FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF POSITIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Supporting secondary school leaders to improve staff wellbeing is important because staff (both teaching and administrative) are key stakeholders in students' educational outcomes. This project is promoting a collaborative approach between a university and leadership staff at three Perth secondary schools to co-create, implement and evaluate professional learning interventions that promote enhanced staff relationships and wellbeing. The participatory action research has involved collecting data across the school environments that were quantitatively analysed to build models of school organisational health and staff morale. These models have facilitated discussion between researchers and staff in the construction of school-wide approaches to supporting staff interpersonal relationships and enhancing school community. The interventions are currently being enacted within the schools, and post-testing will occur in 2017. This paper reports on the generalisable findings from working in the three case study schools, specifically from the initial baseline testing and focus group data used to design the interventions. While the models of factors affecting school culture and staff relationships were different in each school, professional growth and supportive leadership were two factors that were consistent across all three models.

Introduction

There is increased emphasis on the role of schools to improve Australia's educational outcomes, particularly in international testing (Allard & Doecke, 2014; Dinham, 2013; Gorur & Wu, 2015). The public pressure to improve performance, compounded by increasing school accountability and workloads (Timms, Graham, & Cotter, 2007; Watterson & Caldwell, 2011), creates tension within school culture as staff can experience wellbeing issues (Rogers, Barblett, & Robinson, 2016; Timms, Graham, & Cotter, 2007). This research project aimed to promote a collaborative participatory action research (PAR) approach to investigating how positive staff relationships and wellbeing could be enhanced, as one potential solution to improved school culture and minimised wellbeing issues. In this approach the university researchers work alongside the school staff to collect and analyse data, and to implement actions that are co-created with the school staff based on data analysis. The current research is a pilot project involving three Perth metropolitan secondary schools. Each school is unique, with staff of varying experiences and length of time employed at each of the schools, with different numbers of student enrolments, with unique community engagement attributes, and each with their own ethos and values that shape how the school operates. The aim of the research was to explore each of the three schools and their particular interventions in the area of staff relationships and school culture, and to determine if a model of school culture could arise from the shared attributes of each school's case study. The current project is ongoing due to the nature of collaborating with school staff, as collaboration is dependent on school calendars: events, curriculum and reporting periods, and administrative tasks. Nevertheless, this paper reports on part of the initial findings to date, specifically the two key factors that appear to affect positive school culture and staff relationships. The findings presented are based on the pre-test data only. The three schools are currently implementing their interventions, and post-testing will occur in mid-2017.

Literature

This ongoing research builds upon the important findings of the 'Pipeline Project' regarding the complex social factors that make up a successful school (Angus et al., 2009). Conducted by internationally recognised researchers Professor Max Angus, A/Professor Tim McDonald (now CEO of Catholic Office WA) and others, the 'Pipeline Project' was extensively cited in the Education and Health Standing Committee's reports on the Inquiry into improving educational outcomes for Western Australians of all ages presented to the WA Parliament in 2011-12. The report by Angus et al. (2009) stressed that whole-school collaborative approaches are instrumental in improving students' educational engagement as "the construction of a productive school climate in which there is a high level of engagement is seen as the responsibility of school staff members, and it [is] assumed that they collectively have the capacity to achieve such a climate" (p. 86). The challenge of how to create and sustain a positive shared leadership environment is an ongoing issue in schools, as schools are dynamic places that require leadership to be flexible.

In 2008, Australian governments outlined two goals for education in the Melbourne Declaration: "Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence … [and] all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7). The Melbourne Declaration stated that teachers and school leaders would support this goal through high educational standards and supportive learning environments (MCEETYA, 2008). To achieve this outcome, teachers and school leaders are required to sustain positive learning environments focussed on students' unique educational needs; however, rising accountability in Australian schools threatens to shift schools' attention to a narrow focus on students' academic performance and school finance (De Nobile, McCormick, & Hoekman, 2013; Gurd, 2013). The issue of school accountability has led to intensification of teachers' roles with a marked increase in administrative work (De Nobile et al., 2013; Timms, Graham, & Cotter, 2007). Administrative and leadership staff are also under increased pressure to maintain organisational standards compliant with national bodies, such as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and state education departments (AITSL, 2011; Gonski, 2011; Watterston & Caldwell, 2011). These competing tensions between supportive learning environments and performance and accountability measures contribute to increased stress among teachers and fracturing of relationships within school communities.

The inherent challenge of building productive and collaborative school communities is compounded by the high attrition rate of teachers and turnover of school staff (De Nobile et al., 2013; Fetherston & Lummis, 2012; Timms et al., 2007). Yet positive relationships and effective communication between school leaders and staff can serve to minimise the attrition and burnout frequently reported by teachers (De Nobile et al., 2013; Timms et al., 2007). De Nobile et al. (2013) found that organisational communication between school leaders and staff members minimises stress when modelled on democratic values, honesty, and clear and timely access to information. Further, distributed leadership that involves staff in collaboratively planning and enacting school initiatives contributes to increased staff optimism (Mascall, Leithwood, Straus, & Sacks, 2008). Promoting positive staff relationships can therefore improve existing staff morale and minimise attrition (Sterrett & Irizarry, 2015), while also enhancing the affective dimension of school community through increased support for new staff.

Strong, positive staff relationships are crucial to the building of 'social capital' within school communities. Minckler (2013) defines teacher social capital as "the resources available to and used by a teacher by virtue of membership of social network(s) to produce outcomes that are beneficial to the teacher, [his/] her students and ultimately to the school community as a whole" (p. 658). Sustaining teacher social capital is important so that schools continue to operate successfully and meet students' educational needs; even when key teachers or leaders are absent (P. Stringer, 2013). Enhanced social capital has also been linked to teacher self-efficacy and distributed leadership (Minckler, 2013), which may further support retention of school staff and positive organisational communication.

The importance of distributed leadership and active staff participation to promote school community is frequently cited within international literature (Minckler, 2013; Mascall et al., 2008; Sterrett &

Irizarry, 2015; P. Stringer, 2013). Both the United Kingdom and United States of America experience similar accountability pressures with subsequent impacts on staff wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, and therefore school communities (Gurd, 2013; Sterrett & Irizarry, 2015). As a contribution to this internationally significant problem within education, this research project proposed a participatory action research (PAR) method to co-create and implement unique school programs aimed at enhancing staff relationships in three Perth metropolitan schools. It was anticipated that the schools' leaders would have greater autonomy and accountability over these interventions because they actively participated in designing and evaluating their school's program in collaboration with their staff.

Methods

This research project was conducted as three case studies, where each case was bounded by the leaders, administration and teaching staff in one school. A phenomenological framework guided the research, as the researchers sought to understand the lived experiences of staff within each case study school and improve this experience through active intervention in the school community (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

While each school was approached as a separate and unique case study, a participatory action research (PAR) approach was used within each of the schools. A PAR approach was used as it has been well established in community-based inquiry and supports active participation (Creswell, 2014). PAR is characterised by a cyclical process of planning, action, reflection and evaluation (Crane & O'Regan, 2010). It was highly compatible with the whole-school approach of this project because, "rather than focus[ing] on individual teachers solving immediate classroom problems or school addressing internal issues, PAR has a social and community orientation and an emphasis on research that contributes to emancipation or change in our society" (Creswell, 2014, p. 614). The PAR approach is democratic in its design, giving ownership to the participating stakeholders as well as the researchers. E. T. Stringer's (2007) action research model shaped the phases of research: 'look' (build a picture of the issue), 'think' (interpret and analyse the issue), 'act' (resolve the issue through implementing solution) – followed by a distinct phase of 'reflect' (or evaluate) that is essential to the highly reflexive approach of PAR (Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007). Staff members in each school are involved in all phases of the model, in conjunction with the researchers. The key difference in this research was that the university researchers were responsible for the data collection and analysis, minimising the inconvenience for staff members to give up time to complete these aspects of the research. However, staff members at each school have (and will continue to be) involved in all other aspects of the research.

The project is guided by four research questions:

1. How can researchers and school leadership staff work collaboratively to sustain positive school communities?

2. What factors contribute to the development of positive staff relationship opportunities within different school contexts?

3. Does the development of positive staff relationship opportunities improve a sense school culture and community over time?

4. Does enhancing positive staff relationships lead to increased teacher self-efficacy?

To investigate these questions the researchers administered two pre-test questionnaires to the schools, an amended STEBI (Science Teacher Efficacy Belief Instrument) to correspond with each learning area and the School Organisational Health Questionnaire (Hart, Wearing, Conn, Carter, & Dingle, 2000). While teacher efficacy may not be a clear factor affecting school culture, some research has found that congruency between staff members' goals, collaboration, and quality of staff interactions increase self-efficacy (Devos, Dupriez, & Paquay, 2012; Kelm & McIntosh, 2012). The amended

STEBI measured the teacher efficacy in the school to determine its (if any) impact on the school culture. The School Organisational Health Questionnaire provides an overall measure of staff morale and 11 factors that affect morale. This instrument was used to determine the school culture and staff responses to interpersonal interactions occurring within the school. These instruments provided baseline data for repeated measures analysis based on the intervention phase of the project and to inform any changes made to the initial planning. The baseline data were also informed by a series of focus groups with staff at each school that were used to triangulate the quantitative data and to explain the lived experiences of staff members within each school community. The baseline data were used to co-create school community interventions that promoted enhanced staff relationships between leadership teams, administration and teaching staff. It is anticipated that each school will go through multiple action cycles during the research project. At the conclusion of the project, post-test visits will be conducted with each case study school to re-administer the two quantitative instruments and evaluate the overall success of the intervention programs through repeated focus groups and debriefing with the schools' leadership teams.

This paper presents some initial findings in response to research question two:

> *What factors contribute to the development of positive staff relationship opportunities within different school contexts?*

While it was anticipated that the research would be further progressed by this point in time, the nature of PAR has meant that the timeline for the research has been extended and the interventions are still in progress.

Findings

The approach to this research foregrounded the uniqueness of all three participating schools. While the aim is to develop a robust model of factors affecting school culture, the findings from the schools suggested different factors were important in constructing culture in each school. All of the schools identified areas they wanted to strengthen in supporting positive staff relationships during the 'look' phase. In the 'think' phase, the researchers administered the pre-test questionnaires and conducted the focus groups with staff at each school to determine if the data supported the 'look' phase or if there were other areas that could be identified for the research 'act' phase. These findings represent the analysis of staff relationships and school culture at each of the case study schools, which are currently being investigated in the 'act' phase.

The three path diagrams below illustrate the differences from each school when modelling the factors of the School Organisational Health Questionnaire (Hart et al., 2000). The original instrument measures staff morale, and 11 factors that affect morale:

1. Appraisal and recognition;
2. Curriculum coordination;
3. Effective discipline policy;
4. Excessive work demands;
5. Goal congruence;
6. Participative decision making;
7. Professional growth;
8. Professional interaction;
9. Role clarity;
10. Student orientation, and
11. Supportive leadership (Hart et al., 2000).

Figures One, Two and Three show the diversity within the path diagrams for each of the three participating schools. A path diagram illustrates the unique relationships between different factors within a model. The direction of each arrow within each diagram shows the direction of the relationship between two variables. Finally, the arrows themselves represent a pathway that can be taken through the diagram by following their direction.
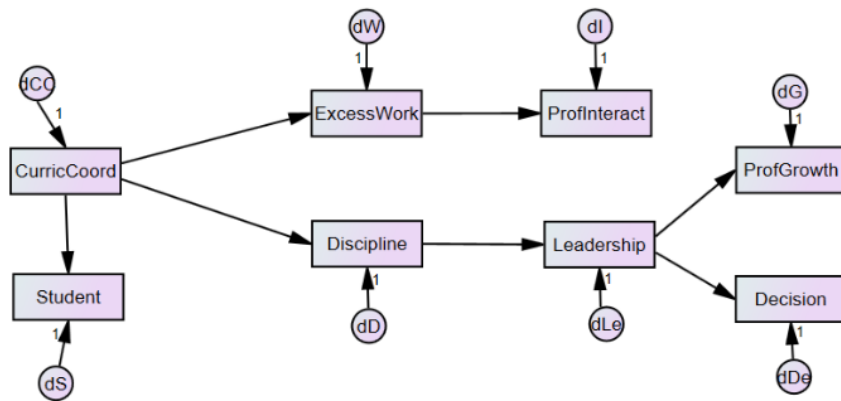
Figure 1. School one's path diagram

Note: CurricCoord = Curriculum Coordination, Student = Student Orientation, ExcessWork = Excessive Work Demands, ProfInteract = Professional Interaction, Discipline = Effective Discipline Policy, Leadership = Supportive Leadership, ProfGrowth = Professional Growth, Decision = Participative Decision Making, d = delta (variance of each factor)
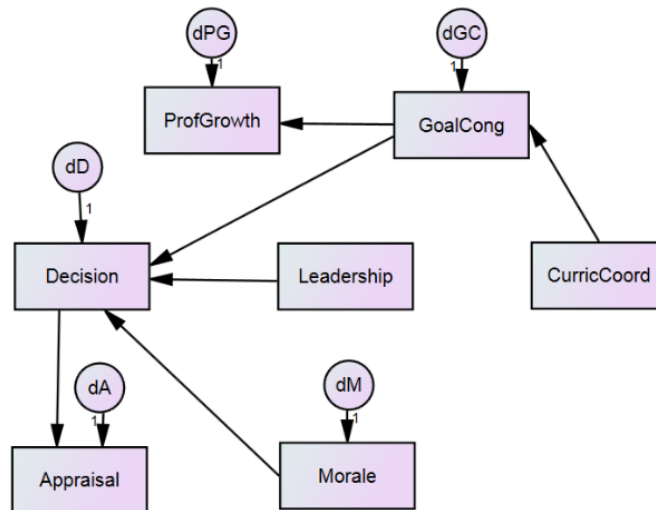

Figure 2. School two's path diagram

Note: ProfGrowth = Professional Growth, GoalCong = Goal Congruence, Decision = Participative Decision Making, Leadership = Supportive Leadership, CurricCoord = Curriculum Coordination, Appraisal = Appraisal and Recognition, Morale = Morale scale, d = delta (variance of each factor)
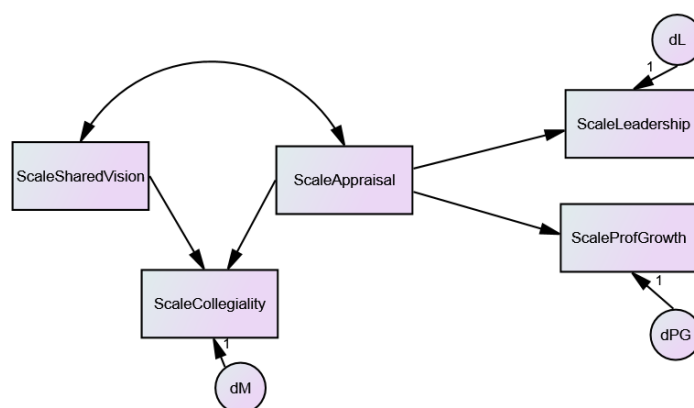
Figure 3. School three's path diagram

Note: 'Scale' denotes that the weighted scale variables were used in the construction of the model. SharedVision = Shared Vision, Appraisal = Appraisal and Recognition, Leadership = Supportive Leadership, Collegiality = Collegiality, ProfGrowth = Professional Growth, d = delta (variance of each factor)

The path diagram for school three included two scales that were not on the original questionnaire. A possible reason for this occurring was that school three had a higher enrolment of senior school (years 11 and 12) students, and the older adolescent students attending the school shaped their school climate. Exploratory factor analyses were computed on pre-test data from school three, which revealed two 'new' constructs from the existing items. For school three, a new morale scale was computed in an exploratory factor analysis. The new morale scale, was measured by the following items:

1. I receive support from my colleagues (originally professional interaction);
2. Teachers in this school can rely on their colleagues for support when required (originally professional interaction);
3. There is good team spirit in this school (originally morale); and,
4. There are forums in this school where I can express my views or opinions (originally participative decision making).

As these items were part of an untested construct, they were further analysed for cohesiveness and returned a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79. Tukey's test of nonadditivity (which determines if a scale is unidimensional) also showed collegiality as a reliable construct.

The second scale that differed from the original School Organisational Health Questionnaire was student orientation. This scale still included many of the original items that were retained; however, some of the original morale items also loaded onto this factor. Subsequently, the new scale was termed 'shared vision', as the focus groups conducted at school three consistently mentioned the concept of a shared vision among the staff. The following items measured shared vision:

1. There is a lot of energy in this school (originally morale);
2. This school promotes the concept of students being individuals (originally student orientation);
3. Students are treated as responsible people in this school (originally student orientation); and,
4. Students in this school are encouraged to experience success (originally student orientation).

Again, these items were analysed for reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the new shared vision scale, was 0.88 and Tukey's test for nonadditivity confirmed the construct as reliable.

Visually and conceptually, all of the three school path diagrams are unique. In all three models; however, there were two factors that were consistent: (1) professional growth, and (2) leadership. The pathways for these constructs were different for each school:

- In school one, professional growth was affected by curriculum coordination, but mediated by effective discipline policy and supportive leadership.

- In school two, professional growth was also affected by curriculum coordination in the school, although this effect was mediated by the staff's sense of goal congruence.

- In school three, professional growth was affected by 'shared vision' (morale + student orientation), although the interaction was mediated by appraisal and recognition.

The qualitative data collected across the three schools supported the path diagrams. For school one the staff felt stressed by the number of professional learning hours required by the Teacher Registration Board, namely "*100 hours over a 5 year period, 80 hours over a 4 year period and 60 hours over a 3 year period*". Professional growth may have been mediated by supportive leadership because of school funding, "*Because of budget cuts you're not really as supported or encouraged to go to lots of PD ... [and] if we need time off the relief coordinator gets impacted*". In the secondary school context, professional growth was strongly related to curriculum coordination as each learning area department had their own professional learning sessions as a team, "*looking through the WA curriculum, course results, and working on that*". This was an issue when there were varying "*departmental dynamics*", which had caused some staff members to build wider networks outside of their learning area department, such as a school social committee or health and wellbeing committee.

For school two, curriculum coordination also affected staff members' professional growth. Instead of professional learning, school two focused their discussion on internal promotion of staff. In this school, focus group participants were concerned about "*a lot of hard-working people doing the right thing and just constantly getting looked over*". The staff also discussed how they would like more committees in the school to drive merit-selection appointment. It was evident in the focus groups that not all school staff shared the same goals, and this could impact on their perception of being supported to grow professionally. These comments supported the quantitative data as goal congruence affected participative decision-making.

For school three professional growth was affected by different constructs, namely shared vision and appraisal and recognition. Appraisal and recognition was a key mediator as the school's leadership team had a strong advocacy for advancing teachers to higher levels of achievement and professional development. The staff were encouraged to "*learn ... We try to provide leadership opportunities for our staff*". Budgets also affected when teachers could invest in professional learning, with the school preferring staff to enrol in courses "*during exams ... when we don't have to supply a relief teacher*". Shared vision appeared to affect professional growth development as staff shared positive stories of collaborative tasks about researching new teaching strategies with each other, such as "*cooperative learning ... [where staff from] different learning areas are intermixed [in the professional learning]*". Examples such as this reinforced the whole-school approach to professional growth, centred on improving student learning.

The second key factor that affected the school organisational health was supportive leadership. The pathways for each school showed even more diversity in mediating constructs:

- In school one, supportive leadership was affected by curriculum coordination, mediated by effective discipline policy.

- In school two, supportive leadership was affected by participative decision-making, mediated by appraisal and recognition.

- In school three, supportive leadership was affected by 'shared vision' (morale + student orientation), mediated by appraisal and recognition.

For school one the same factors that affected supportive leadership also affected professional growth. In the focus groups for school one, the discussion about leadership was often linked back to professional growth and interaction in the school. The participants felt well supported by the

leadership team at the school, and acknowledged the visible presence the leadership team had on school committees and at "*big days, big events*". However, the newer school staff members did not think the leadership team were as visible as the longer-term members. The newer staff members suggested items like a photograph board would help them to identify key leadership and school support staff more effectively.

For school two, the pathway changed dramatically, with new factors affecting the staff's sense of supportive leadership. The focus group discussion mostly explored participative decision making, as they stated that they felt "*staff-staff interactions that breakdown, we tend to shy away from*". The participants suggested that working towards improving communication between staff would be a way of building school culture. The mediating factor of appraisal and recognition was also raised through discussion about social events, where staff members would usually receive recognition for positive achievements; however, the participants discussed how social events were "*turning into another meeting … So lately, the staff are deciding not to go*".

For school three, the pathway remained exactly the same for both professional growth and supportive leadership. The shared vision factor was evident in the focus group discussions with the participants stating, "*Leadership get involved in anything!*" The staff often spoke about how leadership at all levels "*'Have the back' of people. They will look after you. You're not left floundering*". The appraisal and recognition aspect was also covered through leadership 'listening' to their staff. One staff member explained "*if I've got a concern, I'm listened to, even if it's not the right way to go … There's always a good reason*". In this way, staff concerns were recognised by the school leadership, and this contributed to the sense of shared vision and collegiality in the school.

The baseline data from each school were used to establish the parameters for a whole of school intervention for the 'act' phase. The researchers provided a formal report for each school, which was distributed in paper and electronic copies to all staff by the principal. All schools were given time to reflect on the report and recommendations from the research. After several weeks the researchers met with the principal and leadership teams to consider the feedback from their staff. The recommendations were ranked as agreed priorities to be addressed in a full day workshop in a private function centre, to determine a plan for the school's 'act' phase. A neutral facilitator (an independent senior secondary principal) was engaged to conduct the intervention workshop where staff members worked in groups to develop practical strategies to implement the particular recommendations. At point of writing only one school has completed the workshop day and is implementing their intervention processes; however, the other schools have arranged workshops and will implement changes in term 1, 2017. In the case of the first school, the workshop participants were selected from teaching and school support staff; senior leadership team members did not attend in order for the participants to feel free to express their ideas without feeling restricted by power relationships. Subsequently, the workshopped PAR recommendations were reintroduced to the rest of the staff as a whole school activated intervention.

Discussion

Initial findings in response to research question two (*What factors contribute to the development of positive staff relationship opportunities within different school contexts?*) suggest that professional growth and supportive leadership are key factors in developing positive relationships. These were the only two factors to be consistently significant in the data from all three schools.

Professional growth was affected by different factors for each school; however, for two schools curriculum coordination was a mediating factor somewhere in the path. The qualitative data suggest that there are similar issues around professional growth and professional learning at all three schools. Individual improvement was an aspiration for most teachers, who sought professional learning to extend their skills and knowledge. There was an acknowledgement that external regulations, such as the Teacher Registration Board and AITSL National Professional Standards for Teachers (2011) increased pressure on teachers to ensure they were meeting the required number of hours of

professional learning. Finance was discussed as a barrier to attending professional learning, with staff at all three schools explaining how relief teacher budgets and professional learning costs were taken into consideration when planning professional learning. Financial responsibility is a key driver in the independence of schools and an added accountability pressure on schools (Gurd, 2013), so it is unsurprising that it is a consideration for teachers and school staff in planning their professional learning. Promotion and achievement of professional goals were also discussed. These discussions were often linked to Minckler's (2013) notion of social capital, or the resources utilised by teachers within a social network, leading to benefits for both the teacher and his/her students, as well as the wider community. Teachers in this research project spoke about committees and leadership support to apply for promotion and to have opportunities to lead within their school communities. These circumstances increased positive staff relationships within the school. Often social capital is linked to distributed leadership (Sterrett & Irizarry, 2015; P. Stringer, 2013) and this was evident in the case study schools. When teachers felt supported to further their own professional development (i.e., through support from Heads of Learning Areas and senior leadership teams) they felt more positively about the school culture and their relationships within the school.

Supportive leadership was the second key factor evident in all three schools. Schools one and three had similar pathways to this factor as they did for professional growth, suggesting similarities between these two constructs. The qualitative data confirmed these similarities as the discussion of recognition and encouragement to achieve were key topics of the focus group discussion for both supportive leadership and professional growth. Staff at all three schools spoke about the importance of leadership visibility and participation. They wanted to be able to identify and know the leadership team at their school. In some schools the involvement of leadership in whole school events improved the staff relationships, as there was a sense of camaraderie and support for teacher-led initiatives. Promoting teacher-led initiatives where staff have the opportunity to develop leadership skills and participate in making decisions has been shown to improve morale and relationships within schools (Sterrett & Irizarry, 2015). However, some schools spoke about leadership staff that were often absent due to management duties, which is consistent with the increasing burden of administration on teachers and schools (DeNobile et al., 2013; Timms et al., 2007). With rising accountability placed on schools to perform and lift Australia's educational outcomes as well as their own school improvement planning (AITSL, 2011; Gonski, 2011; Watterson & Caldwell, 2011) there is added workload for leadership staff. These increased duties limit the physical time that leadership staff can spend being 'visible' in the school. In turn, this provides another argument for utilising distributed leadership as a strategy to share increased workload across a number of staff. Furthermore, the participating staff spoke about the importance of being 'listened to' by their leadership team, and having time to develop social as well as professional relationships. The professional and personal recognition shared in having social engagements helped staff to develop a more positive and collegial school culture. The development of a 'whole-school' vision was consistent with findings from the 'Pipeline Project', which suggested that whole-school approaches to improve student outcomes were affected by the climate of the school (Angus et al., 2009). In addition, developing social opportunities and building rapport between staff could minimise breakdowns in staff relationships, which was mentioned as something "*we tend to shy away from*". Maintaining positive relationships and actively managing communication breakdowns is one strategy to retaining teachers in the profession, as attrition can be linked to feelings of isolation or stress caused by staff culture (Fetherston & Lummis, 2012; Timms et al., 2007; Sterrett & Irizarry, 2015).

Conclusion

While it was anticipated that the final models of school culture would be presented, the nature of participatory action research (PAR) dictates a project timeline that meets the needs of the individual participating schools. In line with PAR, the researchers are supporting a longer timeline to ensure the quality participation of schools in developing and implementing their own unique professional learning interventions around supporting positive staff relationships. At this stage of the research it is evident that professional growth and supportive leadership are key factors that affect positive staff

relationships, in spite of other factors unique to each case study school. The qualitative data explored the role of leadership in encouraging and supporting teachers' individual professional development, and emphasised the consequences of increased school accountability measures on the opportunity for leadership staff to play a key role in visibly involving themselves within the staff community. The data suggest a role for distributed leadership in sharing accountability and supporting in-school opportunities for teachers to experience leadership roles. Perhaps most importantly, being recognised to have such opportunity and to be 'listened to' is a key motivator for staff to support and invest in their school culture and in positive relationships. While the research is ongoing, the researchers and staff at all three schools have had deep discussions and reflections on what the initial data have revealed, which has led to the current interventions in one school and future interventions for the remaining two. This level of problem solving and collaboration between university staff and schools is also a strategy to minimise administration tasks within schools, as university researchers independently collected and analysed data without additional burden being given to members of staff within the school. Subsequently, school staff's involvement in the research is focussed on the issues of school culture and interpersonal relationships, rather than on processing large volumes of data.

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