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The strategic role of leadership in preventing early school leaving and failure

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Abstract

The retention and success of all students in education systems are a global imperatives. However, the number of students disengaged from mainstream education suggests a need to take a closer look at the role school leaders play in improving educational outcomes for students and decreasing the number of early school leavers. In this article, we explore how school leadership can create a culture of success to improve student achievement, progress, and retention. Three cases from the International Successful School Principalship Project are presented of the leadership of a primary school and two secondary schools from Melbourne, Australia. Understanding the needs of the school, working with students, staff and the greater community to effect change was a crucial starting point for each leader. Strong principal leadership, high expectations, a clear vision for change, and a commitment to success were all critical elements for reform.

Keywords: Leadership, Principals, School success, Student retention, Student failure.

Estratto

Fare in modo che gli studenti non abbandonino gli studi, ma che abbiano invece successo nel loro percorso scolastico, è un imperativo globale per tutti i sistemi d'istruzione. Il numero di studenti che si allontanano dai percorsi educativi e formativi tradizionali impone tuttavia un'analisi più attenta del ruolo svolto dai dirigenti scolastici nel miglioramento dei risultati degli studenti in termini di apprendimento, nonché nella riduzione della dispersione scolastica. In questo articolo si esplorano le modalità di creazione di una cultura del successo da parte dei dirigenti, per migliorare il rendimento degli studenti e il loro successo, prevenendo al contempo l'abbandono del percorso scolastico. Nel contributo vengono presentati tre casi inclusi nel progetto International Successful School Principalship Project, riguardanti i dirigenti di una scuola primaria e di due secondarie di Melbourne, in Australia. Emergono delle linee comuni nelle azioni dei dirigenti coinvolti: capire le esigenze della scuola e lavorare con gli studenti, il personale e la comunità per apportare un reale cambiamento. Elementi fondamentali della riforma sono stati una forte leadership, aspettative alte, una visione chiara orientata al cambiamento e l'impegno per il raggiungimento del successo.

Parole chiave: Leadership, Dirigenti, Successo scolastico, Dispersione scolastica, Fallimento scolastico.

1. Introduction

The effectiveness of an education system should not only be measured by its successes but also by its failures. Retention rates and poor academic achievements largely remain global educational priorities with nations focused on improving student outcomes and reducing the number of early school leavers (OECD, 2012). Ensuring that all children have access to quality education and remain in school for as long as possible “strengthens individuals’ and societies’ capacities to respond to the recession and contribute to economic growth and social wellbeing” (OECD, 2012;3). The personal and societal costs of the failure to educate and retain students in school can be measured through low incomes, unemployment rates and dependence on government financial support. Lamb, Jackson, Walstab & Huo (2004) found that early school leavers were at risk of having low incomes, unemployment, and dependency on welfare. The Pisa 2015 (OECD, 2016) report some ten years later reported that highly skilled adults are three times more likely to earn above the average income, more likely to contribute to society, be in good to excellent health and trust others. It would seem poor educational outcomes not only impact on the school leaver but have a long-lasting effect on society more broadly. Young people who do not experience positive educational outcomes and leave school early are less likely to integrate into society, be less likely to pursue an education in the future and will undoubtedly have low aspirations and experience poor transition into work.

While Australia’s student retention rates to the end of secondary school are amongst the highest in the world, the rates are not equal across each state and territory. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2017), the 2017 National Apparent Retention Rate in Australia for full-time

students remaining in school until the final year of secondary education (Year 12) was 84.8 percent, and this has improved with an increase from 2008 to 2017 of 10 percent. However, there is a wide range of retention rates across the states and territories from 58.6 percent in the Northern Territory to 94.8 percent in the Australian Capital Territory. Within these statistics there is also variation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with, for example, Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander students in 2017 only having a retention rate of 62.4 percent (ABS, 2017). Retention rates for Indigenous students are lower than those of non-Indigenous students however rates are steadily increasing in line with the targets set by the Close The Gap Framework introduced in 2008 by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to achieve equality in health and life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by the year 2030.

To support students who do drop out of education within mainstream Australian schools, the establishment of flexible educational settings are increasing (Te Reile, 2014). Te Reile’s report on Flexible Learning Programs in Australia called *Putting the Jigsaw Together*, found that nationally there are over 900 flexible learning programs catering for marginalized young people educating over 70,000 students each year. While many of these providers are registered schools, the reality is that more and more students are leaving mainstream schools and finding themselves in flexible programs often as a last resort. The establishment of flexible schools has been a positive step in educating and training young people, many of whom are marginalized members of society. The question remains however as to why so many students find themselves disengaged from mainstream schools in the first place. Could schools be doing more to retain students and prevent them from dropping out?

The most common way to prevent early school leaving and failure is to have successful schools that can cater to the needs of diverse student populations. The vision for this resides with school leaders. School leadership is widely recognized as having a significant impact on school success. High-quality leaders understand the needs of their school, establish goals and expectations, and develop their people to build a culture of excellence focused on improving outcomes for all students. The breadth and complexity of the principal's role are widely documented, however, a commitment to improved teaching and learning is essential in increasing student achievement and decreasing attrition in schools. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) reported an average effect size of approximately 0.4 for school leadership on student outcomes.

Similarly, Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008;636) found that "the more leaders focus their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their likely influence on student outcomes." School leadership which maximizes impact on student learning is central to school success and a key tenet of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) which sets out standards for the teaching profession in Australia. In 2011, AITSL published the Australian Professional Standard for Principals which described three core leadership requirements and five areas of professional practice (AITSL, 2011). The first of its practices is *Leading Teaching and Learning*. The standard states:

"Principals create a positive culture of challenge and support, enabling effective teaching that promotes enthusiastic, independent learners, committed to lifelong learning. Principals have a key responsibility for developing a culture of effective teaching, for leading, designing and managing the quality of teaching and learning and for students' achievement in all aspects of their development. They set high expectations for the

whole school through careful collaborative planning, monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of learning. Principals set high standards of behavior and attendance, encouraging active engagement and a strong student voice" (AITSL, 2011, p. 9).

Principals have an integral role in determining the focus of a school and Australian practice standards support this. Based on a literature review of successful school leadership, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) claimed that of school-controlled factors, school leadership was second to teaching in terms of impact on student learning. While leadership was broadly conceived much of the research explored was focussed on principals. Furthermore, they also claimed that leadership has a greater impact in areas where it is needed, such as schools in challenging contexts. While many factors are contributing to student success and retention, "leadership is the catalyst" (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004;7). This was again later confirmed with further research in 2010 (Louis, Leithwood, Walhstrom & Anderson, 2010).

2. Methodology

The three cases are all taken from the Australian research that is part of the International Successful Principalship Project (ISSPP), which is a project that for nearly 20 years has been exploring the characteristics, qualities and practices of principals leading successful schools (see <https://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/>). The ISSPP research utilizes multiple perspective case studies which include individual interviews with the principal, senior staff and school council members, group interviews with teachers, parents, and students, and a collection of appropriate documents to inform the cases. Methodologically the ISSPP relies on a relatively open and grounded approach to constructing interview protocols.

Whilst no protocol is a-theoretical, the ISSPP does not rely on a theoretical foundation for the questions, with interview questions covering areas such as the school ethos and context; principal's vision, leadership priorities and plans for the school; challenges for the school; defining school success; measuring success; accounting for school success; principal role in school success and how they know they are successful; leadership strategies; handling complex issues; principal relationships with members of the school community; non-professional sources of support for the principal and principal succession.

2.1. Leadership in Challenging Contexts

If leadership is essential in improving student outcomes and retention rates, and more so in schools in challenging contexts, then exploring some examples will help to illuminate what successful leaders are doing and how their role has an impact. Three examples of successful principal leaders from our research at the University of Melbourne follow.

John Fleming and Bellfield Primary School: High expectations, positive relationships, and informed practice.

The first example of successful school leadership which impacted on student outcomes is the principalship of John Fleming. John became the assistant principal (1992) and then principal (1996-2006) of Bellfield Primary School. Bellfield was a small (220 students) government school in a high poverty suburb of Melbourne (85 percent of students were eligible for government assistance). During John's time as principal, he transformed the school to a point where literacy and numeracy results improved and were above similar schools and at or above state averages, staff and parent opinions

were high, and student absences decreased. John's work at Bellfield is fully described in Gurr, Drysdale, Di Natale, Ford, Hardy and Swann (2003), Hardy (2006), Gurr (2007) and Fleming and Kleinhenz (2007).

John was passionate about every student being successful at school, regardless of circumstance. He demonstrated a strong belief that every student could learn and achieve in all areas, and was particularly focused on literacy, numeracy, and social connection. Being in a small school, and having a history of teaching success, John saw the opportunity to be a principal who demonstrated a direct influence on the quality of teaching and learning. He had exceptionally high expectations and a very positive, 'can do' attitude. He demonstrated a high level of energy, excellent pedagogical and curriculum knowledge, and a capacity to develop and align staff. He was ever present, regularly visiting classes to work with students and teachers, interested and focussed on helping them improve. The foundation for his influence on teachers was a sound and clearly articulated educational philosophy centered on four pillars: teacher-directed learning; explicit instruction; using strategies to move knowledge from short to long-term memory, and finally establishing very good relationships with students:

"We believe in teacher-directed learning, and Bellfield has four pillars. I am sure any of the teachers at Bellfield could talk to all of our visitors about the four pillars. The four pillars are our vision and our pedagogy about how children learn. They are absolutely crucial to how we have turned this school around. The first pillar is that we believe in teacher-directed learning, not child-centered learning. The second pillar is that we believe in explicit instruction. Our third pillar is fundamental: we believe in moving kids' knowledge from short term to long-term memory. Our fourth pillar states that none of the top three will take their place effectively unless you have very good relationships with your kids" (Gurr, 2007;127-128).

John also believed that teachers should have excellent presentation skills and that

students should be provided with regular feedback. Displays of student work, high expectations regularly reinforced, a celebration of student achievement and a positive school climate helped to set the right tone for the school. Sporting and other activities occurred at recess times, with John usually out in the playground organizing bat tennis at lunchtimes. He enhanced the social capital of student and families by making parents feel welcome to the school, developing parent-school partnerships, and through extensive connections to the external world be that through organizations coming into the school or John organizing excursions to cultural and sporting events. For example, he organized for students to see a Friday night football game and drove each student back to their home to make sure they got home safely and to connect with the families. John endeavored to build a school that was a physically and emotionally safe environment for everyone and one where students felt connected.

Through his unique leadership, John was able to transform the school successfully. The critical focus for him was in working with the staff in a school because he loved the challenge of helping people to develop, and particularly enjoyed working with teachers to improve their practice. John worked extensively with teachers and expected all to show commitment to the students and the school and to want to improve. He realized that not all the teachers would be extraordinary teachers, but if they were willing to support the school direction and to work to improve their practice, then John was willing to support them '100 percent'. For John, getting the most out of teachers was about creating high expectations for student learning, and using data to support the learning environment. Creating a culture in which teachers are accountable, where data is collected and used to inform student learning was integral. He had high expectations of teachers and

put structures in place to formally observe the work of teachers regularly.

Postscript. John left the school at the end of 2005 to become the head of the Berwick campus of a high-fee independent school, Haileybury College. He is currently the Deputy Principal (Junior School Teaching & Learning) at Haileybury College and Director of the Haileybury Institute. Bellfield Primary School no longer exists as it was closed as part of a rationalizing of government education provision in the area.

Glenn Proctor and Hume Central Secondary College: Creating a roadmap for success, building leadership and teacher expertise

Glenn Proctor was a successful principal in a successful school located in an educationally advantaged area of Melbourne. On the opposite side of Melbourne, in the area where Glenn grew up, three secondary schools were in trouble. They had a long history of low performance (poor student learning, high student absences, low staff, and parent opinion) and enrolments were low and declining with many families in the area sending their children to schools in neighboring suburbs. The area, Broadmeadows, was one of the most disadvantaged suburban areas in Australia. The government decided to close these three schools and re-open them as one new school with substantial financial support devoted to building a new campus and renovating two of the other three campuses. In 2008, Glenn was asked to become the executive principal of this school, Hume Central Secondary College, and he accepted the challenge. Glenn's work at Hume is described in Huerta Villalobos (2013), Gurr, Drysdale, Longmuir and McCrohan (2018), and Gurr, Drysdale, Clarke and Wildy (2014).

Hume Central Secondary College consists of two Year 7-9 campuses and a Year 10-12 campus. Both Year 7-9 campuses share their sites with a local primary school, and one of these campuses also has an En-

glish language center to cater for the high number of migrants requiring instruction in English as a second language. More than 70 percent of families are in the bottom quartile for income, and close to 80 percent of students have a language background other than English. Enrolments have remained in the 1,100 to 1,200 range over the time since the school's formation. Student learning outcomes and staff, student and parent expectations have increased. Attendance has also improved, and student, parent, and staff opinion are now favorable.

Glenn's leadership focussed on formulating a sense of direction through a planning strategy, building teacher and leadership capacity, establishing a high expectation performance and development culture, formulating a planning strategy, restructuring the school, and improving teaching and learning. These are similar to the leadership elements described by Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) as being important for turning around low performing schools. Glenn's task was indeed to turn around the three failing schools and to create one new successful school. Staff and students from the three previous schools remained at the school and so a new sense of purpose and culture had to be developed. In the early days after taking up his appointment, he noticed that students did not carry any bags home with them. To Glenn, this was a sign of a low expectation culture and one not focussed on learning success. To change this culture, he brought relentless pressure for change. But it was purposeful change and focussed on improving student performance. Glenn recognized that for students to be performing at a comparable level to the state, he had to somehow get two years of learning growth in one year, and so he developed a '2 in 1' mantra. He established a sense of urgency about the student learning gap through strategies like, in 2010, playing to the staff, audio tapes of year 9 students reading, and

showing how much they were below where they should be. In the early stages of reform, the staff identified over 30 significant change initiatives including building leadership capacity; developing team orientation; distributing leadership; creating curriculum design teams; use of literacy and numeracy coaches; developing an explicit teaching model and enhancing student engagement. These changes were part of an integrated plan, called a road map, that the leadership team developed. In consultation with staff, this was implemented across the three campuses. Glenn was good at developing people and he invested considerable resources in developing the leadership team (executive principal, three campus principals, and 16 leading teachers) and teachers. To develop leadership capacity, leadership team meetings included professional learning activities, intensive professional learning programs were provided (e.g. coaching for success), readings were reviewed, and two critical friends used to provide feedback and advice. Apart from acting as general advisors and as a confidant for Glenn, one of the critical friends provided considerable leadership team development and the other provided a model of school improvement (Zbar, Marshall & Power, 2007). This involved establishing the preconditions for improvement and then developing ways to sustain improvement:

A) Preconditions for improvement:

- Strong leadership is shared
- High levels of expectations and teacher efficacy
- Ensuring an orderly learning environment
- A focus on what matters most

B) Sustaining improvement over time:

- Building teaching and leadership expertise
- Structure teaching to ensure all students succeed
- Using data to drive improvement
- A culture of sharing and responsibility

- Tailoring initiatives to the overall direction of the school
- Engendering pride in the school

To build teacher capacity, the school developed a range of important strategies. They developed a common explicit instructional model, used common assessment tasks and developed curriculum design teams to implement the whole-school approach to teaching and learning. They also created structures for teachers to work in triads to observe each other's practice and plan for improvement which at first was confronting for staff but the peer to peer feedback and collaboration created a culture of change and an openness to alternate ways of teaching and learning. In an effort to impact on the poor literacy and numeracy outcomes of students, the school employed literacy and numeracy coaches to work closely with staff and students alike.

Glenn had high expectations for students, teachers and the community and in light of this, he developed a performance and development culture such as the *triad teacher teams*, which were structured into the school timetable to allow for staff to gain weekly time release to observe each other's classes and to help each other improve their practice. Glenn constantly questioned the behavior, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of teachers, especially if they showed signs of low self-efficacy. There was a deep sense of moral purpose at the school with the school adopting a long-term vision of developing a love of lifelong learning and equipping students with the opportunity to lead a purposeful and fulfilling life beyond school. His relentless pursuit of quality education and strong moral purpose to do the best for students was evident in his belief that "low socioeconomic does not mean low achievement." Student engagement was encouraged through the provision of programs to meet student needs and interests. For example, in the senior years the academic

Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) was provided, but so too were courses focussed on industry experience (Vocational Education and Training, VET) and hands-on learning and basic skill development (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, VCAL).

Postscript. Glenn retired at the end of 2015 and one of his assistant principals was successful in gaining his role. The school continues to develop in terms of facilities and programs, with attention to improving student outcomes.

Peter Hutton and Templestowe College: Revolutionising education, innovating for next practice

Before becoming principal at Templestowe College, Peter Hutton had been a principal at an independent school, and an assistant principal in a government school (both in regional areas, but close to Melbourne). After applying several times for another principalship, he secured the role at Templestowe College in 2009. The school had dramatically falling enrolments, learning outcomes below expectations, and poor student, parent, and staff opinion. The surrounding community, in an affluent area of Melbourne, had lost confidence in the school and, with enrolments of less than 300 students for a year 7-12 school, there was a recommendation to close the school in one to two years unless something happened to arrest the decline. Peter saw the opportunity to try new ideas, as what had been happening was not working. In 2010, Templestowe College was not a school of choice for local families. Of the 300 enrolments, 64 percent of families were in the upper half of income distribution, and 43 percent of students had a language background other than English. By 2017 the school had 71 percent of families in the upper half of income distribution, 20 percent of students had a language background other than English and enrolments in 2018 were over 1,100 students.

What these figures indicate is that the school has succeeded in attracting a broad range of families more representative of the local area. It is now a vibrant, popular and successful school with most learning outcomes at or above expectations. Peter's work at Templestowe is described in Gurr, Drysdale, Longmuir and McCrohan (2018) and Longmuir (2017).

In his principalship, Peter embarked on a program of rapid innovative and disruptive change to the culture, structure, and purpose of the school. His support for Australian education values of equity, diversity and citizenship (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs, 2008), and his understanding of contemporary youth issues, like student disengagement in learning, mental health problems and preparing for uncertain futures, drove him to create a student-centred school that students would want to come to, and where they would feel supported and in control of their learning (student action rather than merely student voice). He had a 'yes' philosophy where students could come to him, pitch a new learning idea, and his first response would be to say 'yes'. For example, some students wanted to grow and sell animals, and so commercial-grade facilities were established, including large fish tanks and terrariums. Other students saw the need for a school café and so a profit-making, student-run café and catering facility was established.

Generating the greatest of impact on the school was a shift away from traditional learning and classroom structures. Students proposed a departure from the traditional curriculum and so Peter worked with staff and students to create a curriculum focussed on students' individual interests and needs:

"Following a strategic review in 2013, Templestowe College moved towards individualized learning, and by 2015 we dropped all reference to year

levels, and now all students Take Control of their learning by selecting 100 percent of their course load from more than 150 electives as part of their Individualised Learning Plan (ILP) once the basic literacy and numeracy is established" (<https://tc.vic.edu.au/our-story/>, n.p.).

With no year levels, after completing the basic literacy and numeracy units, students would find themselves in mixed-age classes. As a result of this individualized approach, the school stated that a student's journey through school may only take between four to eight years for what is typically a six-year secondary school program. Not only did students chose their learning, they were also involved in the school more broadly. For example, students were part of staff selection panels when appointing new staff, students formed the core of the curriculum committee which was responsible for decisions around teaching and learning, and students provided formal feedback to their teachers every five weeks.

The school's vision was to co-create high-quality learning experiences with their students within an inclusive and supportive community. The school worked with each student to determine how they wished to complete their secondary education. In keeping with the school's individualized approach, students could take subjects in a preferred course when they felt it was most appropriate. Unusually, the school did not emphasize completing the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), although this was available and student outcomes in this had improved over time to be similar to other government schools (the VCE is the main certificate of study upon successful completion of secondary school). Alternative educational programs and pathways were available to students such as Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses, and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The school's approach to education has been so successful that two Melbourne schools, one regional school in Victoria and another school in Adelaide, have

adopted similar approaches and worked together as a loose federation of schools as part of the Futures Schools Alliance (<https://futureschools.education>).

Peter's leadership has been directive, explicit and visionary and has led to disruptive innovation across the entire school. This is a somewhat unusual approach when many are extolling the virtues of shared leadership, but the school was in a crisis, and so Peter was able to be more directive and single-minded in his pursuit of change, driven by his vision of a student-centered and personalized school. Peter demonstrated a consuming passion for seeking out contemporary pedagogies and curriculum ideas, with all options open for consideration. His desire to engage his learners and ensure they remained interested and focussed on their education inspired the introduction of new ideas continuously. This mode of operating has led to the students themselves striving to innovate and create. Peter admits that in the early days, he and his senior staff were making it up as they went, and it was only in looking back that it became evident that there was coherence to what they were doing. Some of the early ideas have worked well and endured (individualized programs) and others have been abandoned. For example, at one stage the school had multiple start times to the school day, but it no longer does this. The school evolved to have a School Leadership Team that oversaw school development. Whilst this group had the usual members of the principal, assistant principals, and leading teachers, it was open to any student or staff member who wished to join. Peter described his tenure at the school as consisting of two phases with the first two to three years about survival and staving off closure, followed by great innovation and growth over the next five years until his departure in 2016. Templestowe College was acknowledged as one of the most innovative schools in the world

by the Finish based hundred organization (<https://hundred.org/en/innovations/templestowe-college>).

Postscript. Peter left the school at the end of 2016, and one of his assistant principals was successful in gaining his role. The school has continued to improve in terms of student learning outcomes and enrolments and remains highly regarded as an innovative school.

3. Discussion

The three cases present examples of principals that have made a difference to their schools and who have helped promote student retention and success. Though they have done so in different contexts and different ways, there are some lessons to be learned, and to consider this we will apply the improvement framework developed by Zbar, Marshall & Power (2007), which sets out preconditions for improvement and ways to sustain improvement over time.

3.1. *Preconditions for improvement*

The four preconditions for improvement include strong leadership, high expectations and teacher efficacy, an orderly environment and a focus on what matters most. Each of these factors is explored with examples across each principals' leadership journey.

Each of the principals had what could be described as strong leadership. They each entered the school aware of the needs of their settings and were determined to make a success of the school. Part of their strategy was to inspire a shared vision and create enthusiasm and a commitment toward that vision. Each example of leadership is marked with a strong sense of clarity and purpose: John's four pillars, Glenn's improvement framework and explicit instruction model and

Peter's personalized learning and student activism emphasis. Each of these leaders adopted practices that are closely aligned to a motivationally oriented transformational approach and these approaches have been shown to impact indirectly on student learning outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). What we see with each of the three leaders are distinct strategies that are adapted to inspire and develop those around them to higher levels of energy and commitment (Burns 1978).

Alongside strong leadership, each principal had high expectations as they commenced their appointment, and for the duration of their tenure. As found in the ISSPP (Gurr & Day, 2017) these expectations were for staff, student and parents, and indeed, the broader school community. Leithwood *et al.* (2004; 24) identified that specific practices such as creating high-performance expectations helped successful educational leaders set the direction. Teacher efficacy was also central to all their work, and this was particularly evident in the teacher development work of Glenn and the alignment of teachers with John's educational philosophy at Bellfield Primary School. Glenn's skill in building teacher efficacy was evident through his explicit focus on leadership development and high expectations for his senior and middle leaders. It was less evident in John's school, although once immersed in the school it was evident in how all teachers were empowered to be accountable for their student's learning progress (Hardy, 2006). At Peter's school, the leadership was tightly controlled by him initially, and although he encouraged student voice and participation, Peter was very directive in his approach, mainly because such incredible change was required to achieve his vision for the school.

All schools had low or falling enrolments, poor student outcomes, and low community morale. Each principal prioritized making their school physically and emotionally safe

environments for staff and students. They were purposeful environments focussed on improving student learning outcomes, improving retention and encouraging new enrolments. At Glenn's school, to promote student attendance and punctuality, systems were put in place to monitor these to encourage and support students to be at school and on time. Glenn's method was not a punitive approach to changing poor behavior, but rather an educative one with the mantra 'time counts' – that is time counts in terms of being on time, but time counts in terms of learning opportunities. Peter's leadership at Templestowe was marked by a rapid change to the structure of the school. Changing the physical environment of the school and introducing a new approach to learning resulted in student and staff engagement.

Similarly, John ensured that the school was a safe-haven for students. He was a visible leader, in classes and out in the play areas often engaging with students, and he encouraged the same from his staff. John was focused on ensuring that students wanted to come to school and he made sure that they were supported inside and out of the classroom.

As a final precondition for improvement, each of the leaders focussed on what mattered most in their context. For John, this was literacy, numeracy and social connection. Glenn emphasized learning growth and engagement through improving teaching and program provision, whilst Peter was focussed on meeting the needs of individual students and empowering them to have control of their learning through a progressive approach to education. Leithwood, *et al.* (2004: 14) suggest that "leaders need to know which features of their organizations should be a priority for their attention. They also need to know what the ideal condition of each of these features is, in order to positively influence the learning of students".

3.2. Sustaining improvement over time

The framework of Zbar *et al.* (2007) identified six factors important to sustaining improvement over time in a school. These included: building teaching and leadership expertise, structuring teaching to ensure all students succeed, using data to drive improvement, fostering a culture of sharing and responsibility, tailoring initiatives to the overall direction of the school and engendering pride in the school.

Building teacher and leadership expertise were most clearly evident at Glenn's schools with specific programs that targeted those in leadership roles and, for all teachers, development of schoolwide curriculum and pedagogy frameworks and collegial processes to improve teaching. It was not so evident at Peter's school, and indeed there was little focus on this. However, as the school grew rapidly, one of the advantages was that each year the school was employing new staff who brought new expertise. At John's school, developing teachers was embedded into his direct focus on teaching and learning; he was visible in his leadership, regularly in classes helping teachers to improve their practice. John was described as an example of an instructional leader (Gurr, 2007).

Structures that promoted student success were evident across all schools. For both the secondary schools they offered the full range of senior year programs: VCE, VET, and VCAL. Clear and agreed schoolwide curriculum and pedagogical approaches were evident at Peter's and Glenn's schools and these helped teachers to develop their expertise. Similarly, for students, it promoted smooth transitions between teachers and year levels, and a sense of clarity about programs of work and students' learning outcomes. At Templestowe, the school was re-structured to meet the demands of an individualized learning orientation to promote student success.

Data to improve teaching and learning was integral to the approaches at Bellfield and Hume. For Bellfield, this was centered at the classroom level, with teachers continuously using data to construct the learning program for students: for example, during literacy periods, students worked in their zone of proximal development based on teacher knowledge of the students. For Hume, data was used at the whole-school and sub-school levels to monitor the progress of the school in meeting its ambitious objectives. Data use did not feature at Templestowe College.

All schools had developed collaborative teacher cultures in the sense that teachers were clear about the school's vision. At Bellfield, this was evident in all teachers supporting John's four pillars, and in how they worked in teams to support each other to implement these. At Glenn's school, the development of the leadership group, the use of teacher triads and curriculum design teams enabled people to work together. At Templestowe, after the initial difficulties in establishing a new school direction, the mounting success of the school encouraged teachers to work together more and to support the innovative directions set out by the principal. Each school leader tailored initiatives to focus on what mattered most in each of the schools. The 'time counts' initiative at Hume was developed to get students to school and into class on time, and to emphasize that learning matters. The bat tennis program run by John at lunchtimes at Bellfield was designed to ensure students had social connections. The many students led work initiatives at Templestowe (e.g., animal production, café) engaged students, met student needs and promoted a success orientation.

The last element, engendering pride in the school, was evident across all schools through matters like celebration of group and individual student academic and non-academic success and staff success (for example, students and staff at Bellfield won litera-

cy awards), through the care taken with the physical environments of the schools, and evident in the positive responses on student, parent and staff surveys. Creating and building a sense of pride across the school community promoted a level of engagement and commitment to the ethos of each school. Staff gained the support of parents and together they worked to encourage student efficacy.

4. Conclusion

Improving and sustaining change in schools where student outcomes are low

and school drop-out is high, is a challenge for any school leader. As is evidenced through the work of these three leaders, there are key attributes and focus areas that help schools turnaround. Understanding the needs of the school, working with students, staff and the greater community to effect change was a key starting point for each leader. While we cannot isolate one strategy as the most important or effective, it is clear that there are distinct similarities in the decisions and directions each leader took to create a successful school. Strong principal leadership, high expectations, a clear vision for change and a commitment to success were all critical elements for these reforms.

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