# Success Stories of Collaborative Professional Learning:

# Culture, Dispositions and Self-Efficacy

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**Introduction**

Access to high quality education for all has been the goal of most governments for centuries. With access to education for all students embedded in most of the developed world, the focus of governmental debate and education communities has now turned to ensuring and monitoring the quality of this education. Australia is in a privileged position when it comes to schooling having achieved access to schooling for all students, even in some of the most remote environments in the country. Australia also enjoys a consistent position in comparative studies and prides itself on producing high quality teachers (Thomson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman & Buckley, 2011). However, it is acknowledged that whilst schooling in Australia is strong, there is scope for continued improvement particularly in ensuring equity and quality of education for all young people (Caldwell, 2011).

Educational literature documents school improvement using case studies and research from single schools through to whole system initiatives. One core theme that has emerged from the school improvement literature is the key role teacher's play in enhancing the quality of learning experiences for students (Hayes & Noonan, 2008; Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Louden et al., 2005). Effective teachers have repeatedly been shown to positively alter the learning trajectories of students (Hattie, 2012). The message is clear, to improve outcomes for students, you need to improve the quality of instruction.

Governments, education systems and schools have made significant investments in strategies designed to improve instructional quality (Australian National Audit Office, 2012). Typically these strategies have proclaimed a series of 'must haves' and 'must dos' to improve the quality of education within a school or system (Hopkins, Harris, Stoll & Mackay, 2011; Spillane & Coldren, 2011; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009). Unfortunately, each research article or opinion piece appears to articulate a diverse range of approaches and, in an attempt to apply the latest learning, schools and systems have moved from one initiative to another, creating a sense of initiative overload for those working in schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

A common thread lies at the heart of the many lists and lessons about school improvement, that of building a positive professional learning culture. Current literature and research espouses the importance of culture development as the key to improving the quality of education (Reeves, 2009; Wagner, 2006). By developing culture, defined simply by Hargreaves and Fullan as 'the relationships among people' (2012, p. 104) or by Cromwell as "the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school" (2002, as cited in Muhammad, 2009, p.11), schools and systems can develop and empower teachers and therefore improve student achievement (Fullan, 2008). Three separate, but not exclusive, approaches appear within the literature: changing the professional learning structures in the school, changing the teaching practices used in the school and focussing on the use of student outcome data. The implicit belief is that targeting one of these three approaches will lead to a change in the professional learning culture that in turn will positively impact on the dispositions of teachers allowing them to modify their professional and teaching behaviours resulting in an improvement in student achievement.

The first approach, changing the professional learning structures in the school, encourages school leaders to implement and embed processes to encourage open collaboration between teachers. It suggests that deliberate attempts to create opportunities for dialogue and collaboration are the key to creating or enhancing the desired culture (Stoll, 2011, DuFour,

DuFour & Eaker, 2008). As a result of this literature, schools have worked hard to change meeting structures, alter school routines, implement professional learning community meetings or engage in action research in order to create a more collaborative and open culture (Hallinger & Heck 2011; Leithwood, 2011). In much of the literature it openly describes schooling as not conducive to collaboration and therefore reform and effort is needed to change this.

In the second approach, changing the teaching practices used in the school, the literature focuses on using new teaching practices or routines. It is intended that in implementing whole school pedagogies, teachers will have a reason to collaborate and engage in open and shared communicative practices while working together to implement teaching and learning strategies known to be effective (Gaffney & Faragher, 2012; Tytler, 2012; Wildy & Faulkner 2008).

In the final approach, focussing on the use of student outcome data, educator groups are encouraged to analyse student data as a means to target refinements to teaching behaviours and routines. One such an approach would be the use of data teams (McNulty & Besser, 2011). By having this focus, teachers accept responsibility for all students and participate in problem solving processes in order to change student outcomes (Dufour, 2011; Timperley, 2008). Such an approach builds a collective purpose and places teachers in problem-solving processes to ensure that collective wisdom is harnessed and directed (Anderson, Leithwood & Strauss, 2010).

While implemented to achieve a collaborative culture, school improvement approaches, like those mentioned above, may not always achieve this desired result. Changing professional learning structures can lead to meeting overload. Continuous change in their practice can leave teachers feeling disempowered and undervalued by the powers that encourage classroom practice change (Briscoe, 2006). At times, change can appear to be for the sake of change and fails to respect the wisdom and knowledge base of the educator group. Focussing on student outcomes can result in shifting the blame from classroom programs to other factors. In effect, while the school improvement movement provides direction, the efforts may not always achieve the desired culture.

Frequently, rather than achieve full scale implementation, pockets of excellence have arisen in particular classrooms or schools while in others that have used similar approaches, there are teachers who still feel isolated and disenfranchised (DuFour, 2011). In attempting to answer the question of why full scale improvement in student achievement and quality education is so difficult to achieve, it is important to return to the focus of what these approaches were attempting to achieve. Schools focussing on changing structures, approaches to teaching or new ways of analysing student data were doing so to encourage culture development. It appears that whilst necessary and important, such foci have led some educators to concentrate more on the structures implemented and less on building culture.

The focus of this paper is to study five schools that are engaging successfully in school improvement and explore each school's professional learning culture to see how it impacts on their improvement efforts.

**Methodology**

*Identification of schools*

All schools in the Catholic Education System in Western Australia are visited regularly by two main consultant groups from within the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia: Principal School Advisors who work with school Principals and school staffs in designing and implementing contextualised approaches to whole school improvement and School Support Consultants who work with school leadership teams and classroom teachers focussing on pedagogical renewal processes. These two consultant groups were asked to identify schools that they believed had strong cultures of professional collaboration.

Records of school visits and school Literacy and Numeracy plans were consulted to see which of these schools had a continuous record of work in pedagogical renewal and the use of student assessment data to inform school directions. Using this information and through follow up discussions with School Support consultants, the sample group of identified schools was reduced to five focus schools.

*School Interviews*

At each focus school, two interview sessions were conducted to gain insights into the professional learning culture at the school and the pedagogical improvement journey that had taken place over the past five years. One interview was conducted with the leadership group, those responsible for designing and implementing the professional learning journey for school staff, and a second was conducted with a teacher group. Both researchers attended each interview and took extensive notes of what was said in response to each of the questions. An auditory recording of each interview was also taken.

The questions posed to the leadership group asked them to discuss their approach to the pedagogical improvement process and to comment on changes that they felt they had seen in the school's professional learning culture and the dispositions of their teaching staff. The questions posed to the teacher group asked them to share their perspective on their personal professional learning journey and discuss changes they felt they had seen in their own approach to professional learning, their classroom practice and the learning outcomes of their students.

*Individual School Data Analysis*

Notes from each school interview were classified under six broad categories: school structures and processes, school culture, teacher dispositions, teacher professional behaviours, classroom practice and student achievement. Key themes were identified in relation to these topics for each school and these were written into a brief description of the school.

Each school's student achievement data from annual national assessments were investigated in relation to the focus of their professional learning investigations in 2010 and 2011 as identified in their annual Literacy and Numeracy plan. The school's systemic cultural data, a measure of organisational culture produced using an annual survey completed by school community stakeholders including teachers, parents and students, was also considered.

Once a snapshot of each school was developed, it was sent to the interviewees from each school team and the Principal School Advisors and School Support Consultants for verification.

*Collective Analysis*

The key themes identified in each of the individual school data analysis were investigated to identify central themes in relation to the success of the schools. These were explored in relation to both the actions of those leading the school's pedagogical renewal journey and changes in teacher professional behaviour.

**Findings**

This section is divided into four broad categories:

- Background and History – contextual information regarding the Catholic Education System in Western Australia including recent and current initiatives in the areas of school improvement and pedagogical renewal.
- Focus Schools – contextual information, including location, student population, Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) (Barnes, 2010) ratings and school emphases for each of the focus schools.
- Individual School Analysis – a brief description of the analysis of each school including key themes identified and relevant school culture and student achievement data.
- Teacher Dispositions – commentary on the findings from the collective analysis of the themes from each school.

*Background and History*

The Catholic education system in Western Australia provides a dynamic, student centred approach to education for more than 72,000 young people in 157 schools and colleges across the state. With a focus on the development of the whole person - intellectual, spiritual, social, physical and emotional development - Catholic Education is the State's second largest education sector, educating some 18% of all school-aged children in Western Australia. Western Australia is Australia's largest state and, while the majority of the population live in the capital, Perth, a significant number of people live in regional, rural and remote communities across a total land area of 2.5 million square kilometres.

In 2004, the Catholic Education Office of Western Australian (CEOWA) implemented the Raising Achievement in Schools (RAISe) initiative. The focus of this professional development program was to aid teachers in meeting the needs of all students with a particular emphasis on those students who struggle with basic literacy and numeracy skills. To assist schools in achieving the initiative aims, teachers and school administrators were supported to collect, analyse and use student data to inform instruction. The guidance provided to teachers and schools drew heavily on research in school improvement and student learning. (Hayes & Noonan, 2008, Noonan & Hayes, 2009, Wildy & Faulkner, 2008). Twenty schools participated in the launch of the initiative in 2004, and the program extended to include 88 primary and composite schools across the Geraldton, Bunbury and Perth Dioceses.

RAISe provided schools with various levels of support including: co-ordinators who helped teachers develop expertise in problem solving the literacy and numeracy challenges in their classroom; intervention teachers who focused attention on students who are failing to make satisfactory progress; and teacher leaders who provided demonstration lessons and guidance to graduate teachers and new staff members. Research into the RAISe initiative demonstrated the impact that an integrated comprehensive teacher professional development program has when improving student outcomes is the goal, particularly in establishing common language, practices and beliefs across schools (Hayes, Noonan & Heldsinger, 2011).

In 2010, as a result of this research, experiences of working with schools and a comprehensive review of the literature on pedagogical renewal, school leadership and school improvement, CEOWA established the first of two new systemic initiatives to support continued improvements in teaching and learning in all schools. Underpinned by the Collaborative Professional Learning (Hayes & Noonan, 2010) and Collaborative Professional Learning in Action (Hayes & Noonan, 2011) models, this revitalised initiative focused on supporting schools to embed a comprehensive range of ongoing professional learning strategies (see Figures 1-2). Building on the strong foundation of the RAISe initiative, this approach required school communities to set their own learning directions and contextualize structures and processes for professional learning at their own school site.
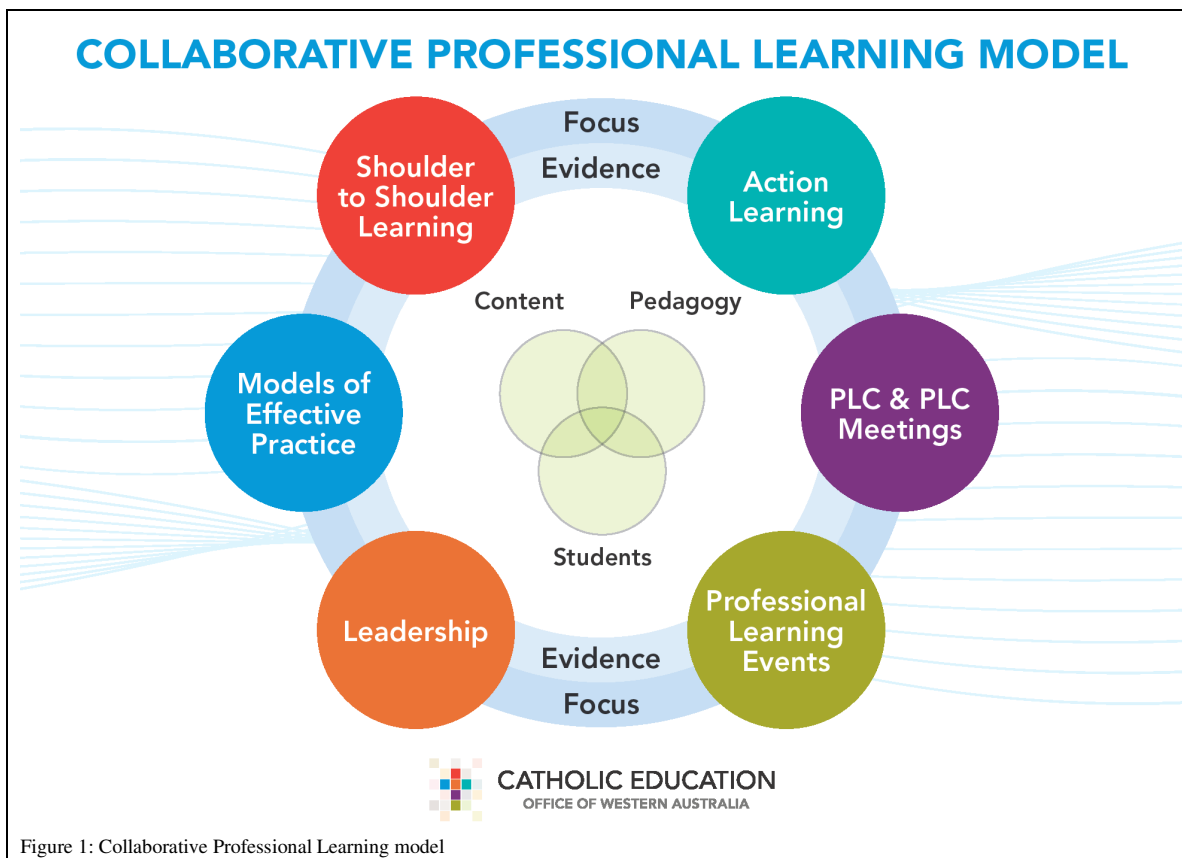


Figure 1: Collaborative Professional Learning model

**COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN ACTION**

**PREPARING** — Using knowledge of their school and their students, educators define a focus for their learning that they believe will create valuable and worthwhile improvements for their school community and in student outcomes. This focus is worded in terms of an instructional question to ensure that their focus remains where it can have the most impact: on their teaching practice.

DECISION POINT

**ENVISIONING** — Looking In - During the early weeks of engagement at this phase, teachers take stock of existing practices and knowledge engaging in classroom explorations alongside colleagues noting exemplary practice. When complete, they have a clear understanding of what works well at the school in relation to the instructional question. This serves to ensure that exemplary practice remains part of the instructional program and celebrates the knowledge and expertise that exists within the current teaching staff.

Looking Out - During the later weeks of this phase, teachers consult the authoritative pedagogy in relation to the school focus in an effort to determine what can be integrated into existing practice in order to answer their instructional question. During these weeks, teachers engage in discussion and debate over educational literature, spot-trial ideas that surface and begin to fashion a complete school-based solution that will lead to improvement.

DECISION POINT

**REFINING** — This phase calls for teachers to refine the original thinking, to understand the needs of teachers and students in order to ensure that the solution is appropriate for the current context. It demands that teachers become field researchers, problem-solving individually or in groups so that the solution is tried and tested. As teachers explore the proposed school-based solution, they work shoulder to shoulder, trialling, reflecting and discussing. Data is collected as pre and post-assessment of student performance so that the staff can be confident that the pedagogical change will lead to sustainable improvement in student outcomes.

At this end of the refining phase, all staff are able to articulate the new practice, are aware of the resources and support structures that will support them and have the confidence (and the data) to know that they will make a difference. At this point, the school has reached universal acceptance of and commitment to a new school-wide practice.

DECISION POINT

**EMBEDDING** — The notion of embedding practice is essential for whole-school alignment and sustainability. This is a phase of focussed action, calling on staff to put their solution into practice. This phase reflects an understanding that change requires discussion, reflection and action over a period of time.

Teachers are able to articulate their current levels of knowledge and skills in relation to the new school-wide practice and determine their needs in order to participate actively in the approach. They review resourcing levels and learning environments to ensure that they have all that is required in order to implement the new practice. Adaptive and comprehensive professional support is also provided. The result of this phase is commitment to and enthusiasm for a comprehensive whole school approach to teaching and learning.

DECISION POINT

**CHECKING** — At some point in the future, determined by the level of change required by the new school-wide approach, the staff engage in review processes to determine that the approach remains part of classroom practice and that there is evidence of improving student performance. As is always the case with school improvement, constant review and evaluation are scheduled at appropriate times to ensure that the improvement is effective.
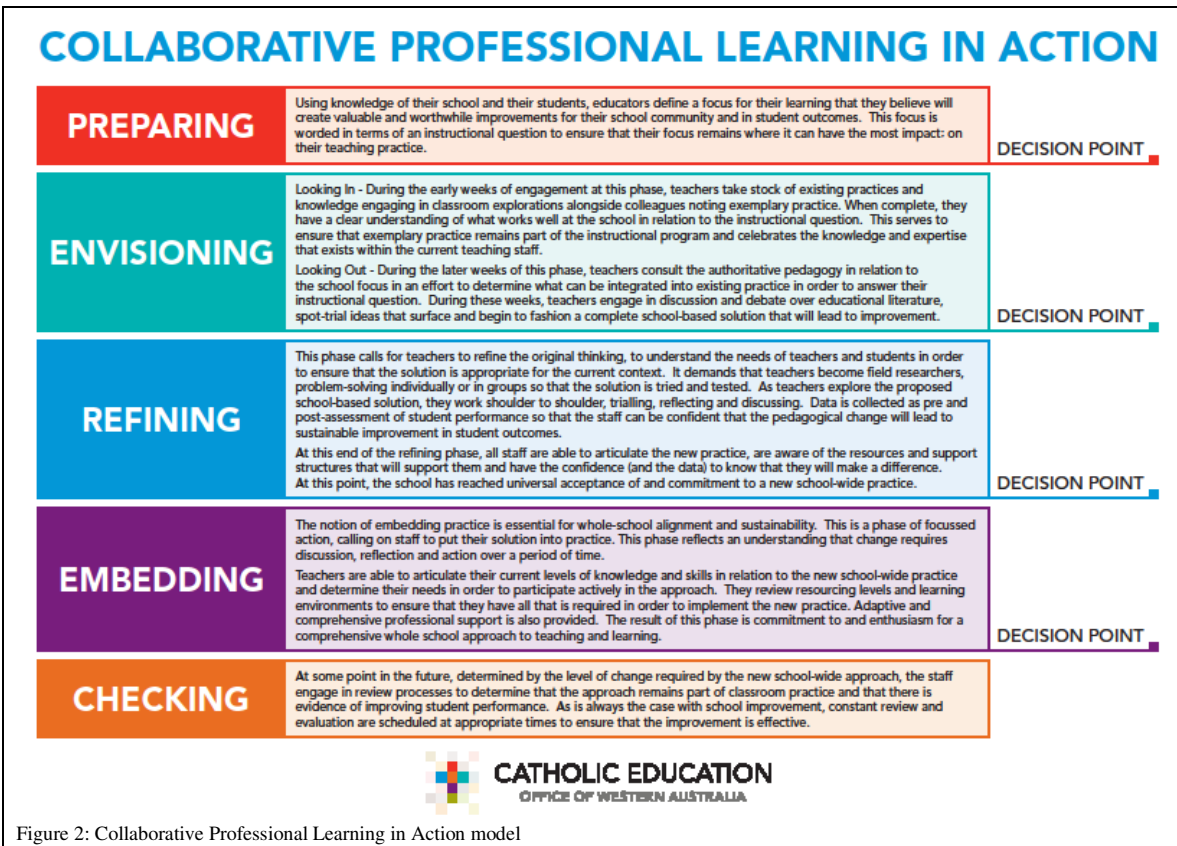
**CATHOLIC EDUCATION**
OFFICE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Figure 2: Collaborative Professional Learning in Action model

While the focus of the first initiative was on teaching and learning and the structures and processes needed to promote effective teaching and whole school pedagogies, CEOWA developed a framework that took a broader view and focussed on the culture, leadership and management of the whole school

After an extensive development and trialling process involving school and system personnel, CEOWA implemented Quality Catholic Schooling (QCS) (CEOWA, 2010), a whole-school planning and improvement framework, in all schools across the state in 2011. This framework focusses on supporting the development of thriving school cultures that support and deepen leadership capacity at all levels. It also assists in developing reflective professional cultures in our schools. QCS is underpinned by five guiding propositions (see Figure 3) that draw from research and experience into how organisations such as schools grow and learn.

| Proposition 1: | The quality of a school cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and staff |
|---|---|
| **Proposition 2:** | **The quality of an organisation is determined by the willingness and capacity of its people to learn** |
| **Proposition 3:** | **An organistion is made up of conversations and the quality of these conversations is an indicator of the strength of the organisation** |
| **Proposition 4:** | **The map is not the territory** |
| **Proposition 5:** | **In the soil of this, trust and enlightened leadership are the key nutrients** |

Figure 3: Quality Catholic Schooling Guiding Propositions

These two current initiatives work synergistically to support the ongoing development of thriving school cultures at the community, school and classroom level.

### *Focus Schools*

#### *St Patrick's Primary School: Fremantle*

St Patrick's Primary School is a single stream school in the metropolitan centre of Fremantle. It is a co-educational, dual campus catering for children from three years of age through to Grade Six. St Patrick's has an average ICSEA rating and caters to a large population of children (39%) with a language background other than English. The school implements a comprehensive whole-school literacy and numeracy program, encourages the use of ITC in the classroom and is committed to developing students who are independent learners and cooperative citizens. The model of schooling offered by the school is underpinned by the Gospel values and encourages students to strive to do their best in all facets of school life.

#### *Padbury Catholic Primary School*

Padbury Catholic Primary School is a co-educational primary school in the northern suburbs of Perth catering to 547 students from Kindergarten to Grade Six. The school promotes a strong recognition of the role and rights of parents and teachers as the co-educators of children. Padbury Catholic Primary School has a moderately high ICSEA rating with almost half of the students coming from the top quartile as rated by the index. Literacy and numeracy development is a strong focus at the school. The staff and parents strive to develop each individual spiritually, academically, physically, socially, emotionally and culturally, encouraging the enjoyment of life through the pursuit of personal excellence and enhancing personal dignity and respect for others.

#### *St Joseph's College: Albany*

St Joseph's College is located in the coastal centre of Albany, some 420km south of Perth. It is comprised of approximately 650 children from three years of age to Year Twelve. The ICSEA rating for the school is in the average range. The College offers various pathways to cater for a variety of gifts within the student cohort and has a rigorous academic programme and supportive pastoral care for each student.

*Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School*

Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School is a single stream primary school catering for children from Kindergarten to Year Six. The school is located in a rapidly growing part of the northern Perth metropolitan area with a multicultural community. The school community comprises families from 30 nationalities with 6% of the children identified as having disabilities. Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School has an average ICSEA rating with almost half of the students coming from the bottom quartile as rated by the index. The school has developed an environment where inclusivity and tolerance are essential and offers a broad curriculum, which supports the children as they become confident and competent members of both the school community and society as a whole. Religious Education program across the curriculum, Aboriginal Studies and Sustainability are core elements of their educational program and they have a high focus on collaborative learning for their students.

*Mel Maria*

Mel Maria is a triple stream primary school in the southern suburbs of Perth catering for 700 children from three years of age through to Year Six.. The school has a high ICSEA rating with the majority of students coming from homes rated in the top two quartiles of the index. Mel Maria promotes an environment based on Gospel values and aims to develop the full potential of every child, promoting a spirit of inquiry and a thirst for knowledge. The school has a history of academic excellence and the ongoing development of numeracy and literacy skills is of a high priority. Enrichment programs are conducted for the gifted and talented children and those needing remediation. The use of learning technology is fully integrated within the curriculum and computer technology is readily available to children within each classroom.

### *Individual School Analysis*

In the interviews with schools, certain themes became evident and were voiced by school personnel in both the leadership group and the teacher group. It was startling how frequently both groups seemed to speak with the same voice concerning the school's journey and celebrations. These key themes were considered central to each school's story and are recorded below along with a brief analysis of school data. In most cases, student outcome data is referenced most strongly as it was felt that the systemic cultural data, being in its first year of implementation, was limited in both its longitudinal scope and capacity to add depth to the story of each school (with one notable exception).

*St Patrick's Primary School: Fremantle*

Over recent years, the clientele of this school have changed significantly with a substantial reduction in the number of Portuguese families living in the area. Once this change was recognised, the leadership group told a story of very quickly and deliberately building a new approach to professional learning. They realised that a change was needed in the way existing teachers worked and realised the potential of a significant number of new young, enthusiastic staff coming to work at the school. Working in a small school, the designated leaders recognised that there was exceptional opportunity to provide leadership opportunities for everyone on the staff.

Throughout the interviews, there was a strong theme of trust. They spoke of trust between the designated leaders and the teaching staff, trust between teachers and trust that in using the professional learning models they would be able to improve student achievement. The teaching staff demonstrated a strong desire for knowledge and knew that they could get this from one another, professional reading and discussing professional learning events attended by their colleagues. It was recognised that the informal conversation between staff had changed considerably with conversations about their work becoming much more frequent.

In 2010, the teaching staff investigated teaching and learning in writing by focussing strongly on differentiation and developing a deeper understanding of the continua of development in writing. Through professional reading and discussion, they worked on their investigation question, "How do we ensure all students have a sound understanding of the conventions in writing, in particular sentence and paragraph structure?" In 2011, their attention turned to the inquiry question, "How do we ensure all students have a sound understanding of the appropriate use of punctuation within writing?" An analysis of national assessment data for 2010 through to 2012 demonstrates significant growth in every quartile in both the writing and grammar and punctuation assessments. Of particular note is a sharp and dramatic change when students were tracked from Year 3 in 2010 to Year 5 in 2012, a very significant gain in grammar and punctuation can be seen across the cohort can be seen when compared with the national cohort. As the writing assessment is only in its second year, similar tracking was not possible in that assessment area
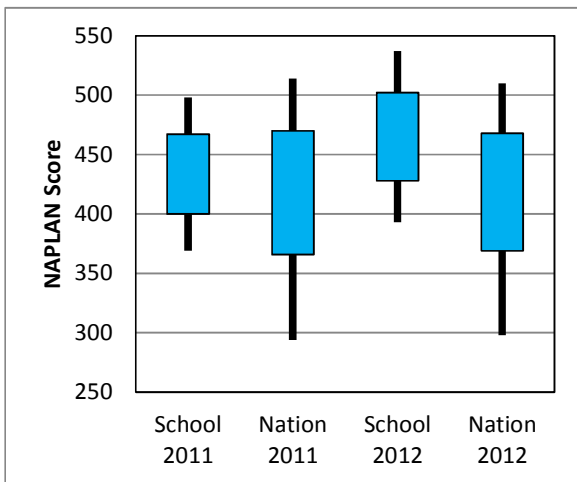
Figure 4: NAPLAN Writing Assessment – Year 3     Figure 5: NAPLAN Writing Assessment – Year 5
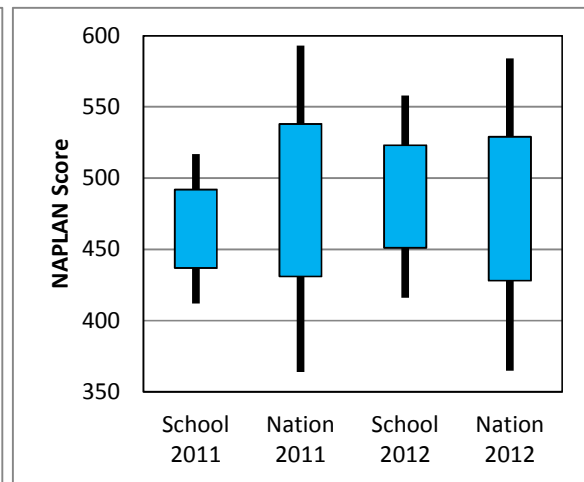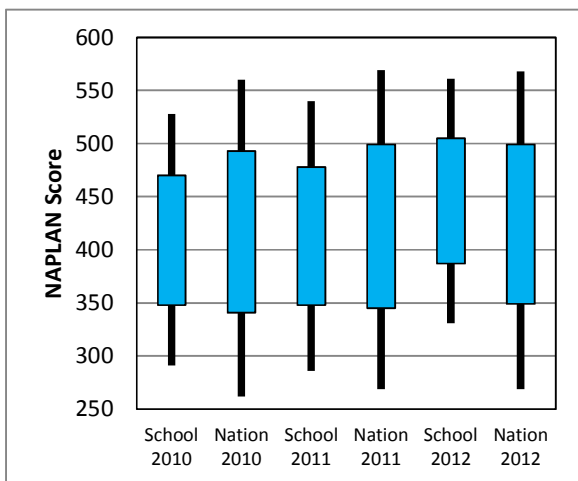
Figure 6: NAPLAN Grammar and Punctuation – Year 3
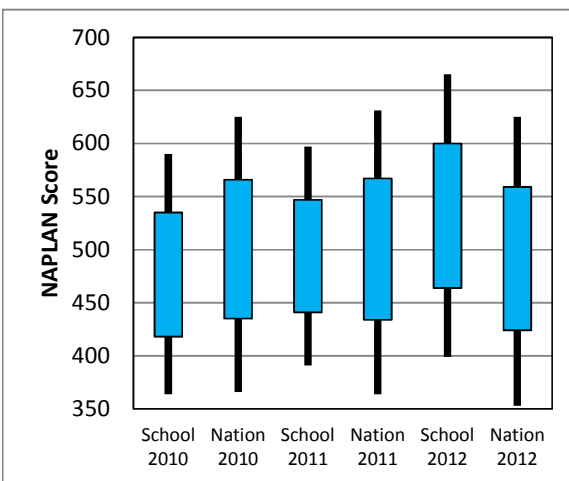


Figure 7: NAPLAN Grammar and Punctuation – Year 5
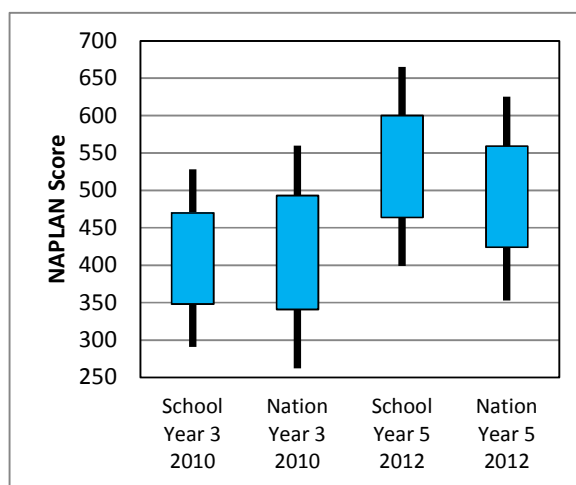


Figure 8: NAPLAN Grammar and Punctuation – Year 3-5

*Padbury Catholic Primary School*

In the interviews with this school's staff, it became quite obvious that the students are the focus of this school. This message was given many times from personnel at different levels. One teacher said, "We'll do anything for the kids even though it might be hard for us." There was a palpable sense of pride amongst the staff. They know they are considered to be part of a team in a highly effective school and identify with this strongly. Another teacher echoed this by commenting, "We don't just come to school to teach, we are excellent teachers doing great things"

There were two particular areas of change spoken about in professional learning over the last two years. Firstly, the introduction of the CPLiA model and associated school wide investigations gave the school greater focus and led to more significant school wide change. Secondly, the school now engages closely with two other schools to add power to their school investigation with significant onsite, offsite and email collaboration occurring between the schools. The interviewed staff frequently suggested that, "It was the right time" for such close collaboration to occur across schools.

The focus of the staff of this school in 2010 was a deep investigation of teaching and learning in grammar and punctuation. Inquiry in professional learning communities was transferred into action as the school began to use 'Shoulder to Shoulder' teacher learning experiences. An analysis of national assessment data in grammar and punctuation showed a significant improvement for children in the lower two quartiles in year 3 and an improvement for students in the top quartile in Year 5. When students were tracked from Year 3 in 2010 to Year 5 in 2012, a very significant gain across the cohort can be seen when compared with the national cohort. A similar gain can be seen in national assessments for numeracy which was their inquiry focus for 2011.
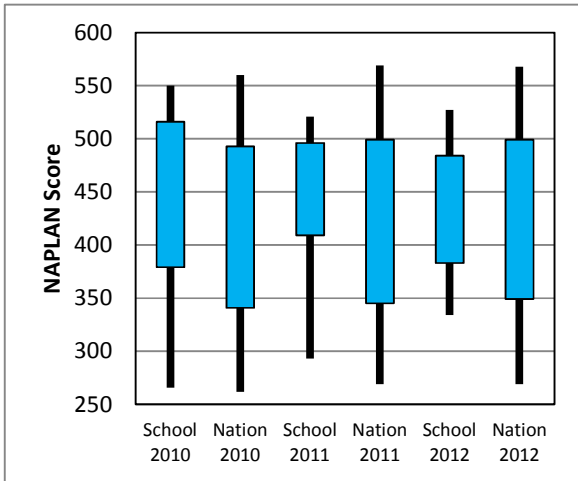


Figure 9: NAPLAN Grammar and Punctuation – Year 3
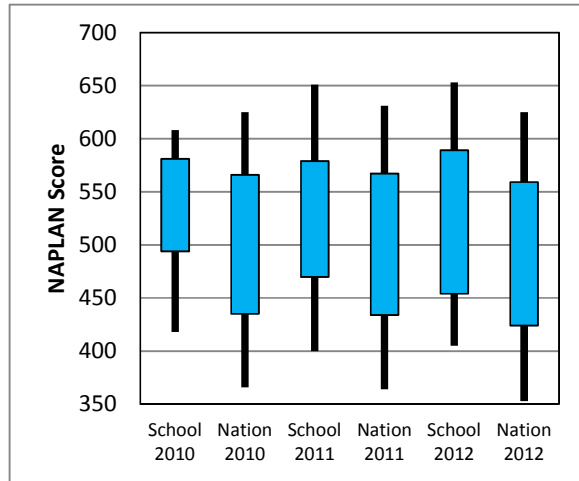


Figure 10: NAPLAN Grammar and Punctuation – Year 5
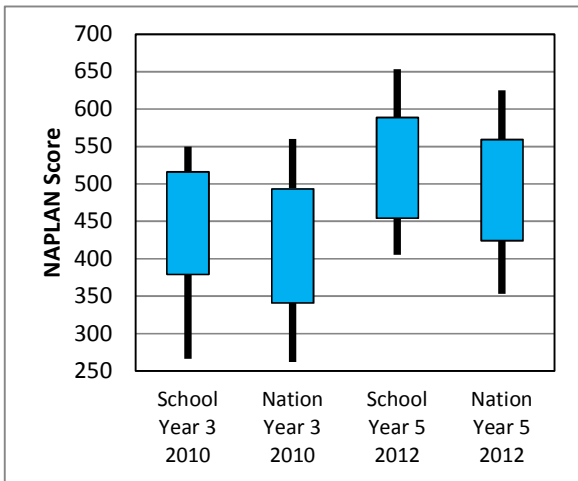


Figure 11: NAPLAN Grammar and Punctuation – Year 3-5
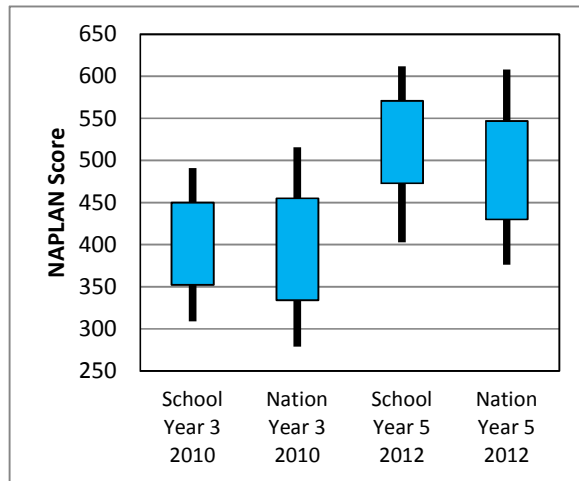


Figure 12: NAPLAN Numeracy – Year 3-5

*St Joseph's College: Albany*

The primary section of the school shared a proud story of establishing their identity as a sub-group of a larger staff. There's was a story of creating and ensuring time for professional discussion away from the typical operational staff meetings, where the staff could work collaboratively toward building a whole-school pedagogy for their students. This was seen as an ongoing journey across the learning areas requiring significant time to ensure teachers acquired deep knowledge of both the content area and associated pedagogies.

Running through both interviews was continual reference to the value of every individual regardless of teaching experience, time at the school or seniority of office. This was voiced both by those in designated leadership positions and teachers who were just starting out in their careers. An early career teacher commented, "Even though I'm only in my second year, people here are interested in what I have to say." There was a deep and abiding respect between the teaching staff and the designated leader. The leader spoke strongly and humbly about the quality of the staff at the school while the teachers exalted their leader as someone who made them feel excited about the work they do on a daily basis. The teacher group agreed, "We would do anything for him. Not because he expects us to do it, just because of who he is."

In 2010, the staff at this school investigated the inquiry question, "How do we insure all students have the necessary knowledge and skills to be competent spellers?" They developed knowledge in spelling content, pedagogy and assessment in order to develop and embed a whole school approach to the teaching of spelling. Student data from national assessments in spelling show a strong improvement in student achievement in spelling across all quartiles from 2010 to 2012 for Year 3 students. While a similar trend cannot be seen in the Year 5 students, when students are tracked from Year 3 to Year 5, there is an obvious and significant improvement as when compared with the national cohort. A similar positive trend in student data can be seen following the school's 2011 investigation, "How do we insure all students have the necessary knowledge and skills to work mathematically in the areas of place value and problem solving?"
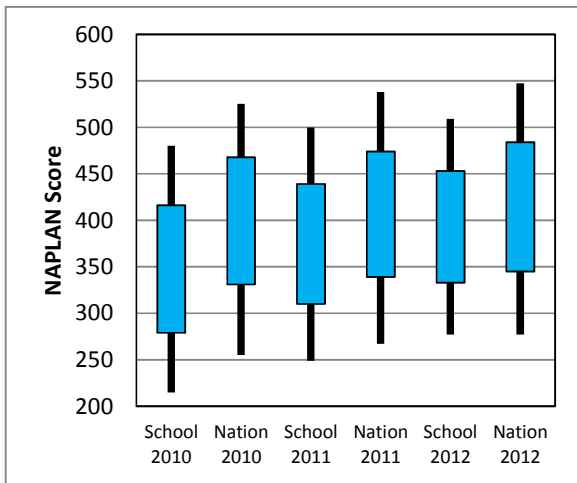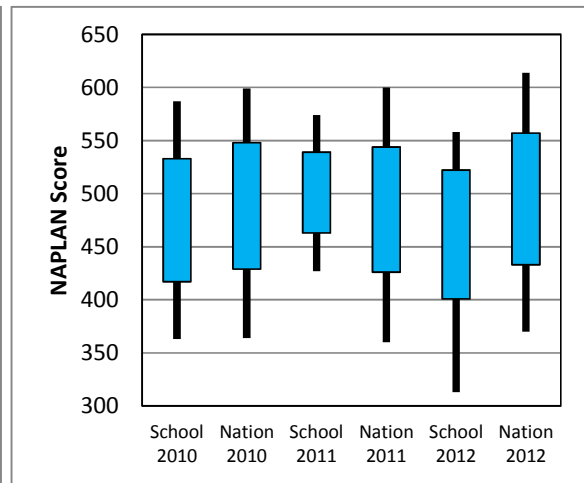


Figure 13: NAPLAN Spelling – Year 3
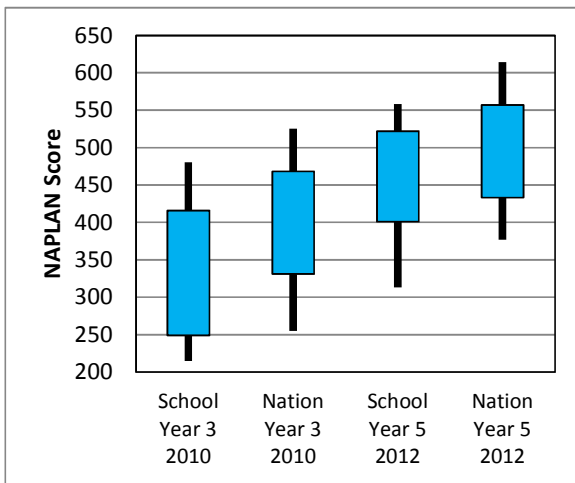


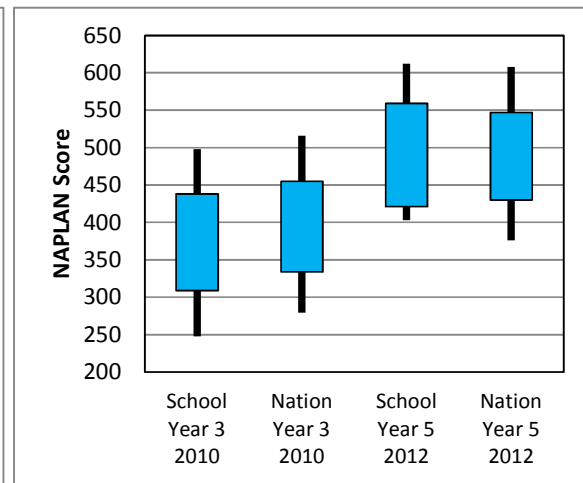Figure 14: NAPLAN Spelling – Year 5

Figure 15: NAPLAN Spelling – Year 3-5

Figure 16: NAPLAN Numeracy – Year 3-5

*Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School*

Banksia Grove has a strong and deeply embedded culture of collaboration. School personnel from both interview groups talked about how the school started on a basis of collaboration between staff when there were just four staff members and continued to grow and build as the school and staff became bigger. This school has a strong commitment to collaborative learning practices for students and this is mirrored in the work between teachers. Strategies used with students are frequently used as part of professional learning community meetings as they are seen as valuable for all learners, teachers and students alike.

There was a high presence of new staff in the interviews and they spoke consistently of their being a way to be and a way to teach at this school. A recently employed teacher commented, "You can't come to this school and do whatever you want. People keep wanting to help you." This 'way' was spoken of in very positive terms by new staff who felt strongly supported and excited about being part of a whole-school approach to learning for all. Another teacher said, "When I started out, people helped me to teach in this way and now I find myself helping others. You kind of pass it on."

In 2011, this school undertook a dual focus, one in Literacy and another in Numeracy. The first focussed on supporting students to develop spelling consciousness and utilise a multi-strategic approach to spelling. The second inquiry question was "How do we ensure that all students have a deep understanding of the problem solving process in Numeracy?" Student outcome data for this school was inconclusive with results varying markedly from year to year.

However, it is worth noting the results from the systemic cultural data for this school. Of the schools investigated, this school appeared to have the most strongly embedded culture. As a relatively new school, staff members spoke of a culture of collaboration and professional learning that was established from the day the school opened. The data reflected the strength of this culture more strongly than in any of the other schools investigated. Percentile scores for the school, in relation to all other assessed organisations across Australia, were considerably higher than the majority of schools in the Catholic Education System of Western Australian.

*Mel Maria*

This school did not participate in the RAISe initiative. Interviewees articulated their interest in being a part of a system-wide initiative and were excited about being a part of the National Partnerships Project and applying the CPL and CPLiA models at their school. This story was one of building a successful collaborative culture quickly. The leadership group spoke strongly of establishing and embedding structures to support collaboration and getting to know the processes that worked and the ones that didn't in their context. One teacher said, "Culture change is slow but we stuck with it and needed to be patient." They spoke strongly of the need to initially lead and then quickly pass the reigns of pedagogical renewal over to the teaching staff. A member of the leadership team commented, "We want engaged people. People with the capacity to lead and tell us what they want." The teaching staff spoke of the support given to them as the journey started and some of their initial tentative steps and their discussion also echoed being given the opportunity to lead teaching and learning at the school. There was a clear sense that both the designated leaders and the teachers shared the journey and had knowledge of the intentions, structures and processes being established.

The school had always attained high results in national testing and staff knew that it would be easy to accept this as a reason to maintain the status quo. Both groups spoke of viewing the classroom as the centre of the school, "The work the teachers do is the most important work," and how data was a motivator to continue to grow as teachers. They could see the opportunity to continue to strengthen and improve learning for the students.

In 2010 the staff commenced a two year investigation into numeracy teaching and learning. They started with the inquiry question, "How do we ensure all students have a deep understanding of 2 and 3-D shape?" at the same time as implementing new school-wide professional learning approaches. In 2011, they broadened their numeracy focus to "How do we ensure that all students have a deep understanding of the Language of Maths and the ability to apply problem solving strategies over a variety of contexts?" Positive trends in national assessment data in numeracy can be seen across both the Year 3 and Year 5 cohorts from 2010 to 2012. When students are tracked from Year 3 to Year 5 against the national cohort significant gains are evident.
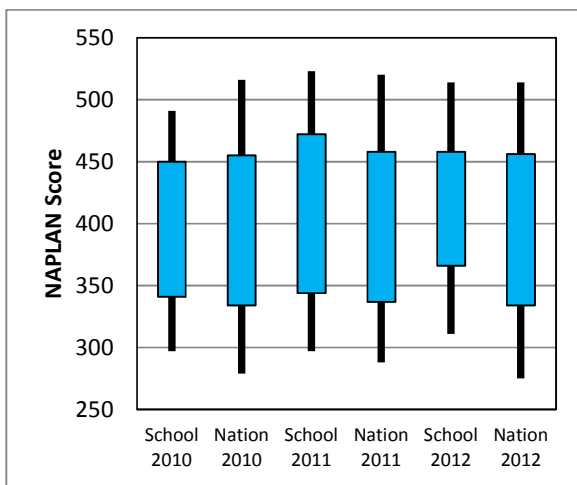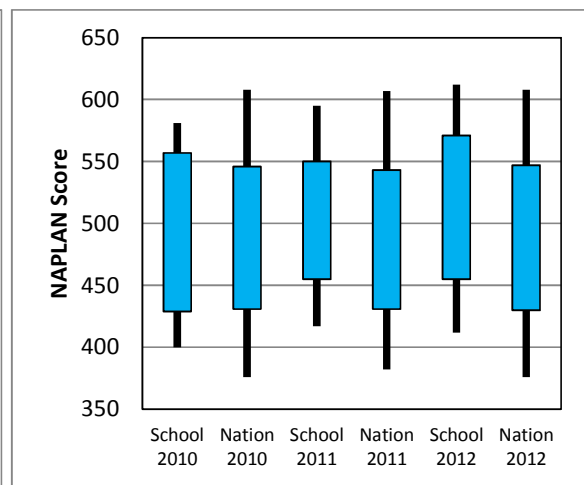


Figure 17: NAPLAN Numeracy – Year 3
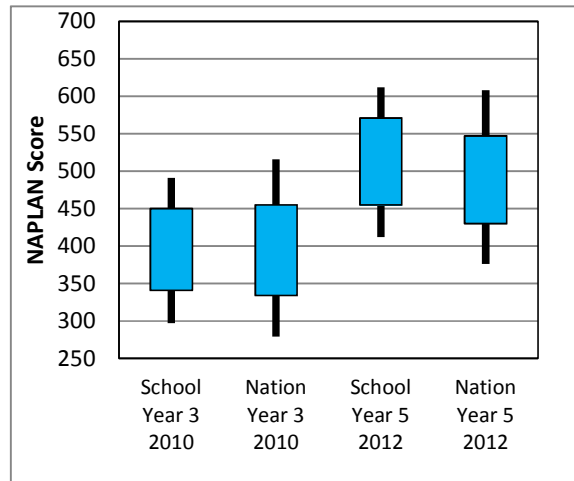


Figure 18: NAPLAN Numeracy – Year 5

Figure 19: NAPLAN Numeracy – Year 3-5

### *Teacher Dispositions*

When data from the interviews were analysed in order to isolate themes that were either unique to an individual school setting or common across each site, it became apparent that the key themes emerging were patterns of thoughts or actions of teachers and leaders at each school. These key themes described certain dispositions or orientations of staff members and fell into five categories. In most cases, staff appeared to display many or all of these dispositions.

*Leadership* - Personnel with this disposition were very proactive in their approach to learning. They were self-starters and showed initiative. During the interviews, they demonstrated a sense of ownership of the learning journey and showed real excitement as the learning journey was described. They displayed a positive, 'can do' energy and knew intrinsically that they were making a difference. Most importantly, they had found their voice and confidently spoke about what was happening at their school built on a firm belief that they had something valuable to share with the broader education community. The professional learning culture of the school and those in designated leadership positions supported these people to 'step up'.

Typical Quotes for Leadership
- "Lots of people do have a voice here. We all have a voice. It's bottom up. Staff lead each other." (Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School, Leadership Group)
- "People jump on board rather than being persuaded." (Padbury Catholic School, Leadership Group)
- "If you need a hand to hold on to, we'll do that for a bit but you have to let go. We can see a pattern in growth now. You have to wait and be in it for the long haul." (St Patrick's Primary School, Leadership Group)
- "It's the people who are leading. They believe in it." (Banksia Grove, Leadership Group)

*Inquiry Mindset* - Personnel with this disposition demonstrated that they were creative and focussed on finding solutions that were as unique as their school. They had an active approach to learning and sought out support for their inquiry, engaged with professional

literature and research and made decisions that were evidence based. These people viewed their mistakes as opportunities to learn and felt able to share partial ideas without the feeling that they might be judged. They were engaged in analysing data to make decisions regarding teaching and learning programs and continued to use data to monitor changes in student outcomes that resulted from their decisions. They frequently described this use of data as a key source of motivation to continue exploring new ways of teaching. They articulated an understanding that professional learning was on ongoing process and were aware that deep learning took time, dedication and commitment. These people could demonstrate how their learning in one area of the curriculum impacted positively on their teaching in other learning areas.

Typical Quotes for Inquiry Mindset
- "If you want inquiring minds, you have to be an inquiring mind." (Mel Maria, Teacher Group)
- "We told the board not to complain when teachers are away. They have to understand that teachers need to learn too. There is broad support for us now." (St Patrick's Primary School, Leadership Group)
- "Initially when hit with professional readings, some people were quite negative. Now they embrace it and want to know more. They like it. They like having knowledge." (St Patrick's Primary School, Leadership Group)
- "Teachers say this is what we need… these are the things we want to know." (Padbury Catholic Primary School, Leadership Group)
- "We see input as useful. People just comment, we are not worried if they are right or wrong." (Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School, Leadership Group)
- "We use 100% of our time on things we are concerned about. In the past we just chatted." (St Patrick's Primary School, Teacher Group)


*Collaborative* - Personnel with this disposition valued team work and understood the importance of working with colleagues to solve instructional questions. These people shared the responsibility for all students in the school and worked within clear processes that were built over time to ensure that time and space was secured for collaborative activity. They had a broad view of professional learning and believed that opportunities to be in in each other's classrooms, discussions about teaching and learning programs and professional reading were all important aspects of the professional learning program at their school. Team teaching, collegial observation, feedback and coaching were seen as valued activities rather than impositions. They also valued the opportunity to connect with other classrooms, other schools and other learning organisations.

Typical Quotes for Collaborative
- "We can do things better if we collaborate." (Padbury Catholic Primary School, Teacher Group)
- "Here we collaborate all of the time. We're a community of learners. At my old school we talked but it's different here." (Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School, Teacher Group)
- "Collaboration outside leads to collaboration inside." (Padbury Catholic School, Leadership Group)
- "The whole school is a classroom. We share and help each other… it's not about just fixing my bit." (St Patrick's Primary School, Leadership Group)

- "It's a common goal to improve learning for our kids. It's the job of every teacher, not just the one teacher." (St Patrick's Primary School, Teacher Group)
- "At my old school, I was responsible for my class. Here, everyone is responsible for everyone." (Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School, Teacher Group)

*Respectful* - Personnel with this disposition respected each other, the students, the families and the education system with which they worked. They acknowledged the importance of all stakeholders having an opportunity to be informed and collaborate around the instructional programs at the school. They trusted each other and frequently indicated that there was no sense of hierarchy at the school site when it came to professional learning. In describing this, interviewees spoke highly of the trust between designated leaders and the teaching staff and between individual members of the teaching staff. These people valued each other and each other's expertise and knowledge and spoke strongly about how all teachers, regardless of experience and age had something to contribute to their inquiry. They understood the importance of allowing each other to grow and worked together to fine tune school professional learning structures so that everyone was enabled to become a stronger teacher.

Typical Quotes for Respectful
- "We had a mindset change. We used to think professional development was an expert coming in. Now we see value in each other." (St Joseph's College, Teacher Group)
- "Critical one day, coffee the next." (Padbury Catholic Primary School, Leadership Group)
- "It stops me being a control freak. I have to trust. If we relied on my limited knowledge in every area we would be stumbling." (St Patrick's Primary School, Leadership Group)
- "Our leader leads with kindness. He respects us." (St Joseph's College, Teacher Group)

*Proud* - Personnel with this disposition displayed a strong sense of identity and belonging with their school and colleagues. They spoke with confidence and pride about their school, how they worked together and demonstrated excitement about the improvements they were making and the outcomes of their students. They articulated a belief that their school had a particular way, in terms of how they behaved as professionals and how they taught and the pedagogies they used, that differentiated it from other schools. They shared the vision for the school and believed that everyone on the staff contributed to the success of the school. During the interview process, there was remarkable concordance between what the designated leaders and the teaching staff talked about, in terms of celebrations, challenges and ongoing work, that gave a real sense that everyone was working together and that communication between all of the staff was open and honest.

Typical Quotes for Proud
- "We project energy and confidence." (St Joseph's College, Leadership Group)
- "We come here to do good work, not just to work." (Padbury Catholic Primary School, Teacher Group)
- "It's more special than I thought. No nastiness, no putdowns, we don't have to think before we speak. It's who we are as people." (St Joseph's College, Leadership Group)
- "We saw that we needed to evolve… and we did." (St Patrick's Primary School, Leadership Group)

- "It's how we teach here" Banksia Grove, Teacher Group)
- "It's the way you are here" (Banksia Grove – Teacher Group)


## DISCUSSION

Though limited in scope, it appears from this research that in successful schools, staff members hold certain positive dispositions. These dispositions appear to both arise from the school culture, as seen when new teachers enter the school, and serve to further develop the school culture. While it would seem fair to assume that many teachers from schools across every education system hold these dispositions, what was striking in these focus schools was that all teachers in the school seem to hold all or many of these dispositions. If these dispositions have a reciprocal growth relationship with developing a positive and collaborative culture focussed on learning, how does such a culture get cultivated and how can such dispositions be nurtured and encouraged in other people?

Such cultures do not build themselves. The important role of principals and leadership groups in coordinating and nurturing efforts to build culture in schools cannot be underestimated. Whilst it is understood that principals have a limited direct influence on the outcomes of students, research and literature clearly indicates the indirect influence that principals can have (Fullan, 2008; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). It was clear from the interviews, that principals and leadership team members played an important role in deliberately building a positive culture in their school. In other schools, groups of teachers may collaborate and build their own sub-culture, but what was noted in the focus schools was that all members of the community belonged to a unified culture and that deliberate effort was put into making all staff members feel a part of the school culture.

Principals and leadership teams build culture by making deliberate choices about structures, to ensure time and space for collaboration and the building of trust and collegial learning. However, while putting such structures in place actively contributes to the building of culture, their mere implementation is not enough. It is easy to be distracted by the structures themselves like making sure everyone attends a fortnightly Professional Learning Community meeting and forget to focus on what is more important. In the schools in this research, the focus was less on the mechanics of the structures, though they acknowledged the importance of them, and more on the quality of the dialogue and relationships between colleagues.

In the focus schools, the principal and leadership teams saw it as their responsibility to build and nurture a culture of trust and collaboration. The leadership teams planned deliberate actions and adapted structures to either build a positive culture or enable an already established positive culture to flourish. They believed that it their responsibility to nurture relationships, nurture positive dispositions and create opportunities for the school to continue to live, learn and celebrate together. Further analysis of the interview transcripts and an understanding of school cultures and adult learning have enabled the researchers to develop five lessons for leadership teams who wish to develop or further nurture a positive culture in their school.


Lesson 1: *Model the dispositions that are valued in the school*

It is one thing for Principals and leadership teams to espouse the value of collaboration, proactivity and trust but it is a much more difficult thing to model these dispositions day in

and day out. The principals and leadership teams in these schools led by example and embodied the dispositions outlined in the findings of this paper. They valued coming together to learn and ensured that meetings were well organised and rarely, if ever, would they cancel meetings or fail to attend in favour of attending to administrative matters. They worked with staff to ensure that time was always available for staff to work together in classrooms. They truly 'walked the walk' and modelled these dispositions in a very authentic way.

Lesson 2: *Believe that all people can grow*

In the focus schools, principals and leadership teams valued their staff and believed that positive dispositions could be nurtured and developed in all people. There was a tangible understanding that people could become active contributors to the positive culture that was being created. They trusted that their staff had the knowledge and expertise to make the right pedagogical decisions for the school. They believed that their staff would be able to identify where there were gaps in their knowledge and access outside help such as other schools, consultants and research. They provided opportunities for all staff members to lead when appropriate and had a high regard for the profession. In essence, the designated leaders in these schools believed in their people and nurtured their growth.

Lesson 3: *Hold people accountable for their actions*

There was an understanding in these schools that accountability could be seen as both positive and punitive. The leadership teams understood the need for consequences when staff failed to complete agreed tasks or participate as an active member of the school professional community. However, more often than not, the teachers in these focus schools wanted to complete allotted tasks and knew how to make them manageable. There was a sense that they felt as accountable to each other as they did to the designated leaders. The leadership team also understood that people needed to be held accountable for their hard work and commitment. Celebrations at every level, from little steps to major achievements were celebrated in these schools and the staff, as a result, felt valued and appreciated. Staff members talked positively about the way they came together and share meals, celebrate achievements and enjoy each other's company and articulated a positive attitude toward coming to work each day with their colleagues and students.

Lesson 4: *Monitor the culture*

Leadership teams in these schools understood the importance of the professional learning culture and their role in ensuring that there were opportunities for staff members to come together to have quality dialogue. Whether they were starting off by building professional learning community meetings into their school routine or moving beyond their school gates to build professional learning connections with other schools, they monitored the quality of the interactions, modifying and adapting structures and time allocations to suit the growing and developing culture. They spent less time considering whether or not meetings were taking place or whether time allocations were evenly distributed and more time prompting and supporting staff to engage in quality conversations.

Lesson 5: *Value and understand deep learning*

In these schools, there were clear foci centred around inquiry questions and these were few in number. They avoided the temptation to become involved in too many initiatives or to engage in disconnected learning events. There was a clear understanding that surface level knowledge that could be acquired through one learning event, meeting or reading was rarely

useful for professionals of the calibre in their schools and that deep learning takes extended periods of time and effort. Staff members, as well as leadership team members, knew about and could articulate the foci of the school. They could discuss the progress in the chosen foci and understood how the different activities they were engaged in contributed to the professional learning that the school was striving for. In these schools, life-long learning was valued.

The above five lessons provide some guidance for principals and leadership teams in developing culture and begins to unpack the very nature of the work of leaders in schools. The development and nurturing of positive cultures and the cultivating of positive dispositions has become clearly the work of leadership teams. Deliberate decisions about structures to allow people to work, learn and celebrate together, along with authentic modelling of desired dispositions is ultimately the core work of leading a school to success. If leadership teams focus on this important work they develop a positive and collaborative culture where teachers focus on improving pedagogy which will in turn bring about improved student outcomes. The main lesson here for principals wishing to improve student outcomes is clear - keep your eye on the culture and empower your teachers to make the decisions and learning.

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