

Leadership teams supporting teacher wellbeing by improving the culture of an Australian secondary school

Geoffrey W. Lummis, Julia E. Morris, Catherine Ferguson, Susan Hill and Graeme Lock

Edith Cowan University, Australia

This research explored teachers' experiences of school and their work-related wellbeing, from the perspective that work-related wellbeing is an organisational responsibility. A single case study was enacted in an urban Western Australian secondary school to explore the relationship between school organisational health and teacher wellbeing. A mixed method pre-test phase determined professional growth, professional interaction and role clarity were areas of organisational health that yielded divergent responses from staff. Subsequently, the school's leadership team implemented interventions to improve these domains, and post-intervention data collection was conducted 18 months later to determine any changes. Qualitative data showed improvements in the professional growth and professional interaction domains, with staff reporting that professional learning summary sessions and mentoring conversations between teachers and the principal were beneficial strategies to improve teachers' school experiences. Role clarity was not so easily addressed, as the school suffered a series of crisis events during the research process that resulted in an emphasis on improving student services roles within the school. Consequently, role clarity was not achieved across the whole school staff. The qualitative data describe the complexity of addressing teacher wellbeing through organisational health, and specific strategies that leadership teams can implement to develop a supportive, collaborative staff culture at school.

Introduction

Principals and their leadership teams work within a global economic framework that increasingly directs the educational agenda (Beatty & Campbell-Evans, 2020; Gurd, 2013; Lingard & Lewis, 2016). In Australia, schools are expected to provide an inclusive educational experience that embraces the uniqueness of each school community, while also adhering to mandated policies and professional standards as outlined by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2015; Watterston & Caldwell, 2011). At a time where there is debate about the state of the teaching profession (Australian Government, 2019) and in light of a difficult few years with COVID-19 changing educational practice, teacher and student wellbeing is at the forefront of many leaders' (Beatty & Campbell-Evans, 2020; Waters et al., 2021) and policymakers' agendas (Dabrowski, 2020; Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020).

This research takes the stance that teacher wellbeing is not only personal, but an organisational responsibility (Falecki & Mann, 2021; Waters et al., 2021). Wellbeing is a "community and worldwide concern" (Falecki & Mann, 2021, p. 176) that needs to be managed by organisations before it leads to burnout, stress and teacher attrition - especially in urban contexts (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Cowley, 2019). The case study reported here was part of a series of investigations conducted in three urban secondary schools,

focused on school organisational climate and culture. This focus was chosen as staff culture influences how students perceive school culture, with positive staff cultures fostering more positive learning cultures school-wide (Weiner & Higgins, 2017). Given that organisational health is tied to the unique context of a school (Hart et al., 2000), the case studies proceeded differently, yielded different results and hence are reported separately (see Morris et al., 2020). This paper draws on qualitative data from teachers and school leaders at the case study site to explore how leadership-driven interventions aimed at improving teachers' professional growth, professional interactions and role clarity were perceived by staff. These data are presented in response to the overarching research question:

How do school-led interventions to improve organisational health affect teachers' work-related wellbeing? And in this case specifically, how do interventions on professional growth, professional interactions and role clarity affect the school culture, and in turn, alter teachers' experiences of school?

While not an initial aim of the study, the qualitative findings presented also show how school interventions respond to community crisis. During the research the school experienced a series of crisis events which caused significant emotional disruption and trauma to both staff and students. These incidents stemmed from mental health issues, commonly expressed in the literature about secondary school climate (Lester & Cross, 2015). As a mark of respect to those people still enduring the healing process and to protect the anonymity of the case study site, details of the incidents will not be disclosed. Consequently, the case study findings show the impacts (both positive and negative) of school staff managing complex circumstances and navigating the difficult course of wellbeing when there is also a need for compliance to the system.

Teacher wellbeing

Teachers' work-related wellbeing is about how positive teachers feel about the functioning of their workplace and their role within it (Collie et al., 2016; Cowley, 2019; Turner & Theilking, 2019). Consequently, teacher wellbeing is comprised of internal, relational and external factors (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, Cowley, 2019). Whilst intrinsic factors such as autonomy and job satisfaction (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Granziera et al., 2020) are critical to teacher wellbeing, this paper specifically focuses on relational factors such as professional working relationships, and extrinsic factors such as school culture (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Brouskeli et al., 2018; Burns & Machin, 2013).

Teachers tend to have greater wellbeing, resilience (Brouskeli et al., 2018) and positive emotional states when they feel they have positive professional relationships and a supportive network (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Le Cornu, 2013; Shirley et al., 2020). These relationships include "implementing collaborative teams or mentoring relationships [that] enabled professional growth" (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 105). Leadership staff who are collegial and establish a learning community (rather than a hierarchy of power) also help to foster a supportive network for teachers (Butt & Rettalick, 2002; Turner & Theilking, 2019). The relationship between leadership staff and teacher staff is particularly relevant,

as leadership staff and the overall climate and culture of a school have an impact on teachers' collective efficacy to manage the daily demands of teaching (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018).

Teachers' wellbeing, and in particular, early career teachers' wellbeing, can suffer when heavy workloads lead to burnout and mental health issues (Glazzard & Rose, 2020; Kelly et al., 2019; Scott, 2019). These issues affect teacher retention and teacher wellbeing both within and beyond school. For example, a Norwegian study (N = 2569) of elementary and middle school teachers found that excessive workload and challenging student behaviour are major tipping points which can increase family conflict and result in teacher attrition (Burns & Machin, 2013). However, when teachers work in collaboration they can "be productive in the midst of adversity" (Mintrop & Charles, 2017, p. 51). When dealing with challenging situations in schools, professional collaboration can help teachers to empathise with challenges and overcome grief or distress by looking to collectively build better practices (Burns & Machin, 2013; Mintrop & Charles, 2017). Importantly, a strong workplace culture is a critical factor in retaining educators in the profession (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2019; Thorpe et al., 2020) as well as supporting their work-related wellbeing.

School organisational health and implementing reforms

Just as teachers with positive wellbeing are an indicator of a positive school climate (Turner & Theilking, 2019), teachers who are stressed or have mental health issues are associated with negative school organisational health (Thorpe et al., 2020). School organisational health encompasses school morale and the factors that affect morale, including professional growth, recognition of staff and supportive leadership practices (Hart et al., 2000).

One core component of organisational health is the relationship between teachers and leaders. When there is sustained collaboration and dialogue between teachers and leaders there is the ability to transform school practices for both staff and students (Sterrett & Irizarry, 2015). When implementing school reforms, it is necessary for school leaders to be sensitive to teachers' wellbeing (Nguyen & Hunter, 2018). Morale and school climate suffer when teachers are asked to do too much on top of their teaching loads, such as taking up consultancy roles for school improvement (Nguyen & Hunter, 2018). When the approach to school reform is more consultative and decision making is participative, there is greater capacity for sustainable change and a more positive school culture (Berkovich & Eyal, 2016; Devos, 2010; Shirley et al., 2020; Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). This extends to principals and school leaders quickly and effectively managing staff concerns about school reform (Derrington & Campbell, 2015), as well as recognising when change might have a negative effect on wellbeing for part of the school's population (e.g., students, teachers, wider community) as everyone in the school system is interconnected (Shirley et al., 2020). The establishment of a supportive school culture can promote a school climate characterised by a general sense of contentment; that is, teachers report better relationships with students and a better learning culture when they feel positive towards their workplace (Beatty & Campbell-Evans, 2020; Weiner & Higgins, 2017).

Independent public schools and accountability

Internationally, schools are expected to create and use data in order to evaluate and refine their operational practices (Datnow & Hubbard, 2016). Yet, data can shape school culture through the way in which they are selected and used (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Datnow & Hubbard, 2016). This is particularly important in independent public schools, schools that are funded by State Education Departments but are governed independently by a school board (Department of Education WA, 2020). In Australia, independent public schools have the autonomy to employ their own staff and are given a one line budget that they can manage to meet their school community's needs (Department of Education WA, 2020). Gathering data within the school's specific context is essential to ensure that any reforms meet the needs of their community, yet this approach can have negative impacts when their use does not align with teachers' values or the school's teaching and learning culture (Acton & Glasgow, 2015).

Data use in education is often related to school accountability (Schildkamp et al., 2017). Heightened accountability in terms of policies and processes "impose additional hours, work demands and personal burdens upon [teachers]" (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018, p. 1) as they learn to create and use data effectively in their practice (Mandinach & Jimerson, 2016). The result of these work demands is a particularly important issue for early career teachers, who often leave teaching due to discrepancies between the reality of teaching and their expectations of what the profession would be like, or ineffective mentoring and support mechanisms in place during their first years of teaching (Kelly et al., 2019; Scott, 2019). For those who stay in the profession, the incongruity between using data for compliance and using data for teaching and learning growth can have a detrimental effect on teacher wellbeing (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). Consequently, it is essential that teachers see the production of data as beneficial for their professional growth and part of a positive school culture.

Method

This study engaged a participatory action research (PAR) approach to examine school organisational health, within the bounds of a single case study (Sanders, 2016). A single case study was necessary for this research as each school context is unique and we sought to acknowledge the staff perceptions of their individual school culture. Consequently, a constructivist, interpretivist epistemology (Creswell, 2014), was applied to the research, where the aim was to engage the participants in examining and shaping the social constructions of organisational health and wellbeing within the school. An explanatory case study approach (Yin, 2014) was used as the research sought to explore *how* co-designed interventions focused on school organisational health affected the school culture, and in turn, supported better teacher wellbeing. Both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (focus groups) data were utilised.

Within the bounds of the case study, the PAR approach allowed for the school to have greater ownership over and more active engagement with the research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). However, at this case study site the research was largely driven by the

school's leadership team to minimise burden on other staff. The leadership team's choice to implement the interventions privileges their voice in this research as they took responsibility for what changes occurred, how they occurred and when they occurred (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Even though both teachers and leadership staff contributed to the pre- and post-intervention phases of data collection, the control of the intervention phase was not consistent with the democratic nature of PAR (Stapleton, 2021). Nevertheless, we have chosen to discuss this study as PAR as opposed to action research as the data utilised to make the changes and the resultant response to these changes came predominantly from the teaching staff. In spite of their limited formal involvement in the intervention phase, it is our intention to be inclusive of multiple voices in this research and to address issues of power that come from privileging specific voices in research (Stapleton, 2021).

School context

The case study school is an urban secondary school in Western Australia, catering for over 700 students from years 7-12 (12 to 18-year-old students). It has been operating for several decades but had recently become an independent public school. The school is located in a lower socioeconomic area and has a higher proportion of students with socio-educational disadvantage (ACARA, n.d.) compared to the average Australian school. The school had experienced a recent change of principalship prior to the research occurring, but staff noted in the pre-test that they had a "good mixture of both old and new staff" at the school. There were approximately 100 staff employed at the school, with 13 staff in the leadership team, teachers in the range of 50-60 staff, and the remainder as school support staff.

Sample

Approximately 50% of the whole school staff participated in the pre- and post-intervention phases of data collection (details of the quantitative and qualitative data collection are provided below.) When the school agreed to participate in the research, the leadership team of 13 staff members actively supported the project's pre- and post-intervention focus groups. They also all helped in the co-design and implementation of the intervention phase of the action research. Importantly, the Principal chose not to participate in the pre- and post-intervention activities so the Principal's authority would not affect the data collection. The Principal did, however, participate in the intervention phase.

For the quantitative component of the research, 43 and 41 participants (leaders and teachers), respectively, contributed to the pre- and post-intervention phases. For the qualitative component, 22 teachers (in addition to the leadership team) participated in the pre- and post-intervention phases. These were not the same 22 teachers on both occasions, as four teachers in the post-intervention activity were new to the school and could not have completed the pre-intervention phase.

Across all participants (inclusive of both teaching and leadership staff), there was a balance of genders represented at all data collection occasions. Approximately 40% of the participants were aged 46 years or more.

Methods, instrumentation and analysis

The study occurred in three phases from 2016 to 2018. In the first (pre-intervention) phase, the *School Organisational Health Questionnaire* (SOHQ) (Hart et al., 2000) was administered to all staff. This survey measures staff morale and 11 associated factors that affect morale, including appraisal and recognition, excessive work demands, professional growth, professional interaction, supportive leadership and role clarity (Hart et al., 2000). In accordance with the University's Human Research Ethics Committee approval and permission from the Education Department, the survey was made available online to all staff and participation was voluntary and anonymous. Staff could also nominate to participate in a follow up face-to-face focus group. Focus groups were conducted with both teaching and leadership staff. These focus groups were conducted independently to mitigate power imbalances, and the teacher focus group was conducted off-site to maintain participant confidentiality. The first phase lasted from February to April 2016.

From the pre-intervention phase, the research team calculated descriptive statistics for the SOHQ and deductively coded the verbatim transcripts from both focus groups against the 12 factors of the SOHQ, as listed in the previous paragraph. A report was provided to the school in mid-2016, with the researchers suggesting intervention in one or more of the following SOHQ areas:

1. Professional growth: staff had polarised views on this factor, with professional learning being a key area of concern;
2. Professional interaction: overall this factor was more positive, but the staff noted that interactions were largely discipline/department based and there was little communication between departments or across the whole-school staff; and,
3. Role clarity: staff had responded particularly negatively to the items 'my work objectives are always well-defined' and 'I am always clear about what others at school expect of me', which the research team felt warranted further investigation.

The leadership team was presented with the independent analysis and given time to reflect on what area/s they would like to focus on for the study. The leadership team decided to enact interventions for all three of the identified factors, and decided that they would be the team to lead the intervention phase across the school. To begin the intervention phase, the leadership team completed a one-day workshop to unpack the pre-intervention data and plan what would occur during the next phase in December 2016, with the aim to begin interventions in the school during the 2017 academic year. The workshop was facilitated by a well-respected retired school principal who had previously worked in educational contexts with similar challenges to the case study school. The researchers attended the workshop and took detailed field notes of the discussions. The leadership staff returned to the school to implement interventions over the course of a year, with their actions detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Alignment of leadership team's interventions to the three research foci

SOHQ focus area	Leadership intervention
Professional growth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve performance management processes and implement classroom observation on a whole-school timeline to ensure equity across learning areas. 2. Improve opportunities for staff to share professional learning outcomes.
Professional interaction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement professional conversations periodically 2. Scaffold teachers' interactions across common areas of interest (i.e., STEM). 3. Increase executive staff (Principal and Associates) presence in learning area meetings to increase direct communication of policies and processes.
Role clarity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review staff workload. 2. Re-assign tasks so there is greater equity among staff.

In the final (post-intervention) phase, staff repeated the SOHQ. However, the approach to the follow up focus groups was adjusted for this phase. The Principal disclosed to the research team that a series of traumatic incidents had occurred at the school during the intervention phase. Consequently, the interventions had to be revised and carefully managed while the leadership team prioritised staff wellbeing outside of the context of this research. As a result, the post-intervention phase was delayed (to approximately 18 months after the pre-intervention phase) and the teacher focus group was not conducted. Instead, teachers could opt to write their qualitative responses within the survey. This decision provided participants with total anonymity, and meant they could choose how much they felt comfortable disclosing their views about the school culture and morale without any pressure from their colleagues. It also removed the imposition on their time to attend additional focus groups. The focus group with the school leadership team still occurred face-to-face, a decision made by the leadership team. Again, the Principal agreed not to be included in the final leadership team focus group to avoid their position of power influencing responses.

The leadership focus group and the questions in the survey for teachers focused on the same broad themes:

1. What interventions have been enacted/experienced since the workshop?
2. How have they been received/experienced?
3. What areas for improvement have been identified?

Like the pre-intervention phase, verbatim transcripts or survey text were thematically analysed; however, in this phase, they were analysed against the three school foci chosen for intervention. This final phase was conducted in late 2017, with the results being presented to the school in early 2018.

Findings

While both quantitative and qualitative data were collected within this case, this analysis focuses on the findings from the qualitative data analysis. We have elected to concentrate on the qualitative findings as the participants' stories are the most appropriate data to unpack the lived experience of teachers and leaders within the context of teacher wellbeing and development of a positive school culture.

Professional growth

Initially, the staff who participated in the focus groups held polarised views on the opportunities for professional growth at their school. Teachers' discussions centred on the challenges to undertake professional learning, especially in light of the industry requirement to complete "100 hours over a 5 year period, 80 hours over a 4 year period, and 60 hours over a 3 year period," as outlined by AITSL and state teacher registration bodies (AITSL, 2017). Finding 20 hours per year to complete professional learning was hampered by finance; namely, the ability for the school to pay for casual relief teacher cover and the expense of professional learning courses: "Because of budget cuts you're not really as supported or encouraged to go to lots of [professional learning] ... [unless they] develop you and the School's priority areas." Teachers felt there was also a correlation between the cost and quality of professional learning: "private organisations [offered] really good ones, although they are pretty expensive, and the not so expensive ones are not so good." As a result of funding issues and the need to align professional learning directly to school priorities, teachers would often "rely pretty much on the professional learning days here at the school." While teachers felt that subject specialisation development was lacking, they acknowledged that the school provided good opportunities for teacher advancement, saying "[there] are a multitude of committees to sit on. It's open to all and there are plenty of things to do outside your normal teaching area to advance your professional standing."

As a result of these data, the leadership team focused on improving subject specialisation professional learning. They implemented new performance management processes, including classroom observation sessions. They also implemented opportunities for staff to share professional learning outcomes, with staff members required to present information from external professional learning sessions they attended when they returned to school. This strategy took into consideration the need for better dissemination of professional learning across the whole school staff while minimising cost.

At the conclusion of the study, participants explained the benefits of having their peers summarise professional learning: "[Sharing] involves keeping up with cutting edge developments ... people come back and share it ... to have that person take us through online resources and so forth ... staff found that very valuable." They discussed how having teachers summarise professional learning helped to contextualise their professional learning, as staff could take the key messages and explain how these related to their specific school community's needs.

The clearer communication of performance management strategies, including classroom observation, also had a positive impact on staff. Teachers said: "I have taken part in more

formal classroom observations this year, and the process of self-reflection is stronger ...” The leadership staff reflected on their new approach to performance management, saying they had *“deviated away from a one size fits all approach”* and although *“a lot of it still involves the growth coaching model, all of it is underpinned by AITSL ... the one thing which is not negotiable.”* Teachers acknowledged a positive change in this area, which also overlapped with role clarity: *“Performance management has set clear guidelines, providing clarity of my job description and role as a teacher.”*

For this school, performance management was extended to include the induction of new staff in the school, with leadership staff stating: *“The mentoring of new staff is going very well in terms of making sure that they are up with what’s going on in the school, and they’ve got sufficient support structures.”* The support for new staff included classroom observation of other teachers: *“... to look for specific things such as common themes in presenting work, in an effort to standardise ... the STEM approach [at the school].”*

In addition to supporting new teachers, the leadership team also focused on student services staff, particularly due to the crisis events that had occurred in the school. This approach was shared across staff who triage students in need: *“We have put a lot of time and money into the [professional learning] of the student services team ... year coordinators have been offered at least one [professional learning] activity and they’re sharing [it].”*

Professional interaction

Initial data from staff suggested that professional interactions were generally positive. However, the leadership team chose to explore this factor further because staff were commenting about the siloed nature of subject departments. As one teacher summarised in the pre-intervention data:

As a learning area we spend so much time together ... we sort of live in our learning areas. We take lunch together, we organise our spare time ... we are constantly feeding off each other and engaging professionally ... We would like to spend more time engaging cross-curricular, having professional conversations. But that’s not always possible.

The teaching staff explained how whole school events meant social interactions were positive among staff, such as *“staff versus staff competitions, like games at lunchtime”*, but these opportunities did not allow for professional interactions about learning and teaching to occur. They described cross-curricular interactions as being *“not sustainable.”*

However, teachers did note that some staff were really good at working collaboratively due to the nature of their roles. They explained, *“the chaplain, student services and the student counsellor are readily available and are always willing to help where they can, and offer advice even when they are extremely busy.”* Teachers explained how interacting with these staff, who operate outside of learning area departments, were valuable professional growth experiences. They enjoyed the opportunities *“to form and build relationships”* beyond their own department walls.

Based on the initial staff feedback, the leadership team chose to scaffold opportunities for greater professional interactions about learning and teaching in the school. They decided to implement periodic professional conversations with staff, and scaffold teachers' interactions in the STEM area through making sure that time was blocked out on the timetable to allow these staff to collaborate. The leadership team also made a schedule for attendance at learning area meetings so that Heads of Department did not have to relay messages from the executive team. This approach aimed to increase direct communication between teachers and executive staff.

The increased visibility of leadership staff was seen as a key improvement in the post-intervention data. A Head of Department relayed feedback from one of her teachers through the following anecdote:

The Deputy Principal came to ... combined learning areas do professional learning on behaviour management and a second year out teacher actually asked a question [about changing the way staff access letters of commendation] ... she was really, really chuffed that as a second-year grad teacher she could bring something up ... [and based on her question we] actually get a whole school change, which was... really good.

There was consensus that *“Executive [staff] being part of learning area meetings [provided] another opportunity to make sure that the link from top to bottom is a little bit more seamless.”* Another example of this was periodic professional conversations:

[The Principal] has just spent quite a large proportion of his time interviewing Heads of Learning Area and teaching staff ... making a point of actually talking one-on-one with teachers about how they're going ... that's really quite time consuming, but nonetheless a valuable experience.

In addition to the increased presence of executive leadership staff, there was more cross-curricular collaboration happening in the school. Teachers felt that *“professional interaction between learning areas is helping to build positive relations with others”*, with more *“focus on professional conversations around effective teaching and learning practice.”* The result of these comments was that teachers felt there was *“more cohesion-not only within learning areas, but across learning areas, and better communication to all stakeholders.”* Cross-curricular learning was particularly evident in the STEM area, where staff focused on professional growth activities as outlined in the previous section, with *“every teacher in Maths, Science and the ICT [Information and Communications Technology] department [being involved].”* Yet, while teachers found these types of collaborations really valuable, they also explained that *“it is hard to find time to interact with other departments due to workload commitments.”*

Role clarity

In the pre-intervention data, staff responded particularly negatively to two items about role clarity: ‘My work objectives are always well-defined’ and ‘I am always clear about what others at school expect of me.’ These data prompted the leadership team to further investigate role clarity within the research. In the pre-intervention qualitative data there

were divergent perspectives. Staff explained how they were “*really putting their souls into their work*”, but “*everything else that comes the department’s way is the responsibility of the Head of Learning Area.*”

During the intervention phase, the leadership team set two goals to address role clarity: to review staff workload, and to re-distribute tasks to improve equity between staff members. While the Principal did have professional conversations (as outlined in the previous section) to review individual staff member’s workloads, the most significant improvement was observed around student services. Given the traumatic incidents that had occurred in the school during the research, the need for additional student support was heightened. Teachers commented that it was helpful to know where and how support could be accessed for students:

Role clarity, a lot of it does come down to Student Services ... we have actually changed the structure ... changed the physical rooms that they use ... took another classroom and changed that from being a classroom into Student Services so we could actually triage our students.

The review of staff workload resulted in new thinking around Student Services as a whole. Staff explained how “*job clarity work within the Indigenous [area] has progressed ... having a new Deputy of Student Services [resulted in] a new strategic plan.*” As part of the new strategic plan and a greater emphasis in this space, “*two school psychologists ... divided a job and created another role*”, which provided more support to staff and students during challenging times.

While there were perceived improvements in regard to role clarity, there were also concerns by the end of the research period: “*Workload and equity of task distribution concerns [me], if a staffer is a high performer, they tend to be allocated more work than others...*” The improvements in this area were also not school wide, with teachers in some departments saying: “*I have not noticed role clarity, job descriptions, or review of workload.*” Given the incidents faced by the school, the leadership team communicated that role clarity (except for student services) was an ongoing area for improvement.

Mapping the interventions to AITSL’s Principal Standard

At the intervention workshop and post-intervention focus group, the leadership staff made consistent reference to AITSL. As the leadership staff were responsible for developing and implementing interventions based on the pre-intervention data, the research team wanted to further investigate the degree to which AITSL was shaping the leadership team’s foci. Documented in the researchers’ field notes are professional conversations between the school leaders, researchers, and the independent facilitator from the workshop. This documentation revealed the alignment of the interventions to AITSL’s *Principal Standard*, and four of the five associated *Professional Practices* within this Standard.

Table 2: Mapping of research foci to AITSL's Principal Standard Professional Practices (AITSL, 2015)

Professional practice	Principal standard	
	Relevant sections from the <i>Professional practices descriptions</i> (AITSL, 2015)	Alignment to research foci
Leading teaching and 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. (p. 14)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional growth: mentoring 2. Professional interaction: collaboration of staff across learning areas
	They set high expectations for the whole school through careful collaborative planning, monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of learning. (p. 14)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional interaction: collaboration of staff across learning areas 2. Professional interaction: Principal conversations with individual staff
Developing staff and others	Principals work with and through others to build a professional learning community that is focused on continuous improvement of teaching and learning. (p. 15)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional growth: peer summaries of professional learning 2. Professional interaction: Principal conversations with individual staff
Leading the management of the school	Principals use a range of data management methods and technologies to ensure that the school's resources and staff are efficiently organised and managed to provide an effective and safe learning environment as well as value for money. (p. 17)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional growth: peer summaries of professional learning 2. Role clarity: increase of student services support
Engaging and working with the community	[Principals] create an ethos of respect taking account of the spiritual, moral, social and physical health and wellbeing of students (p. 18)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional growth: professional learning for student services team 2. Role clarity: increase of student services support

There were clear synergies between the interventions implemented in this research and the Principal Standard. While the leadership team did not explicitly state their intention to engage in research as part of addressing the Standard, the need to align all school practices to the Standard was implied throughout the research.

What was explicit was the protection of teacher wellbeing throughout the research. Interactions with the leadership team during and after the intervention phase confirmed there were concerns about the research adding to the workload and stress of all school

staff (including the leadership team) unless it was aligned to other school needs, such as school compliance. These interactions between the researchers and leadership staff highlighted the delicate balance between schools meeting compliance and reporting requirements while actively supporting the work-related wellbeing of their staff.

Discussion

This case study explored how leadership-driven interventions focused on school organisational health affected the school culture, and in turn, supported better teacher wellbeing. In this case, professional growth, professional interaction, and role clarity were selected as three domains of school organisational health that needed improvement. The qualitative findings show the school climate was significantly impacted by the crisis events that the school experienced, which added an additional challenge for staff in terms of their wellbeing and dramatically increased the need for student services support. The trauma experienced had repercussions for staff and student mental health and could understandably have been a factor that diminished school climate (Thorpe et al., 2020). However, the staff in this case study school gave multiple examples of how they came together and collaborated during this period to help overcome their grief and establish better practices in the school moving forward, consistent with the findings of previous research (Burns & Machin, 2013; Mintrop & Charles, 2017; Turner & Theilking, 2019).

Overall, both teachers and leadership staff noticed greater collegiality among staff, evidenced by increased cross-curricula work and collaboration with staff that broke down learning area silos. While three unique domains were proposed for intervention at the beginning of the study, the post-intervention qualitative data suggest there were many synergies in the interventions put in place by the leadership staff. For example, having staff share professional learning summaries both improved individual teachers' professional growth and provided an opportunity for staff to have professional interactions about teaching and learning that may not have occurred otherwise. Similarly, having the Principal meet with each staff member individually to discuss their role and how they align to the broader school structure demonstrates how leadership can enhance role clarity as well as facilitate positive professional interactions between leaders and teaching staff. Both of these strategies are examples of how staff can build supportive networks and positive relationships at work, which in turn facilitates greater wellbeing and enhances school culture (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Brouskeli et al., 2018; Cowley, 2019; Le Cornu, 2013; Morris et al., 2020; Turner & Theilking, 2019). The staff also gave examples of how the leadership were aiming to break down power hierarchies by attending learning area meetings and informally mentoring new staff, which is another approach to building supportive networks (Butt & Rettalick, 2002), and consistent with our past research in this field (Morris et al., 2020).

Role clarity experienced the least change of all three research domains, but it was a domain that was clearly affected by the traumatic incidents experienced. Consequently, leadership staff channelled their energy into improving student services support so they could more quickly and effectively triage students with mental health or other issues. It is interesting that professional interactions with student services was noted as being positive

in the pre-intervention data, but that the changes to processes for referring students to student services further enhanced teachers' interactions with their department. This experience is similar to Wilcox and Lawson (2018) who explained how collective efficacy of teachers is enhanced when they have supportive networks that allow them to work together efficiently, even in the face of adversity. Through establishing collegial networks, teachers also build a sense of camaraderie that can enhance their work-related wellbeing. From a leadership perspective, it was clear that this intervention was a direct response to the crisis events they had experienced. This type of response is consistent with the literature: "Leadership in times of crisis, however, is neither developmental nor future-orientated in its primary focus - it is about dealing with events, emotions and consequences in the immediate present in ways that minimise personal and organisational harm within the school community" (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 69). This case study shows the need for leadership to change focus in times of crisis to ensure they are supporting their school staff and community.

While there were mixed perceptions of the impact of interventions on the school culture and teachers' experiences of school, the research exposed tensions between staff participation in school change and staff wellbeing. The literature suggests that school reform is most effective and sustainable when there is consultation and participative decision making that involves diverse school staff (Berkovich & Eyal, 2016; Devos, 2010; Morris et al., 2020; Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). However, Glazzard and Rose (2020) and Nguyen and Hunter (2018) both cautioned that school leaders need to be sensitive to teacher wellbeing when implementing reform, as school climate and teachers' mental health can suffer when reform results in additional workload for teachers. In this study, the leadership staff were cognisant of the impact of workload on teachers and chose to implement many of the interventions themselves to minimise the impact on staff. However, the result of this decision was increased burden on the leadership team, with some of the interventions being described as "*quite time consuming*." It was evident that the interventions resulted in an emphasis on procedural changes, although teaching staff did suggest that the outcomes of these changes were mostly positive. It is crucial that teachers see research data as being aligned to school improvement that supports their growth, as teacher wellbeing can be negatively affected when they feel data are being used solely for compliance or reasons that do not align with their personal values (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Brouskeli et al., 2018). In this case study, the need to align school-based research with AITSL was implied in researcher and leadership staff interactions; however, most participants gave feedback that the interventions elicited positive changes to the staff culture and helped to develop them professionally and individually.

Limitations

It should be acknowledged that participation in the overall study was limited to approximately 50% of the whole school staff, and that some teachers who participated in the post-intervention data collection were not at the school when the research commenced. In addition, recruitment in this study was challenged by information technology issues whereby many teachers' email inboxes were full, resulting in invitations to participate bouncing back to the research team. In discussion with the leadership staff

at the school, this was a common occurrence due to the limit on email data by education departments and the high frequency of contact between staff and the school community within this case study school, particularly as they managed the fallout from the traumatic incidents.

The disruption that occurred in the school meant that post-intervention data collection was delayed, giving the school time to grieve and re-group prior to the concluding phase of the research. Nevertheless, discussing teacher wellbeing, school culture and organisational health are sensitive topics, and the voluntary participation of teachers results in the potential for self-selection bias in the research. Given the sensitive nature of the research it is also likely that teachers still deeply affected by the series of incidents that occurred might opt-out of participating in this research.

In addition, as the leadership staff designed and implemented many of the interventions in this study, there is a limit to which the research can be explained as participatory action research. While there was strong participation from the leadership team with the research team, the lack of buy-in from staff would have affected the outcome of the study and minimised the democratic intent of the PAR method (Stapleton, 2021). Yet, as articulated, this decision was clearly justified by the leadership staff to minimise the burden of research on staff who already had intense workloads and high levels of stress at the commencement of the study.

Conclusion

Education is a compliance-centred industry and principals and staff negotiate this accountability daily (Beatty & Campbell-Evans, 2020; Gonski, 2011; Lingard & Lewis, 2016). Within this context, school leadership staff must balance managing accountability and school reform with supporting staff wellbeing (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; AITSL, 2015; Butt & Rettalick, 2002; Shirley et al., 2020). The qualitative data from this urban case study emphasised tensions that exist in trying to be inclusive of staff when making whole-school changes while being sensitive to teachers' workload and, in particular, the negative effect of increasing workload on teacher wellbeing (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Nguyen & Hunter, 2018). The leadership-implemented interventions reported in this study appeared to have a positive impact on teachers' experiences at school; however, there were still improvements to be made to ensure these effects were felt across all areas of the school. The incidents experienced by the school amid the research resulted in unexpected challenges for the school staff that also impacted the research. Nevertheless, the qualitative data suggest positive changes can come from a major school disruption when staff work together to promote changes that facilitate supportive collaborative practices and develop them as both professionals and individuals (Turner & Theilking, 2019).

References

- ACARA (n.d.). *What does the ICSEA value mean?*
https://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/20150302_ACARA_ICSEA_infographic.pdf

- Acton, R. & Glasgow, P. (2015). Teacher wellbeing in neoliberal contexts: A review of the literature. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(8), 99-114. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2015v40n8.6>
- AITSL (2015). *Unpack the Principal Standard*. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/lead-develop/understand-the-principal-standard/unpack-the-principal-standard>
- AITSL (2017). *Maintaining and renewing teacher registration*. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/prepare-to-be-a-teacher/become-a-registered-teacher/maintaining-and-renewing-teacher-registration>
- Australian Government (2019). *Status of the teaching profession*. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/TeachingProfession
- Beatty, L. & Campbell-Evans, G. (2020). School leaders and a culture of support: Fostering student social emotional development. *Issues in Educational Research*, 30(2), 435-451. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier30/beatty.pdf>
- Berkovich, I. & Eyal, O. (2016). The mediating role of principals' transformational leadership behaviors in promoting teachers' emotional wellness at work: A study in Israeli primary schools. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(2), 316-335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143215617947>
- Brouskeli, V., Kaltsi, V. & Maria, L. (2018). Resilience and occupational well-being of secondary education teachers in Greece. *Issues in Educational Research*, 28(1), 43-60. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier28/brouskeli.pdf>
- Burns, R. A. & Machin, M. A. (2013). Employee and workplace well-being: A multi-level analysis of teacher personality and organizational climate in Norwegian teachers from rural, urban and city schools. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 57(3), 309-324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2012.656281>
- Butt, R. & Rettalick, J. (2002). Professional well-being and learning: A study of administrator-teacher workplace relationships. *The Journal of Educational Enquiry*, 3(1), 17-34. <https://ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/EDEQ/article/view/547>
- Collie, R. J., Shapka, J. D., Perry, N. E. & Martin, A. J. (2016). Teachers' psychological functioning in the workplace: Exploring the roles of contextual beliefs, need satisfaction, and personal characteristics. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(6), 788-799. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000088>
- Cowley, A. (2019). *The wellbeing toolkit: Sustaining, supporting and enabling school staff*. Bloomsbury Education. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/wellbeing-toolkit-9781472961655/>
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson. [6th ed.] <https://www.pearson.com/us/higher-education/program/Creswell-Educational-Research-Planning-Conducting-and-Evaluating-Quantitative-and-Qualitative-Research-plus-My-Lab-Education-with-Enhanced-Pearson-e-Text-Access-Card-Package-6th-Edition/PGM335066.html>
- Dabrowski, A. (2020). Teacher wellbeing during a pandemic: Surviving or thriving? *Social Education Research*, 2(1), 35-40. <https://doi.org/10.37256/ser.212021588>
- Datnow, A. & Hubbard, L. (2016). Teacher capacity for and beliefs about data-driven decision making: A literature review of international research. *Journal of Educational Change*, 17(1), 7-28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-015-9264-2>

- Department of Education Skills and Employment. (2020). *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Resources for teachers and school leaders*. Australian Government.
<https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/schools/resources-teachers-and-school-leaders>
- Department of Education Western Australia. (2020). *Independent public schools*.
<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/independent-public-schools>
- Derrington, M. L. & Campbell, J. W. (2015). Implementing new teacher evaluation systems: Principals' concerns and supervisor support. *Journal of Educational Change*, 16(3), 305-326. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-015-9244-6>
- Devos, A. (2010). New teachers, mentoring and the discursive formation of professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(5), 1219-1223.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.03.001>
- Falecki, D. & Mann, E. (2021). Practical applications for building teacher wellbeing in education. In C. F. Mansfield (Ed.), *Cultivating teacher resilience: International approaches, applications and impact*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5963-1_11
- Glazzard, J. & Rose, A. (2020). The impact of teacher well-being and mental health on pupil progress in primary schools. *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 19(4), 349-357.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMH-02-2019-0023>
- Gonski, D. (Chair) (2011). Review of funding for schooling final report December 2011. Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment.
<https://www.dese.gov.au/school-funding/resources/review-funding-schooling-final-report-december-2011>
- Granziera, H., Collie, R. & Martin, A. (2020). Understanding teacher wellbeing through job demands-resources theory. In C. F. Mansfield (Ed.), *Cultivating teacher resilience: International approaches, applications and impact* (pp. 229-244). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5963-1_14
- Gurd, B. (2013). Rising accountability of Australian non-government schools. *Public Money & Management*, 33(6), 415-420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2013.836002>
- Hart, P. M., Wearing, A. J., Conn, M., Carter, N. L. & Dingle, R. K. (2000). Development of the School Organisational Health Questionnaire: A measure for assessing teacher morale and school organisational climate. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70(2), 211-228. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709900158065>
- Kelly, N., Cespedes, M., Clarà, M. & Danaher, P. A. (2019). Early career teachers' intentions to leave the profession: The complex relationships among preservice education, early career support, and job satisfaction. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(3), 93-113. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v44n3.6>
- Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 559-603). SAGE.
- Le Cornu, R. (2013). Building early career teacher resilience: The role of relationships. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(4), article 4.
<https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2013v38n4.4>
- Lester, L. & Cross, D. (2015). The relationship between school climate and mental and emotional wellbeing over the transition from primary to secondary school. *Psychology of Well-Being*, 5, article 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13612-015-0037-8>

- Lingard, R. & Lewis, S. (2016). Globalization of the Anglo-American approach to top-down, test-based educational accountability. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of human and social conditions in assessment*. Routledge.
<https://www.routledge.com/Handbook-of-Human-and-Social-Conditions-in-Assessment/Brown-Harris/p/book/9781138811553>
- Mandinach, E. B. & Jimerson, J. B. (2016). Teachers learning how to use data: A synthesis of the issues and what is known. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 60, 452-457.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.07.009>
- McGrath-Champ, S., Wilson, R., Stacey, M. & Fitzgerald, S. (2018). *Understanding work in schools: The foundation for teaching and learning*. Sydney: NSW Teachers Federation.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2123/21926>
- Mintrop, R. & Charles, J. (2017). The formation of teacher work teams under adverse conditions: Towards a more realistic scenario for schools in distress. *Journal of Educational Change*, 18(1), 49-75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-016-9293-5>
- Morris, J. E., Lummis, G. W., Lock, G., Ferguson, C., Hill, S. & Nykiel, A. (2020). The role of leadership in establishing a positive staff culture in a secondary school. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 48(5), 802-820.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219864937>
- Nguyen, T. D. & Hunter, S. (2018). Towards an understanding of dynamics among teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators in a teacher-led school reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(4), 539-565. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9316-x>
- Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (2001). *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. SAGE Publishing. [2nd ed.] <https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/oc/the-sage-handbook-of-action-research/book228865>
- Sanders, M. (2016). Leadership, partnerships, and organizational development: Exploring components of effectiveness in three full-service community schools. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 27(2), 157-177.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2015.1030432>
- Schildkamp, K., Poortman, C., Luyten, H. & Ebbeler, J. (2017). Factors promoting and hindering data-based decision making in schools. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 28(2), 242-258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2016.1256901>
- Scott, J. (2019). Wellbeing and workload: What are our graduate teachers telling us? *Independent Education*, 49(3), 14-16.
<https://search.informit.org/doi/epdf/10.3316/informit.669059803784774>
- Shirley, D., Hargreaves, A. & Washington-Wangia, S. (2020). The sustainability and unsustainability of teachers' and leaders' well-being. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 92, article 102987. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102987>
- Smith, L. & Riley, D. (2012). School leadership in times of crisis. *School Leadership & Management*, 32(1), 57-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2011.614941>
- Stapleton, S. R. (2021). Teacher participatory action research (TPAR): A methodological framework for political teacher research. *Action Research*, 19(2), 161-178.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750317751033>
- Sterrett, W. & Irizarry, E. (2015). Beyond "autopsy data": Bolstering teacher leadership, morale, and school improvement. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 18(1), 3-13.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458914551828>

- Thorpe, K., Jansen, E., Sullivan, V., Irvine, S., McDonald, P., Thorpe, K., Irvine, S., McDonald, P., Lunn, J., Sumsion, J., Ferguson, A., Lincoln, M., Liley, K. & Spall, P. (2020). Identifying predictors of retention and professional wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce in a time of change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 21(4), 623-647. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-020-09382-3>
- Turner, K. & Theilking, M. (2019). Teacher wellbeing: Its effects on teaching practice and student learning. *Issues in Educational Research*, 29(3), 938-960. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier29/turner2.pdf>
- Waters, L., Cameron, K., Nelson-Coffey, S. K., Crone, D. L., Kern, M. L., Lomas, T., Oades, L., Owens, R. L., Pawelski, J. O., Rashid, T., Warren, M. A., White, M. A. & Williams, P. (2021). Collective wellbeing and posttraumatic growth during COVID-19: How positive psychology can help families, schools, workplaces and marginalized communities. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, online first. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2021.1940251>
- Watterston, J. & Caldwell, B. (2011). System alignment as a key strategy in building capacity for school transformation. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(6), 637-652. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231111174794>
- Weiner, J. M. & Higgins, M. C. (2017). Where the two shall meet: Exploring the relationship between teacher professional culture and student learning culture. *Journal of Educational Change*, 18(1), 21-48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-016-9292-6>
- Wilcox, K. C. & Lawson, H. A. (2018, 2018). Teachers' agency, efficacy, engagement, and emotional resilience during policy innovation implementation. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(2), 181-204. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9313-0>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications. [6th ed.] <https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/oce/case-study-research-and-applications/book250150>

Associate Professor Geoffrey W. Lummis *PhD* is a researcher in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. Geoff is the Chair of a Perth secondary school board and has collaborated with State Government ministers on local education projects. Geoff has taught preservice education for over 35 years and has a doctorate in sustainability and interests in evolutionary epistemology and aesthetics. His interdisciplinary interests are inclusive of the arts, humanities and STEM in education. Geoff has presented his research at both national and international conferences and supervised over 36 higher degrees by research completions.
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1632-6676>
Email: g.lummis@ecu.edu.au

Dr Julia E. Morris is a senior lecturer and course coordinator for visual arts education (secondary) in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University, and an honorary fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her main research interests include engagement and evaluation in applied education research, with an emphasis on developing and utilising evidence-based measures to improve educational practice.
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4481-8050>
Email: j.morris@ecu.edu.au

Dr Catherine Ferguson is an experienced multidisciplinary researcher, currently a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. Her research interests include multi-cultural competence, the transition experience of commencing students in higher education, and organisational behaviour in the context of school management and leadership.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6204-7301>

Email: c.ferguson@ecu.edu.au

Dr Susan Hill is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University and has worked on a range of education and training related programs and research projects in universities and public sector settings. Her broad research interests include school-based support for students experiencing disadvantage, school leadership, literacy practices, and post-compulsory education pathways.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1833-2500>

Email: susan.hill@ecu.edu.au

Associate Professor Graeme Lock, now retired, is the former Associate Dean Teaching and Learning in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. His research interests include educational leadership, rural and remote education and student experiences at university.

Email: graeme.lock11@gmail.com

Please cite as: Lummis, G. W., Morris, J. E., Ferguson, C., Hill, S. & Lock, G. (2022). Leadership teams supporting teacher wellbeing by improving the culture of an Australian secondary school. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(1), 205-224.
<http://www.iier.org.au/iier32/lummis.pdf>