school performance, teacher performance and principal access to the best possible teachers became the defining issue for SASPA in the local management era. For P21 principals, they had the autonomy to expend Global Budget funds in the most efficient, effective and equitable manner, but approximately 85% of those funds were expended on human resources, and this was an area over which the bureaucracy retained considerable control. For example, the incoming Labor government rapidly changed the initial right of P21 principals to appoint teachers to 3 year contracts, by converting most of these positions to permanent. Alongside this decision, the Labor government retained the idea of tenured principals. For much of the period from 2002, SASPA engaged governments and the bureaucracy on the topic of merit selection. As SASPA Pres-6 recalled, “We had been interested in principals having greater autonomy in the recruitment and selection of staff, but P21 did not deliver on this.” Later, under SASPA Pres-1, the argument with the DfE shifted its focus to “accountability without autonomy” and how “It was unfair to hold school principals responsible for the results of students when it was the bureaucracy which supplied the vast majority of teachers to the school.” Here, the related policy issues of performance management and managing the significant underperformance of staff were also contested because, as principals shifted the burden of school accountability to teachers, they looked to the bureaucracy for increased procedural support. These skirmishes over human resources policies – teacher recruitment and selection, performance management, and managing significant underperformance – tested what was meant by principal autonomy and what was meant by local management.

### ***Tenured School Leadership***

As SASPA Pres-6 noted, “one of the biggest changes in the relationship between principals and the bureaucracy occurred circa-1989 when newly appointed principals

were tenured rather than substantive. This meant that permanent principals were phased out over time.” Whilst it was not immediately apparent in 1989 when the Curriculum Guarantee decision abandoned the permanency of school leaders (i.e., principals, deputy principals and seniors), by the time of the P21 reform it was obvious to principals wanting to continue at their school or at another school, just how reliant they were on the good opinion of their line manager (i.e., District Director). Essentially this decision placed principals on the same uncertain footing as DfE bureaucrats; that is, working to a tenure and reliant on supervisor opinion for their next job. For SASPA and other principal associations, having their members fettered to this performative system made advocacy more complex. It increased the dilemma of dualism (discussed in Chapter 5) because principals now had to show an agreeable face to the system and reserve for the relative safety of principal association forums their dissatisfaction with various policies of that system.

### **9.3 SASPA’s Political Agency and PPRP**

For South Australia’s public education principals, it was the Partnership Performance Review Panel reform that made accountability a collective responsibility (as well as an individual one). During this period, nominally 2015–2020, SASPA’s political agency was constrained despite its use of various tactics of resistance.

#### **9.3.1 *Constraining Effects***

As SASPA President during this period, there were two specific developments that constrained my efforts to disrupt the bureaucracy’s new managerial practices (which included its increased reliance on performativity). The first was the Chief Executive’s attempt to terminate my employment (discussed in Chapter 2) and, once it was established that this could not be done, the threat which followed was to withdraw the

annual subsidy for SASPA's work. The SASPA Board, concerned by the effect diminished funds would have on its work, became more cautious in the adoption of resistance tactics. The second was the Minister for Education's decision to form the Public Education Advisory Group (also discussed in Chapter 2). The PEAG had forged a counter-narrative to the DfE's performativity agenda and the Chief Executive's establishment of new managerial practices. Although my political agency as SASPA's President was high with the Minister, it was low with the bureaucracy who, having agreed to divert funds to a major SASPA, Flinders University and University of SA collaborative project, *Doing Secondary Schooling Differently in the North*<sup>67</sup>, subsequently rescinded this decision despite the Minister's strong educational and political interest in it<sup>68</sup>.

Within its membership, SASPA was now constrained by principals who had been encouraged to behave more corporately by the bureaucracy through its new managerial practices and its commitment to collective accountability (i.e., the PPRP). The effect of dualism that was evident from the P21 reform was further strained by the introduction of the PPRP. Several secondary principals were isolated within their Birth–Year 12 Local Education Partnerships. Yet, these principals who had been driving improvement for their school community now found themselves collectively responsible for the improvement of key data sets within their local partnership and were held to account by the DfE's senior executive for their progress. More than previously, the career of DfE principals now hinged on their data. At the same time, principals at

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<sup>67</sup> In June 2016, I met privately with the DfE Chief Education Officer and the DfE Executive Director, Finance at which it was agreed that a suite of 6 projects recommended by SASPA and the Northern Adelaide State Secondary School Alliance at the March 2016 forum, *Doing Secondary Schooling Differently in the North*, would be supported by DfE with funds, including a \$400K grant as industry partner in an ARC Linkage Grant application. Within a week, the DfE Chief Education Officer had reversed the decision.

<sup>68</sup> The *Doing Secondary Schooling Differently in the North* project was tied politically to the knowledge of the imminent closure of the Holden Factory in Elizabeth and the Minister wanting to optimise northern suburbs students' experience of schooling and their preparation for the labour market.



the SASPA Board level and at the various secondary network meetings I attended were petitioning me for my intervention. Whilst my advocacy could not dissuade DfE from conducting the PPRPs, a change of DfE Chief Executive in July 2016, produced some respite for school leaders. SASPA was able to get agreement from the new CE that these panel forums would no longer be undertaken annually<sup>69</sup>.

With principals now constituted as corporate members, the political work of principal associations was constrained by two enduring differences with the bureaucracy. First, there was the struggle over what was meant by principal 'autonomy'. Second, there was the struggle over the relative value of Local Education Partnerships (and of the PPRP as its collective accountability technology). SASPA continued its interest in improving the level of principal autonomy despite the bureaucracy's introduction of the PPRP reform that clearly established new limits. This was an ideological difference where the DfE was impervious to the various resistance tactics attempted by SASPA.

## **9.4 SASPA's Political Agency and FG TG**

For South Australia's public education principals, it was the *From Good to Great* strategy that transformed them into corporate proxies for the DfE. School improvement was now linked directly to system improvement. Improved NAPLAN results and SACE completion rates were the means by which the DfE system could achieve its ambition, i.e., to move from good (482) to great (530) on the universal scale (see figure 1). So, for the sake of the system, schools had to lift student achievement. During this period, nominally 2018–2020, SASPA's political agency was constrained despite its use of various tactics of resistance.

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<sup>69</sup> From 2018, the PPRP process became a triennial event.

### **9.4.1 Constraining Effects**

Perhaps the most challenging of the various constraining effects on SASPA's political agency was from within. Public school principals, having been constituted as good corporate citizens by the compliance apparatus within the FGTG strategy, had a reduced interest in SASPA's challenge of the DfE on the issues of constrained autonomy and lopsided accountabilities. Several SASPA members had accepted the sharp improvement focus framed by the FGTG reform because they saw it as a way of making their principalship more manageable. As long as they followed directions from their Education Director and the Local Education Team, these principals considered that they would thrive within DfE's new compliance culture. Whilst this did not diminish my efforts as SASPA President to resist this neoliberalising policy regime, it did mean my tactics were subverted. The event that crystallised this understanding for me was the planned AEU-SA, SAPPa and SASPA Symposium, *Doing Secondary Schooling Differently*, which was scheduled for 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018. The idea for this project had emerged out of the successful AEU-SA, SAPPa and SASPA collaboration on the Public Education Advisory Group (PEAG) some two years earlier, and our collective dissatisfaction that this good work had been ignored by the Marshall Government and disregarded by the public education bureaucracy (which, by this time was committed to the FGTG ten-year strategy). The intended purpose of the symposium was "to consider the implications for school leaders and the teaching profession in undertaking the work related to the Stages of Improvement Report (SoIR) and School Improvement Planning (SIP) which underpin the Department's interest in becoming a World Class System" (Mader, 2018). The coalition's planning had included my meeting with Professor Richard Teese to consider a piece of work that questioned the mathematics behind the Universal Scale. Local academics from Flinders University and the University of South Australia had been enlisted to the cause, with their brief to

introduce other research into the symposium's proceedings and to facilitate the thinking of invitees, i.e., twenty of South Australia's most highly regarded public education leaders.

Sadly, the symposium never went beyond the planning stage. As an elected SASPA official and an employee of the Board, I was obligated to take the proposal to my Executive. At a meeting held in October 2018, the SASPA Executive (elected office bearers) indicated that this event risked the SASPA brand and dissuaded me from any personal involvement with the enterprise given that my professional identity was indistinguishable from that of SASPA. Having shared this directive with my AEU-SA and SAPPa partners, I hoped that they might push ahead regardless, but the idea for the symposium remained just an idea. The constraining factor, here, was the degree of nervousness that had already emerged within the ranks of the SASPA Board. Whilst most were critical of the FGTG strategy at the internal Board level, they were not wanting to be reproached by the DfE for being too strident in that criticism.

There were other constraining factors – i.e., the DfE preference for advice from consultancies ahead of principal associations, and the distancing effect of principal associations becoming an 'external relation' – both of which were discussed at length in the previous chapter. My discussion now shifts to the various attempts SASPA made to resist the efforts of the DfE to limit principal autonomy. But, before doing so, I return to the thinking of Foucault, particularly in relation to critical attitude.

## **9.5 Critical Attitude**

As Lorenzini (2023a) noted, a key function of Foucauldian genealogy was “to commit us to carrying on ... the struggle against the subjugating effects of the governmental

mechanisms and regimes of truth ... whose functioning they insightfully reveal" (p. 117). In this regard, Foucault's notion of *critical attitude* performs an important function. For Foucault (2011), critical attitude involved a commitment to examining the underlying power relations that shape our knowledge and practices. To possess a critical attitude within a set of power relations enabled practices of freedom to be applied, such as counter-conduct, resistance and truth-telling. The subjectivities produced by exercising such practices of freedom included an assertion of one's autonomy (i.e., de-subjection) and a disruption to the hegemony (i.e., subjectivation). Here, 'de-subjection' is understood as a reactive moment of resistance to a truth regime, whereas 'subjectivation' is a creative moment of invention for counter-hegemonic effect. In his examination of Foucault's notion of regimes of truth, Lorenzini (2023a) noted that the potential for resistance is located in the 'therefore' decision taken (by principals) prior to the 'I submit' act in relation to the (bureaucracy's) truth obligation (pp. 37-38). This is the moment when principals decide to submit or resist. The struggle against such attempts (by the bureaucracy) to subjugate (the principal) is consistent with the adoption (by principal associations) of a critical attitude and the use of counter-conducts (p. 110), both of which encapsulate the role and function of 'political agency'. On the understanding that such practices of freedom can be undertaken by a collective acting with political agency, then SASPA's critical attitude to the DfE's attempts to make principals more governable by enmeshing autonomy and accountability can be explained through the lens of counter-conduct.

### **9.5.1 Counter-Conduct**

Lorenzini (2016b) argued that counter-conduct was the product of Foucault's rethinking of resistance in *Security, Territory, Population* (in Foucault, 2007), specifically the

notion that, faced with constraint or domination by governmental mechanisms, “the individual is free to choose to be governed or not to be governed like that” (pp. 7-8). Here, the exercise of power is understood as conducting the conduct of another, i.e., trying to govern her or him (p. 10). But, as long as they remain free, individuals have various options for how they behave or act in relation to their being governed. And, whilst this logic is argued through the lens of individual actions, since it is essentially an ethico-political response given within a set of power relations, the notion of counter-conduct also applies to the collective or group context (see Davidson, 2011; Death, 2010).

Foucault (2007) explained counter-conduct as “the struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others” (p. 201). With regard to the various examples of counter-conduct undertaken by SASPA which follow, these should be broadly understood as a struggle against the DfE’s apparatus for surveillance and compliance. Through the PPRP and FGTG reforms, in particular, DfE conducted principal conduct by creating the conditions for principals to constitute themselves as less autonomous, more accountable and, above all, more compliant.

## **9.6 Resistance Tactics - PPRP**

According to Lorenzini (2016b), counter-conduct is the struggle “to claim and obtain an *other* conduct” (p. 130, italics in original). Therefore, counter-conduct involves the use of tactics within a system, such as evasion or reinterpretation of rules and norms, to disrupt its operations. An example of such counter-conduct during the PPRP reform period was SASPA’s encouragement of school leaders to maintain their regionally-based secondary networks despite the insistence from the DfE that they were unhelpful to the work of the Birth–Year 12 Local Education Partnership and to the PPRP which was attached to it.

Foucault (1982b) in *The Subject and Power* made the point that to govern someone is to structure their field of freedom and, therefore, their possible field of action (p. 790). In accordance with such an arrangement, Foucault argued that truth was not fixed nor objective but was instead contingent upon power relations. It is within this notion that he highlighted the role of truth-telling as a form of resistance against regimes of power-knowledge.

Accepting that truth-telling involves speaking out against injustices, challenging official narratives, and amplifying marginalised voices as means of disrupting hegemonic power structures, there are three examples of this in my response as SASPA President to the PPRP reform. First, I provided full and frank advice on the composition of Local Education Partnerships (including how they isolated secondary principals from one another). Second, I provided full and frank advice on the excessive accountability of principals to the DfE Chief Executive and members of his senior executive (including how it was unfeasible for PPRPs to be rehearsed). Third, following an invitation from the Chief Executive to observe two PPRP forums held on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2016 (along with deputy principals and assistant principals from participating schools as other observers), I provided feedback that highlighted how these aspiring principals were no longer interested in becoming principals if it meant having to be interrogated in front of one's peers.

This truth-telling was an assertion of SASPA's autonomy (albeit nullified by the Chief Executive's counter-claim that principals were telling him of how supportive they were of the PPRP initiative). The truth-telling was also an attempt to disrupt the bureaucracy's hegemony so that principals might not have to be so governed. This truth-telling did not change DfE's policy on either PPRPs or Local Education

Partnerships, but it was an important demonstration of SASPA's resistance to a reform that narrowed how principals were to be judged.

## **9.7 Resistance Tactics – FGTG**

As SASPA President, I deployed a range of resistance tactics during the FGTG reform period. These included counter-conduct and truth-telling.

### **9.7.1 Counter-conduct**

According to Davidson (2011), there is a conceptual correlation between Foucault's notions of conduct and counter-conduct which is evident in the latter representing the struggle against the former (p. 28). This gives counter-conduct an ethico-political dimension, and one which SASPA exploited. On the understanding that conduct within the FGTG reform required principals to comply with directions related to literacy and numeracy targets, challenges of practice, and the use of guidebooks, my counter-conduct as SASPA President included a monthly bulletin to members which openly challenged this 'evidence-based' discourse. Much of this counter-conduct was in my promotion of peer-reviewed articles and books by Biesta (2009, 2010), Reid (2013, 2020), Sahlberg (2008, 2016) and Zhao (2017, 2020) which critiqued the neoliberalising policy regime. Each of these academics accepted my invitation for them to headline SASPA's annual conference where they were asked to relate their thinking to the context of the FGTG strategy so that members could hear *a different narrative*. My design of SASPA's professional learning program for Band B leaders<sup>70</sup>, *Unleashing Your Leadership Potential* (UYLP), also drew attention to the thinking of Biesta, Reid, Sahlberg and Zhao, along with futures-education advocates Lee Crockett (see

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<sup>70</sup> In South Australia, principals are classified as Band A leaders; school-based leaders other than principals – Deputy Principals, Assistant Principals and Coordinators – are classified as Band B.

Crockett, Jukes, & Churches, 2011) and Valerie Hannon (see Hannon, Thomas, & Ward, 2019). Here, my emphasis was in preparing our next-generation principals as critical and reflective thinkers, at a time when DfE wanted leaders to be technicians following a prescribed path.

### **9.7.2 Truth-telling**

According to Tamboukou (2012), Foucault's notion of truth-telling is an exercise of freedom where frankness and truth are invoked as a moral duty (p. 854). This is certainly an apt description for what transpired when I led a SASPA delegation to an August 2018 meeting with the DfE Chief Executive and the two Executive Directors leading his FGTG strategy. The purpose of the meeting was to share the results of a SASPA survey of principals which raised concerns about the *Stages of Improvement Report* (SoIR) and the *Quality School Improvement Planning* (SIP) instruments. Those concerns included: (i) diminished professional and school autonomy; (ii) a greater incursion by the bureaucracy into the school improvement space, and (iii) a threat to SASPA's long-held commitment to a futures-focussed approach to secondary schooling.

The meeting of the two delegations was unproductive. The six-page SASPA report included quotes from respondents whose anonymity was justifiably protected. Much of the meeting was consumed by the DfE Chief Executive's insistence that he should be told the names of those principals who were critical of the FGTG strategy. These criticisms included:

I do not believe that the system has a record of leading improvement. Most of its recent endeavours including *Results Plus*, *PALL*, *SPALL* and myriads of other literacy initiatives over 30 years have been ineffectual. The Department needs to get out of the school improvement space and focus on building leadership capacity... [Principal W]



I am very satisfied with leadership at the school level, but very dissatisfied with the Department's capacity to lead directions for the future. We need strong educational leadership underpinned by strong philosophy, and resources that enable pedagogical development that will enable us to prepare young people for the future. [Principal X]

In relation to morale, it just seems that we are working harder, being held to greater account, being asked to do more, and just pushing more and more shit uphill. It just seems that no-one cares and I'm just so tired. I will probably be one of those Principals that will leave the profession early because I know the job is literally killing me. I love the job, but it always seems so damn hard. [Principal Y]

...my greatest fear is that this approach to becoming a "world class system" will compromise improvement, disempower the great leaders and empower the 'managerial, yes' leaders...We have a system that is led predominantly by non-educators and, as a result, the complexity of leading learning improvement is simply not understood. This approach is being 'cooked up' in isolation of leaders in schools and associations. [Principal Z]

Essentially the SASPA Board's interest in getting the DfE senior executive to consider our concerns about the FGTG was derailed by the effect of these and other criticisms on the Chief Executive's demeanour. On reflection, SASPA's delegation should have understood that what Foucault described as "the parrhesiastic pact" (see Tamboukou, 2012, p. 854) would not apply to us. Beyond our willingness to provide frank and honest feedback, there was no ethical contract that suggested the DfE Chief Executive would listen to the critical truth without punishing the truth-tellers<sup>71</sup>. Following this meeting, the SASPA Board (and I as SASPA President) were seen as strong critics of the FGTG strategy and we were never consulted directly over subsequent project developments within it, including the Literacy and Numeracy Guidebooks, the role of the Local Education Team and the creation of the Orbis Professional Learning Academy. Back in 2015, when I assumed the SASPA presidency, my mantra had been 'codesign ahead of consultation'. Having never shown much interest in codesign<sup>72</sup>, the DfE by

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<sup>71</sup> The Chief Executive acknowledged the resistance of principal associations in an interview he gave McKinsey and Company, which they included in their report (2021, p. 4).

<sup>72</sup> There was one example of SASPA-DfE codesign during my presidency, a dialogic tool titled, "Leading World-Class Teaching and Learning: Navigating the curriculum to develop expert learners" (2020). See [https://saspa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SASPA-SAPPA-DE\\_Leading-world-class-teaching-and-learning\\_A3-poster\\_online.pdf](https://saspa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SASPA-SAPPA-DE_Leading-world-class-teaching-and-learning_A3-poster_online.pdf)

late 2018 had stopped formally consulting SASPA altogether on the FG TG components in-development.

Another example of SASPA's truth-telling related to one of the effects of the FG TG strategy; that is, the DfE's reductive reckoning for what constituted a 'good' principal which was based on NAPLAN results and an 'enthusiasm' for initiatives such as the Literacy and Numeracy Guidebooks. By 2020, some SASPA members were in dispute with their Education Director over whether they would have their tenure extended (one of the options open to principals at the end of tenure, subject to the Education Director) or whether the position would be advertised. Invariably, most processes which went to advertisement saw the appointment of another applicant.

At a time when it was becoming increasingly difficult for the DfE to fill principal vacancies, particularly in country locations, it was somewhat distressing for me to learn that an experienced principal with metropolitan and country experience had failed on more than one occasion to be appointed to a difficult to fill vacancy in a major country town<sup>73</sup>. Having raised the matter as a legitimate SASPA concern, I was told by a member of the DfE's senior executive that this principal did not show enough interest in the use of Literacy and Numeracy guidebooks. After several attempts to fill this vacancy, the DfE offered one of its Principal Consultants (who had been working on assignment in the State Office), to perform the principal duties at this country school for one year. Having been a member of the External Review Team for this particular school, I was clear that the last thing the school's community needed was another short-term leadership solution. My reason for sharing this disturbing situation is to illustrate just how consumed some members of DfE's senior executive had become

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<sup>73</sup> This principal, at the time, was leading one of the most complex schools in the DfE system and wanted to return to the country despite this meaning a reduction in principal classification and salary.

with the notion of principal compliance and corporate membership. The bureaucracy had templated a solution to NAPLAN improvement, and any perceived indifference to the resources produced to support it threatened a principal's capacity to not only retain one's current role but to win a lower classified role in a difficult to staff location.

## **9.8 Conclusion**

This chapter follows Chapters 6, 7 and 8, and my examination of how principals were constituted by three accountability moves the DfE made within its P21, PPRP and FGTG reforms. It has continued my genealogy by explaining how SASPA's political work became constrained because of how principals had been constituted. My discussion traced how SASPA's political agency was both empowered and constrained during the period of autonomy and accountability that principals experienced under Partnerships 21 but became increasingly constrained by the effects of DfE's surveillance (PPRP) and compliance (FGTG) agendas on principal subjectivities. The less autonomous and the more accountable principals became, the more SASPA's political agency was constrained. In the following chapter, I explore how further consideration of these constraining factors might suggest possibilities for the future work of principal associations. Using the argument of Lorenzini (2023a) that a Foucauldian genealogy has a 'possibilising' dimension, and by invoking Step 7 in the Bacchi (2022) WPR framework, I suggest how the thinking of Michael Apple, Chantal Mouffe and Michel Foucault could expand the political agency of principal associations and support their interest in interrupting the neoliberalising policy regime.

# 10. POSSIBILISING

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## 10.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the genealogy section of my thesis. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I revealed the effects of how principals were constituted by the accountability models of three major DfE reforms and how they constituted themselves. This established a trajectory which I described as the move from principal agency to bureaucratic compliance. This shift towards principal obedience affected how the bureaucracy engaged the political work of principal associations which, particularly in the years 2013–2020, became more and more constrained. In Chapter 9, I provided an account of these constraints, alongside an analysis of the various resistance tactics SASPA deployed.

Following Lorenzini (2020, 2023a) and his reading of Foucauldian genealogy as “possibilising”, and drawing upon the seventh step in the Bacchi (2022) WPR framework, Chapter 10 considers the constraints placed on the political work of principal associations and proposes various possibilities for the future. This “futuring” (see Gunter & Fitzgerald, 2008) is consistent with my taking a Foucauldian approach to genealogy. Here, I am reliant upon Lorenzini (2023a) who explained that the notion of “possibilising” emerges from Foucault’s purpose for using the genealogy approach, “to instill...a sense of ethico-political commitment toward the...subjugated individuals of the past – a commitment to carrying on their struggles in the present, albeit in a different form” (p. 114).

This chapter performs the final act of research in my study. Having commenced this project seeking knowledge about ways that the profession’s constituted voice was included or excluded from public policy contests, I now consider what this knowledge

means for the political work of principal associations in the future. Using Bacchi's *What's the problem represented to be* framework (2009), my genealogy revealed that, with each successive reform, the bureaucracy had strengthened its surveillance, power and control over school principals. Despite this (or, perhaps, because of this), school leaders had actively contested and resisted this subjugation through the political work of SASPA and other principal associations. In this chapter, I re-examine what has limited or constrained the political work of principal associations with a possibilising lens. Matched to these limits and constraints, I then propose some possibilities for principal associations to expand their political work and, by invoking Bacchi's (2022) seventh WPR step, problematise their suitability.

## **10.2 Constraining Effects**

In the years 1995–2020, the principal agency conferred upon South Australia's principals by Jones (1970) was reconstituted: first, as principal autonomy and second, as bureaucratic compliance. In part, this subjugation of principals was achieved through creating the conditions for compliance through the introduction of new accountability models which were increasingly performative in nature. The PPRP (2015–2022) and the SIP (2019–2022) accountabilities were consistent with the neoliberal project in education (GERM) and its new managerial methods which relied on a surveillance role being performed by the bureaucracy's middle-tier; that is, Education Directors and their Local Education Teams. The PPRP and the SIP were both introduced by DfE during my SASPA presidency and, despite various acts of courage and resistance, SASPA and other principal associations were unable to disrupt the South Australia's march towards bureaucratic compliance. Amongst the constraining factors were the neoliberal project and new managerial bureaucracies.

### **10.2.1 Constrained by the Neoliberalising Policy Regime**

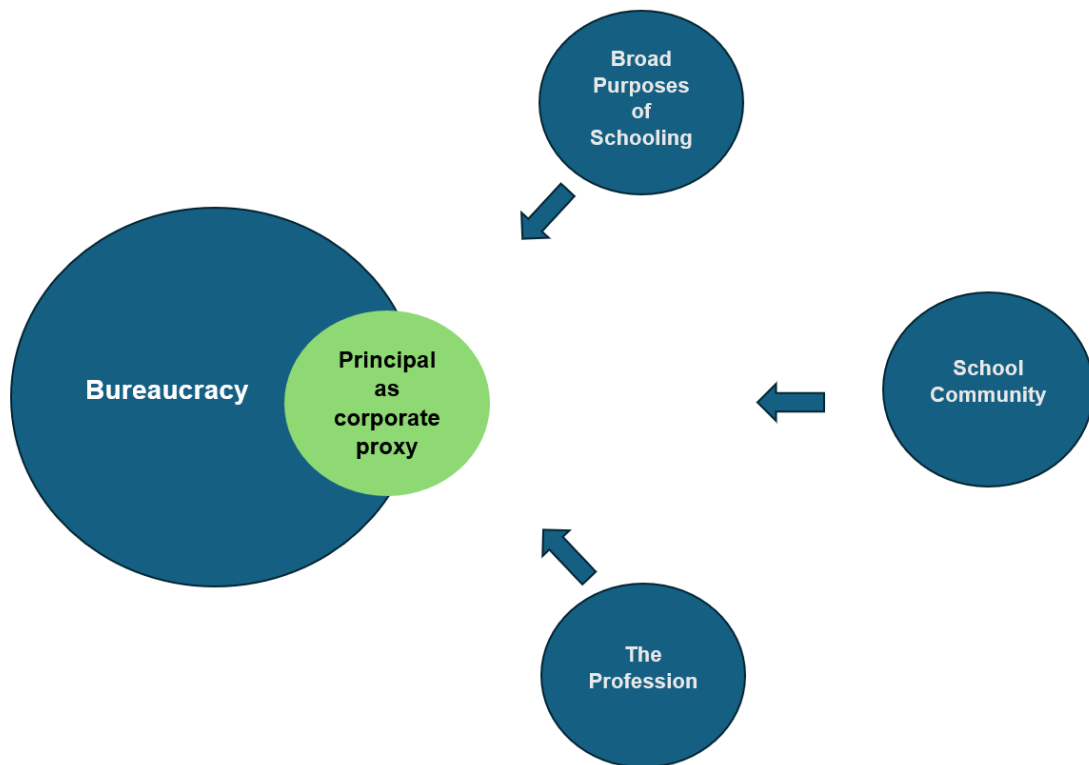
In Chapter 3 of this thesis, the neoliberalising policy regime was discussed through the case study of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). Following Springer (2012), I established the GERM's hegemonic credentials by considering how *elite actors* (e.g., Sir Michael Barber) and *dominant groups* (e.g., the OECD, World Bank, McKinsey and Company) had worked to encourage nations to commit to PISA testing "as a powerful instrument for educational research, policy and practice" which allowed "education systems to look at themselves in the light of intended, implemented and achieved policies elsewhere" (Schleicher, 2017, p. 129). Here, the neoliberalising policy regime was revealed as one which: (i) considered education quality to be determined by the standardised testing of a narrow range of knowledges and skills (where the assumption was that test scores are infallible); (ii) promoted 'evidence-based' practices (where the assumption was that this evidence was incontrovertible); and (iii) encouraged policy borrowing between nations (where the assumption was that what works in one country will most likely work in another).

As discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, the neoliberalising policy regime was administered by bureaucracies that adopted new managerial practices which included "flows of performativities" (Ball, 2000, p. 2). The application of these practices over the actions of principals produced increased compliance to the bureaucracy and diminished autonomy for the principal. The very managerial practices that constrained principal autonomy also limited the political agency of principal associations. SASPA experienced this constraint in three ways. First, the bureaucracy transformed the principal into their corporate proxy so that schools became instruments of an improvement agenda developed by the bureaucracy and consultancies in isolation from the profession. Principal associations were not corporate and, from 2017, were

considered by DfE as 'external relations'. Advocating for principal members who worked as corporate proxies proved increasingly difficult. Second, although considered 'external relations' by DfE, SASPA was in receipt of government support provided via funding from the bureaucracy. This funding, the equivalent of the SASPA President's salary plus on-costs, was consistent with support provided to other principal associations across the nation. A dependency on these funds often compromised the position taken by the SASPA Board particularly when threats were made by DfE to withdraw it. Third, it was the high trust the bureaucracy placed in consultancies which revealed the low trust they held for principal associations. The DfE's high regard for the wisdom of the profession collectively organised through principal associations was evident in the mid-1990s and, despite some patchy moments along the way, was still apparent in 2013. During the period 2014–2020, the bureaucracy's distrust developed even as the Minister for Education's trust grew, which was evidenced by the pivotal role principal associations played during 2015–2016 within the Public Education Advisory Group (PEAG). A symptom of this distrust was an increasing reliance by the DfE on the advice of consultancies.

### ***10.2.2 Constrained by Principals as Corporate Proxies***

In Chapter 8, I introduced Figure 11 as a graphic representation of the principal constituted as the bureaucracy's proxy in a school.



**Figure 11: Principal as corporate proxy**

Visually the diagram illustrates how large the bureaucracy loomed in the working lives of principals and how this made it increasingly difficult to deliver on the broad purposes of schooling; uphold the attitudes, beliefs, ethics and values of the education profession; and honour the contextual needs and interests of their local community. Under this arrangement the bureaucracy had positioned its schools as a problem to be fixed.

By bringing the school principal into the 'corporate tent' at a time when principals were vulnerable because of their tenured conditions, the bureaucracy was able to use its apparatus of control (PPRP, SoIR, SIP, School Improvement Dashboard, LET, and Literacy and Numeracy guidebooks) to achieve principal compliance. Here, a dilemma of dualism was experienced by SASPA's members – i.e., compelled to act as corporate proxies for the bureaucracy which employed them, yet still active in a resistive association they had chosen to join. With principals in the 'corporate tent', and principal



associations considered 'external relations', the struggle for SASPA's political agency was noticeably constrained. Despite its counter-conduct and truth-telling, SASPA was unable to disrupt the DfE's "panic about educational quality", and its "unsatiable need for improvement, geared towards ever narrower definitions of what counts as education and what counts *in* education" (Biesta, 2019, p. 657, italics in original). SASPA was unable to interrupt the flow of performativities and the constrained autonomy of principals.

### ***10.2.3 Constrained by Funding Dependency***

In Australia, principal associations are not-for-profit organisations whose work is supported by membership fees collected from school leaders. During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it became commonplace for Australia's principal associations to receive additional funds from the education bureaucracy with the agreement of both major political parties. This funding made it sustainable for most of the nation's principal associations to operate with a full-time president (elected by the membership) and a small office staff employed to support. In SASPA's case, this funding enabled considerable growth to its professional learning programs which included an annual conference and the Band-B leadership program, *Unleashing Your Leadership Potential* (which supported 256 participants across its six years). But the funds also released the time needed for the full-time president to critique major DfE reforms and, given that diminished principal autonomy and increased accountabilities were two effects of these reforms, SASPA's counter-conduct and truth-telling tactics became more widely used and were poorly received by the bureaucracy. It was in these moments that successive DfE Chief Executives threatened to cease SASPA's funding support.

### **10.2.4 Constrained by Diminished Relevance**

Chapters 7 and 8 of this genealogy examined the rise of a new managerial education bureaucracy matched to the diminished relevance of principal associations. Within South Australia's public education eco-system (2014–2020), the role of policy advice now fell to selected principals favoured by the bureaucracy for their compliance, but mostly it was imparted by a suite of consultancies which included Dandolo Partners, Deloitte, Ernst and Young, Learning First, McKinsey and Company, and Price Waterhouse Cooper. For the purpose of this thesis, my focus has been on McKinsey and Company, one of the identifiable 'dominant groups' within the GERM (see Chapter 3).

## **10.3 A Possibilising Genealogy**

Lorenzini (2023a) argued that genealogy

does not tell us precisely what we should do" but it does constitute "a concrete framework for action – an ethico-political 'we' – that *commits* us to resisting certain aspects of the governmental mechanisms and regimes of truth it reveals, thus inciting us to elaborate alternate ways of conducting ourselves (p. 109, italics in text).

Referring to this as "possibilising", Lorenzini (2023a, p. 103) drew upon Foucault's 1983 lecture, *What is Enlightenment?* (see Foucault et al., 2010), and explained how notions of "counter-conduct", "critical attitude" and "truth telling" provided us with the means to criticise and destabilise those "power/ knowledge apparatus that still govern 'our' conduct today" (Lorenzini, 2020, pp. 1-2). My *possibilising* of what principal associations could do to contest and negate the subjugating effects on principals of diminished autonomy, increased accountability, and augmented corporate responsibility, emphasises the obligation of principal associations to act politically. This obligation is consistent with Lorenzini's view that a "possibilising genealogy" has a "

‘we-making’ dimension” (2020, p. 2) where our consideration of past struggles experienced by the collective generates a “commitment for us to carry on their struggles in the present” (p. 3). Those struggles – for principals to have greater agency and for their accountability to the system to be more authentic, contextual and developmental – have endured. Some of SASPA’s efforts to improve the autonomy and accountability policy conditions for members have been documented in this thesis. Despite those efforts, by 2020 South Australia’s public school principals had more instruments of accountability imposed on their work than principals anywhere else in Australia. Consequently, South Australia’s public school principals accepted a greatly diminished level of autonomy, particularly by comparison with the *freedom and authority* bestowed upon them in 1970, and the ‘conditional autonomy’ provided in 1999 under Partnerships 21.

My attention now turns to some of the theoretical possibilities principal associations could consider in addressing these constraints and expanding their political agency into the future. This is consistent with “a ‘we-making’ dimension” (Lorenzini, 2020, p. 2): one where principal associations, as the ‘we’, are considered more as a partner in improving the whole public education system than representing the individual interests of public school leaders. For this undertaking, Bacchi’s (2022) Step 7 is invoked as a way to consider the problem of the political agency of principal associations being constrained and the suitability of the suggestions made.

## **10.4 Problematizing Constrained Political Agency**

Bacchi (2022) explained the introduction of Step 7 to the WPR framework as the means of “ensuring adequate attention to self-problematization” (p. 1). Essentially the task of Step 7 is to apply Steps 1–6 to one’s own problem representations (p. 1). My use of an abridged version of WPR in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of this genealogy focused on how

DfE's accountability models constituted schools principals as being more corporate than autonomous. In accepting this subjugation, principals were governed by the bureaucracy as if they were in fact part of the problem, i.e., poor NAPLAN results compared to other states and territories. Not only were principals constrained by this rendering, so too were their principal associations.

One of my assumptions has been that public education policy is an enterprise best undertaken by those who own the policy (the bureaucracy) and by those who represent the professional interests of the principals who enact it (principal associations). This is a notion supported by Reid (2020) who argued the importance of educators being involved in policy-making (pp. 302-303). But my genealogy revealed a neoliberalising policy regime (GERM) where international comparisons were encouraged and where education had been conflated with standardised testing. The GERM relied on the neoliberal bureaucracy's use of new managerial practices to control principals, which subsequently constrained their professional associations. Resistance tactics, as illustrated by the discussion of SASPA's political work in this genealogy, had a limited effect on the neoliberalising policy regime. SASPA, further constrained by the dilemma of dualism experienced by their members, and by the increased reliance of the bureaucracy on the policy advice of consultancies, appeared a long way from becoming a partner in the enterprise of public education policy formation. But there are possibilities for the future that should be considered.

## **10.5 Some Theoretical Possibilities**

What follows are: (i) some possibilities for principal associations to expand their political work; (ii) the theoretical underpinnings behind them; and (iii) a critique of their capacity to address known constraints. All of the possibilities discussed are matched to the various constraining factors identified in SASPA's political agency; that is, the

neoliberalising policy regime, the dilemma of dualism experienced by members, the dependency on DfE funding support, and the advance of the ‘consultocracy’. Table 3 (below) provides a delineation of this relationship.

	<b>Possibility</b>	<b>Constraint(s)</b>
<b>10.5.1</b>	Activism	Diminished relevance
<b>10.5.2</b>	Counter-hegemonic Struggle	Neoliberalising policy regime
<b>10.5.3</b>	Ethico-political Projects	Diminished principal autonomy
<b>10.5.4</b>	Critical Attitude and Resistance Tactics	Principals as corporate proxies
<b>10.5.5</b>	Internal Redesign	Dualism of members Funding dependency

**Table 3: Possibilities matched to constraints**

Whilst the depiction in Table 3 suggests that the relationships between constraints and possibilities are direct, the reality is that there is considerable cross-over between them, which the following discussion aims to address.

### **10.5.1 Activism**

Apple (2013; 2015; 2016) wrote of the “critical scholar/activist”. In forming this construct, he acknowledged the influence of Stuart Hall who, in his writings and lectures, provided “the rich mix of academic excellence and political commitment” and explained “how and why the Right was successful” (2015, p. 172). There is merit, I believe, in principal associations taking a more activist role within their advocacy function so as to contest the reliance bureaucracies have on consultancies and to interrupt the neoliberal project. Apple (2016) argued that to interrupt the dominance of the neoliberal hegemony we need to be “critical educators and activists” (p. 501) but we need to consider how we cannot do this alone: that there is value in the collective and in the notion of “progressive social movements” (p. 512).

For principal associations, there is much to be learnt from contemporary movements such as *Black Lives Matter* (see <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>) and Greta Thunberg's *School Strike for Climate* (see <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>). Both disrupt the neoliberal hegemony, and both bring together a diverse collective that has been unified behind a single cause. If a socially just public education in Australia became our cause, could a fully functional social movement be formed by a collective of activists, i.e., academics, principal associations, social commentators<sup>74</sup>, parent organisations and the Australian Education Union? This is a notion redolent of Smyth (2011) who, as a counter to the Self-Managing School initiative, argued for an activism "motivated by a conception of social justice" and with "an ethos of responsibility to citizen needs" (p. 116).

The advocacy role provided by principal associations is not cutting through the neoliberalising policy regime. This is because the task is performed within a set of rules established by bureaucracies and governments. They are the ones determining systemic directions, goals and strategies and, if and when they consult principal associations, it is usually after an unyielding internal position has been formed. Activism, however, is played by a different set of rules. Whilst some authors conflate activism and advocacy (Biddle & Mitra, 2021), others see activism as akin to a political campaign (VanSlyke-Briggs, 2024) or geared towards social policy disruption (Ryan & Higginbottom, 2017) and advocacy as more methodical and respectful of process (Scott, Lubienski, & DeBray-Pelot, 2009). As a tactic, I see collective activism as a means for macro issues to be recognised and understood as the basis for social policy change (e.g., an equitable approach to public education) whereas collective advocacy is the mechanism for policy changes to be negotiated within the pre-existing norms. To make a case for change, advocacy relies on communication and negotiation whilst

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<sup>74</sup> Jane Caro is a social commentator who comes to mind. See <https://janetheproject.com/jane/jane-caro/>

activism uses more confrontational tactics such as protest, resistance, counter-conduct and refusal.

In Chapter 2 and, again, in Chapter 5, I touched briefly on SASPA's campaign for Year 7 students to be moved from primary education to secondary education. I mention it here because this campaign was the closest SASPA came to acting as activists during my presidency. Advocacy was not going to see the DfE move Year 7s into high schools because the Labor Government was staunchly opposed. By my taking SASPA's cause into the political arena, the media locked onto it as an issue of public interest, and the Liberal Opposition adopted the policy idea as a key component of its education platform. The Liberals were elected in March 2018 and, by 2022, Year 7 public education students in South Australia transitioned into a secondary education program.

In arguing for activism, I am not suggesting that principal associations cease their advocacy role. Rather, I am agreeing with Apple (2015) who argued that we must keep "radical and progressive work alive" to "counter dominant narratives and relations" (p. 179). So, for principal associations looking to interrupt the influence of the GERM, advocacy will not be enough but activism, under the right circumstances, might just work.

### ***10.5.2 Counter-hegemonic Struggle***

One such circumstance is the notion of hegemonic struggle. Apple (2015), for more than two decades, focussed on a "Gramscian-inspired project"<sup>75</sup> of "understanding and interrupting the Right" (p. 174). He argued that "if you want to counter the Right's

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<sup>75</sup> Antonio Gramsci, writing in his Prison Notebooks about Italian history and the relationship between power and ideology, claimed that a ruling class revealed its dominance in two ways: "it rules the allied classes and dominates the opposing classes" (in Nowell-Smith & Hoare, 1971, p. 57). It is this view of dominance that was fundamental to Gramsci's conception of hegemony. A Gramsci-inspired project, therefore, is one that seeks to challenge dominance or to counter hegemony.

hegemonic project look very carefully at how they became hegemonic” (p. 174). In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I analysed how *elite actors* and *dominant groups* created and maintained the Right’s hegemonic project in education, the GERM. This case study followed Apple (2015) and his notion that if you wanted to consider what was possible, you must first take note of that to which you are opposed (p. 174). In my consideration of this strategy, I was drawn to the agonistic theory of Chantal Mouffe and its practical possibilities for principal associations.

### ***Agonism***

In Chapter 5, agonism was introduced as a political theory which influenced how my analysis of ethnographic data was interpreted. For Rawls (2005), “a liberal view removes from the political agenda the most divisive issues” (p. 157) and agonism, rather than trying to eliminate conflict, advances the notion that society should focus on productive and democratic ways to managing differences. Here, the suggestion is that liberalism aims for people to reach wide agreement on important political practices and institutions and, to do so, they must achieve neutrality by bracketing their individual social, cultural, and moral values and beliefs. In contrast to liberalism, Deveaux (1999) explained that an agonistic approach stressed “oppositional yet respectful civic and political relations and practices” (p. 2). In other words, agonism sees the merit in there being opposing views and upholds the notion that there is value in difference. The key is that differences are managed respectfully. This is consistent with Foucault (1982b) who described agonism as “permanent provocation” as opposed to antagonism which he observed was “a face to face confrontation that paralyses both sides” (p. 792). As Mouffe (2014b) explained, distinguishing agonism from antagonism is an important step since, in agonistic confrontation, “the opponent is not considered an enemy to destroy” but, rather, “an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate” (p. 150).



### ***Agonistic Pluralism***

Mouffe's (1999) theory of "agonistic pluralism" asserts that the aim for democracy is to transform an "antagonism" into an "agonism" (p. 755). In her advocacy for adopting an agonistic struggle rather than an antagonistic one, Mouffe (1999) established that the key challenges for democracy were its capacity to accommodate dissensus and to welcome divergence and debate (p. 756). Within this theory, hegemony is considered "provisional" because it "always entails some form of exclusion" (p. 756). It is this "impossibility of consensus without exclusion" that keeps alive the notion of "democratic contestation" (p. 757). Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism (1999) critiques liberal democratic practices (which she sees as working to a model of consensus and neutrality) and argues for an alternative where conflict, diversity, and the ongoing struggle for hegemony are embraced by democratic societies.

Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism holds relevance for principal associations on two fronts. First, it suggests a way for associations to work internally: (i) to encourage divergence and debate amongst members, and (ii) to harness the passions that emerge from such a struggle to create a unity of purpose behind key ethico-political projects. Second, it provides a way of thinking differently about the policy spaces held in common by governments (and their bureaucracies) and the profession (in its collectively organised forms of associations and unions). It is here that agonistic pluralism emphasises the importance of allowing dissent to remain open and not collapsing into consensus (i.e., which is the liberal strategy of working to neutrality). This notion of dissent holds relevance for how principal associations confront the big macro policy issues of our times (i.e., government funding of public school systems, increased equity within the public education system, principal agency, and more authentic measures of school performance) where consensus is improbable.

## ***Hegemonic Struggle***

Schaap (2007) observed that “politics refers to the agonistic struggle for hegemony” (p. 62). For SASPA, its struggle for political agency has transpired within a neoliberal hegemony which, as Tambakaki (2014) observed, “forecloses possibilities for thinking and acting differently” (p. 8). Again, the work of Mouffe (2009) is helpful, should principal associations and their allies (working as a ‘chain of equivalence’<sup>76</sup>) seek to counter this hegemony. Dolan and Mader (2024), for example, used Mouffe’s process of “disarticulation”, “rearticulation” and “counter-hegemony” to illustrate how principal associations could challenge governments and bureaucracies by “counter-hegemonic intervention” (p. 179). In their example they suggested that by:

harnessing principals’ discontent and disaffection, principal associations can create unity around the need to challenge existing power and its discourse (a disarticulation) and mobilise behind a different discourse (a re-articulation) which frames the potential for a new hegemony (a counter-hegemony) (p. 179).

They argued for a challenge “to the narrow standardisation agenda as a disarticulation” followed by “a rearticulation” that expressed “the broader purposes of schooling (see Biesta, 2015) and, by implication, the need for more open and extensive school success measures” (p. 179). It is here, they argued, that “counter-hegemony” forms by allowing “dissent (to) remain open until such time as policy shifts favourably” (p. 179). This process for hegemonic struggle could be applied to any of the big macro policy issues of our times, i.e., government funding of public school systems, increased equity within the public education system, and principal agency.

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<sup>76</sup> The term ‘chain of equivalence’ is used by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) to describe how collective political subjects (such as social movements and political coalitions) are formed.

Wenman (2013) claimed that agonism is “a strategic and tactical doctrine concerned with the capacity of human agents to challenge the tragic forces that seek to govern their lives and determine their conduct” (p. 39). In my agreement with him, I see Mouffe’s (2014a) notion of “counter-hegemonic intervention” as a promising strategic and tactical method for challenging neoliberal governmentality. Unlike the liberal approach to democracy—which works towards consensus and neutrality—Mouffe’s approach supports dissensus and protects groups from “a collapse into compromise” (Dolan & Mader, 2024, p. 179).

### ***10.5.3 Ethico-political Projects***

According to Ucnik (2018), Foucault’s interest in the ethico-political is to be found in his thinking about “the connection between systems of knowledge, power and practices of the self” (p. 63). Here, the ethical practices of the self can take the form of resistance or transformation. Such steps invite us to critically engage with, and to challenge, the prevailing norms and power structures whilst fostering alternative modes of ethical subjectivity and political action. It is by combining these two modes that the notion of the ethico-political project is formed.

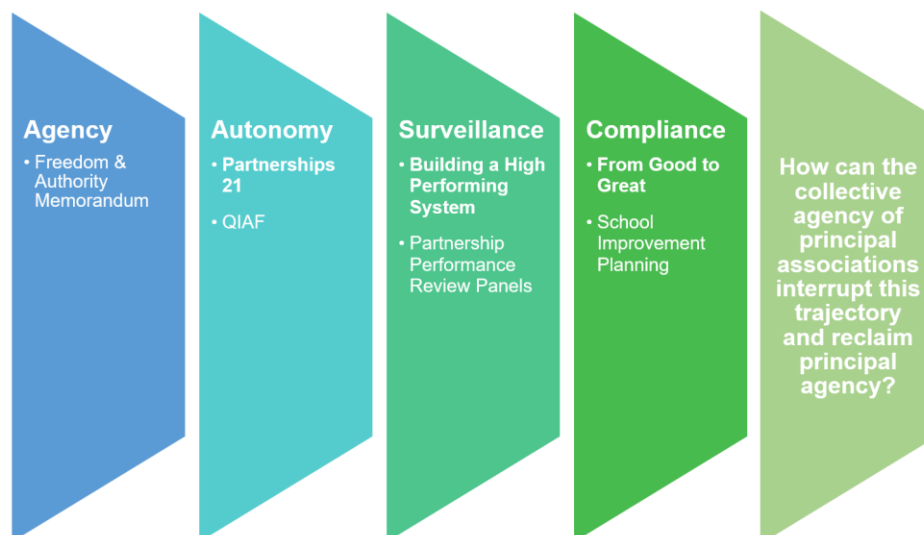
I believe that there is considerable merit in principal associations taking on an ‘ethico-political project’ as a means of interrupting the neoliberalising policy regime. My study has shown that the neoliberal project sees public education as a problem to be fixed. Invariably, that fixing is undertaken by governments, bureaucracies, national agencies (ACARA, AERO, AITSL and Education Services) and the “consultocracy” (see Gunter et al., 2015). Understanding that power is not only imposed from above but also operates through techniques of governance and self-regulation (see Foucault et al., 2010), I argue that there is considerable merit in principal associations adopting at least one ethico-political project as (i) a means of resisting, contesting and transforming how

power is used in making education policy; and (ii) by way of challenging the existing norms, in order to achieve a more equitable and just public education system.

Examples of ethico-political projects might include a focus on:

- The broad purposes of schooling (see Biesta, 2015; Reid, 2018), as a means of challenging Australia's obsession with test-based accountabilities
- Equity for excellence (see Sahlberg, 2007, 2016; Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021), as a means of eradicating the inequities between our schools and school systems
- Reclaiming principal agency (Jones, 1970), as a mechanism for increasing the educational decisions made using professional judgement.

For example, in Figure 13 (below), the project of reclaiming principal agency is conceived as an ethico-political response to the policy effects of increased accountabilities and diminished autonomy on principals (as depicted by Figure 12 in Chapter 8). It may be that a project such as this, if successful, would embolden principal associations to take a lead role in other potential ethico-political struggles, (as suggested by the list above).



**Figure 13: Principal associations reclaiming principal agency as an ethico-political project**

The change objective of principal association participation in ethico-political projects would be two-fold. As well as changing the instruments of a particular policy, the ethico-political project's ambition should also be to transform the ways in which public education policy is made in the future. Tactically, an ethico-political project could be supported by principal associations (or an alliance) adopting activism and/or a counter-hegemonic intervention approach.

#### ***10.5.4 Critical Attitude and Resistance Tactics***

Elsewhere in this thesis I have explained that SASPA had limited success in changing DfE policy by adopting a critical attitude and by deploying resistance tactics such as counter-conduct and truth-telling. One of the factors limiting success was SASPA's reliance on funds from the bureaucracy. It may be necessary, therefore, for principal associations to abandon funding support from the bureaucracy so that the freedom that comes from such financial independence can enable sustained resistance if or when it is needed.

Another factor limiting SASPA's use of counter-conduct and truth-telling was the dilemma of dualism experienced by its membership. On one hand, principal association members wanted their constitutive body to represent their political interests by negotiating improved public education policy. On the other hand, each association member was also a loyal employee of the public education system which was governed by the very bureaucracy that owned the contested policies impacting schools and principal's work. Following Foucault (1982b), work should be performed by principal associations on how principals see themselves – i.e., subjectivation – and how they can become better equipped tactically to deal with power dominance scenarios occurring within their professional lives – e.g., counter-conduct and truth-telling. Subjectivation is the process through which individuals are shaped and constituted as

subjects within the power relations and discourses which govern them. A key question, therefore, is how can principal associations better equip their members to see themselves as knowledgeable and influential members of a noble profession rather than as proxies of the bureaucracy based in a school?

Truth-telling is the concept of challenging and contesting dominant power structures. It involves voicing dissent, criticism or alternative perspectives against those in authority. Speaking truth to power aims to disrupt the dominant narrative and challenge existing norms, discourses and practices in order to effect change. So, how can principal associations better equip their members to find such a voice? And how can principal associations assert their independence and protect members who speak truth to power from becoming victims of the bureaucracy's disapproval?

There is merit in continuing to develop these resistance tactics for greater effect, particularly if considered as part of an activist attitude where members are occupied on an ethico-political project. Here, principal associations and their allies could adopt Reid's (2020) project of developing a new narrative for Australian education (p. 289) as an example of counter-conduct. They could also partner with other activists whose work deliberately challenges the neoliberalising policy regime including Ashenden's (2024b) *Unbeaching the Whale – Can Australia's schooling be reformed?*; Greenwell and Bonnor's (2023) *Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for All Australian Schools*; and Sahlberg and Cobbold's (2021) *Leadership for equity and adequacy in education*. If principal associations are to be one of the 'dominant groups' countering the neoliberal hegemony, then joining with 'dominant actors' such as Ashenden, Bonnor, Reid, Sahlberg and others is an important next step.

### ***10.5.5 Internal Redesign of Principal Associations***

To adopt tactics such as activism, counter-hegemonic intervention, counter-conduct and truth-telling, and to undertake strategies such as an ethico-political project, the internal redesign of principal associations might be needed. For this discussion I am reliant upon Paxton and Lowndes (2018) who considered it possible for institutions to be reorganised using an agonistic design process (p. 693). For principal associations, a redesign along these lines would build on existing strengths – e.g., democratic principles, values based, member oriented, and policy interested – but would address complex organisational and representational issues such as diversity and cohesion, consensus and dissensus, doing and un-doing, and contestation and contingency.

#### ***Agonistic Institutional Design***

Paxton and Lowndes (2018) argued for “an approach to the design of democratic institutions that embodies agonistic principles of contestation, contingency and interdependence” (p. 705). These principles, to some extent, are evident in how the political work of principal associations is performed. For example, in Chapter 2 my discussion of four work samples from my SASPA presidency traversed the ideas of contestation (e.g., critique of FGTG), contingency (e.g., lobbying for the expansion of Education Director numbers), and interdependence (e.g., working with others on the formation of the PEAG). But these examples were all ‘outwards-facing’. What if these principles became ‘inwards-facing’ and were applied to the internal design of principal associations? For Paxton and Lowndes (2018) it would mean the internal work of principal associations would become agonistic and “encourage diversity, subvert domination, revive political contest and promote interdependence” (p. 708). Whilst agreeing with these directions, I would add that such work is a considerable challenge in the context of principal associations where their members are also employees of the

bureaucracy and leaders of a local school community. For principal associations, the work would need to involve the capacity building of individual members to act according to these principles and practices. How could diversity be encouraged internally so that the policy passions of members are (re)awakened? How could these passions be harnessed into a collective will to revitalise interest in the political contest? How could this collective respect the differences within the membership but preserve the strength of institutional unity? When the political contest demands more than a principal association can be expected to do and achieve alone, how can its institutional unity be maintained in the formation of strategic alliances? In keeping with agonistic theory, one way for principal associations to build a strategic alliance would be to create what Mouffe termed, “chains of equivalence” (in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 8).

### ***Chains of Equivalence***

For Mouffe with Laclau (1985), identity within a hegemonic struggle is cemented by a “political idea” (p. 39). By this they meant that it is the idea at the centre of the struggle that is paramount, rather than the individual(s) or the organisation(s) or the institution(s) projecting that idea. Using this logic as a starting point, I argue that in situations where there is a common adversary—government and/or bureaucracy—principal associations should look to form “chains of equivalence” (Interview with Chantal Mouffe in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 8) with other organisations who hold a similar (rather than the same) point of view. Here it is important to stress that what holds “the chain” (p. 8) (or alliance) together is a common dissatisfaction with a current policy or agenda, whilst recognising that the links in the chain (alliance members) will rightfully hold a range of views about a replacement policy or a revised agenda. This ensures that any important differences amongst the “links in the chain” are not “neutralised” and that “the chain” maintains its strength to “impede” the adversary held in common (Chantal Mouffe in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 8).



For principal associations, such an approach would support some of the other tactics discussed in this chapter including activism, ethico-political projects and counter-hegemonic intervention. A chain of equivalence, for example, could be formed by the twenty or so principal associations representing the interests of school leaders in public schools where the common adversary is government (Commonwealth, states and territories) and their education bureaucracies, and the contested political idea is principal agency and/or more authentic accountability measures. Assuming this political idea gained traction with decision makers who provided ‘in principle agreement’ to change, then the differences each ‘link in the chain’ held regarding the extent to which principal agency should be increased and/or how accountabilities could become more authentic would transform ‘the chain of equivalence’ along newly established similarities. It is one way of undertaking political struggle collectively and agonistically: one which is redolent of the notion of impactful social movements such as Black Lives Matter and School Strike for Climate.

## **10.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided the final act of research in my study. Having commenced this project seeking knowledge about ways that the profession’s constituted voice was included or excluded from public policy contests, I have concluded it by imagining what this knowledge might mean for the political work of principal associations in the future. Using Bacchi’s *What’s the problem represented to be framework* (2009), my genealogy revealed that, with each successive reform, the bureaucracy had strengthened its surveillance, power and control over school principals. This trajectory, described as the move from principal agency to bureaucratic compliance, constrained how the bureaucracy engaged the political work of principal associations, most notably in the period 2013–2020.

Drawing upon Lorenzini (2020, 2023a) and his understanding of Foucauldian genealogy as “possibilising”, this chapter considered the constraints placed on the political work of principal associations and, matched to these limitations, proposed some possibilities for expanding that work in the future. Those possibilities—activism, chains of equivalence, counter-conduct, counter-hegemonic intervention, ethico-political projects and truth-telling—are simply ideas, notions or theories, until the day when principal associations act upon them and use them as transformative tactics in the struggle against the neoliberalising policy regime. Principal associations, traditionally consigned to the role of ‘feedback giver’ or ‘resister’ in policy production, have much more to offer but are hindered by the new managerial practices of education bureaucracies.

The purpose of this chapter was to identify strategies and tactics for principal associations to interrupt the neoliberalising policy regime. This step is necessary if we are to interrupt its policy effects of: “inequitable educational outcomes”; “a socially segregated schooling system”, and “an impoverished understanding of educational accountability” (Reid, 2020, pp. 28-40). But it is also a necessary step if we are to change the rules for public education policy making in Australia. If principal associations are to ever experience ‘co-design ahead of consultation’ as standard practice, then the neoliberal project and its new managerial practices must be rejected.

# 11. IN CONCLUSION

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## 11.1 Introduction

In this chapter I draw together the findings of the analysis for this research and make some overall conclusions about the ways in which principals have been constituted and constitute themselves and how this rendering has constrained the political work of principal associations. I also reflect on the theoretical and methodological approach taken, acknowledge some limitations of the study, and suggest areas that have been opened up for further research. I conclude the chapter by summarising the contribution to knowledge made in the thesis and discuss its broader implications.

## 11.2 The Main Thesis

My research has established how principals were constituted and constituted themselves by the various approaches to accountability instituted by South Australia's public education bureaucracy from 1995–2020 and then explained how this rendering has constrained the political work of SASPA. At the very time that principal associations needed to use their political agency to contest the neoliberalising policy regime of competition, standardisation and test-based accountability, the South Australian education bureaucracy instituted a suite of technologies that provided the apparatus to reinforce 'truths' to which principals identified their obligation to "submit" (see Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 36). Here, principals were subjects of unquestioned compliance, the corollary of which was that the political agency of their principal association was weakened. My defence of this rendering relied upon Lorenzini (2023a) and, specifically, two insights he made into Foucault's notion of regimes of truth. First was the potential of the "therefore" decision taken (by principals) prior to the "I submit" act in relation to the (bureaucracy's) truth obligation (p. 117). This was the moment when principals decided

to submit or resist. Second was that the struggle against such attempts (by the bureaucracy) to subjugate (the principal) was consistent with the adoption (by principal associations) of a critical attitude and the use of counter-conducts (p. 110), both of which encapsulate the role and function of 'political agency'. Drawing upon the work of SASPA, I have identified some of the factors constraining the political agency of principal associations. In doing so, I have located possibilities for expanding and strengthening that political work. Informed by the thinking of Michel Foucault and Chantal Mouffe, these possibilities – counter-conduct, ethico-political projects, hegemonic struggle, resistance and truth-telling – are actions principal associations could adopt through a collective critical attitude (Lorenzini, 2023a) to challenge and question the neoliberalising policy regime more effectively. Aligning with Apple (2015) and his idea of the scholar activist, my recommendations suggest ways for principal associations to adopt activism and a critical attitude as a collective approach for interrupting the neoliberal project. Here my possibilising is redolent of Foucault and his approach to writing that Ball (2024) described as a “form of agonism, part of an attitude, a perilous act requiring the courage and the will not to be governed thusly, not to be governed like that by these people, at this price” (20 minutes and 50 seconds).

This study offers three original contributions to the field. First, it introduces into the policy sociology literature the political agency role performed by principal associations. Second, it reveals that as the DfE accountabilities increased, principal autonomy declined, and the school leader was reconstituted as a corporate entity. This rendering weakened the political agency of principal associations who were constituted as 'external relations' by the department. Third, it provides a set of possible tactics to transform principal associations from policy advocates to political activists, on the understanding that the damaging effects of neoliberalising policy regimes must and can be interrupted.

## 11.3 A Summary of My Research

My thesis summary comprises six moves: (i) the problem; (ii) its contextual features; (iii) the research; (iv) the results; (v) the implications of the results; and (vi) the contribution to the field.

### 11.3.1 *The Problem*

This thesis opened with a reflection from my personal work history as SASPA President. It related how the DfE's strategy *From Good to Great: Towards a World Class System* represented another example of neoliberal inflected policy, and its implementation foreshadowed the need for me to act politically on behalf of principal members. In addition to positioning me in the research, the narrative established my motivation for this research: an interest in examining the tension between those who make policy (the bureaucracy) and those who represent the policy interests of the school leaders who enact policy (the principal association). Whilst this remained my steadfast concern, I recognised that the 'political tension' behind this narrative could not be examined sufficiently without storying how we arrived 'here'.

The 'here' of my concerns was two-fold. First, my experience of the SASPA presidency was that, whilst DfE chief executives and senior officers considered the macro policy concerns of the Association, they rarely acted upon them. Second, I recognised how principals had once been trusted by the bureaucracy's director-general who bestowed upon them "freedom and authority" (see Jones, 1970) only to observe how that trust had diminished to such an extent that, some 50 years later, DfE Local Education Teams (LET) had been instituted to check principal compliance with key departmental directions and policy. These two concerns represented how neoliberalising policy regimes and new managerial practices had fundamentally changed the relationships

between the DfE and school principals and, consequently, between the DfE and SASPA.

### ***11.3.2 Contextual Features***

In Chapter 2, I introduced a short autoethnographic account of selected episodes from my political work as SASPA President as a 'history of my present'. The inclusion of this brief history was a necessary step in establishing the political work of principal associations, a subject that was unrepresented in the literature. Policy sociologists working this field have focussed on the work of principals, not principal associations. Nevertheless, I did discover Thomson (2001), whose analysis of the representational work of principal associations in Australia suggested that more consideration could, and should, be given to this field.

In Chapter 3, a review of the literatures relating to neoliberalism, new managerialism and performativity was performed. Here, GERM was used as a case study to establish the hegemonic credentials of neoliberalising policy regimes and to understand how dominant actors and dominant groups acted to create and maintain those credentials. This step was necessary on the understanding that if principals and others are to play a role in disrupting the GERM, they must first understand how it functions. This discussion located my policy interest within the terrain mapped out by Foucault's notions of governmentality and regimes of truth which I introduced as tools for thinking about the effects of the neoliberal project on education.

### ***11.3.3 The Research***

My research consisted of settling upon a three-part question, formulating a plan for drawing together methodologies and methods to examine this question, and developing an approach to analyse the data.

### **Research Question**

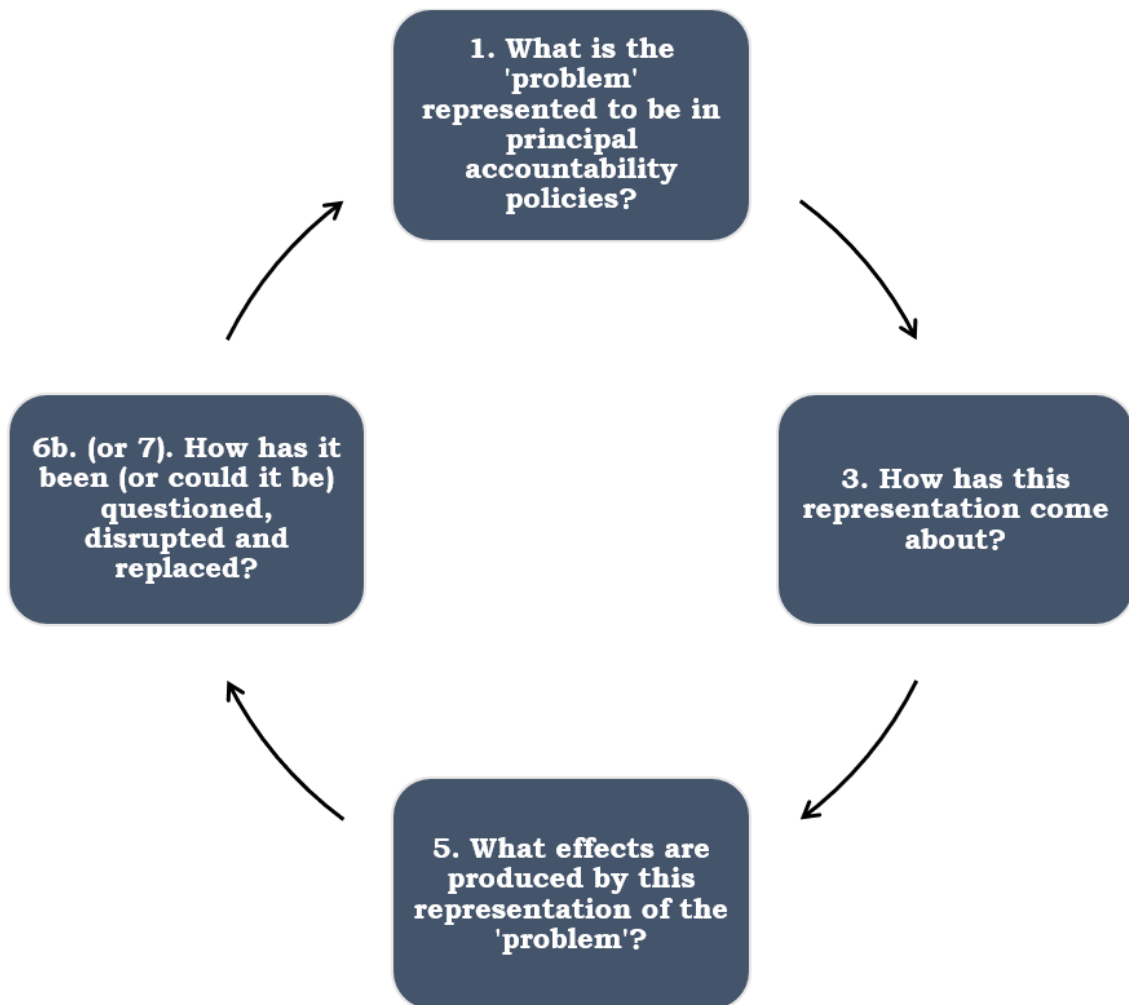
Conscious of the enormity of my interest, I limited the study to a single policy focus – i.e., principal accountability – and to a dedicated timeframe – i.e., 1995 to 2020. Subsequently, my research answered a three-part question.

- What is the problem represented to be in the various positions taken on principal accountability policy within the *Partnerships 21* (1999–2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015–2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019–2022) reforms?
- How have principals been constituted because of these policy representations?
- How has this rendering impacted the capacity of principal associations (i.e., the organised and collective voice of principals) to engage the bureaucracy in productive processes for improving public education policy?

Collectively these questions satisfied my investigation of the effects of accountability on principal autonomy and the relationship between the diminished autonomy of principals and their principal association's political struggles.

### **Methodology**

My research developed instinctively as a critical policy sociology. As a researcher of policy, this meant that I approached my task with what Ozga (2021) described was “the explicit concern that the underlying assumptions that shaped how a ‘problem’ was conceptualised and how ‘solutions’ were selected (and who did the defining and selection)” would be subjected to critical scrutiny (p. 294). Here, my decision to use the WPR framework of Bacchi (2009) as a methodological tool for problematising principal accountability policies was a deliberate step to keep faith with Ozga's (2021) concerns.



**Figure 4: How the WPR framework has been adapted**

In Chapter 4, I introduced Figure 4 (see above) to graphically explain my adaption of Bacchi's WPR. My defence of this adaption attached Steps 1, 3, 5, and 6b (or 7) to my three-part research question. Here, the responding to the first part of my question (which pertained to the problem representations of the *Partnerships 21*, *Partnership Performance Review Panels* and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* reforms) was supported by Steps 1 and 3. The second part of my question (which was concerned with how principals were constituted by the expansion of accountabilities attached to these reforms) was supported by Step 5. A brief summary of what was learnt from my use of Steps 1, 3 and 5 is provided in Table 4 (see below); a more expansive discussion of which follows.



**Table 4: Summary of policy problem representations and effects**

	<b>Problem Representation</b>	<b>Policy Effect</b>
<b>P21</b>	How to retain bureaucratic control of schools in a devolved model of schooling.	Principal autonomy and school accountability are enmeshed.
<b>PPRP</b>	How to accelerate school improvement in a system now governed through the Local Education Partnership.	Clusters of schools and pre-schools are compelled to perform collective surveillance of each other's performance data and to account for the effects of their leadership to the DfE's senior executive.
<b>FGTG</b>	How to accelerate school improvement so that the system could move from 482 (good) to 530 (great) on the McKinsey and Company's universal scale.	An accountability apparatus is assembled to control each school's improvement targets, plans for improvement, strategies for teaching literacy and numeracy, and monitoring and reviewing school (principal) performance.

Through Partnerships 21, the devolution of public education in South Australia was realised. To control schools, the bureaucracy assembled a suite of accountabilities which included an Annual Report, external checks that schools had performed their Self-Review, and the external monitoring of Basic Skills Test data and SACE completion. The effect of this was that principal autonomy became enmeshed with school accountability. By 2014, schools were managed by the Local Education Partnership, a geographical cluster of schools and pre-schools, and supervised by the Education Director. To accelerate school improvement through this form of devolution, the Partnership Performance Review Panel was established. Its effect was to compel schools and pre-schools to surveil each other's performance data and to give an account to the DfE's senior executive of their response. Here, principals retained responsibility for student achievement at their own school but were encouraged to take an interest in improving the performance data at neighbouring schools. That this work became the focus of data conversations with DfE's senior executive saw principals constituted as corporate subjects. In 2018, the FGTG reform strategy was launched with the intention of accelerating school improvement in South Australia so that the DfE could move from good to great on the McKinsey and Company's Universal Scale. The accountability apparatus that was assembled under this model saw the Education Director (and their Local Education Team) control the principal's school improvement

targets, plans for improvement, strategies for teaching literacy and numeracy, and the monitoring and review performance. Here, this middle-tier of the bureaucracy's leadership performed a surveillance role that further diminished the principal's autonomy. The effect of this was to constitute the principal as an instrument of the bureaucracy, i.e., their corporate proxy working in a school.

The third part of my research question was concerned with how the political work of principal associations was constrained by how principals had been constituted by these reforms. As a means for understanding this rendering, I used Bacchi's (2009) Step 6b which problematises what happens as a result of policy effects. This also encouraged me to consider the various tactics of resistance SASPA had deployed across the three reform periods. Lastly, by invoking Bacchi's (2022) Step 7, I was able to extend my interest in collective resistance by problematising some future tactical possibilities for principal associations.

### ***Autoethnography, Ethnographic Interviews and Genealogy***

To satisfy the scope of work formed by this curiosity, I needed a research methodology that revealed change effects across time and one that encouraged the analysis of data related specifically to context, hegemony, discourse, policy texts and lived experience. Here, a working assembly was needed: one which was constructed by my considered decisions to include policy genealogy (as methodology), WPR (as a methodological tool), ethnographic interviews and autoethnography (as the lived experience of myself and others), and post-structural interview analysis (as a method applied to interview transcripts).

Such an assembly gave rise to me reading Foucault, initially for insights into genealogy but ultimately for his thinking on governmentality, subjectivity, regimes of truth, and practices of freedom. Bacchi (2023), in her own genealogy of WPR, described her

framework as “a Foucault-influenced poststructural approach” (p. 4), one where Foucault’s notions of critique, discursive practices, governmentality and problematisation coalesced. So, upon making the decision to use WPR as the methodological tool for my genealogy, I recognised that my thesis also had become “Foucault-influenced”. Four of my key moves had been augmented by Foucault’s thinking: (a) *genealogy* as my choice to make more explicit in WPR; (b) *governmentality* and *subjectivity* as a way of thinking about neoliberal inflected policy and its effects; (c) *regimes of truth* as a thinking tool for considering how principals had been constituted and constituted themselves by changes to accountability policies and how this rendering had constrained a critical attitude and, hence, the political work of principal associations; and (d) *practices of freedom* such as *resistance*, *counter-conduct* and *truth telling* provided tactical expressions for the ‘possibilised’ political work of principal associations. Foucault’s genealogy approach, and his emphasis on power relations through notions such as governmentality and truth regimes, proved effective tools for understanding how subjugation, subjection and subjectivation were features of the DfE–principal–SASPA relationship over a 25-year period.

In Chapter 4, I assembled and introduced my research methodology as Foucauldian-infused WPR genealogy, my methodological tool, my data trail and my method. My discussion of this assembly defended the relationship between the knowledge I was pursuing and producing through research, and the theoretical underpinnings and practical choices I made in formulating its production. Such was the scope of my research brief that, in metaphoric terms, I not only needed the multiple ‘searchlights’ of genealogy, ethnography and autoethnography but, to understand what had been illuminated, my analysis also required the bi-focal ‘lenses’ of WPR and PIA.

### ***Ethnographic Interview Data***

Following on from this, Chapter 5 examined my empirical data (ethnographic accounts from four DfE chief executives and four SASPA presidents): specifically, why it was collected, how it was analysed, and what it revealed about the political agency of SASPA and its relationship with the DfE. Here, findings included: (i) an understanding that SASPA was sometimes ‘inside the policy tent’ and sometimes ‘outside the policy tent’; and (ii) an understanding that SASPA’s political agency was sometimes interpreted as ‘one voice’ but at other times was considered ‘multiple voices’. Whilst these findings were useful, they also suggested the need for me to identify how these variances occurred. It was here that the need to trace the effects of principal accountability was established as a mechanism for understanding the relationship between changes to DfE—principal power relations and to SASPA’s capacity for engaging the DfE in productive processes for improving public education policy.

### ***Genealogy***

In Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 I examined how South Australia’s principals were constituted by the expansion of principal accountability programs and how they constituted themselves. This provided a rendering from which it was possible to consider how this had constrained the collective critical attitude, the possibilising effects, and the political work of SASPA. Here, my research located persistent moves by the bureaucracy which had the effect of rendering principals more compliant and tractable. This trajectory also revealed the bureaucracy’s waning interest for engaging principal associations meaningfully in macro policy work, resulting in managerially centric, rather than professionally oriented, policy. The absence of the organised and collective voice of principals from the formative stages of policy and the setting of directions meant that the bureaucracy’s approach, particularly in the years between 2013–2020, not only focused on the problems the DfE senior executive wanted to solve

through change (e.g., improved NAPLAN results and SACE completion rates) but also on its strategy for change. It was here that the DfE's managerially centric approach constituted principals as the bureaucracy's policy conduits, and installed apparatus designed to surveil and control. This established technologies that conveyed a "truth" in how principals were to constitute themselves through "it is obviously true, "therefore" I submit (Lorenzini, 2023a, p.36). In Chapter 8, I concluded that South Australia's public school principals were now performing their roles as 'corporate proxies'.

The Foucauldian thinking tools I applied to these genealogy chapters included regimes of truth and critical attitude. Regimes of truth were used to analyse how the accountability models in the P21, PPRP and FGTG reforms presented principals with a truth obligation to which they felt compelled to submit or choose to refuse. In P21, submission involved principals constituting themselves as entrepreneurial leaders with increased corporate responsibilities and constrained by an autonomy enmeshed with accountability; PPRP principals experienced diminished autonomy and were constituted and constituted themselves as corporate members – part of a bureaucracy consumed by an interest in improving prescribed data sets; and FGTG principals were further constituted and constituted themselves as corporate members, with even less autonomy and working to a 'lopsided accountability' agenda (where the focus was on what the school could do for the system). Another of Foucault's thinking tools, critical attitude, was used to examine in what ways the political work of SASPA had been constrained by how principals had been constituted by the bureaucracy and constituted themselves. Here, a range of resistance tactics were deployed, including counter-conduct and truth-telling, but with limited impact, because they relied on principals' awareness of the connection: "if it is true ... then I will submit ... "therefore" I submit" (Lorenzini, 2023a, p.36). Drawing upon Lorenzini (2023a), Chapter 10 expanded my genealogy to include a 'possibilising' future process for the political work of principal

associations. Working from the knowledge that SASPA had contested neoliberalising policy regimes and the bureaucracy's new managerialism during the 1995–2020 period, but with limited effectiveness, the possibilising capacity of genealogy was devoted to a consideration of the ways the political agency of principal associations could be expanded. Here, the constraining factors impinging upon the political work of SASPA were theorised using the post-structural thinking of Michel Foucault and Chantal Mouffe. This discussion provided a catalogue of tactics within a collective critical approach which principal associations might consider in their political struggle over neoliberalising policy regimes and its effects. These included: counter–conduct, ethico–political projects, hegemonic struggle, resistance and truth telling. Considered as a whole, my recommendations suggest ways for principal associations to adopt activism as a critical approach for interrupting the neoliberal project.

### **11.3.4 The Results**

My research has revealed that as principal accountabilities were increased through the neoliberal reforms of *Partnerships 21* (1999-2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015-2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019-2022), principal autonomy decreased. Here, school principals were constituted and constituted themselves largely as corporate entities within regimes of truth which provided technologies to ensure principals submitted to the 'truths' promulgated in the regimes or risk their exclusion from the ongoing role. This policy solution implied that the problem the 2013–2020 bureaucracy was seeking to solve was: how to ensure autonomous principals sufficiently improved NAPLAN and/or SACE results. Principals became constituted and constituted themselves more as corporate entities because the PPRP and FGTG reforms, in particular, demanded that they contribute to the data improvement challenges set by the bureaucracy. First, the PPRP expected that

principals of neighbouring schools would 'collaborate' to improve the NAPLAN and SACE completion results across their Local Education Partnership (LEP). A key function of this 'collaboration' was surveillance, since principals were now expected to take an interest in the performance of all schools within the LEP, as well as their own. Second, the FGTG reform challenged principals to lift NAPLAN results and SACE completion rates by following a bureaucratised process of school improvement planning, and of literacy and numeracy teaching, so that the DfE could move from *good* (i.e., 482) to *great* (i.e., 530) on McKinsey and Company's universal scale. The "truth obligation" (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 34) for principals was that these narrowly conceived performative measures set by DfE were what really mattered. And, whilst it was difficult for school principals to openly challenge these policy settings because of their reliance on the bureaucracy's approval for their next job, their principal associations could (provided that principals who were members could see the truth obligations inferred by the technologies of compliance). Principal associations such as SASPA were constrained by their diminished relevance (by now consultants' advice had primacy); a reluctance to forego the funding support provided by the DfE; and the effects of the neoliberalising policy regime on their membership (who now acted as corporate proxies in schools). Despite the various constraints on principal associations, my research revealed that resistance tactics were used to contest the DfE's neoliberal reforms. That these tactics were unable to interrupt the course of the PPRP and the FGTG strategy encouraged me to consider future possibilities. Here, I reason that the political work of principal associations would be enhanced by plausible possibilities such as Apple's (2015) "critical scholar/activist" (p. 177), Mouffe's (2013) notion of "counter-hegemonic struggle" (p. 79) and, Foucault's (2010), engagement with the "ethico-political" (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 117). Such possibilities are consistent with Foucault's thinking of "truth regimes" (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 34), "critical attitude"

(Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 103), “counter-conduct” (Lorenzini, 2016b, p. 130) and “truth-telling” (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 62), all of which I used to make theoretical sense of the resistance work of SASPA.

In summary, the key understandings that emerged from research into my three-part question were:

- In the various positions taken on principal accountability policy within the *Partnerships 21* (1999-2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015-2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019-2022) reforms, the problem was represented to be the bureaucracy’s increasing control of principal autonomy and school improvement.
- Because of this increased bureaucratic control, principals were constituted (and constituted themselves) as corporate entities.
- Consequently, in the processes for improving public education policy, principal associations (the organised and collective voice of principals) were constrained by the reticence of their membership (which had been constituted as corporate proxies) and by a diminished relevance (given the education bureaucracy’s increased reliance on the advice of consultants).

### **11.3.5 The Implications of the Results**

This thesis set out to understand the struggle of principal associations for political agency during an era of neoliberalising policy regimes in South Australia from 1995–2020. Although that political agency was constrained by the DfE’s increased interest in taking policy advice from consultants such as McKinsey and Company, mostly it was constrained by how principals had been constituted by the bureaucracy’s expansion of accountability models<sup>77</sup> and by the concomitant restrictions to autonomy in the regimes of truth that inferred to principals, the “therefore”, “I submit” (see Lorenzini, 2023a, pp. 37-38). Weakened by a membership who then felt compelled by their employer to

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<sup>77</sup> I take the opportunity here to restate that some DfE accountabilities, in particular, the external review of schools were welcomed by most school leaders. It was the expansion of accountabilities beyond the external review of schools, such as the PPRP and the FGTG surveillance apparatus, that constituted principals as corporate proxies and, consequently, constrained principal associations.



become more compliant, the immediate challenge for principal associations was to find ways to reclaim principal empowerment so that increased political agency could follow. My study also revealed that, despite these constraints, principal associations did challenge neoliberalising policy regimes by adopting resistance tactics which included counter-conduct and truth-telling. Whilst these tactics failed to interrupt the bureaucracy's new managerialist practices and its neoliberal inflected policies, much can be learnt from the experiences. My Chapter 10 discussion, in particular, suggests possibilities for expanding the political work of principal associations to include the tactics of activism, the ethico-political project and hegemonic intervention. Here, my argument for disruption is consistent with Ball's (2024) observation of how Foucault's genealogical approach works, where "the point is that things can be unmade as long as we know how it was that they were made" (23 minutes, 25 seconds). Ball concludes that "genealogy" has "revolutionary import" (59 minutes); that is, its purpose is transformative.

### ***11.3.6 The Contribution to the Field***

This study makes three original contributions to the field. First, it introduces into the policy sociology literature the potential political agency role performed by principal associations by imagining a collective critical approach formed in various policy contexts. My search for existing research found it was very limited. Second, in its consideration of three neoliberal reforms, it reveals that as the accountabilities to narrow data fields increase, principal autonomy decreases, and the school leader is reconstituted as a corporate entity. Here, principals are expected to identify the truth obligation as part of the policy regime and comply without thinking or questioning. This rendering weakens the political agency of principal associations. Third, on the understanding that the damaging effects of neoliberalising policy regimes can and

must be interrupted, and that the profession has a role to play in such a project, I recommend a set of tactics designed to transform principal associations from policy advocates to political activists.

This new knowledge will be of interest to those scholars working in the field of critical leadership studies whose passions include how principals and/or teachers have resisted neoliberal technologies (for example Ball, 2016b; Dolan, 2020a; McKay, Thomson, & Blackmore, 2024; Niesche et al., 2024). That my study “occupies territory” (after Thomson & Kamler, 2010, p. 152) kept fertile by the contributions of these academic researchers, reflects the importance I place on following their lead and making my own contribution to the on-going study of resistance.

In *Resistance in Educational Leadership, Management and Administration*, its editors, McKay, Thomson and Blackmore (2024), argued that “studying resistance more consistently would allow for new approaches...to educational change” (p. 17). Certainly, this has been one of my intentions with this study. In a chapter from this same book, “Theorising principals’ resistance and compliance as part of school autonomy reforms in Australian public education”, Niesche and others (2024), indicated that, “in the face of stringent performativity, accountability and administrative burdens” (p. 35) principals “can be constrained” but can “also find gaps or spaces in which to pursue socially just aims” (p. 25). Some of those gaps, i.e., working around accountabilities and administrative hurdles, have been reflected in my research without ever being its central focus. Drawing upon interviews with South Australia’s school principals, Dolan (2020a), in *Paradox and the School Leader: The Struggle for the Soul of the Principal in Neoliberal Times*, wrote about “the possibilities and limitations of pushing back against the controls and forces of government” (pp. 108-109). My discussion in Chapters 7 and 8 also reveals possibilities and limitations, but with a

focus on the principal collective. My study owes much to the work of Ball. In his article, "Subjectivity as a site of struggle: refusing neoliberalism?" Ball (2016b) told of "the risks of refusal through Foucault's notion of fearless speech or truth-telling" (p. 1129). His work tells us of the courage of individual educators refusing the neoliberal project. My study has sought to honour that tradition, albeit with an emphasis on shifting the research of resistance from school leaders to principal associations. This emphasis is consistent with Thomson (2008) and her idea that, "if the field is to take up the question of resistance" it will need to "move beyond a focus on individual headteachers to take seriously their collective professional organisations" (p. 86). Further to this, my research has also contributed to theory, policy and practice in critical leadership studies.

#### **11.4. Implications for Theory**

In my use of WPR and the concepts of truth regimes and critical attitude, I have described my approach as Foucauldian infused WPR genealogy (see Chapter 4). But what is silent in the terminology I have used is the blending of ethnography with genealogy. Early in my study I was influenced by Tamboukou and Ball (2003) who argued that, "(g)iven the complexity and rapidly changing events of our actuality, we suggest that there is an urgent need to listen to the epistemological and political agendas of different traditions of historical and social research" (pp. 9-10). Their point, here, was "not to 'stir well' and add 'a little of genealogy' or 'a little of ethnography', but to create differentiated tools of analysis" which would be "effective in sociological analyses within related theoretical and epistemological fields" (p. 10). This emphasis on creating "differentiated tools of analysis" (p. 10) provided the permission for me to customise my approach. To satisfy the nature and scope of my research, I brought together: (a) genealogy for its capacity to reveal change effects across time; and (b)

autoethnography and ethnographies from policy actors for insights into lived experience; and (c) Bacchi's (2009) pivotal questions as a lens to the research questions. This combined approach enabled me to consider the DfE–SASPA struggles through the contrasting lenses offered: on one hand, the insights of individuals (DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents, including myself) and, on the other hand, the understandings formed by the analysis of context, hegemony and discourse in my genealogy. The decision to draw ethnography and genealogy together was responsive to the need to find answers to my research question rather than a deliberate strategy to deviate from conventional practice. For example, genealogy alone could not answer the third part to my research question, i.e., how the capacity of principal associations (i.e., the organised and collective voice of principals) to engage the bureaucracy in productive processes for improving public education policy was constrained. Likewise, ethnography alone could not answer the first part of my research question, i.e., the positions taken by DfE, principals and principal associations on the accountability programs within the *Partnerships 21* (1999–2002), *Partnership Performance Review Panels* (2015–2022) and *From Good to Great: Towards a World-class System* (2019–2022) reforms. My combination of methodologies emerged, therefore, from a curiosity to understand the DfE–SASPA relationship through the effects of different, but not unrelated, struggles.

For my research to consider the implications for the future, the possibilising function of genealogy was introduced and utilised. Here, I was reliant upon Lorenzini (2020) who claimed that Foucault's notion of *parrhēsia* enabled humans to move to the “*possibility* of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” (p. 2, italics in original). This subjection suggested counter-conducts “to criticise and destabilise a given power/knowledge apparatus that still governs (certain aspects of) ‘our’ conduct today” (p. 2). In following Lorenzini (2020, 2023b) and his interest in the bond between

genealogy, regimes of truth and possibilising, my research moved beyond how principals had been obliged to submit to the bureaucracy's apparatus of compliance (and how this rendering weakened the political agency of principal associations), to suggest potential tactics "to carry on their struggles in the present" (Lorenzini, 2020, p. 3). These tactics, aligned to Apple (2015) and his idea of the scholar activist, were informed by the post-structural thinking of Michel Foucault and Chantal Mouffe, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Introduced in Chapter 4, my data trail consisted of using ethnography, autoethnography and genealogy to focus on Bacchi's WPR questions. Analysis of this data drew upon Foucault's thinking of problematisations, and was applied through utilising the WPR framework of Bacchi (2009) and the post-structural interview tools developed by Bacchi and Bonham (2016). The former enabled me to consider the DfE's accountability approaches as the discursive practices of bureaucracy and the various effects of these practices. The latter compelled me to depersonalise my interview transcripts of DfE chief executives and SASPA presidents, so that my analysis of this knowledge could be politicised. Here, I was guided by the PIA approach to consider each interviewee's 'truth' as a way of recognising them as political 'subjects'. This constancy of using a post-structural discourse analysis approach helped harmonise my use of ethnography with genealogy. Notwithstanding its usefulness, my Foucauldian-infused WPR genealogy needed to introduce an autoethnographic component to address my 'insider' knowledge of the political work of principal associations, in particular.

## **11.5 Implications for Policy**

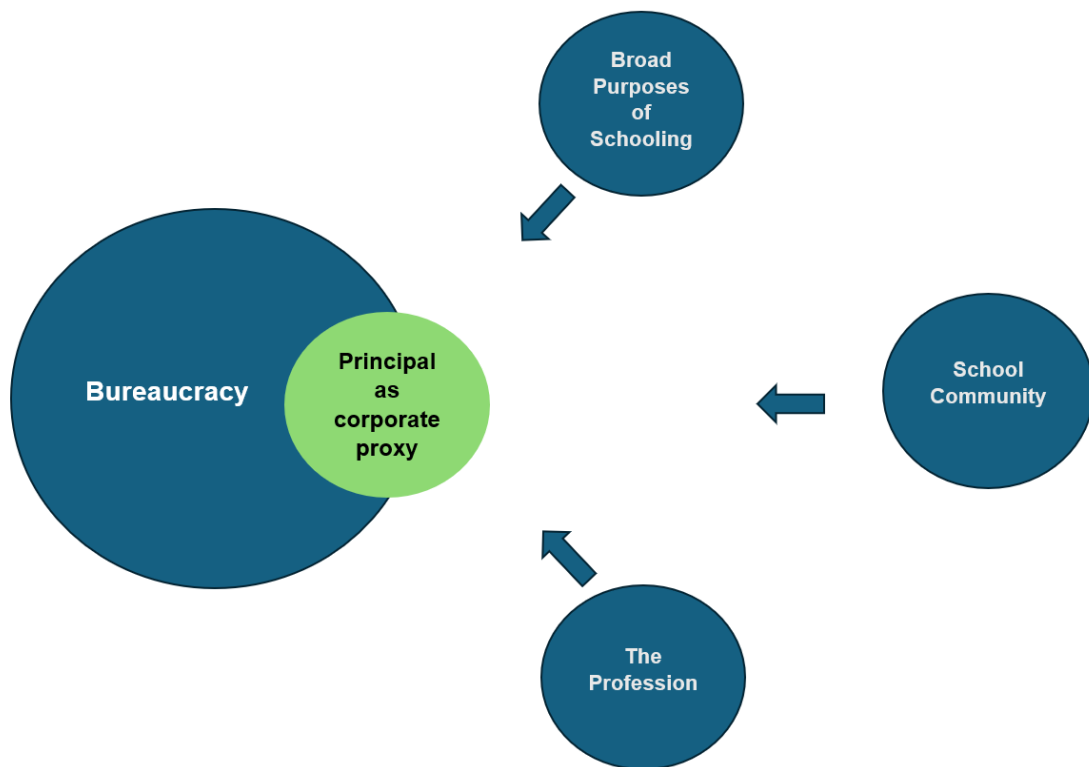
My thesis accepted the view of Reid (2020) that "the damage being done to Australian education [by neoliberalism leaves] no option but to change policy direction" (pp. 27-

28). This has made the interruption of the neoliberalising policy regime the most urgent ethico-political project for principal associations and others to undertake. Whilst there has been considerable academic weight given to such a project (Ashenden, 2024a; Biesta, 2019; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Bonnor et al., 2021; McKay et al., 2024; Reid, 2020; Sahlberg, 2016, 2023; Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021; Zhao, 2018), the only tangible step taken recently by principal associations was the ASPA publication, *Beyond Certainty: A process for thinking about futures in Australian education* (Reid, 2018). Acknowledging that no one individual or stakeholder group can effectively counter the neoliberal education project, there is considerable scope in Australia for an alliance to be established between academics, principal associations and other stakeholders (e.g., media champions, parent organisations and teacher unions). This is consistent with Apple (2013) who argued the importance of alliances in challenging the neoliberal hegemony; that is, diverse groups finding points of convergence around this singular interest (p. 14).

## **11.6 Implications for Practice**

In Chapter 9, I examined the implications of my research for the political work of principal associations and suggested a range of tactics for working within the neoliberal hegemony we find ourselves in (i.e., counter-conduct, ethico-political projects, resistance and truth telling) and for working strategically to replace it (i.e., activism, alliances and counter-hegemonic intervention). Whilst my research focused on the political work of a particular principal association, SASPA, my genealogy section revealed how education bureaucracies had instituted a suite of technologies that provided the apparatus to reinforce “truths” to which principals identified their obligation to “submit” (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 38). Here, principals were subjects of unquestioned compliance but, importantly, not all principals accepted this subjugation. This

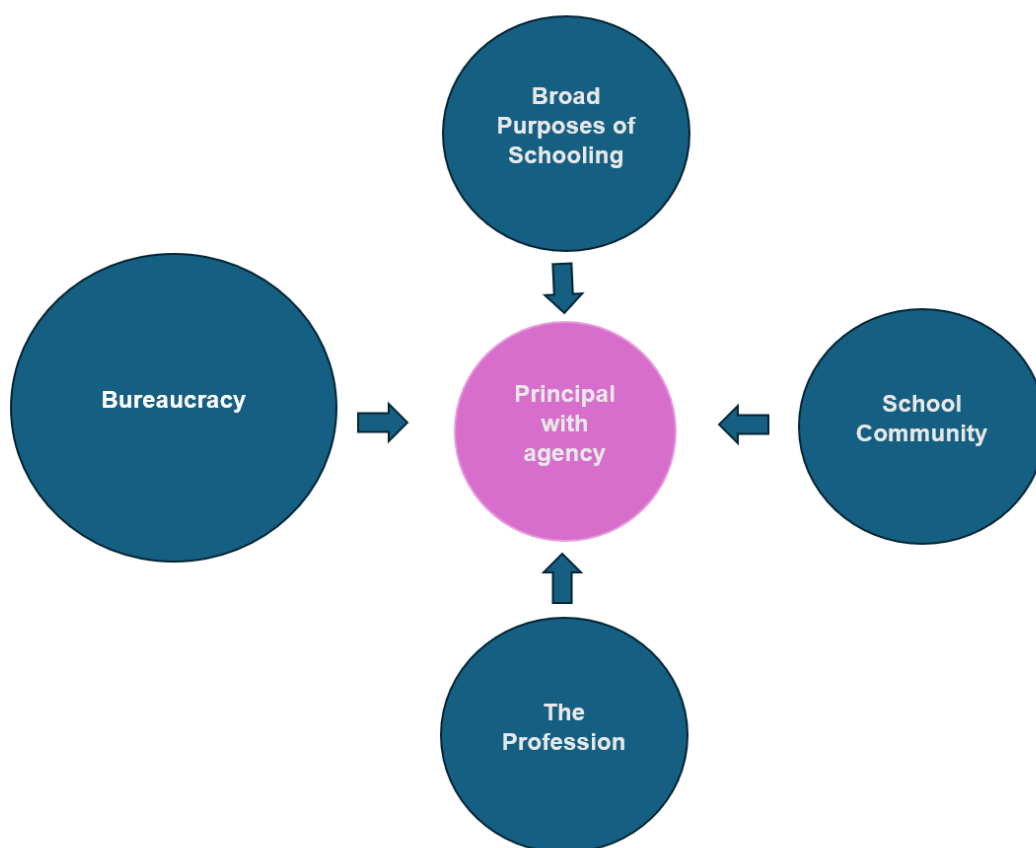
variegated effect, where some principals submitted to the “truth obligation” (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 34) promoted by the bureaucracy and some principals resisted it, perversely made the political work of principal associations even more complex. One of the reasons for this variegated effect and its impact on principal association work is that principals have been so invested in doing the job that they cannot easily see how they are being constituted by it in its corporate proxy form (see Figure 11).



**Figure 11: The principal constituted as a corporate proxy**

Figure 11 was introduced to this thesis in Chapter 9 and graphically depicts what happens when the principal becomes so governed by the bureaucracy that they act as its proxy. My thinking, here, is that the principal as a corporate proxy is so distanced from the interests which have previously constituted their work (i.e., the broad purposes of schooling, the aspirations and needs of the school and its community, and the attitudes, ethics and values of their profession) that they cannot see what they have become. Consequently, the immediate challenge for principal associations is to use

their political agency to reduce the need for principals to act as corporate proxies and to reclaim the autonomies lost during the neoliberal era. The ambition, therefore, would be to work towards realising a principal with increased agency: one whose experience of school leadership better reflects an equilibrium between the various tensions of the role, i.e., upholding the values of their profession, committing to the broad purposes of schooling, honouring their community's expectations of them, and accommodating the demands of the bureaucracy. (This is depicted graphically in Figure 14 below.)



**Figure 14: A principal with increased agency**

The contrast between Figure 11 and Figure 14 reflects the political agency challenge for principal associations. In the South Australian context, the period 2013–2020 saw the principal reconstituted as the bureaucracy's proxy. Because the bureaucracy now conflated the idea of quality schooling as improved NAPLAN results and SACE completion rates, by acting as their corporate proxy principals were less able to fulfil



their broader professional responsibilities and the needs of their schools that were contextually diverse. These included their school community's interests and needs (beyond literacy and numeracy); the broader purposes of schooling (beyond qualification); and the attitudes, ethics and values of the educational profession.

Figure 14, therefore, is an imagining of what it might be for a public school principal whose agency has been reclaimed through the political work of principal associations. Here, that increased agency would provide for an improved balance or equilibrium between the principal's obligations to their profession, to their school and its community, to the broad purposes of schooling, and to fulfilling the expectations of a more enlightened bureaucracy (one whose interests in public education have become more holistic than was apparent during the 2013–2020 era).

Earlier in this thesis I shared my assumption that effective public education policy is best achieved when policy owners and policy users worked together on the enterprise. This assumption is based on the idea that policy development and implementation should be iterative processes between policy owners and users, so that policy design and implementation are informed by both perspectives. Here, my thinking aligned with Dolan (2020b) and his observation that principals had an interest in “renegotiating models of consultation” (p. 10). But if principal associations remain constrained by a membership obliged to ‘submit’ to the bureaucracy’s control apparatus, such an enterprise is compromised. This is one of the reasons why principal associations must assume responsibility for creating the circumstances to build a collective critical attitude which examines how we can be governed in a way where assumptions are investigated to understand the implications of the “I submit” (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 38) which may bring about governing differently. Here, principal associations can create a safe space to develop a collective critical approach, one which Lorenzini (2023a) explained as the “‘we’ made by all the individuals who endured and fought against the

governmental mechanisms and regimes of truth ... and by those who are carrying on or will carry on their fight in the present ” (p. 115).

SASPA and other principal associations could better utilise the professional development component of their work to build the capacity of their leaders to critique government and bureaucracy policy and to tactically respond to the risks such policy poses to principal autonomy and/or to our professional obligations to young people and the broad purposes of schooling. To some extent, this was the intention of a 2021 SASPA, SAPPA and University of SA pilot program, *The Thriving Principal*<sup>78</sup>, which used the Dolan (2020b) research as the basis for building the capacity of a group of twenty school principals to selectively deploy resistance tactics. Essentially it was a pilot program that supported principals to understand the choice between subjection and subjectivation, and how the latter encouraged a critical attitude and the adoption of resistance measures.

## 11.7 Further Research

My research has revealed how the expansion of principal accountabilities has constituted principals and framed how they constitute themselves, and how this rendering has constrained the political agency of principal associations. It provides a stepping off point into the “struggle over and against what it is we have become” and “what it is that we do not want to be” (Ball, 2016b). In suggesting further research, my thoughts remain focussed on the production of knowledge that supports the political work of principal associations and assists the field to make sense of this work.

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<sup>78</sup> This project’s report is located at <https://www.parf.org.au/research-reports/building-leaders-capacity-to-manage-the-paradox-of-the-principalship>

In Chapter 10 I suggested some plausible possibilities for expanding the political work of principal associations. On the understanding that there are principal associations interested in building their political capital by deploying some of these tactics, there is potential for case study research to be undertaken. Here, the research interest could be tied to an ethico-political project (e.g., reclaiming principal agency) and, if permissions are obtained, contrasts could be made between the thinking and actions of policy owners (the bureaucracy) and of policy activists (the principal association).

To complement various academic studies of principal resistance (Fitzgerald & Savage, 2013; McKay, 2018; Niesche et al., 2024; Thomson, 2008), my research shows the field that there is potential in examining the political work of principal associations. One of the possibilities for future research is to move beyond my South Australian case study to examine the national landscape and, in particular, the roles the Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) and the Australian Government Primary Principals' Association (AGPPA) have played in contesting school funding and standardised testing policies. This would be useful in establishing how the differences between the profession and the Commonwealth Government on these matters are processed, and what potential there might be for new ways of working on policy together. There is even potential for such research to be framed as a case study of the recently established National Reference Group<sup>79</sup> which represents the commitment by the Federal Government's Minister for Education to ongoing collaboration with Australia's nine principal association peak bodies<sup>80</sup>. Such research could be examined through the lens of associations being 'inside the tent' with government. Does such an occurrence enable principal associations to achieve their policy change ambitions? Or,

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<sup>79</sup> Details of this National Reference Group are limited to media releases. For more detail see <https://www.aspa.asn.au/principals-national-advisory>

<sup>80</sup> These nine principal association peak bodies provide representation for all three schooling sectors.

paradoxically, does it constrain principal associations, on the understanding that it is the government that controls 'what is on and off the table'.

To further understand the increased accountabilities and diminished autonomy of principals, an investigation into the role played by the bureaucracy's middle tier of leadership (which, in South Australia, is the Education Director) is suggested. When I commenced my career as a principal, the middle tier challenged and supported me to be the best principal I could be. But, as my thesis has revealed, the Education Director now performs a surveillance role (with PPRPs) and a compliance function (with FGTG). If the field wants to know more about how new managerial approaches constitute the work of public school principals research into the effects of middle tier leadership on the principalship would be a useful next step.

Each of the three projects I have suggested above would enrich the field's knowledge of resistance to neoliberal policy regimes. By understanding how the regime works, the field is better placed to manage how to interrupt it. Principal associations, by having more insights into how the resistance of the collective and organised voice of principals is hindered, will be better informed as to the changes needed to achieve enhanced and expanded political agency.

## **11.8 Methodological Reflections**

To my knowledge, this thesis has provided the first systematic application of the Bacchi (2009) WPR method to the case of how principal accountability regimens have constituted principals and also framed how they constitute themselves and how this rendering has constrained the political agency of principal associations. But, in doing this, other thinking tools such as Foucault's notions of "regimes of truth" (Lorenzini, 2023a, p. 33) and a "possibilising genealogy" (p. 103) were introduced to augment the

problematism invoked by the WPR framework. Having set sensible limits to the scope of my research – i.e., a discrete timeframe (1995–2020) and a single focus of principal accountability from within the neoliberalising policy regime – staying within these limits became a difficult discipline, particularly since the 2013–2020 period saw an expansion in the number of ways principals were held to account. A decision that I took for manageability purposes was to focus largely on the concept of expanded accountabilities (and how these constituted principals and framed how they constituted themselves ) rather than including an examination of how accountabilities were sustained beyond the reform period that produced them. This meant that the effects of annual reporting and the external review of schools (which were constant technologies through the 2001–2020 period) received far less attention than the effects of the PPRP and the SIP regimes.

## **11.8 Concluding Remarks**

My research has claimed that the constitution of principals and their work has resulted from the bureaucracy's expanded interest in accountability and a diminished regard for principal autonomy. This has been a lopsided contest: one where the new managerial practices and neoliberalising policy regimes of the bureaucracy have made it injudicious for individual principals to offer resistance and made it more complicated for principal associations to provide collective resistance. Here, the complications have arisen from the bureaucracy's increasing interest in obtaining policy advice from consultancies and from their constituting principals as corporate proxies, thereby exaggerating the dilemma of dualism experienced by school leaders/principal association members. Alongside this claim, my thesis has made two further original contributions to the field: (i) the introduction of the political agency role performed by principal associations into the policy sociology literature; and (ii) a set of tasks designed

to transform principal associations from policy advocates to political activists (so that they can play a more active role in the disruption of neoliberalising policy regimes).

### **11.8.1 A Postscript**

In March 2022, Labor was returned to government in South Australia. Shortly thereafter, a new chief executive, Professor Martin Westwell, was appointed to lead the DfE. Formerly the chief executive of the SACE Board of South Australia, Professor Westwell has taken the DfE in a new direction: one that is consistent with his SACE Board's ambition of having students 'thrive'<sup>81</sup>. At the time of my writing, much of the PPRP and FGTG apparatus had been stripped away, and there was a burgeoning sense that the DfE senior executive and principal associations had found ways to work together on the macro education agenda.

A tangible indication of this was the support exhibited by South Australia's Minister for Education, the Hon. Blair Boyer, and by the new DfE CE, for *Rethinking and Redesigning the Role of the Principal*, a 2024 project conducted by SASPA and the South Australian State School Leaders' Association (SASSLA)<sup>82</sup>. This principal association project considered the seemingly intractable issues of principals' work demands and the diminished interest from educators wanting to become principals. Through a series of forums held from March to October 2024, school leaders suggested ways to increase their agency and to restore much needed balance to how

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<sup>81</sup> The DfE and SACE Board of SA's use of the term 'thrive' is consistent with that of Hannon and Peterson (2021) whose book, *Thrive: The purpose of schools in a changing world*, focuses on preparing young people to live lives that are healthy, meaningful, and connected to the broader needs of society and the planet. Rather than conflating educational success to good results in standardised tests, Hannon and Peterson, consider the attitudes, capabilities, dispositions and habits students need to make a difference to their own lives and the lives of others.

<sup>82</sup> See details about this project at <https://saspa.com.au/events/school-leaders-reconceptualising-school-leadership-with-each-other-for-each-other-twilight-series/>

principals manage the ethical obligations they have to the profession and to their local school community alongside the demands for school improvement.

It has been almost 30 years since DfE asked SASPA's President to author a paper on Local School Management, an example of the mutual trust that once existed between the bureaucracy and principal associations. Whilst the Minister for Education and the DfE CE did not commission the *Rethinking and Redesigning the Role of the Principal* project, their interest in how it lands is genuine. They recognise that reform in this area is overdue. Could it be that a redesign of the principalship becomes a joint undertaking between government, the education bureaucracy, and principal associations? If so, it would represent a tangible example of policy 'codesign ahead of consultation'.

## **Appendix A Interview Questions**

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### ***Interview questions – DfE Chief Executive***

#### Professional Context:

1. When were you the DfE Chief Executive?
2. What motivated you to undertake this role?
3. What was your understanding of what the role entailed?

#### SASPA + DfE Engagement:

4. Who were the SASPA Presidents during your tenure?
5. What was your access to these Presidents?
6. How was “SASPA’s business” transacted with you and your Department’s senior executive?
7. How would you describe your working relationship with the SASPA President(s) and other heads of associations during your CE role?

#### Influencing Education Policy:

8. What were the SASPA Board’s “policy interests” during your tenure as CE?
9. How did the SASPA Board advocate for improved policy and policy settings during your tenure?
10. What helped? What hindered?
11. Can you describe how power was used to settle the interests of policy owners and policy activists during this time?
12. In navigating this terrain, were there ever any tensions between you and the other policy actors – i.e., the SASPA Board, Departmental officers, the Minister for Education – and, if so, how would you describe them?
13. How did you understand the “political” implications of your role as DfE CE?
14. To what extent was SASPA able to operate “independently” of the DfE and of Government?

#### The Wisdom of Hindsight:

15. On reflection, if you had your time over again, what if anything, would you do differently with regards to your methods in responding to policy advice from SASPA and other associations?



## **Appendix B Interview questions – SASPA President**

### Professional Context:

1. When were you the President of the SA Secondary Principal's Association?
2. What motivated you to undertake this role?
3. What was your understanding of what the role entailed?

### SASPA + DfE Engagement:

4. Who were the Chief Executives of the Department for Education during your tenure?
5. What was your access to these Chief Executives?
6. How was "SASPA's business" transacted with the Department's corporate heads?
7. How would you describe your working relationship with the CE other key senior Education Department executives during your SASPA presidency?

### Influencing Education Policy:

8. What were the SASPA Board's "policy interests" during your tenure?
9. How did you and the Board go about advocating for improved policy and policy settings during this period?
10. What helped? What hindered?
11. Can you describe how power was used to settle the interests of policy owners and policy activists during this time?
12. In navigating this terrain, were there ever any tensions between you and the other policy actors – i.e., the SASPA Board, Departmental officers, the Minister for Education – and, if so, how would you describe them?
13. How did you understand the "political" implications of your role as SASPA President?
14. To what extent was the Association able to operate "independently" of the Agency and of Government?

### The Wisdom of Hindsight:

15. On reflection, if you had your time over again, what if anything, would you do differently with regards to your methods in advocating for improved policy with the Department and/or the Government of the day?

## Appendix C The Commitment

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Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2019

### The Commitment

**We understand** that the people of Australia want children, adolescents and young adults to experience a world class education. As educational leaders we fully support this goal and, as a profession, we want nothing less.

**We believe** that, as professionals within this education sector, we are the people who understand best what it means to be a ‘world-class learner’ and what that looks like throughout 13 years of learning at school.

**We commit**, as educational leaders, to exercising our professional wisdom so as to be recognised within the political process and to shape public debate. This implementation should further contribute to a clear, coherent and compelling narrative for world-class education in Australia.

**We stand** together in our profession and are determined to inform the future direction of Australian education.



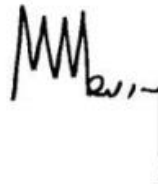
**Andrew Pierpoint**  
President, ASPA



**Malcolm Elliott**  
President, APPA



**Loretta Wholley**  
President, CASPA



**Mark Merry**  
Chair, AHISA



## Appendix D Ethics Approval and Information

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### APPROVAL NOTICE

Project No.:	<input type="text" value="8626"/>		
Project Title:	<input type="text" value="A Risky Business? Activism in navigating the contested policy space for Principal representative bodies within South Australia's public education terrain"/>		
Principal Researcher:	<input type="text" value="Mr Peter Mader"/>		
Email:	<input type="text" value="peter.mader@saspa.com.au"/>		
Approval Date:	<input type="text" value="17 April 2020"/>	Ethics Approval Expiry Date:	<input type="text" value="1 April 2023"/>

The above proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application, its attachments and the information subsequently provided with the addition of the following comment.

#### Additional comments:

The Deputy Chair agrees with the researchers, regarding permissions not being needed.

### RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS

#### 1. Participant Documentation

Please note that it is the responsibility of researchers and supervisors, in the case of student projects, to ensure that:

- all participant documents are checked for spelling, grammatical, numbering and formatting errors. The Sub-Committee does not accept any responsibility for the above mentioned errors.
- the Flinders University logo is included on all participant documentation (e.g., letters of Introduction, information Sheets, consent forms, debriefing information and questionnaires – with the exception of purchased research tools) and the current Flinders University letterhead is included in the header of all letters of introduction. The Flinders University international logo/letterhead should be used and documentation should contain international dialling codes for all telephone and fax numbers listed for all research to be conducted overseas.
- the SBREC contact details, listed below, are included in the footer of all letters of introduction and information sheets.

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number 'INSERT PROJECT No. here following approval'). For more information regarding ethics approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au).*

## 2. Annual Progress / Final Reports

In order to comply with the monitoring requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018)* an annual progress report must be submitted each year on the **17 April** (approval anniversary date) for the duration of the ethics approval using the report template available from the [Managing Your Ethics Approval](#) web page.

**Please note** that no data collection can be undertaken after the ethics approval expiry date listed at the top of this notice. If data is collected after expiry, it will not be covered in terms of ethics. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that annual progress reports are submitted on time; and that no data is collected after ethics has expired.

If the project is completed *before* ethics approval has expired please ensure a final report is submitted immediately. If ethics approval for your project expires please either submit (1) a final report; or (2) an extension of time request (using the modification request form).

First Report due date:

17 April 2021

Final Report due date:

1 April 2023

### Student Projects

For student projects, the SBREC recommends that current ethics approval is maintained until a student's thesis has been submitted, assessed and finalised. This is to protect the student in the event that reviewers recommend that additional data be collected from participants.

## 3. Modifications to Project

Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval has been obtained from the Ethics Committee. Such proposed changes / modifications include:

- change of project title;
- change to research team (e.g., additions, removals, researchers and supervisors)
- changes to research objectives;
- changes to research protocol;
- changes to participant recruitment methods;
- changes / additions to source(s) of participants;
- changes of procedures used to seek informed consent;
- changes to reimbursements provided to participants;
- changes to information / documents to be given to potential participants;
- changes to research tools (e.g., survey, interview questions, focus group questions etc);
- extensions of time (i.e. to extend the period of ethics approval past current expiry date).

To notify the Sub-Committee of any proposed modifications to the project please submit a Modification Request Form available from the [Managing Your Ethics Approval](#) SBREC web page. Download the form from the website every time a new modification request is submitted to ensure that the most recent form is used. Please note that extension of time requests should be submitted prior to the Ethics Approval Expiry Date listed on this notice.

### Change of Contact Details

If the contact details of researchers, listed in the approved application, change please notify the Sub-Committee so that the details can be updated in our system. A modification request is not required to change your contact details; but would be if a new researcher needs to be added on to the research / supervisory team.

## 4. Adverse Events and/or Complaints

Researchers should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 08 8201-3116 or [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au) immediately if:

- any complaints regarding the research are received;
- a serious or unexpected adverse event occurs that effects participants;
- an unforeseen event occurs that may affect the ethical acceptability of the project.

Kind regards  
Rae

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*Please note: Both Executive Officers are currently working from home to assist with the management of COVID-19 and to ensure everyone's safety and wellbeing Flinders University. During this time we will still able to be contacted by email..*

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**Andrea Mather and Rae Tyler**

Executive Officers, Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee  
Research Development and Support | [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)  
P: (+61-8) 8201 3116 | [andrea.mather@flinders.edu.au](mailto:andrea.mather@flinders.edu.au)  
P: (+61-8) 8201 7938 | [rae.tyler@flinders.edu.au](mailto:rae.tyler@flinders.edu.au) (Mon, Wed, Frid mornings)

Flinders University  
Sturt Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042  
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[http://www.flinders.edu.au/research/researcher-support/ebi/human-ethics/human-ethics\\_home.cfm](http://www.flinders.edu.au/research/researcher-support/ebi/human-ethics/human-ethics_home.cfm)



*Proactively supporting our Research*

CRICOS No: 00114A This email and any attachments may be confidential. If you are not the intended recipient, please inform the sender by reply email and delete all copies of this message.



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