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An ecological approach to school reviews

Going beyond
verification and
accountability to
achieve real school
improvement

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Foreword

An Ecological Approach to School Reviews: Going Beyond Verification and Accountability to Achieve Real School Improvement

Worth the Struggle is a modest publication that succinctly and thoughtfully chronicles the story of Catholic education in Sydney from 1820-1995. In detailing the events of the first half of the 1900s much is made of the visits of the State and Church school inspectors. It concludes: “For both teachers and pupils in those times the visit of the inspector was a fearful event.” Some seven decades on, school leaders in the UK, reflecting on the *Ofsted* inspection model have remarked that their approach to reviewing school performance has left schools ‘rife with anxiety’. So much so, that as of September 2019 a new model was introduced. It marked a shift from focusing on test data to an emphasis on the quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management.

It seems that we continue to struggle with finding a model of school review that will result in the deep and lasting change and improvement that we desire for our schools. All too often we seem to be tinkering at the edges. All too often we find that the good school is yet to become great, the struggling school continues to struggle, and the gap between our aspirations and our reality continues to grow.

Perhaps it is time to think of schools differently. To stop looking at them through the lens of an organisational chart, replete with libraries of policies that chronicle compliance and rankings against accountabilities, and see them for what they are: organic, human learning institutions that operate within a particular context. Using this paradigm, Dr Christopher Branson and Dr Maureen Marra have come up with a refined understanding of schools and a subsequent way of attending to school review that gets to the heart of the institution and results in real and lasting change. In addition to this, the model seeks to integrate, not separate our focus on Catholic identity and improvement in teaching and learning.

I commend this latest paper from the La Salle Academy to you and if you’re interested in pursuing this new model of school review we’d be delighted to hear from you.



Professor Br David Hall fms
Dean
La Salle Academy

Introduction

Right around the world at present it seems that the more schools try to improve, more often than not, they fail to do so. Indeed, if you are part of a school community in which a formal school review has led to desired and sustainable improvements, then research shows that your school is one of a very small minority to have done so. This is despite the fact that national governments in all developed countries are placing enormous pressure on their schools to improve in order for the country to gain the highest rankings possible in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. It would seem that these national governments assume there is a cause-effect link between the nation's PISA test scores and the perceived economic success and sustainability of the country in the eyes of its population and its current and potential global trading partners. Hence, many of these governments want to see proof that their schools are getting much better at teaching the students. Moreover, such proof is thought to be provided by means of a formal school review. Essentially, the main function of the school review process is to capture the current picture of the school's quality in order to provide guidance and clarity in how the school can seek to improve. Based upon the report produced from the analysis of the data gathered during the review, schools are then routinely

required to formulate a school improvement or development plan that focusses on student learning outcomes.

Thus, in this climate of globalisation and international education comparisons, evaluation, verification and accountability within some form of school review have become key school issues in all developed countries. Hence, comprehensive school review processes, which incorporate a systematic, evaluative assessment of the conditions of work, working methods, and outcomes of the individual school, are now commonplace in most educational systems worldwide. The impetus to introduce school reviews came from the prior application of similar processes within the business world (Peck et al., 2014). However, what was not acknowledged in this 'cloning' process is the acceptance within the business world that such processes "do little to address the ongoing improvement of the organisation and thus provide only temporary effects to organisational improvement" (Mette, 2013, p.320).

Be that as it may, the introduction of comprehensive school review processes is usually justified by arguing that, as schools are now increasingly responsible for the quality of their work, they should undergo regular external reviews. These regular external reviews are

intended to guarantee minimum standards for quality of processes. However, school reviews were not only introduced for monitoring purposes. Rather, the introduction of school reviews is linked to certain hopes and expectations, often encapsulated in the more palatable term, "improvement". Often, judgements about the degree of improvement are based on standardised criteria for evaluating good teaching and good schools according to normative expectations determined by administrative and/or government bodies. It is in this way that school reviews claim to represent an objective, data-based evaluation.

As a consequence, many education systems have introduced varieties of evidence-based school review processes. In general terms, these evidence-based school review processes aim to (a) set expectations through their review standards and procedures; they (b) collect evidence by verification visits and use information produced by other evaluation instruments to assess the quality of education and hold schools accountable for a broad range of goals related to student achievement, teaching, organisation, and leadership; and they (c) aim to stimulate school and system improvement by producing reports which point to strengths and weaknesses of individual schools and include or imply recommendations

The impetus to introduce school reviews came from the prior application of similar processes within the business world (Peck et al., 2014). However, what was not acknowledged in this 'cloning' process is the acceptance within the business world that such processes "do little to address the ongoing improvement of the organisation and thus provide only temporary effects to organisational improvement" (Mette, 2013, p.320).



for action to be undertaken by the reviewed schools or the authorities in charge of them. Thus, these review processes mirror the national policy of education and are meant to be an essential system-level factor assuring and promoting the effectiveness and the quality of an educational system. Regrettably, however, these school review processes are yet to produce any real and sustainable improvements in student learning. Indeed, based on the internationally accepted national measuring stick, PISA test scores, for many countries the perceived quality of student learning is worsening. A closer look at the nature, function and limitations of current school review processes will not only show why this unsustainable situation exists but also this will provide guidance and support for the adoption of the unique process, the ecological approach, presented later in this paper.

AN OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL REVIEW PROCESSES

As described by Caldwell (2007), the core purpose of a review process when applied to the educational sector can take many different forms: “to turn around a once successful school that has fallen on hard times, to take a good school and make it a great school, to reinvigorate a system of education that is losing market share, to rethink

the mission of the school to make it a better match to the times, or even more fundamentally, to rethink the knowledge base for learning and teaching” (p.225). It is presumed that each of these purposes can be best addressed by the actions of a School Review Panel tasked with generating data-informed knowledge which makes existing perceptions about the school’s current problems official. That is, the School Review Panel tend to identify problems that are already more or less known to the school. By publishing these problems in a Review report, however, the process transforms them into something that can be addressed officially by the school itself and, if necessary, by the educational system authority administering the school.

Also, it is important to note that the data-informed knowledge gained through a school review is evaluative knowledge. During the review process, the school’s perceived educational attributes are evaluated against existing norms, goals, and expectations so as to identify any substandard aspects. These are then highlighted in the Report so as to offer the school concrete starting points for improvement as well as exerting a certain pressure to act. The assumption behind this effect is that a good school review has the motivational force to persuade a school

to address the deficits identified. This knowledge can also be utilised as a basis for an accountability mechanism, in the sense that the knowledge created by the school review in the form of a review report can be used by both the school and the relevant school authority to publicly account for the quality of internal school processes.

PERCEIVED LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT SCHOOL REVIEW PROCESSES

Given that similar organisational review processes have proven to be of limited benefit in the business sector it is unsurprising to note that similar disappointing outcomes are being acknowledged in school review research data. According to Peck and colleagues (2014), American empirical studies offer little evidence that school reviews or similar approaches to school improvement are an effective way to improve student academic performance. Similarly, research conducted by Altrichter and Kemethofer (2015), which gathered survey data from 2300 school principals across 7 European countries, found that the overall results from school reviews was far from conclusive as to the question of whether or not the review processes contributed to school improvement. While Australian research by Antoniou, Myburgh-Louw



and Gronn (2015) posits there is very little research evidence supporting the view that current school review processes actually improve school effectiveness.

Various research informed reasons have been offered to explain why school review processes have had limited capacity to achieve desired improvements. First, pragmatic concerns have been raised about the compatibility of combining accountability with improvement goals. Schildkamp and Visscher (2010) argue that the presence of accountability, verification and comparative evaluation processes introduces perceptions of high stakes leading to the risk of window dressing whereby problems are hidden instead of being found and solved. In the opinion of these researchers, there is an important distinction between school accountability processes and confidential school improvement processes. “The former promotes a hide-strategy (window dressing), the latter a find-strategy (finding problems and causes in order to solve them)” (p.1401).

In addition, Hallinger and Heck (2011) propose that a common fundamental flaw in most school review processes is the absence of contextual specificity. These authors define context as the school’s unique “environmental and organisational conditions that moderate the school’s capacity for improving student learning” (p.2). This perspective is shared but expanded upon by Robinson et al. (2017) who highlight the critically important influence of coordination, coherence and orchestration upon a school’s capacity to achieve success

with any school improvement strategy and argue that the degree to which each of these qualities is present within a particular school is contextually specific. Here, coordination refers to the variety and effectiveness of organisational structures and processes that integrate the actions of interdependent agents in the accomplishment of a goal or task. Coherence is described as a cultural property of the school and its degree of attainment is evident by how well its interdependent parts are connected in ways that enable the desired student learning output. This understanding of coherence acknowledges the essential presence of many different types of connectedness within a school. Orchestration refers to the current degree of effectiveness in the deliberate actions taken by leaders in the pursuit of greater coherence. Moreover, it is argued that school review processes more aligned to essentially generic evaluation, verification and accountability criteria will invariably insufficiently explore these key contextually specific criteria of coordination, coherence and orchestration and, in so doing, fail to provide sufficient feedback and guidance to the school to enable it to improve.

More specifically, Jones and Harris (2013) propose that a critically important reason as to why the various forms of current school review processes fail in their endeavour to produce significant improvements is that they treat the school as a simplistic rather than as a complex organisation. These researchers argue that school reviews must be able to gather data associated with the

school community’s collective rather than individual endeavour because each individual, whether they work as an isolated individual or in more collective ways within the school, are highly interdependent. This implies that an appropriate school review process must go beyond examining the more objective output data associated with accountability, verification and comparative evaluation criteria in order to explore the far more significant data associated with such matters as social and professional relationships between individuals and teams throughout the school community, perceptions of the school’s organisational climate by all key stakeholders, the nature and functioning effectiveness of the various levels of decision-making across the school community, and the diversity of responsiveness within the school community to external and internal change influences.

This understanding aligns with that of Murphy and Meyers (2009) who question the capability of school reviews because these processes fail to recognise the organisational dynamics, that is, they overlook determining how people within the school are behaving. They claim that successful school improvement depends on the quality of interpersonal relationships as well as other more readily available objective information. This means that, for school improvement efforts to take root and grow, the existing culture cannot be allowed to constitute a barrier. In school improvement, “game changing culture is critical: it isn’t just one aspect of the game – it is the game” (p.22). For school reviews to succeed, the process must be able to fully

illuminate the cultural dimensions that inhibit or enhance the improvement process. These must be able to explain to the school community why it is essential to create a new school organisational culture and propose ways for how this new culture can become embedded in the operating environment. For the school leader, the crux of being able to successfully guide school improvement is in being capable of developing a new culture.

This view is shared by Brown and colleagues (2018) who maintain that truly effective school improvement strategies must be embedded in changes that take place in school and classroom cultures at the level of beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours. In contrast to the notion of school improvement being founded upon the replication of generic approaches to management and teaching practices founded on accountability measures seeking to identify measures of school effectiveness and improvement, a truly successful approach to school improvement must focus on individual and collective participation in the practices within social and cultural contexts. Such a different approach to school improvement is to do with turning people around, with helping people move beyond assigning blame for problems and wallowing in a climate of despair, which are often unintentional outcomes from processes incorporating key elements of evaluation, verification and accountability. Unless the basic motivation of the people in the school changes from that of a defeatist, underperforming attitude, it is doubtful that the school would have the social cohesion and capacity, and the professional resilience and commitment, to sufficiently adopt effective improvement strategies. Essentially, the most important outcome from an effective school review process is that it provides the school community, and its educational system authority, with data-informed knowledge that enables the school to restore its professional confidence and to feel empowered to seek improvement by “replacing denial with dialogue, blame with respect, isolation with collaboration, and helplessness with opportunities for initiative” (Murphy and Meyers, 2009, p.11).



It is indisputable that any effective school review process must inculcate guiding information about the strengths and weaknesses of the existing culture and, thus, how it is to be more closely aligned with the achievement of the desired school improvement outcomes.

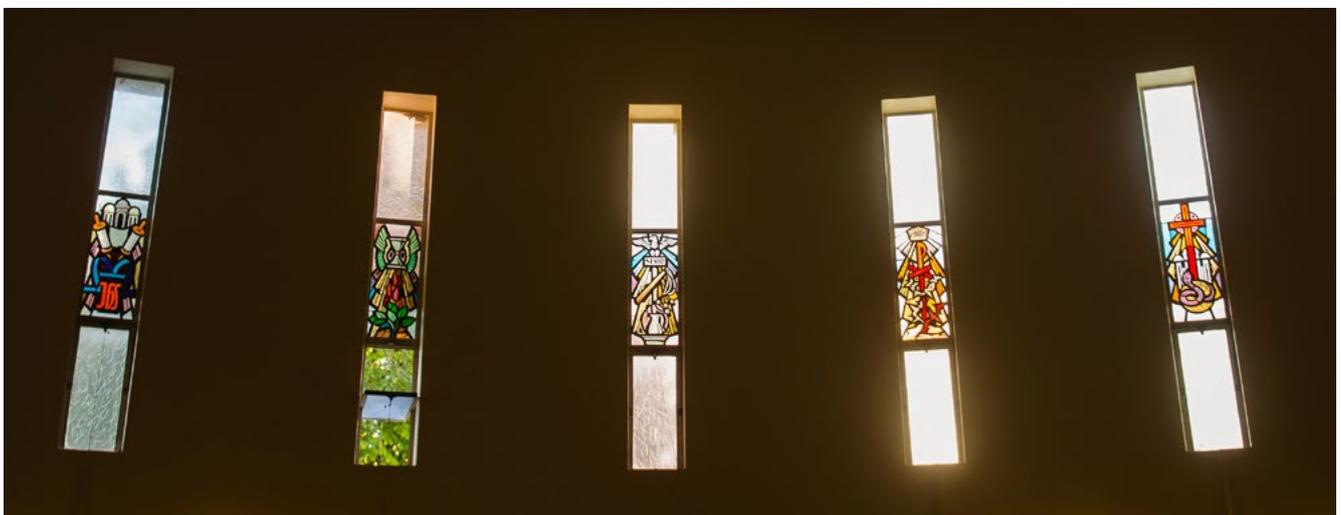
THE CULTURAL CHALLENGE AND SCHOOL REVIEW EFFECTIVENESS

However, the view posed by this discussion of unambiguously founding school review effectiveness upon an exploration, illumination and reconstruction of the school's culture is not without its challenges. Despite more than 30 years of insight from the internationally acclaimed MIT researcher, Professor Edgar Schein, into what constitutes organisational culture, and what this requires of the leader, there remains "an inability or unwillingness of leaders to look at the shifting world objectively and to overhaul the culture to align with new realities" (Murphy & Meyers, 2009, p.22). Perhaps a foreseeable finding, given the steadfastness of an existing organisational culture and the fact that it is the glue, the invisible force, that holds the organisation together and influences what is valued and how things are to be done. However, a common catchphrase in the business sphere is that 'culture trumps strategy every time'. That is to say, the presence of a non-responsive or resistant or unsupportive school culture will invariably undermine any school or system attempt to implement school improvement strategies. It is indisputable that any effective school review process must inculcate guiding information about the strengths and weaknesses of the existing culture and, thus, how it is to be more closely aligned with the achievement of the desired school improvement outcomes. We argue that a far more pragmatic understanding of organisational culture than that currently available is necessary for this to be confidently accomplished.

CULTURE AS THE MANIFESTATION OF BELONGING

An organisation's culture can only be effective if and when the individual feels that they belong in the organisation. If the culture is the glue, the invisible force that holds the organisation together, this can only come about through the individual's sense of belonging. People are only truly connected with others when they feel a deep and sincere sense that they belong to the group. Hagerty and colleagues (1992) defined this sense of belonging as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (p.173). Similarly, Cockshaw and colleagues (2013) proposed that belongingness is the extent to which individuals feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in their social environment.

According to Social Psychology, this need to seek belongingness comes from our basic survival instinct. From an evolutionary perspective, humans have developed a subconscious acknowledgement of being a relatively frail and defenceless species, and so we automatically seek to overcome this vulnerability by living and working closely with others. Thus, this inherent human need for belonging is accepted as being one of the most powerful sources of personal motivation. Indeed, this need for belonging is so important to us that Social Psychology research has shown that its absence in peoples' lives can lead to depression, sadness, and lowered self-esteem and self-confidence.





This discussion of culture as the manifestation of belonging provides critically important insight about the tenacity of a school's organisational culture and why it can play a dominant supportive or resistant role in any attempt to implement a school improvement strategy.

This acknowledgement of the motivational power of belonging has led to an extensive array of research towards better understanding its nature and function. For example, various research studies have confirmed that individuals with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to experience good physical and mental health outcomes and achieve higher levels of performance. Furthermore, research has shown how belongingness promotes meaningfulness within an individual because it creates a personal positivity through being able to help others, being appreciated and validated by others, gaining access to required resources, and having influence over one's environment. Hence, Moynihan, Igou, and van Tilburg (2017) argue that "one of the great benefits that feelings of belongingness offer is that they serve as a key source of perceived meaning in life" and add that "meaning in life substantiates the relationship between free will beliefs and belongingness" (p.55). That is, free will enables people to restrain their impulses so as to gain acceptance and approval from others, which in turn promotes feelings of belongingness and thereby meaningfulness.

This discussion of culture as the manifestation of belonging provides critically important insight about the tenacity of a school's organisational culture and why it can play a dominant supportive or resistant role in any attempt to implement a school improvement strategy. It provides insight into why many employees often prefer to comply with the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of their co-workers in implied or explicit opposition to that expected by their leaders. In search of a sense of belonging, and thereby a sense of workplace inclusion, the employee will strive to behave in ways that are presumed to make them more compliant with the pre-existing culture. This explains why an employee might choose to resist becoming involved in certain newly expected workplace actions. This resistance is likely to arise when an employee senses that a proposed new workplace action appears to either challenge the accepted way it has been done by their group in the past or jeopardises the status, employment or well-being of their self or other individuals within the group to which they feel they belong. Simply, the requested new action is judged by the employee to be counterproductive if not destructive to

the established means by which all in the group, including their self, achieve their sense of belonging.

The other essential insight to be gleaned from this view of culture as the manifestation of belonging is that its exploration is far more informed by subjective rather than objective data. Belonging is not a technical element that can be measured but rather it is an affective phenomenon that can only be individually described. A person's sense of belonging is a feeling or belief based upon individualistic and idiosyncratic interpretations of their self and the perceived level of their acceptance, inclusivity and contribution to the desired group. Hence, it is highly unlikely that any two-people working in the same organisation will have an identical sense of belonging based upon the same experiences and interpretations. In effect, the person's sense of belonging is a window into their personalised workplace sense-making and meaning-making. It influences how they judge the climate of the workplace, how they rate the quality of leadership within the workplace, how they respond to the decision-making processes within the workplace, how open and transparent they communicate with others in the workplace, how loyal and committed they feel towards their workplace, and how dedicated they are to performing to the best of their ability in the workplace. This being so, clearly the person's sense of belonging within a school community is an integral factor in the successful achievement of any school improvement strategy.

In other words, if it is essential to include a comprehensive cultural exploration within an effective school review process then this requires the

need to include a means of investigating personalised senses of belonging of key stakeholders from across the whole school. As will be seen below, our ecological approach to a school review readily achieves this necessity.

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO A SCHOOL REVIEW

The remainder of this paper describes ongoing research that applies an ecological approach to the school review process and, thereby, is accomplishing extraordinarily beneficial school improvement outcomes. By means of this unique ecological interpretation of school leadership and culture, where the quality of relationships becomes the pivotal focus of the review, it becomes possible to provide a rich array of data-informed knowledge about what is currently working well within the school as well as what and how the school can achieve important improvements. Effectively, this ecological approach lays bare the school's culture and then proceeds to inform the school community and its system authority how it can build upon its current position in order to attain desired improvements. This unique approach to a school review is founded upon the following imperative organisation principles.

A school's potential possibilities can only be fully achieved when people feel they fully belong in the organisation so that they can truly connect with each other to create a shared understanding of the core purpose of their work (Senge, 1990). Such a widely shared understanding cultivates a profound personal commitment because each person

knows the important contribution they provide to the achievement of this core purpose. Genuinely connected people create a fertile ground for productive professional relationships founded upon the values of respect, inclusion, openness and collaboration. These values enable people to earnestly listen, learn and work closely with each other so that the organisation can be confident in its capacity to fully achieve its core purpose.

However, such an awareness of the importance of each worker's sense of belonging and connectedness is rare because its achievement is not sufficiently appreciated. Hence, workplace cultures are more likely to form pockets of disconnected groups and individuals. It is possible for the people to feel that they belong to a small group but not to the organisation as a whole. This is how sub-cultures can arise. In these cultures, relationships tend to become competitive and exclusive, and fall well short in promoting the values of respect, inclusion, openness and collaboration. Rather than working together to realise the potential of the organisation, some become disengaged in their work; they do the minimum and they limit their social interaction with their colleagues and clients. Each time this happens, the energy that drives the organisation's potential is lost, and the core purpose achievement level is significantly diminished. Moreover, many leaders are often ill equipped to understand the complex causes of these cultural issues and therefore struggle to know how to overcome them.

To date, practical ways to manage, control and artificially orchestrate

Effectively, this ecological approach lays bare the school's culture and then proceeds to inform the school community and its system authority how it can build upon its current position in order to attain desired improvements.

collaboration and performance have dominated the advice to leaders on how to fix these problems. But this has produced little success. Rather than striving to impose collaboration upon a culture, the ecosystem approach seeks to understand the culture and to find out what is currently diminishing a sense of belonging and, thus, collaboration and performance. Essentially, this entails learning about:

1. the degree to which there is a clearly articulated shared understanding of the core purpose;
2. the ways in which the people are personally and professionally interacting in their workplace;
3. the cultural norms, values and beliefs that are driving these relationships and interactions;
4. the existing factors that are motivating the people at work; and
5. the influence of the leaders within this culture.

These five factors underpin our ecological approach as it seeks to illuminate any habits and practices that are limiting belongingness and interconnectedness and diminishing core purpose achievement.

DESCRIBING THE ECOLOGICAL RESEARCH APPROACH

Specific to the context of our research in schools, once there has been an exploration of understandings in relation to the school's core purpose, an investigation occurs into the quality, diversity and extent of belongingness and interconnectedness both within the school as well between the school and its community. During this investigation, judgments about belongingness and interconnectedness are developed based on data gathered pertaining to the presence or otherwise of the following elements within existing relationships:

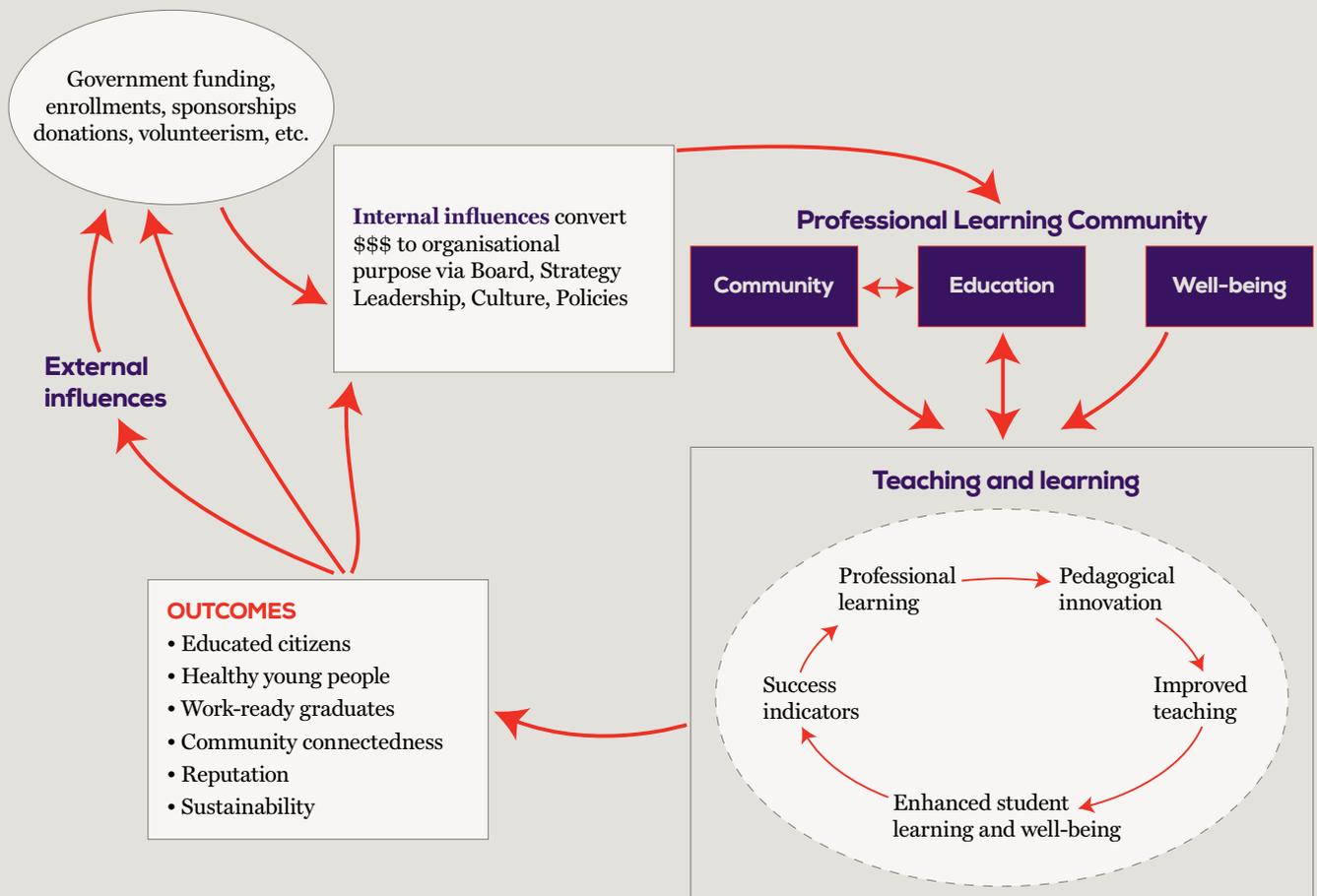
- Collaboration
- Compassion/care
- Commitment to Mission
- Harmony

- Information sharing
- Respect
- Responsibility to Contextual Character
- Shared values and beliefs

These elements are seen as energy factors that are able to drive the school's processes for growing and developing its students. It is argued that if this energy is reduced through the presence of some disconnections, the beneficial outcomes for students are reduced. Where the energy flow is optimised through strong and extensive interconnectedness, the beneficial outcomes for students are maximised. An appreciation of the important influence that interconnectedness plays in a school's productivity can be shown diagrammatically as follows:

A SCHOOL ECOSYSTEM

(The energy flow through the system is the holistic growth of children/students. When energy is maximised, growth is maximised.)





Importantly, this figure is an illustration rather than a detailed map of a school's culture. A detailed map would be far too complicated. However, in the case of an actual school research site, the illustration would have some additional detail in order to show its closer alignment to the case in question, and not every arrow would be either red in colour or double-headed. As such, the adjusted illustration would show more clearly the relative level of effective and efficient interconnectedness as indicated by the colour, direction and continuity of the arrows joining each part of the culture. Red arrows indicate stronger interconnectedness than grey arrows. Double-headed arrows indicate excellent communication that goes both ways (i.e. strong interconnectedness) as distinct from single headed arrows which indicate that the communication is predominantly in the direction shown by the arrowhead. Finally, a continuous arrow indicates stronger interconnectedness than does a broken arrow. Thus, the figure illustrates the perception provided by the data that achievement of the school's desired educational outcomes is being significantly compromised by a lack of appropriate professional interconnectedness throughout the culture.

RESEARCH METHODS

Informed by the focus of this particular research being centred upon personal constructions, interpretations and perceptions of the quality of relational interconnectedness throughout the school, qualitative research being underpinned by a Social Constructionist epistemology is adopted (Gergen, 2015). Such an approach acknowledges the subjectivity of personal constructions, interpretations and explanations associated with common lived realities, yet these also enable the explication of generalised beliefs, perspectives and understandings. Hence, this research incorporates a Case Study Methodology which gathers a rich array of data from individual interviews, focus group interviews, an online staff survey, and document reviews. A Constant Comparative Analysis [CCA] method is then used to consolidate, reduce, and interpret all of this data so that a rich and comprehensive understanding of it is gleaned. This data analysis

method enables commonly held cultural insights to emerge from each interviewee's reported interpretations and constructions of their reality, since these are grouped around common experiences and perceptions to form overarching impressions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Essentially, this CCA method employs open and axial coding as well as triangulation of data sources, which, together, enables patterns of convergent understandings, perceptions, values and beliefs about the school's leadership and culture to emerge.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Given that each school explored by this ecological approach is a case study, no generalisable or universal truths about school leadership and culture are possible. But, deep insights into the unique capacity of the approach to discover and illustrate the array of current leadership and cultural strengths and weaknesses in a case school is clearly discernible. For example, one recent research school was that of a large Australian secondary school. Although this school had maintained a very positive reputation in its local community there was a growing perception amongst the staff, students, and parents that this was now under threat. Despite all the efforts being made to sustain the school's reputation, student enrolments were decreasing. In particular, a growing number of students were seeking to complete their final two years of secondary education at other available schools. Furthermore, a strongly held concern by many of those associated with the school community was that the school's culture had become outdated. Essentially this view was that the school's culture, with emphasis on senior academic achievements, the elite status of certain traditional subjects, and a very hierarchical and authoritarian administrative structure, needed to be replaced by one that was far more holistically inclusive, equitable and relational.

But, the serious challenge for this school community was twofold. The first serious challenge for the school was in determining whether or not this view was correctly naming the problem and, thereby, promoting the best solution. Then, the second serious challenge, if this view was correct, was in determining how to successfully change the culture. Without relevant data the leaders of this school community were not in a position



to address either of these two serious challenges. The aim of the research was not only to address both of these serious challenges but also to provide some clear direction for how the school could overcome whatever unhelpful leadership and cultural issues that were present.

The implemented ecological review of this school occurred across five school days, which saw a total of 77 persons – staff, students, parents, education system personnel, or key community stakeholders – being involved in an interview either individually or as a member of a focus group. In addition, 58% of the school staff completed the online survey. Data gathered in this way were then cross-referenced with that provided in official school documents including vision and mission statements, school prospectus, position descriptions, publicity brochures, school policies, strategic planning documents, and school newsletters.

As a resultant of the data analysis procedures, data not only unequivocally substantiated the view of the school's culture as being outdated but also the following five leadership and cultural themes were determined as being key foci when implementing the desired cultural change:

1. A Compelling Vision, Mission and Purpose;
2. Educational Priorities and Strategies;
3. Structure and Function Primacies;
4. College Reputation and Promotion; and
5. Strategic System Support.

Moreover, this ecological approach enabled us to use data to highlight many commendations and recommendation within each of these cultural themes.

While ethical considerations for anonymity and confidentiality prevent detailing these commendations and recommendations, it is vitally important to note the capacity of this ecological approach to produce considerable numbers of both commendations and recommendations. A potential major concern when implementing any school improvement strategy is to be confident that one is not only overcoming an unhelpful cultural element but also is not undermining a beneficial one simultaneously. This ecological approach ensures that the school recognises not only those leadership and cultural elements

that it needs to change but also those that it needs to keep. Furthermore, by providing a rich array of data in support of the description of the elements needing to be improved, there is far less room for disagreement or discredit. Finally, guided by the data and such descriptions it is far clearer as to how such unhelpful leadership and cultural elements can be changed.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Essentially, the aim of this review process was to determine the actual reason why students were leaving the school and how this enrolment decline can be turned around. What the ecological review process established was that the school's leadership and culture were deemed by a rapidly growing number of students and parents to be outdated and no longer suitable. Simply stated, the leadership and culture were considered often to be far too authoritarian, elitist, inequitable, and non-inclusive. Indeed, the ecological review process was able to readily provide a rich array of data describing and supporting these perceptions. Moreover, because this data not only captured many participants' common impressions about the school's leadership and culture but also their reasons for having such impressions along with their views about what they would like to see changed, the ecological review process effectually developed a comprehensive list of both the highly beneficial and the decidedly constraining elements within the current leadership and culture.

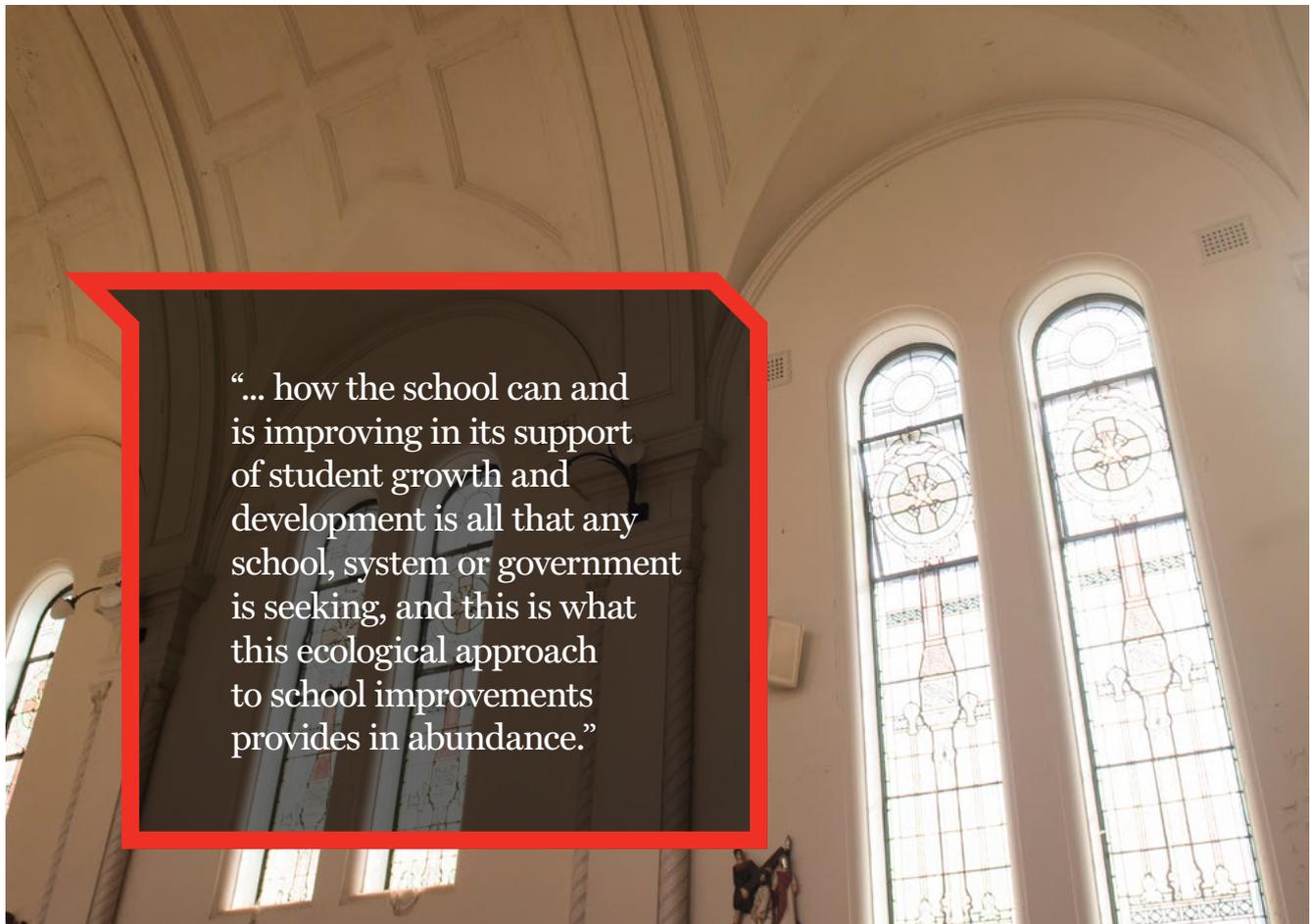
In so doing, this ecological approach to this particular school review comprehensively addressed, and thereby readily overcame, the aforementioned limitations which are undermining school improvement processes worldwide. Clearly, this approach has an exploration and examination of the school's organisational cultural as its foundation. Its inclusion of an intensive and extensive interview schedule effectively surfaces the breadth and depth of diverse personal and group values, beliefs, attitudes, interpretations and meanings about the school, its leadership, its community, its past and its future. Moreover, the seat for these cultural artefacts gained from school and system leaders, teachers, students, parents, and relevant local community members was in how they described their everyday interpersonal relationships across the school community. Essentially, each interview

provided individual and collective impressions pertaining to senses of belonging and connectivity, and how these influenced the construction of their judgements about the school and its leadership. That is, this approach sought to uncover impressions and justifications in relation to the qualities of coordination, coherence and orchestration. In this way, this ecological approach recognised the organisational complexity of the school by gathering awareness of the diversity, rather than generality, of views and opinions. This acknowledges that there is never just one ‘truth’ about the school, and any one view is an opinion based on personal interpretations of experiences and not facts, but within the described justification for commonly held or opposing views and opinions there is precious insight about the school, its leadership and its culture.

Thus, this ecological approach is contextually specific – each school review is deemed to be unique. But does this mean that it fails to meet the evaluation, verification and accountability demands? It is so that this ecological approach does not

explicitly include any data gathering process to address government or system devised evaluation, verification and accountability criteria. However, we argue that these criteria only gain prominence when school review processes are failing to generate clearly observable school improvement outcomes. Where school reviews are generating clearly observable school improvement outcomes evaluation, verification and accountability data become self-evident and do not need to be deliberately sourced through the school review process. The development from this ecological approach of a wide but focused array of strategically important commendations and recommendations for the school will undoubtedly meet both system and government accountability requirements. Having concrete guidelines and evidence of how the school can and is improving in its support of student growth and development is all that any school, system or government is seeking, and this is what this ecological approach to school improvements provides in abundance.

Hence, we argue that the outcomes generated by this ecological approach to achieving school improvement readily and remarkably achieves the “ultimate” goal of school improvement which is “to improve outcomes for students, including levels of achievement and wellbeing” (ACER, 2016, p.5). Specifically, this particularly unique school improvement process is, as urged by the National School Improvement Tool, “fundamentally about improving what a school does.” Rather than initially focussing on pre-existing learning and teaching criteria, this process begins by seeking to explore and illuminate the functioning quality of the overall educational culture and, from this critically important starting point, provide commendations and recommendations pertaining to what constitutes quality learning and teaching in that particular school. In this way, this ecological approach to achieving school improvement provides an essential complimentary element to the National School Improvement Tool by adding vital contextual and strategic insight and guidance.



“... how the school can and is improving in its support of student growth and development is all that any school, system or government is seeking, and this is what this ecological approach to school improvements provides in abundance.”



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His move to tertiary education in 2009 followed the international recognition and adoption of the outcomes generated by his doctoral and post doctoral research into how personal values influence the leadership behaviours of school principals. His ensuing academic activities extended this research into issues aligned with the nature and practice of contemporary leadership, ethical leadership, leadership of educational change, and organisational culture. He is the author of four books along with a number of book chapters and many articles published in both Australian and international journals.



Dr Maureen Marra is an experienced organisational development practitioner and consultant with experience/expertise in leadership, organisational culture and employee engagement. In addition, Maureen's extensive background in ecology underpins an interconnected, ecosystem approach to ensure health and vitality in teams/organisations. In this way she specialises in developing the leadership, culture and learning that make organisations not only successful but also great places in which to work. These are organisations where culture is aligned to strategy, where everyone feels they are making an important contribution, where people enjoy their work, and where they grow and remain relevant for the future. Maureen is currently researching and publishing on leadership, culture and the workplace ecosystem.

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