

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1: Introduction and the Research Context

This initial chapter introduces the research topic and provides the rationale for undertaking the research. The research aims, objectives and the research questions are presented. This chapter establishes the research context and considers some of the major challenges facing education in Queensland. The school's history, characteristics and the principal's role are considered.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the literature that informs the research. The review covers and defines what culture is; describes the principal's role in cultivating a positive school culture and identifies some of the strategies a school principal may use to cultivate a positive school culture.

Chapter 3: Discussion of Results

This chapter provides a discussion of the results.

Chapter 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter provides conclusions from the research and considers recommendations for the school principal in cultivating a positive school culture.

Chapter 5: Positive Culture Improvement Tool

This chapter will present the Positive Culture Improvement Tool. This tool provides the many different strategies that the school community recommended would assist in the cultivation of a positive school culture to enhance school performance. The Positive Culture Improvement Tool can assist school communities to examine their own culture as the strategies presented can be used as indicators of a positive culture.

Effective leaders are reflective thinkers and take the time to reflect about how their actions and words impact on those people they lead. You will be asked questions and consider actions in relation to what you have just read.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Research Context

1.1 Introduction

I took a deep breath as I put down the phone. I had just accepted a principal appointment knowing that the school I was to lead had several significant challenges. For instance, the school's enrolment had dropped by 30% in four years, and there were significant behaviour challenges from the students. There was talk in the community that the school was going to be closed. As the third principal at the school in two years, my first challenge was to somehow stop the number of families leaving. My goal was to increase enrolments by being the top-performing school in the region. Therefore, I wanted to know what the specific strategies a principal could use to improve performance were.

In this respect, Deal and Peterson (2002) believe that a key factor for a school's success in promoting staff and student learning is for the principal to understand and shape the culture. They stress that a positive school culture assists in successful teaching and student learning. In order to change the school culture effectively, the principal must have a good understanding of the culture within their school (Fullan, 2009). To improve the performance of the school I needed to understand the leadership behaviours that promote a positive school culture.

I started to examine the literature about schools that had positive cultures and were achieving great results. The literature suggested that schools with positive cultures have the following attributes:

- strong community support (Engels, Horton, Devos, Bouckennooghe & Aeltermann, 2008);
- promoting a positive school culture was a priority (Habegger, 2008);
- collegiality among staff (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Fullan, 2010);
- a rich sense of history and purpose (Deal & Peterson, 1999);
- a shared vision and strong moral purpose (O'Mahony et. al., 2006; Fullan, 2010);
- a strong leader (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Fullan, 2010; Jensen, 2014a);
- distributed leadership (Fullan, 2010; Barnett & McCormick, 2012);
- well-behaved students (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; SSCEWR, 2013);
- offering a wide selection of subjects and co-curricular activities (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009);
- and
- a reputation of being innovative (Parsons & Harding, 2011).

I observed that a nearby secondary school, McAuley College (a pseudonym) had many of the above attributes. It also had enrolment waiting lists due to its reputation within the local community. The principal of the school, Jim Ford, was a colleague of mine and I had always been impressed by his passion and enthusiasm toward education. I was keen to learn how he had created the school's current positive culture and wanted to explore specific strategies that were used to cultivate this culture. Jim was enthusiastic about the proposed doctoral research being done at the school. This book explores one principal's approach to cultivating a positive school culture within the school community. The reader will gain a rich personal insight to how a highly effective principal can cultivate and maintain a positive school culture. It will also discuss the aspects that contribute to the cultivation of a positive school culture and the perceived challenges and benefits to the development of a positive culture within a school. The conclusive chapter will provide fourteen practical recommendations that leaders can implement to improve their own school culture.

1.2 Background

A well-performing school system is fundamental to building Australia's 'human capital' and is integral to the nation's economic and social futures. School personnel play a central role in promoting positive outcomes for students and the community generally (Productivity Commission, 2012). Schools are characterised by complexity, diversity and accountability measures which present significant challenges for school leaders. Principals, teachers and support staff all have an impact on student performance and there needs to be collaboration between the stakeholders if strategic policies and reforms are to be implemented successfully (Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (SSCEEWR), 2013). The key to the successful implementation of high school programs is school culture because this influences how teachers, school administrators and students behave and act (Rhodes, Douglas and Hemings, 2011). Principals play a crucial role in inspiring students, staff and members of the school community to continuously enhance the learning of all (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). Fredrickson (2009) reveals that the mood of leaders impacts upon the mood of the people they lead. This has significant implications for leaders as highlighted below:

Every action you do will either add to or detract from the culture of the school. It is the old emotional back account stuff. You are either adding to or taking away from the culture. (Principal)

The Productivity Commission (2012) states:

Principals have primary responsibility for setting their school's culture. They and their leadership team provide the local foundation on which excellence in student outcomes are based.

The role of the school principal continues to change and that school leaders today are required to display expertise in instruction, human resources, financial management, development, marketing, enrolment management and community relations (Nuzzi, Holter and Frabutt (2012). Researchers acknowledge the crucial role that the principal plays in cultivating a positive school culture within their own schools (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; James & Connolly, 2009; Khalil, Kalim & Abiodullah 2013). Furthermore, Fullan (2005) notes that the principal is the key player in promoting change and sustaining the school's vision. A preliminary literature review established that:

- Leadership is an important factor of successful school outcomes and the culture of a school (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Fullan, 2010; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Jensen, Hunter, Lambert & Clark, 2015; Edwards & Martin, 2016).
- School culture has a significant influence on the teaching and learning process (Fullan, 2005; Lima, 2006; Meredith, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).
- Culture has an important role in the performance of an organisation and without a positive culture, school improvement is difficult to achieve (Barth, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Parsons & Harding 2011).
- An important component of schools that have higher achievement results was each having a positive school culture (Fullan, 2005; Engels et al., 2008; Rhodes, Douglas & Hemings, 2011; Jensen, 2014b; Edwards & Martin, 2016).
- In order to improve the performance of students, principals need to make the establishment of a positive culture a high priority (Habegger, 2008; Holmes, 2009; O'Mahony, Barnett & Matthews, 2006; Rhodes et al., 2011).
- To establish a positive school culture, principals need to first examine the school's current culture (Keiser & Schulte 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).
- Major cultural change is difficult to implement in a school and requires energy and commitment from all those who are implementing the change (Fullan, 2009; Sparks, 2009; Fullan 2010; Jensen, 2014b).
- School leaders hold extremely responsible positions that are complex, demanding, challenging and stressful (Bush, 2009; Khalil, Kalim & Abiodullah, 2013).

It is noted by Fullan (2009) that the development of a school culture may be very challenging for principals and it is claimed by some researchers that the cultivation of a positive school culture is the most essential task of a school principal (Holmes, 2009; Turan & Bektas, 2013). It follows that school leaders need to make the cultivation of a positive school culture a high priority since it impacts on school improvement and student achievement (Fullan, 2002; Engels et al., 2008).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011) acknowledges the crucial role of the school principal and suggests that in the 21st century this role is one of the most exciting to be undertaken by any person in our society. The school principal's impact is difficult to measure, however, few roles have more potential to shape society's future than the leader of a school. A recent study examining the Australian workforce in schools acknowledges their importance, and proposes that integral to the nation's economic and social future is a well-performing school system (Productivity Commission, 2012). The commission also recommends that school leaders be held accountable for their school's results as part of a rigorous performance management process. The key to the successful design and implementation of secondary-school programs is creating a positive school culture (Rhodes et al., 2011). Cleveland, Powell, Saddler and Tyler (2009, p. 51) state that, "School culture is a critical ingredient in the establishment of a successful learning environment." Current literature about school culture and leadership indicates that when school principals make cultivating a positive culture within their schools a high priority, there are significant benefits. These include:

Culture is something that you need to be working on the whole time. It never gets to a point where it is stable, it is in a constant state of change. It is not like you can have a holiday from it.
(Principal)

- increased student motivation and achievement levels and teacher satisfaction (Harding, 2007);
- assistance in building and maintaining positive and caring relationships between staff, students and parents (Department of Education and Training, Queensland, 2014);
- promoting high staff well-being, commitment and affirming educational success (Rhodes et al., 2011);
- lessening the occurrence of school violence and bullying (Coyle, 2008);
- supporting the development of positive peer relationships as well as pupil engagement in learning (McGrath & Noble, 2010);
- encouraging other components of successful schools for continuous improvement to occur (Habegger, 2008; Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2008); and
- assisting with school improvement (Habegger, 2008; Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2008).

1.3 Purpose of the Book

My purpose of writing this book was to assist school communities, especially school leaders, to improve school performance by creating positive school environments that promote all aspects of student growth. This book combines current research in effective leadership and positive culture so that leaders are presented with the knowledge and practical advice to improve their results in their own school. Chapter 4 discusses the key behaviours of the principal that assist with the cultivation

of a positive school culture. This section also provides practical recommendations which school leaders may apply in their own school setting. Every leader has a moral purpose to provide the best learning environment for the students in their care. This book is written so that principals can maximise the learning that is happening in their school. In doing so, they are creating a better future for the generations that follow. When examining their own school culture principals may like to use the Positive Culture Improvement Tool (Chapter 5) to apply many of the strategies presented. The strategies originate from the research site and give a rich insight into what the research school community believes cultivates a positive school culture.

There needs to be a shared moral purpose, which is doing what is in the best interest of our students. (Principal)

1.4 Research Aims

The following information is derived from my thesis – Cultivating a positive school culture in a secondary school: The principal’s role. The general aim of the research was to explore the role of the school principal in cultivating a positive school culture within the school community. Specific aims were as follows:

- to establish the aspects of a school community that contribute to a positive school culture;
- to describe the benefits of a positive school culture;
- to investigate what the challenges are for a school principal in the cultivation of a positive school culture;
- to explore the roles of the principal in establishing a positive school culture in the context of a leadership framework; and
- to document the recommendations of the school community for the cultivation of a positive school culture.

1.5 The Research Site and Context

Introduction

The first part of this section presents a broad overview of education in Australia and schooling in Queensland. A detailed description of the school where this research was undertaken is presented. Also, this chapter will explore some of the specific challenges faced by the school principal at the school where the research took place.

Overview of School Systems in Australian Schools

Introduction

In Australia, there are close to 10 000 schools. Approximately 67% are primary schools, 15% are secondary schools, 14% are primary and secondary schools and 4% are special-needs schools. Australia's education system is formed from several distinct, though overlapping systems. No other country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development (OECD) has three different education systems – government, Catholic and independent (Gillespie, 2014). Approximately 70% of schools are state and territory government schools, 20% are Catholic schools and 10% are independent schools. Both primary and secondary schools are located in a wide range of settings whether that be in urban, rural or remote areas.

Government responsibilities for schooling

In the Australian context, schools are a state government's responsibility but are assisted financially through federal government funding. Recently this has caused much political debate as the various sides of government suggest pouring more money into education. Politicians need to tread carefully, as spending more money on education does not mean that students are going to achieve higher results. For instance, the state of Florida spent 20 billion dollars to reduce class sizes in its schools with little improvement, if any, on student achievement outcomes (Gillespie, 2014). Money must be spent on areas that make the biggest impact, such as improved leadership capabilities and teacher competences.

Increasing educational funding does not equate to improved learning outcomes for students (White, 2015)

In Queensland, the government considers that education is central to Queensland's economic prosperity (Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE), 2013). This view is acknowledged by the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations who add that the Australian government is implementing national educational reforms by providing funding for areas of national educational importance (Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013). According to Caldwell (2015), the state government schools, as well as Catholic and independent schools, are dependent on the Australian government for much of their funding. Each state and territory government, however, has the responsibility of overseeing education within its jurisdiction. Responsibilities include: curriculum; infrastructure; governance and financial reporting. State and territory governments are also required to maintain a database of all registered teachers, and 'accredit' pre-service teacher education courses. In the past, there has been little policy coordination across the states and territories. Currently the Australian government is funding national reform initiatives, including the implementation of a new national-level policy framework, for Australian schools (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008). The success of the Australian government education initiatives

is dependent on the cooperation of state government schools, independent schools and Catholic schools. The Australian government has made funding available to support these newly agreed-upon national initiatives.

The Queensland Department of Education and Training (2014) states that a high-quality education system is vital to the economic health of individual systems, states and countries. Furthermore, Australia's economic and social future is integrally linked to its school system and school staff play a central role in promoting positive outcomes for students and the community. The Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations states:

Maximising our investment in our schools is of paramount importance to all Australians: the quality of education each student receives has important consequences for the student, his or her family and, ultimately, the Australian economy (2013, p. vii).

They further point out that Australian education policies are failing the lowest-performing students in Australia and these students are predominantly from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Productivity Commission (2012) argues that priority needs to be given to improving teacher quality, to reducing teacher shortages and to assisting the educationally disadvantaged. McKinsey and Company (2007) point out that “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” (p. 16). The AITSL (2012) believes that the ultimate goal of all teachers and school leaders is improving student outcomes and recommends that teachers need to embrace professional learning.

I think it is great when leaders continue to develop their teaching skills and understanding so they know exactly what the classroom teachers are doing and how they are doing it and they can have a conversation with the teachers. This allows them to be a leader of learning. An instructional leader.
(Principal)

Furthermore, they assert that there is no higher priority than further improving the quality of teaching in Australian schools. In this respect, Edwards and Martin (2016) recommend that school leaders focus on building the school's culture to improve the performance of the school. This book explores how a school principal cultivated a positive school culture within their school community.

Goals of the Australian schooling system

The objectives of Australia's schooling system were articulated in 2008 in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. The two goals are: “Goal 1: Australian schooling needs to promote equity and excellence. Goal 2: All young Australians should become: Successful learners; confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7). The Melbourne Declaration sets the direction for Australian schooling for the next 10 years. This document aims for all young Australians to have access to high-quality schooling so that all students are given the opportunity to achieve.