

The interrelationship of leadership and
culture:
Perceptions of middle leaders.

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to critically examine the role that middle leaders play in developing and maintaining school culture. In doing so it sought to understand how middle leaders described their school culture. It also examined the interrelationship between leadership and culture. It addressed this by understanding the perception middle leaders have of their leadership actions and the impact this has on school culture, and in understanding how they see culture impacting on their leadership. It also sought to understand the barriers and affordances that supported their leadership of culture.

The study used an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methodology in the research design, which was appropriate given the topic was looking at the interpretation of middle leader's views on leadership and culture. A narrative case study approach was also used to gain an understanding by examining the stories of the two participants. Data were gathered from two semi-structured interviews with each participant. In between each interview the participants were asked to collect three to four artefacts that they could use to discuss their leadership actions that maintained and developed school culture.

The middle leaders appeared to have very little understanding of their role in culture development and maintenance, and it was through participating in the study that they reflected on their actions and began to understand this. Both participants described the culture of their school through the use of the word 'family'. Using the descriptor of 'family' is a form of 'Type-ing' where-by a single idea is used to describe the culture. Despite this, the cultures were significantly different. The use of 'type-ing' oversimplified the complexity of school culture.

The study found that the ideas of 'family' and 'connection' were the foundation of both school cultures. The actions the leaders took, as well as the barriers and affordances that were described, were linked to their ability to connect with others and to connect with the culture. The leaders viewed themselves as protectors of the school culture and conformity was how they ensured the culture was maintained. This study exposed a resistance to change within the middle leaders and a reluctance to take on unfamiliar ideas from new members to the school. COVID-19 also had a

significant impact on the middle leaders, particularly since connection was crucial to their school culture.

Attestation of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

This chapter provides a background context to the research. The background outlines the definition of a middle leader, and the call to look beyond the principal when researching culture. As Schein and Schein (2016) note “Founders or leaders must be aware they are creating culture, whether or not they explicitly intend to and whether or not they are aware of their actions.” All leaders within a school should be aware of how they contribute to the culture of the organisation. With the development of distributed leadership in education in New Zealand as discussed by Jarvis (2012) and Fitzgerald (2009), the way leadership is structured in schools has changed. The middle leader role has changed as they take greater responsibility for leading teaching and learning within their areas. Therefore, it is natural to assume middle leaders play a role in the development and maintenance of school culture.

Background to study

The research aimed to critically examine the role that middle leaders play in developing and maintaining school culture. According to Stoll (1998), the most important responsibility for a leader is the culture of the school and how they maintain and develop it. It is the culture that determines how change is implemented and processed within a school and therefore whether a school improves or not. It is the link to organisational improvement that has researchers insisting that culture development is a key aspect of leadership and ultimately impacts on student achievement (Dinsdale, 2017; Hollingworth et al., 2018; Lakomski, 2001; Lunenburg, 2011). *Kiwi leadership for principals*, released by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2008), states principals focus on building a culture that enhances learning and teaching. The leadership model in this document states that culture is one of four leadership actions. Kaplin and Owings (2013) state cultural leadership is essential to school success as it links students, teachers, and others to the unique character of the school creating feelings of belonging to something special. It would seem that research in the field of culture links improvement and change management to the culture of the school. When a

school has a culture that fosters reflection and self-improvement there is a higher chance that changes will be made to improve student achievement (Dinsdale, 2017).

This study focuses on middle leaders and their perspectives regarding school culture. For the purpose of this study a middle leader is defined as those that have specific leadership responsibilities that include leading a team, but who are also led by a more senior staff member, for example, team leaders, curriculum leaders. Grootenboer, et al., (2019) refer to middle leaders as those positioned between classroom teachers and senior leaders. Middle leaders often receive monetary compensation for the extra leadership tasks they perform. The decision to focus on middle leaders evolved from distributed leadership theory. If culture is a leadership action for principals, then in a distributed leadership model it must also be an action for other leaders within the organisation. Distributed leadership helps promote a positive school culture through collaborative decision making (Liu et al., 2021; Supovitz et al., 2019). According to Kaplin and Owing (2013), principals work with other leaders to develop school culture, including those that can influence others (middle leaders), because they are connected to students and team members directly and are better positioned to know their viewpoints and behaviours. When leadership is distributed through an organisation leadership is displayed at all levels. Therefore, other leaders play a role in maintaining and developing school culture. According to *Leading from the Middle* (Ministry of Education, 2012), Middle leaders have a key role in contributing to the culture of a school. It is their responsibility to ensure the culture is reflected in their areas of responsibility. Culture is one of the four areas of practice discussed in *Leading from the Middle* (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Despite the acknowledgment in research that middle leaders play a role in cultural development, there appears to be little research specifically discussing how middle leaders contribute to culture development.

Rationale

This research critically examines the stories of middle leaders and their contribution to developing and maintaining school culture. Research into student achievement has identified school principals' leadership of school culture as one the indicators of student success (Dinsdale, 2017; Hollingworth et al., 2018; Lakomski, 2001, Lunenburg,

2011). Kaplan and Owings (2013) assume schools are successful when individual interactions combine to create conditions for growth and learning. However, there appears to be very little literature regarding the role of middle leaders in developing and maintaining school culture despite the wealth of literature that pertains to middle leadership in schools. Literature (Lakomski, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2012) suggests that there is a role for middle leaders in culture development, however, there seems to be little to no explanation as to what that role is. This research seeks to gain insight into the perceptions of middle leaders and their role in culture development and maintenance as a starting point to gaining an understanding of the role they play within school culture. Therefore, this research investigates the perceptions of middle leaders to begin a conversation about culture that focuses beyond the principal.

Research aims

This research aimed to explore middle leaders' perspectives on the interrelationship between leadership and culture. It explored the ways middle leaders describe any interrelationship between their leadership practice and the development and maintenance of school culture, and particularly focused on the following questions:

1. How do middle leaders describe and justify their school culture and possible sub-cultures?
2. In what ways do middle leaders describe the impact school culture has on the way they lead?
3. What are the barriers and affordances that middle leaders traverse when attempting to influence any perceived interrelationship between their leadership practice and school culture?

Overview

In Chapter Two of this research the current literature on the topic of culture and leadership is explored. The literature discusses how cultures are described; and it discusses the impact leadership can have on culture. It also explores the impact culture can have on leadership, the barriers that prevent culture being developed and maintained, and the affordances or things that support culture development and maintenance.

In Chapter Three the methodology for this research is discussed including the use of an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach, validity and reliability, the role of the researchers, the setting, participants and schedule, the data collection process, data analysis; ethics.

In Chapter Four findings of the research are stated answering each area of the research questions. Firstly, the chapter explores the middle leader's descriptions of their school cultures, and the impact the middle leaders think they had on culture. Then the chapter explores the impact middle leaders think culture has had on them, the barriers they find in developing and maintaining culture, and the things they think that support them to build culture.

Chapter Five discusses the finding in relation to the research and suggests possible areas for further research to be explored.

The last chapter is a conclusion which summarises the main outcomes of the research.

Chapter Two: Literature review

Introduction

The term 'culture' in a workplace is used to describe the everyday interactions and rules that a group of people follow to identify membership in the group. Schein and Schein (2019) state culture is the learned structures and practices of a group of people who work together for a purpose. Culture building occurs in small groups and in large organisations. When researching this phenomenon in large organisations it is often referred to as 'organisational culture' (Kondra & Hurst, 2009; Schein & Schein, 2016). According to Schein and Schein (2016) organisational culture refers to the behaviours, beliefs, and values held by an organisation that determine how the members interact, make decisions, and work together. While organisational culture is complex and multilevel, understanding aspects of small group culture can assist with developing and maintaining culture in a large organisation. Therefore, for the purpose of this study culture is defined as the beliefs, values, and behaviours that inform interactions and decisions within a school.

In the education world, organisational culture is becoming important for schools to understand. In the last 30 years, there has been an increase in research in the field; however, most of the literature focuses on the principal leading the organisational culture. For example, Lumby (2012) suggests that the links between culture and school performance seen in education research in the 1980s and 1990s caused widespread adherence to the charismatic leader who could transform school culture and therefore the success of the school. This led to a view that leading culture was a core job of the principal. More recently studies found a principal's leadership of school culture impacted on the school's performance. Where principals lead a positive school culture there was an increase in school performance (Tonich, 2021).

School culture comprises the rules, rituals, and behaviours shown by the school membership group, just as it is in small group and organisational culture. Research (Gunter et al., 2010; Teasley, 2017) suggests school culture is the way we work; it is the habits, beliefs, prejudices, assumptions, and expectations that guide the way we interact with each other. It is also suggested it provides a sense of identity, promotes goals, shapes standards and patterns of behaviour, and distinct ways of doing things.

Culture in schools is complex and multileveled due to the wide range of membership and the differing groups within the larger group. 'Membership' in a school culture is often seen as not only staff and students but the wider community as well.

Researchers (Stoll & Fink, 1992; Tveit & Kovac, 2020) also support the idea that culture in schools is multileveled, stating that school culture is not a single entity but rather a collection of subgroups linked together. When delving into culture in schools and how it is developed, culture can be oversimplified to the actions of a few. However, the complexity with which it is developed and maintained through the actions of members at each level is just as important to explore and understand.

In this chapter I will discuss the definitions and descriptions of culture that leaders use and the impact that they have on the culture developed. I will then explore the ways leadership impacts on culture and the impact culture has on leadership. Lastly, I will begin to establish the barriers and affordances that leaders face when developing and maintaining culture in a school.

Descriptions of culture

The culture of an organisation is difficult to describe. It often relies on feelings or examples that are neither succinct nor clear. Haiyan et al. (2017) in their case study of a primary school culture, found the participants described culture as having three components: visible, visible but intangible, and invisible. This idea of components to culture identifies the complexity of the idea, grouping behaviours and values into what you can see, what you can see but is hard to describe, and what you cannot see.

One of the ways to describe culture is by looking at the relationship between the purpose of the group and the social connection within the group. By analysing these two concepts, cultures can be placed in groups or types. Bell and Kent (2010) describe culture as the relationship between the goals and social harmony of the school. They describe three types of culture: formal school culture that has an emphasis on academic outcomes and creates pressure for students to achieve academic goals, welfarist culture that has a relaxed and friendly feel that emphasises joining in, enjoying yourself, and being a success. The last type described by Bell and Kent (2010) is 'survivalist' which exists in difficult or failing schools. This 'typing' of school culture is also seen by Lunenburg (2011) who describes four types of culture in schools: family,

machine, cabaret, and 'little shop of horrors.' This description refers to the relationship between members and how that changes the interactions between people. Family cultures invoke feelings of being nurtured, whereas machine cultures invoke feelings of the output being the most important. The cabaret culture describes the idea of putting on a show or performance, reactions from the audience (community) is essential to the view of school's success. This culture focuses on appearances, whereas the reality is often vastly different. Finally, the 'little shop of horrors' culture describes the dysfunctional school where unpredictability and tension create a cold and hostile environment. In Wilson's (2002) study of student perspective on school culture, the students also described their school culture in this 'typing' manner. They describe the school as an 'academic' school, or a 'sporty' school. In the case of the students, this labelling of the school culture inhibited participation for subgroups of students. In the studies mentioned above the culture was described by not only the aim of the school but also by the social connection between members. The labels or types immediately begin to set expected behaviours that align to it.

However, the description of a culture can be obtained by investigating the process by which the culture is developed and maintained. Kondra and Hurst (2009) discuss the process by which the behaviour and values are maintained and created. They refer to coercive, mimetic, and normative cultures that all create conformity. They assume that by understanding culture in this way we are better placed to understand what maintains behaviours in organisations and what changes them. Kondra and Hurst's (2009) reference to the use of power to create and maintain culture is supported by Lumby (2012) who also refers to culture from a power perspective, stating, culture is a force which shapes and disciplines organisations through conformity.

The description of a culture would appear to be an important part of the maintaining and developing culture in the school (Teasley, 2017). Being able to articulate the culture to new members is part of the process for ensuring the culture is maintained. The description of the culture also forms the unique image of the school. It conveys to students and the public what the school represents or what its mission is (Weller, 1998). In most cases it would appear description refers to a type of culture based on the purpose and the social connections; however, it can also refer to the processes by which the culture is developed and maintained.

Leaders' impact on culture

To develop and maintain positive culture in a school, all leaders play an important role, the actions of leaders within the school set the expected behaviours and values.

Literature (Harris, 2018) suggests four main ways by which leaders impact culture. The first impact is how their deliberate actions bring unconscious behaviours to the surface and help others to see the beliefs and values their behaviours demonstrate. Another impact is through the planning and actioning of shared experiences. Linked to the planning and action of events is the actions during those events and the rewarding and celebrating of expected behaviours. The last two impacts are through the relationships of trust they build and the structures that are put in place to support expected behaviours and values.

One of the impacts leaders can have is through specific actions that highlight unconscious actions and behaviours that need to be considered. Harris (2018) suggests that the behaviours are developed and maintained through the conscious actions a leader takes to develop the culture, and the unconscious actions that maintain the culture. The research of a number of writers (Harris, 2018; Kaplan & Owings, 2013; Schein 2010) shows that members of a group are only conscious of a small number of ways that their actions shape the culture. As a result, cultural development is a mainly unconscious process members of a group use to reinforce or change the culture of the group. When unconscious behaviours are revealed, members are then able to change their behaviour. According to Kaplan and Owings (2013), it is the role of the leader to expose the unconscious behaviours. Therefore, a key role of a leader is to be purposeful in their actions to highlight unconscious behaviours so that it can be determined whether they fit the culture of the school.

Another impact leaders can have on culture is creating shared experiences that bring group members together and strengthen the bond between members or strengthen the purpose. Events do not have to be big and significant to create this bond but can happen in seconds - for example, a teaching sharing a positive story about a student with a colleague bonds the teachers through that experience of celebration. Shared experiences big or small develop and maintain culture by developing a sense of being a group and being connected. Schein (2010) describes a shared experience as the most fundamental act of culture formation, as anyone who had the experience is

automatically 'in', while those that did not are 'out'. For example, attendance at a staff dinner or a small group attending professional development together are bonded in that experience. However, it is not only the event itself that is important, but it is the actions the leader takes while sharing the experience that embeds behaviours and values. According to Harris (2018), it is the reaction of the leader or the group immediately after an event that embeds the norm. For example, if a member of the group speaks out against an idea and the leader is silent or suppresses the speaker then a group norm is developed that it is not ok to disagree with ideas. Researchers (Harris, 2018; Schein, 2010) suggest that these norm-building events happen in seconds and are often missed if you are not alert to them. In addition, researchers stress the importance of events that reward and celebrate in creating culture (Kaplan & Owings, 2013; Kondra & Hurst, 2009). Again, both large and small celebrations and rewards impact on the culture. When leaders reward the behaviour, they wish to see in a way that clearly links the behaviour and expectations to the rewards, they are more likely to get that behaviour again. Likewise, sanctioning unwanted behaviours in the same way reduces the likelihood of repeating behaviours. Kaplan and Owings (2013) extend this further by stating that how a leader responds to celebrating and highlighting behaviours that fortifies the school culture. Events are an important part of culture building, big events are talked about repeatedly, embedding the culture and normalising behaviours as the way things are done.

Another way that leaders build culture is through building relationships of trust with the staff. Hollingworth et al. (2018) found that leaders needed to build trust by learning alongside teachers, encouraging teachers to have autonomy and to experiment. With the role of Principals becoming more administrative, it is the middle leaders that classroom teachers trust more. The relevant literature (see, for example: Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Kaplin & Owings, 2013) suggests that typically colleagues trust their faculty leaders more than administrators as they are closer to the teachers and the students in the day-to-day activities of a school. Trust is vital to development of school culture. In a study carried out by Edwards-Groves et al., (2016), participants identified that leaders who create environments where open, honest, non-judgemental discussion could be had greater success in developing teachers than those that didn't. Edwards-Groves et al., (2016) also suggest that leaders need to

balance this support with challenge to ensure growth. Balancing support and challenge with the freedom and autonomy to discuss, debate, and reflect on practice is seen as crucial in building a positive culture in a school (Hollingworth et al., 2018). The relationships leaders build with the members of the school need to have trust at the base.

The last aspect of building organisational culture is how leaders use school structures to support behaviours they are seeking. For example, researchers found (Haiyanm et al., 2017; Wilson, 2002) school leaders redesigned the school structures to enhance opportunities for teacher learning to occur. Providing time and structural support for the behaviours to occur that the school valued was a common theme. It is also suggested that when schools created conditions which supported teachers and students to engage in certain behaviours, then participation in those behaviours increased. Aligning structure to support behaviours and values prevents barriers to participation in the culture. Structures allow the behaviours to occur naturally.

The impacts described above are not solely in the realm of principals. Many of the actions described are likely to be actioned by middle leaders. According to Fitzgerald (2009) the role of the middle leader in New Zealand schools is becoming increasingly about improving the performance of a school within their area, as the role of the principal changes to being a desk job. Therefore, Cardno and Bassett (2015) believe a principal's impact is indirect and middle leaders have a direct impact due to being in a position where they have face to face contact with both students and teachers within their team or department daily. Therefore, the middle leader and not just the principal, play a crucial role in the development and maintenance of culture. The actions and reactions of all leaders have an impact on the culture of the school.

The impact of culture on leadership

Thus far, school culture has been discussed in a uni-lateral direction, in that the impact of leadership has on culture has been discussed but not the impact culture has on leadership. The leader's actions and reactions impact on the culture. However, culture development and maintenance are not uni-directional but multi-directional. Culture also impacts on leadership because organisational cultures are not static - they change due to both internal and external pressures (Lumby, 2012; Kondra & Hurst 2009).

Within a school's culture are subcultures and countercultures that either strengthen or undermine it. A leader's own culture, cultures within the organisation, and external cultures all influence leadership. Leaders require the skills to navigate cultural influences on their leadership (Lumby, 2012). Therefore, culture impacts on how leaders lead within the organisation. This section will discuss ways culture impacts on leadership, firstly by looking at a leader's own culture and then subcultures within the school and community. Lastly it will address the external cultures that come from national and international levels.

One way that culture impacts leadership sits within the leader's own cultural background, or the way they have been brought up. Stoll and Fink (1992) believe that a leader's own culture and belief systems colours the way they view others and impacts upon their decision-making. A leader's culture is established through their experiences both in their personal and their professional lives (Schein, 2010), and the cultures leaders bring with them into the position impacts on the way they lead. In Mette's (2020) case study of a leader brought into a school to change the culture, the leader struggled to create change. This was due to their own cultural upbringing being very different to the school area and therefore they were not seen as having knowledge of the area. In this case his cultural differences put him on the outside of the group making it challenging to create change. In this example, the difference between the leader's cultural background and the culture of the school impacted on his leadership. Leaders need to purposefully consider their own culture and the impact it is having on decision making. Kaplin and Owings (2013) describe leadership and culture as two sides of the same coin. They suggest if a leader is not conscious of the cultures they are part of, then the cultures will control the way they lead. A leader's own culture will affect the way the lead unless they purposefully consider it when making decisions.

It is not only a leader's culture that impacts on their leadership. The established cultures within the school and community can also influence leadership and can sometimes prevent change or improvement from occurring, particularly if any aspect of culture is negative or resistant. Liddicoat et al., (2018) found that existing ideologies sustained structures that prevented cultural change. They found that beliefs and values already established within the organisation created biases when evaluating culture and therefore hampered critical reflection. For example, the school culture

influences the staff that are hired, valuing candidates with similar beliefs and values. This selection process ensures the culture is maintained (Lunenberg, 2011). Likewise, the culture of the school must be considered when implementing something new. Gomez et al., (2011) caution against taking leadership models and processes from successful schools and mirroring them in other schools. The context and organisational values of the school and community must align for the model to improve outcomes. Leaders that want to move subcultures and countercultures in a certain direction need to do so in a way that respects the group's existing culture. It is suggested when there is a misalignment between the culture of the individual and the organisation, challenges occur that inhibit success (Bell & Kent, 2010; Lumby & Foskett, 2011). The pre-existing culture within a school could change the leadership displayed by the leaders to make change or to create alignment. For example, in a study of sixth form students' perception of school culture, Bell and Kent (2010) found stories preserved institutions' values, which in turn created pressure on the students to conform to the beliefs and values of the school. While this is for students, the same thing can be said for leaders within an organisation. The cultures within a school create pressure to conform whether it is students, staff, or leaders. The cultures in a school and community will impact the way a leader will lead. External cultures also influence leadership within schools. The culture of a school does not exist in isolation. Therefore, it cannot be ignored that there are external cultures and pressures that impact the leadership in a school. Basset (2016) and Fitzgerald (2009) both discuss changes in New Zealand government policies that have directly impacted the way leaders in schools lead. The increase in corporate -style bureaucracy from the Education Review Office and the Ministry of Education that focuses on outputs, targets, and efficiencies is changing the way middle leaders work by putting an increased responsibility on organisational performance and efficiency demands. (Fitzgerald, 2009) Likewise, the educational reforms of the 1980s changed the role of senior educational leaders, which in turn led to a movement of distributed leadership in schools (Bassett, 2016). In both these situations changes outside of the school directly impacted on the leadership within the school. Another example is students that are influenced by societal culture. A case study by Bell and Kent (2010) found the emphasis for academic success was largely driven by a higher level of competition in the workplace and a change in criteria for entry into the workforce. Also, with more students involved in

part time jobs the cultures of society have an increased impact on school culture (Bell & Kent 2010). External cultures impact students' attitudes and practice which then transfer into the way they behave in school. Leaders of schools are impacted in the same way. Lumby (2012) suggests leaders in schools are not immune to the global pressures. Global changes have a trickledown effect to impact on leadership within individual schools. (Bell & Kent, 2010; Lakomski, 2002; Lunenburg, 2011)

Cultural pressures and influences, both internal and external, impact the leadership in a school. Cultures are a dynamic relationship involving interactions between internal and external influences. The impact is multi-directional. External influences require changes in behaviour from the top down, while bottom-up processes can change individual behaviour and shift values, ethics, and moral expectations (Kondra & Hurst, 2009). As leadership influences culture, so does culture influence leadership. The interrelationship between these aspects means both must be considered when interpreting school culture.

Barriers to leadership to leading culture

When developing and maintaining culture leaders must firstly identify the barriers that prevent a positive and productive culture from occurring. The literature suggests (see, for example: Lumby, 2012; Lumby & Foskett 2011; Wilson, 2002) that there are several barriers that have been identified as problematic to organisational culture and leadership. These barriers are discussed below.

The first barrier is the existence of conflicting beliefs displayed in structures and processes within a school. These structures and processes naturally determine the culture of the school. For example, if a person believes that anyone within the organisation can show leadership, but the structure for decision making is hierarchical whereby the top makes all the decisions and there is no autonomy, a misalignment between the structure and the belief will exist. This misalignment inhibits that belief resulting in actions within the organisation. Likewise, if the belief is that planning should be done collaboratively, but the process for planning is that everyone does their own in the weekend, then there is a misalignment that will prevent collaborative planning from occurring. The misalignment between the structure and processes that support the action and the beliefs and values that are espoused, prevents the beliefs

and values from showing in the actions of the members. Beliefs and attitudes are constrained by structural and procedural constraints and participation is inhibited (Wilson, 2002). Learning, teaching, use of time, and human resources can all constrain change in school culture (Liddicoat et al., 2018). For example, when less time was allocated to the teaching of languages the school developed unintentionally, a belief that language learning was of lesser value. Language learning was seen as of lesser value to the extent that the teachers were seen as not equal to that of other teachers in the humanities department (Liddicoat, et al., 2018). In the studies the common theme of misalignment between what was said to be the culture of the school and how things were done in reality, prevented both teachers and students from participating in the espoused culture of the school (Bassett, 2016; Wilson, 2002). The school in this study espoused that the students had a say in the running and decision making of the school, but there was no process in place for this to happen such as the creation of a student council or other forms of student representation. The structures and processes within schools form the pathways for behaviours to occur. When the pathways do not support the expected behaviours, they become a barrier to culture development. For example, if a school espouses that they value high achievement but there is no process by which high achievement is recognised, then high achievement is not likely to be valued by the students, staff, or community.

The second barrier identified in the literature is that of conflicting beliefs between members. When members of the school have differing beliefs and values to those leading a school conflict and tension is created. Both Bell and Kent (2010) and Wilson (2002) found when the beliefs of the teachers or students conflicted with the schools' beliefs, both groups opted out of engaging in the behaviours that were expected. The groups chose to sit outside the expected norms and effectively created their own subgroups. The seminal work of Argyris (1982) suggests it is common for leaders to espouse participation in the organisation, while engaging in behaviours which act against participation. These conflicting beliefs create tension in the organisation and influence culture. As discussed in the previous section, a misalignment of values and beliefs can prevent members of the group from displaying the preferred behaviours. When multiple members with a common counter-belief connect, a subgroup can be created with the shared commonality that runs counter to the school culture. For

example, a group of teachers that believe in the use of detention, where the school culture is based on positive encouragement for behaviour could form a subgroup that works against the school culture. These subgroups can prevent progress and prevent culture development.

The third barrier is that of the power and status of the person developing and maintaining the culture. Lumby and Foskett (2011) state it is the leader that sits in a position of hierarchical power that is assumed to have the power and status to develop and maintain culture. Literature suggests that power and status play an important part in building culture and that without power and status, culture development is difficult (Lumby & Foskett, 2011; Schein & Schein, 2019). The power to influence the group comes not from positional power but from social power.

Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the leader or person who is highest in the hierarchy has the power within the group to influence changes in behaviour. For example, Mette (2020) found that despite modelling behaviours, promoting values, and allocating time and space to building the values, the leader was unable to change the culture within the group, despite being hired to do exactly that. The leader's status within the group was low, as he was new and not from the area and had no influential power to change the behaviour and no hierarchical power either. Kaplin and Owings (2013) suggest middle leaders are seen to have greater influence over teachers than senior leadership members. Their closer connection by being within the department and also in the same position as a classroom teacher, gives these leaders greater status and power than senior leaders who are often seen as being disconnected from the face-to-face practice of teaching. Culture development requires power and status to influence others' behaviours, values, and belief systems. Without power and status to influence others, development is difficult.

The last barrier is the lack of professional development in leadership and in understanding culture. Members that are in positions of leadership require the skills and knowledge to understand leadership and culture, but there are limited opportunities for new leaders to gain professional development in leadership. For many leaders their knowledge lies in being classroom teachers and leading adults is a skill set that needs support to be developed. In the studies conducted by Cardno and Bassett (2015) and Grenda and Hackmann (2014), a lack of professional development

in leadership was a barrier for middle leaders. Both studies highlighted the importance of learning the interpersonal skills needed to engage in leadership practices and to develop culture within their areas. Professional development in leadership and culture is an important step in developing and maintaining culture. When these skills are lacking it prevents members from leading in this space.

Affordances to leading culture

In establishing the affordances to lead culture there is a clear connection between conditions that prevent positive culture and conditions that support that culture. In the example of school celebrations of success, it encourages behaviours that gain this, however, if what is considered success is narrow, it could also alienate those that don't fit that version of success (Bell & Kent, 2010; Schein & Schein, 2016). Therefore, many of the barriers become affordances when put in reverse. There are however some affordances that are discussed in the literature that are not also discussed as barriers. In this section I will discuss the barriers that can be reversed to be affordances, how reflection supports culture development and maintenance through focusing members on visible and invisible components of culture; the importance of celebrations, rituals, heroes, and stories; and, lastly, the modelling and role of talk.

When looking at affordances that support developing and maintaining culture it pays to begin at removing the barriers. When the reverse of the barriers is in place then it is an obvious conclusion that conditions are then created that support culture development and maintenance. As discussed earlier in this chapter the structures and processes can prevent the culture from being supported due to misalignment. When this is reversed the culture is able to be seen in action. For example, Haiyan et al., (2017) found that when structures, values, and relationships align, an appropriate school culture is developed and maintained. Alignment would appear to be the most influential affordance for leading culture. The relationship between organisational values and managerial processes is fundamental to maintaining culture (Gomez et al., 2011). The allocation of resources is one of the fundamental aspects of leadership that supports culture building (Schein & Schein, 2016). What leaders dedicate time, money, and people to, determines what is perceived as important. The alignment between values and structure strengthens and embed culture. Therefore, when there is

alignment between structure and processes, culture can be developed and maintained within a school.

However, reversing barriers is not the only way to support culture development and maintenance. There are some affordances that are independent of the barriers. The first of these is reflection on culture. Reflection supports members to develop consciousness of the visible and invisible components of culture and identify the impact they are having (Harris, 2018). This means members identify the actions and thoughts they have and connect it to the underlying beliefs and values it shows. Purposeful reflection allows members to critically review their behaviours, beliefs and values. For example, a teacher saying a student can't do a particular course due to a perceived lack of ability shows a belief that students have a fixed ability, and this may create a culture of low expectations for low achieving students. If the teacher reflects on and understands the belief, they could change their thinking to look at what supports that student needs instead. Reflection can be enhanced by outside participants who are not part of it. By using outside members to assist in reflection, bias is reduced allowing for visible and invisible behaviours and values to be critically reviewed. (Liddicoat et al.,2018) Leaders may also display unconscious biases when selecting and promoting new members of an organisation (Schein & Schein, 2016). When recruiting new staff, leaders generally are attracted to candidates that display their own organisational values and beliefs. The selecting of these candidates supports the culture of the school. Unconscious behaviours maintain the status quo. Being mindful of visible and invisible components of culture and reflecting on them regularly supports culture development and ensures alignment with the school.

Ceremonies, rituals, heroes, and stories are another affordance that through everyday actions embed culture and shape behaviour. Ceremonies, rituals, and heroes are vehicles by which culture is transmitted from one member to another and reinforce the culture in the school. Research suggests that these aspects reward and model behaviours that members in the organisation should strive for (Bell & Kent, 2010; Kondra & Hurst, 2009; Lunenburg, 2011). Kondra and Hurst (2009) state rites and rituals also provide opportunities to transmit the ideal behaviours an organisation is aiming for. High school students' stories and anecdotes in Bell and Kent's (2010) study preserved the academic culture of the school. Stories about shunned students or

students punished for 'underperforming' created added pressure on the students to perform. Students who fit the mould of the school were held to a higher regard by the student body, turning them into heroes. Kaplin and Owings (2013) assume the telling of stories also maintained and reinforced myths, traditions, and beliefs that underline culture. By retelling stories, the messages are repeated and reinforced, embedding the message in the culture of the school. Likewise, leaders who create heroes using rewards and status to emphasize behaviours that align with the beliefs and values of the organisation, show they prioritise and value the behaviours being shown and therefore encourage others to do the same (Schein & Schein, 2016). The celebrations, rituals, stories, and heroes within a school are the visible face of the school culture. Leaders that use these platforms effectively to promote the school culture they are developing create a visible and tangible component that clearly expresses the culture for the school.

The idea of visible and tangible components to school culture could also explain why modelling and promoting of the values by leaders is seen as one of the important components for culture building in schools. The modelling of the culture by leaders creates a visible example for other members to follow. Leaders who promote values, model the values, and put time and effort into building the values are more successful in developing school culture (Haiyan et al., 2017; Kaplin & Owings, 2013; Schein & Schein, 2016). In the study of Donald McKay school, (EdVestors, 2019) the principal often modelled vulnerability and authenticity through staff meetings and conversations. His modelling allowed teachers to feel safe to take risks and make mistakes, creating a culture of trust amongst the staff. When leaders model the culture, they wish to develop and maintain, they provide a visible example that other members can copy.

The last affordance is the role of talk in developing and maintaining culture. Due to the nature of teaching whereby staff predominantly work in siloes as an individual teacher with their own class of students, meetings are one of the few times when staff are all together and culture in action can be seen and understood as a whole. Therefore, meetings are the basis for how shared knowledge and understanding of the culture spreads through the school (Harris, 2018). Researchers, assume that talk from leaders plays a vital role in the coaching of members (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Harris, 2018;

Schein & Schein, 2016). It is through the words a leader selects that informal messages of what is acceptable and what is not are sent. Similarly, Harris (2018) suggests that talk establishes cultural norms and practices, and the words leaders use are indicators of the culture, for example use of 'we' instead of 'you' or 'I' create unity and a sense of everyone being involved.

Summary

In summary I have reviewed the literature that indicates that culture is the beliefs, values, behaviours, and actions that underpin the way a school operates. It is often described as a 'type' that encompasses the purpose of the school and the relationship dynamics between members. The 'type' creates feelings and sets the expectations that members and outsiders have of the school at a surface level. The relationship between leadership and culture is multidirectional, with leadership influencing culture and vice versa. Middle leadership therefore is influenced by culture and their leadership actions influence the culture of the school. The next chapter explains the research design used in this thesis.

Chapter Three: Research design

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methods used in this research. The chapter begins with justifications for the use of an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach, and the use of narrative case study. This chapter then describes validity and reliability, the role of the researcher, the research setting and the recruitment approach used to identify participants. Finally, the data collection methods and data analysis approach are described, along with the relevant ethical concerns.

Justification of the methodology

The aim of this research was to critically examine the role that middle leaders play in developing and maintaining school culture. This research sought to gain knowledge through the subjective experiences of the participants and assumed middle leaders have practical knowledge that can be expressed through stories. It also assumed teachers obtain practical knowledge through everyday experiences and actions (Caduri, 2013). The knowledge gained by the analysis of the participants' stories offers a teleological explanation. I assumed an interpretivist position, meaning there is an acceptance that I have impacted on the research. I have retold the information and the purpose it served.

An interpretive paradigm recognises that people's perceptions are subjective and influenced by their environments (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020; Willis, 2007). It seeks to interpret human meaning in the topic (Mills et al., 2010). The use of a narrative method acknowledges that the storyteller will adapt their story for the listener, giving more information when the listener has less knowledge of the topic (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Therefore, I have impacted on the story being told as the storyteller will adapt the story depending on the audience. This is acceptable in interpretivism. This means that narrative research catches a moment in time and is not easily replicated through other studies. This research accepted that the participants and I influenced the data collected. This however does not diminish the validity or reliability of the study. It merely means that the findings were representative of a moment in time and

that the embedded reciprocity raised the expectations that researchers and participants had of each other. This promoted mutual accountability. It also added to the trustworthiness and quality of the research as I did not want to let down participants with whom I had developed a relationship. An epistemological perspective provides a scaffold for predicting, describing, empowering, and deconstructing specific worldviews, increasing knowledge that leads to greater understanding of the purpose behind qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Qualitative methodology is appropriate for this research as it allowed the researcher to gather information in a variety of forms such as observations, field notes, classroom artefacts, interviews, and questionnaires. This study utilised two semi-structured interviews in order to gather data. A qualitative researcher studies things in their natural setting, interpreting, and making sense of the meanings people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative methodology is a term that includes a variety of methodological traditions, strategies, and designs that are largely non-interventionist, in that they seek to observe and/or understand what is being studied without trying to change it in any way or place their own spin on it (Punch & Oancea, 2014). This research sought to understand the middle leader's perspective of leadership and culture and the complex relationship that exists between the two. By using qualitative methodology, it allowed the participants' views to be captured and their experiences and the context in which these developed to be better understood.

Case study methods was used in this research. There were two cases and each case was an individual middle leader. Miles and Huberman, (2011) define a case as a phenomenon occurring within a bounded context. Case study is research in a bounded system (Creswell, 2018) or case, uses informative and contextual data to interpret findings about the phenomenon. Tight (2021), suggests that case study can be considered a robust research method especially when in-depth investigation is required. He maintains that case study methods can go beyond quantitative studies and understand the behavioural conditions through the perspective of the participant. This research used a case study method, which is appropriate as the aim is to gather in-depth data that recognises the complexity and the context of middle leaders and their roles in maintaining and developing school culture. This study looked at the

middle leader's perspective of leadership and culture and the complex relationship that exists between the two.

A case study is most often conducted in real-life contexts and aims to produce in depth accounts (Punch & Oancea, 2014). These accounts can take a narrative form. Narrative case studies aim to explore and understand human experience in story form. They use in-depth exploration to find the meanings that the participants give to their experiences and stories. Narrative research generally involves working with small samples of participants to gain rich and open discussions. The emphasis is on a storied experience. Generally, this takes the form of interviewing people around the topic of interest, but it might also involve the analysis of written documents (Josselson, 2010). A narrative case study is a snapshot of a moment in time that is connected to a particular context and in this research the perception of the person being studied. This research used a narrative research perspective which sits naturally with the idea of gathering in depth data in context.

Narrative approaches use participants stories to gain personal and practical knowledge of the topic. Narrative research allows the researcher to consider the whole person, context, and perception of the middle leader (McAlphine, 2016). This is highly important considering the complexity of the relationship between leadership and culture. Narrative research uses people's experiences, it asks them to tell their stories, often in relation to phenomena that are new or unknown. Narrative approaches are used in education as they gain personal practical knowledge and an understanding of perception (Andrews et al., 2008; McAlphine, 2016). This research aimed to gain both. A narrative approach also affects the learning of both the researcher and participants, and this was important as along with the information that was gathered during the research it was hoped that the research would be empowering for both.

Validity and reliability

Narrative research is sometimes criticised for lacking reliability and validity. Validity relates to the trustworthiness or authenticity and therefore the credibility of the research. Reliability is connected with consistency. Narrative research is unlikely to find similar results over time due to participants' viewpoints and reactions changing or in other settings. This, however, can be seen as a strength not a weakness of as the

participants will be the most suitable and knowledgeable at that particular time. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, cited in Cohen et al., 2018) suggest that to "replace validity and reliability with trustworthiness and its components" (p. 138), is more fitting. As mentioned earlier this study was not transferrable but when combined with other case studies it could provide the opportunity for generalisations to be made.

An interpretivist case study is often criticised for a lack of rigor and the potential for bias (Creswell, 2018; Feagin et al., 1991). However, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that case study has no greater bias than any other methods of inquiry especially if triangulation is used. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) refer to triangulation to ensure validity. Checking data against multiple sources including other research to assist in ensuring the accuracy of the information collected is important. In this research I triangulated the data from the two interviews with research already in the topic to ensure accuracy of the information gathered and checked the accuracy of the interview interpretations with the participants themselves.

Narrative case studies under conventional validity and reliability interpretations can create some challenges. Narratives are often the stories of the participants at that time on that day and would likely be different on a different day. Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) suggest that a storyteller adds and removes detail depending on the audience's knowledge of the topic. The same participant talking about the same event to two different researchers could result in two very different stories. The researcher's interpretation of the story also affects the accuracy of the data. Therefore, using respondent validity by asking the participant to check the accuracy of the data gathered ensures that the data is accurate to the participant's point of view at that day and that time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Another criticism could be the ability to generalise the data. Due to the small number of participants some would say that case studies are not able to be generalised. Generalisation is the process by which information from a sample is transferred to a population, analytic or connection to theory, or to case-to-case transfer (Firestone, 1993). The aim of this research was not to generalise, but to gain an understanding of the case in its complexity and prompt questions for further research. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state that the purpose of a case study is not to generalise but for the knowledge gained to be transferable. They suggest the outcome of a case study could

be to develop hypotheses for future trials and studies. To ensure that different views are gathered the participants came from different schools.

Other methods for this research were rejected as narrative research acknowledges the interdependence of those involved in the research and uses critical reflections on the knowledge gained.

Role of the researcher

A researcher using case study, has a main purpose to gain a deep understanding of the topic, in its natural environment, by collecting data and analysing it. In this study the role of the researcher included designing and preparing the study; conducting the investigation and data collection; as well as interpreting and reporting the results of the study. As the researchers' main purpose is to gain a deep understanding, they usually but not always act by observing and questioning as outsiders and they often have little control over interactions within their study. Within this study my role was to hear and interpret the stories being told, it was the participants that decided which stories to share.

A case study researcher designs and plans the study, carries out the investigation and data gathering, interprets the results and reports on the findings. The researcher is required to build an in-depth understanding of the case within its natural environment. Usually, but not always, this research is done as an outsider or etic. Etic approaches to research use a descriptive system that allows for representation of similarities and differences between cultures (Helfrich, 1999). However, both etic and emic can be used when explaining observed behaviours. Etic views assist with comparisons whereas emic views are used for understanding the relationship between what is being observed and the culture. For this study I assumed a predominantly etic role, while knowing that a possible crossover into emic could occur as the storytelling is indirectly affected by the listener. Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) suggest the interviewee will select information to share based on what they think the researcher wants to hear and what they feel comfortable sharing.

I have spent a considerable amount of time working as an educator in schools. Over that time, I have been in middle leader leadership positions and am familiar with the

demands and dynamics of the role. This knowledge afforded me the opportunity to build a relationship with the participants that supported a trusting environment for the participants to share their stories. I was familiar with the two schools through general knowledge of education; however, I had no direct link or knowledge of the participants and their schools prior to the research taking place.

The research study: Sample, setting, and schedule.

Participant selection occurred using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling relies on researchers using their own judgment when selecting participants in their research. The criteria for sampling were that each participant had to be a middle leader in a school which was built in the last 10 years. I specifically chose new schools due to the unique nature of these schools; they have created their culture without the influence or obstruction of old cultures that were previously in place. Schein and Schein (2016) discuss outside influences as one of the aspects of building culture, stating the culture of an organisation must fit within the macro-culture it belongs to. Because of these criteria, the population I could select from was small. Due to the size of the study, there were only two participants. Some may see two participants as a limitation to the research - however given the scale of the research and restrictions due to COVID 19 two participants was sufficient. One participant was found through a Facebook post on the New Zealand Teachers (Primary) Facebook group (see Appendix A), while the other was found through an email to a principal. The use of the Facebook site was added after initial attempts through emails to principals were unsuccessful in finding participants. However, I ensured the participants were from different schools to gather different views and practices.

Data collection

The data collection process for this research project involved three steps. It took place over the period of three months. I met with the participants individually to answer any questions they had and to begin to build a relationship with the participant to ensure that they felt comfortable to share their stories with me. This was particularly important to achieve with one of the participants. This participant was of Samoan heritage, so it was important from a cultural view that 'ava fatafata' or mutual respect

was established prior to the study in order for this participant to be willing and open to share her knowledge. For both participants mutual respect was needed to form the basis of the researcher / participant relationship, in order to protect it. For the Samoan participant this acknowledged the Vā fealoa'i. Vā fealoa'i is the spaces between places and people and the mutual respect and reciprocity needed to maintain them. It refers to the tapu nature of these spaces and the sacredness of the relationships. Vaiolēti (2006) asserts, it is important to maintain the personal relationship. Relationships are the base on which most Pacific activities are built. Smith (2005) also states that the ability to build, maintain and nurture relationships to strengthen the connection is important when gaining knowledge from indigenous people, and that this requires sensitivity and reciprocity. Smith (2005) suggests it is not about making friends but about being aware and willing to power share. For both participants I spent time with them showing me around the school and getting to know them and the school so that they would feel comfortable with me, and I could understand their schools.

The design of this study included two separate narrative interviews with each of the participants. The interviews were semi structured. Czarniawska (2001) asserts the challenge with narrative interviews is to include enough flexibility in the questions for participants to share their stories in their own style, but to also ensure that I obtained the information I needed. Czarniawska (2001) continues to say it is challenging in narrative interviews to keep it on track to ensure the researcher can answer their questions. Narrative interviews are different to other interviews as they have a set of questions that prompts and guides the interview but also can adapt to the stories generated by the participant (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

Preliminary stage

I initially met with each participant individually to explain the research project, hand out the Participation Information Sheet (See Appendix B) and the Consent Forms (see Appendix C), and answer any questions they had. Time was allocated for me to collect each Consent Form prior to the first interview. At this stage I also began to establish a relationship with the participants through general conversation in order to build a respectful reciprocal relationship which as mentioned earlier is important in order to strengthen connectivity (Smith, 2005).

With the ongoing disruptions of COVID-19 and lockdowns in Auckland I was mindful that the interview process might need to move to an online platform such as Zoom. Fortunately, this turned out not to be the case and the interviews were able to go ahead *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face to face). Initial contact and the following contact with the teachers were made face to face. As the study used a narrative research methodology it was important that where possible communication was face to face. From a Maaori¹ perspective, *kanohi ki te kanohi* is an important cultural practice that shows a commitment to the kaupapa (O'Carrol, 2013). *Kanohi ki te kanohi* is about a being physically present as an acknowledgement of the mana (status), and knowledge the person has. Body language and other non-verbal cues are more obvious in a face-to-face interview than online as the environment that the conversation takes place in is not sterile or void of human interaction. For both participants they felt more comfortable in a face-to-face interview as they felt they could then give the interviews the respect they thought the research deserved. *Kanohi ki te kanohi* interviews were preferred due to the relationship and focus that could be built through meeting face to face.

Phase one

The first phase focused on gathering the story of each middle leader through a narrative interview comprising of six questions that encourage story telling (see Appendix D). It is proposed that most people enjoy telling stories and need little encouragement, however the wording of the questions can suppress storytelling if worded poorly (Elliot, 2005). These questions were worded with narrative based sentence starters. For example, can you tell me about..., can you share. Each interview took approximately 1 and half hours. Elliot (2005) suggests narrative interviews should be between one and two hours long, with 90 minutes being the optimal length. An interview that is likely to require over two hours is recommended to be done over multiple days. The interviews were recorded using a small dictaphone that was placed on the table and took place at the schools in which the participants worked.

¹ Maaori is spelt using Tainui dialect with a double vowel rather than a macron. Due to the research taking place within the Tainui area.

Phase two

Over a three-week period, participants collected 3-4 artefacts that were connected to them leading culture in the school such as photos, minutes from meetings. These artefacts were to support the middle leaders with the recall of specific examples where their leadership had influenced the culture of their school. It ended up also being empowering for the participants as it caused them to reflect on their own practice while they were collecting the artefacts which were shared in the second interview. In terms of the research, it generated deeper and more meaningful discussions in the second interview than what had occurred in the first. Heersmink (2021) posits that cultural identity can be materialised when people integrate their own memory with cultural artefacts or the memories of others. In this research the use of artefacts supported the participants to connect back to their memories of the events and the actions they showed.

Phase three

The final phase focused on the artefacts the participant had collected. Again, it used a semi structured interview, where I asked participants to explain the stories behind the artefacts and describe the event that took place. The participants had their artefacts with them and describe the events and their reflections for each one. These interviews took approximately one hour.

Data analysis

Analysis of data used the program NVivo. The data were analysed using a narrative approach. Punch and Oancea (2014) suggest narrative approaches to data analysis look at the data from a holistic point of view right from the beginning. Rather than fragmenting the data up into pieces, narrative analysis looks at the form and content together. I used colour coding to highlight sections of stories that had similar themes. The focus of the analysis was on the language used to convey meaning and experiences and the themes that were expressed through the stories.

Ethics

This study gained full ethics approval (see Appendix E). It followed the ethical principles set out by Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC). The

first of these principles was partnership. This was acknowledged with the time allocated to building a relationship with the participants prior to the interviews taking place. Both participants were also acknowledged and thanked for their participation with a small gift.

The second principle of participation was addressed through the participants' self-selection to participate. They also self-selected the stories they shared and the artefacts they gathered. Participants also checked the transcripts to ensure they were a true record of the interview.

The third principle of protection was applied at all times. I made sure there was no known connection between myself and the participants including excluding participants from my own school. I acted in good faith and with integrity at all times. The participants selected to be interviewed within their own workplaces, therefore anonymity could not be ensured. However, confidentiality was maintained and the use of pseudonyms for the participants have been used to protect their identity. Any identifying language or ideas specific to the schools have been removed from the findings.

The risk for participants in this research was low, it was highly unlikely that they would experience risk or discomfort as a result of cultural, employment, financial, or any other pressures. The participants could have felt uncomfortable, particularly if they choose to share negative stories about their school or colleagues. It was made clear to the participants it was their decision what they chose to share, and that confidentiality would be upheld. When discussing relationships and workplace interactions it is not always possible to avoid uncomfortable topics arising during the interview. (Oliver, 2010). Therefore, it was important that I responded to stories in a respectful and confidential manner that acknowledged the emotions and feelings of the participants.

Summary

The research design used an interpretivist paradigm, using qualitative methodology. A narrative case study was used as this allowed the participants to share their knowledge and experiences through stories, they had experienced. The design of the two interviews ensured answers were given in story form and the use of artefacts helped

prompt memory and reflection. The relationship built between me, and the participants ensured they felt comfortable to be honest in their stories.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the research design and methods used to collect data in this research. This chapter will present the findings in relation to the key research questions in keeping with the narrative approach, the context, and the stories by which the participants explained their views. The chapter is divided into the following sections: the descriptions of culture, perceptions of leader's impact on culture, perceptions of culture's impact on middle leadership, barriers to developing and maintaining culture, and affordances to developing and maintaining culture. The data from both interviews was used across each section of this chapter.

Question 1 gained a basic understanding of each participant. Lee was an experienced teacher, who had taught for many years both overseas and in New Zealand. She came to her current school as a foundation staff member in her current position as head of Years 9 and 10 (aged 13-14). She came from primary² teacher training and most of her experience previous to the current school was in primary. Syd was also a primary trained teacher who was a foundation staff member as a classroom teacher in her school. She was a curriculum leader for Physical Education and Health, and the Arts.

Descriptions of 'culture'

This section examines the perceptions that the middle leaders had of their school cultures and the terminology they used to describe it. Prior to the first interview taking place I spent approximately 30 minutes being shown around each of the schools while building a relationship with the participants and gaining an impression of the contexts in which they worked. This section presents the themes expressed in response to Question 2 of the first interview: "How would you describe your school's culture or atmosphere, climate?"

The first theme identified in the descriptions the participants shared was the importance of the context and history of the school. Both participants described the cultures of their schools by starting with the demographic of the school and the history

² Primary school teaching in New Zealand is for ages 5 to 12 year olds, secondary school teaching is ages 13 to 17 year olds.

of the school's development. The journey each school had been on appeared to be important to the participants to give context to the description of the current status of the school. Both participants explained the school's history and their role within it, before beginning to describe the culture of the school. They touched on the location of the school, the year levels included in the school, and the structures of the classes where the participants were leaders and teachers. For example, Syd shared she was co-teaching with a colleague in a Year 7 and 8 hub³, which was the only Year 7 and 8 class in the school, while Lee was co-teaching in a Year 9 and 10 hub which had a number of staff also teaching groups of the students.

Lee is a team leader in a school that is in a low socio-economical area. It is a special character school⁴ that caters for students in Years 9 and 10. She currently co-taught in a mixed Year 9 and 10 class. She came from a primary school (ages 5 - 11) background having taught overseas and in New Zealand. Syd is a curriculum leader in a school in a low socio economic community that caters for Years 1-8 (ages 5 – 12). The school is newly built and for the first few years had a small roll but is now experiencing rapid growth due to new subdivisions in the area.

Both Lee and Syd described their school cultures as being based on feelings and 'typing' (a way to classify culture with a simple term for descriptive purposes e.g., sporty), often describing the culture by using examples of interactions to explain what they meant by particular phrases. Both participants referred to their school culture as being 'like a family' with examples of familial interactions between staff and students, and staff and staff to explain this. This was another theme of their descriptions.

For Syd the theme of 'family' came about through the staff members knowing each other well so a feeling of belonging was already embedded in social interactions. For example, Syd described the school this way:

We are a family, tight knit. [Syd]

However, for Lee 'family' was explained more by the way the school structured their classes, including titles for staff and relationships between both staff and students:

³ A open space where multiple classes are taught at the same time.

⁴ A school in New Zealand that is a partnership between the state and a private organisation. Often the private organisation is a religious one, for example, the catholic church.

We have our aunts and uncles and me, and the younger teachers also have a family bond as I look out for them like a mother would, and so the beauty is we are an extended family, intergenerational. So, our students experience what they have at home, here at school. [Lee]

Lee referred to multiple scenarios where family terms of endearment were used by students when interacting with her or other staff as examples of how this culture manifested each day. Staff were referred to as aunty or uncle and then their first name and students used terms like brother or sister to refer to other students.

When describing the culture of their school both participants referred to the relationships between staff and between students and staff. Lee noted that:

First and foremost, it's about the relationships we have. Not just me, but all of us, and the kids see that, because they see our relationships are strong. [Lee]

We care about the kids, and we want the kids to care too. We are in the job because we love it, and we want the kids to experience that. [Syd]

Over the course of answering this one question both participants referred to the closeness in relationships as knowing the students and colleagues beyond the participants doing their job. For example, knowing about staff and students and the things they did outside of school, as well knowing their familial connections to others in the school.

I was talking to this student and realised that it was the brother of [...] so then I could talk to him about that I knew his sister and connect that way. [Syd]

The connection between members of the school was a key aspect of the descriptions the participants shared. It was clear that it was important for both participants that the relationships between members of the school were much more than just knowing them as teachers. They knew each other as who they were outside of school, knowing their families, their hobbies, as whole people.

While the concept of family was the same for both Lee and Syd there were some differences in their descriptions of their school's culture. Lee referred to the ethnic cultural make-up of the school as well as strong faith-based values that were core to the school's culture. These elements were strongly evident in the description of events

that happen as part of the regular school day. In this school the day is structured around events that purposefully build the culture of family and faith, with students and staff participating in village worship and eating together. Lee referred to the importance of these events:

[Morning prayer and worship are] times where we fellowship, and we build our relationships [.....] when our children come here, they know they are loved, they are supported, and it's not just about subjects. [Lee]

The use of feelings was also a theme in the descriptions. The presence of love was a key descriptor for Lee when describing her school culture. 'Alofa', 'aroha' was described as a foundational aspect of the school culture.

We believe if you don't have love, you're not doing your job and love doesn't finish at 3 o'clock. [Lee]

The idea of love as part of the school culture was strongly embedded in the stories of this participant. It was being displayed in the way both staff and students greeted each other with hugs and terms of endearment, even when just passing in the corridor.

In contrast Syd outlined some differences that were beginning to happen in the culture of their school. She referred to the culture as a feeling of being in a point of transition. This was explained by the rapid growth and change in the demographic profile of the school in recent times. Syd described the challenge of this,

When you are a small school it's kind of natural to be a tight knit staff and close, you kind of have to. But now with other staff, it's challenging to be like that and with the demographic change, like, it's like that has to shift and we change our teaching styles. [Syd]

The idea of being in a transitional phase of culture, - a point where culture is changing and evolving was evident within the description and stories and was seen as inevitable by Syd when a school expanded, however it also created feelings of uncertainty. Syd explained,

Things are changing, you either accept it or you don't, but it's hard, you know... [Syd]

In describing the culture of the school both participants referred to 'family' and feelings. The relationships between staff members were crucial in their explanations and formed the basis for how they labelled their culture. 'Family' was used as the 'type' by both participants, and this was strongly connected to the way members interacted with each other. It was however clear that Lee was describing a well-embedded school culture, whereas Syd was describing a culture that was currently in a state of continual fluctuation.

Perceptions of leaders' impact on culture:

This section examines the participants' views on their own leadership and the impact it had on the school culture. The data from both interviews contribute to this section, including reflections shared in the second interviews as a result of being a participant in this study. The events described by the two participants were individual to them – however there were some common themes across the examples.

The first perception evident in the first interview was that both participants made statements that implied they did not see themselves as leaders. They questioned if the examples they were giving were 'leadership' in that they didn't see themselves in positions of leadership. They both thought that they did not really have an impact on culture and that was more the domain of the principal of the school and the senior leadership team. As a result, their first descriptions of events that they led that contributed to culture development and maintenance were minor acts describing more about what happened than the actions they took:

I'm not sure if this is what you mean [...] I'm not sure what I do is leadership...

[Syd]

I don't really consider myself a leader [...] so this one is really hard to answer...[Lee]

The second perception was they felt they impacted on culture through day to day interactions they had with other members. In the first interviews both participants gave small examples of things they did that they felt contributed to the culture of the school. Lee shared how she greeted the students each day, and how the students

sometimes referred to her as 'Mum' and she would still answer them. Syd talked about spending breaks in the gym so the children could play sport at break.

The examples given at this time were simple. However, as the first interview progressed and in their second interview, their own understanding of culture and their leadership developed in the moment, and their examples became more detailed and specific as they began to see their actions as being deliberate acts to build school culture.

Initially in the first interview both participants described simple events and interactions they had implemented that impacted on the culture in the school. In one such example Lee described several small interactions that created the family-based culture. Lee described how she stood at the gates each morning to welcome the students into school which allowed her to have a good understanding of how the students were feeling each day. Lee explained,

We meet all the kids, and we know whether they've had a good start to the day. Anything else you know academic-wise, it doesn't matter until the child is loved and safe and wants to be here. A quick friendly word and a hug as they enter the gate can achieve that.

She shared an interaction with a 13-year-old student who had not been at school for a while. The child had a number of days off in a row and eventually she found out the child had been going to the hill in the local area to play rather than coming to school. She talked about going to the hill and finding the child. At first, she wanted to growl him because she had been so worried, but instead she used that she knew the child's sister to help get him back to school. This event suggested a relationship was built and connection with the student, that demonstrated Lee's care about him as an individual and strengthened the 'family' culture in the school.

Syd discussed the interactions in the staffroom. She purposefully made sure she went into the staffroom to ensure she maintained connections with other staff. This was something she felt was changing as the school grew. Each area in the school having their own facilities for staff to make drinks and store food, meaning they did not need to go to the staffroom for lunch and breaks. Syd thought going to the staffroom and connecting with the staff was essential to maintaining the 'family' connection within

the staff. She also discussed organising lunchtime sports games in the gym so the students could interact in organised games at break time. Syd shared how she set up a timetable of sports allocating students to each session. The students would run the games, but she would attend for supervision. The students really enjoyed these games and would often stop her in the school to discuss certain things that had happened in the games.

The kids are really keen and it's so cool to see them want to be there. I'm really passionate about it so it's cool to connect with them with that. [Syd]

The next perception they shared was bigger events that they organised that aligned to the culture of the school. Syd firmly believed that students needed organised physical activity and as Teacher in Charge of Sport saw it as her role to ensure students had these opportunities in their day. Syd's actions were helping to maintain the connection between staff, to ensure the relationship went beyond knowing each other as teachers. Running break time activities ensure she stayed connected with the students as well.

When Syd was given the role for leading physical education and health, one of things she was asked to do was to ensure it was valued by the staff as an important part of the curriculum. Syd saw her role in this as supporting the staff to also provide opportunities in the implementation of the physical education and health curriculum area, changing the teacher's thinking from seeing the curriculum area as a 'reward' to being a vital part of student learning.

Teachers wouldn't take their kids out because they thought they would play up, but it was getting them to see that they needed it. [Syd]

Syd modelled and supported the teachers to make the necessary changes successfully. This action suggests that it supported the school culture of valuing Physical Education and Health as part of the curriculum in the school.

Lee also had made a change to align more closely to the family culture of the school. They discussed how student conferences were done prior to COVID-19 whereby all the staff sat around the edge of one room and parents came in to talk with them "like speed dating" according to Lee. This practice was counter to the culture of the school which valued connection and relationships. Lee shared the change that she made so

that relationship and connections could be made with family members. She had the conferences moved to the rooms the students were in. These rooms all came off a central area. In the central area they placed tea, coffee, and biscuits with couches and chairs for parents to sit on and chat with each other. When staff weren't talking with individual parents, they joined the open area and joined the conversations that were being had by the parents in the central space. Lee felt the change supported the staff, parents, and students to connect and build relationships. It was more relaxed, and parents could take their time and not feel rushed.

Having this system really did strengthen our culture, we weren't all different parts. We have those connections, and those connections are so important.

[Lee]

Another way the participants thought their leadership impacted on the school culture was in supporting staff. Lee discussed was the responsibility of helping new teachers align with the school culture and the challenge this created when it came naturally to her.

It's hard to explain to others something that is just natural for you. But by doing this I realised if I explain why and I document everything that is in my head, then it will help our new teachers to understand what we do here.

Lee reflected that when you had the connection and the 'real you' aligned with the culture it was easy to demonstrate the culture, but she found it hard to explain that to other people who did not yet have that connection and understanding.

Syd also shared an experience of leading a change although this time, through leading a discussion of a challenging situation to come to a consensus. Syd and another teacher were in charge of organising the school production. The other teacher wanted to use a known script with music and costumes, like they did pre COVID-19. Syd felt that as this was the first production back after COVID-19 and there was still a lot of staff sickness so a simpler down scaled version of production would be better. While navigating the challenges this situation created, Syd brought the problem back to the school culture to help resolve the challenge.

I said that we needed to take it to staff and be prepared to listen to their suggestions, so we could get the buy-in, without staff-buy in we weren't going

to be able to do this, so we had to get that. I thought if I led the staff meeting it might go better.

Syd felt that having the staff wanting to engage in the ideas would provide a better outcome than going in and 'telling' them. The relationship between the leaders and the staff would be able to be maintained in this approach and it would show that they valued all staff perspectives.

The examples above were shared in the second interview where participants were asked to bring artefacts that showed actions they had taken to maintain or develop school culture. In both Lee's examples of leading staff and changing student conferences, and in Syd's situation of overcoming a challenge, the participants said they reflected on their action of leadership and how it connected with the school culture. By taking the decision away from being told to do something, to having the people they were working with understand why they were working in a particular way, appeared to strengthen the culture and maintain the relationships for both Lee and Syd. Both participants acknowledged this skill was something they had to develop over time to be able to successfully use it.

Lee gave another example of teacher aides⁵ new to the school,

It's important the kids see them as just more aunties in the classroom, otherwise it will affect the relationships, so they are just like us, aunties too, there is no hierarchy.

In this school the hierarchy was based on age, with the older staff being held in high regard, regardless of their position. Lee saw that it was important that teacher aides were seen as equal to teachers of similar age and not held at a lower level due to being a teacher aide and not a teacher. To support this, they used the same terms of 'aunty' and 'uncle' regardless of the adult's role.

The last perception the participants had was a reflection due to participating in the study. Both participants acknowledged that they never really considered their actions in relation to school culture and never considered that what they were doing could have an impact. They both considered culture something that sat outside their role

⁵ 'Teacher aides' in New Zealand schools are not trained teachers but do have responsibility for meeting the needs of students with, for example, particular learning needs.

and more with the principal of the school. However, while thinking about their answers and in the time between the two interviews they both noticed there were things they did that subconsciously contributed to the culture of the school. Lee stated that.

Doing this has made me have to really think about what I do and why I do it. So much of what we do here is just natural and I don't really think about it. But for someone new they need to know what it is I do, and so I have written some things down to help our new aunties.

In all the examples the participants gave, there was an element of time being given to something that they valued, and thought was important. It appeared they personally gave extra time to role-model to and support others, and to build relationships to develop and maintain the culture of the school. It seemed both participants acknowledged that building and maintaining respectful relationships between themselves and the people they were working with whether it was other teachers, students, or parents, was the core basis of their work.

Perceptions of culture's impact on middle leadership

When researching culture, there is a need to explore the impact culture has on leadership, not just the impact leadership has on culture. Due to this research taking place during a worldwide pandemic, the pandemic was prominent in the stories, however context specific stories were also shared that uncovered local cultures impact on the middle leader's leadership.

To begin their discussion on culture impacting their leadership both participants discussed the impact of COVID-19 had on them and their schools. However, for Syd this impact was discussed more often and appeared to be of greater importance due to the transition the school was experiencing at the time with rapid roll growth. For both participants COVID-19 created a time of disconnect and a feeling of separation from their students and their teams. While both participants created opportunities for connections with staff and students online, the lack of face-to-face connection was felt by both. Syd stated,

We lost the sense of belonging a little bit, we weren't able to mix and mingle.

Face to face connections were viewed as important for both participants' ideas of developing and maintaining culture. While both participants participated in online connections over this time, they felt that without the face-to-face connection with their colleagues and students, the connections in their relationships were negatively impacted. For Syd the lack of connection enhanced the feelings of change and uncertainty that were already building in the culture of the school, which in her opinion lead to a greater feeling of disconnect.

Another external influence for Syd was the rapid expansion of the school, which she believed was having a significant impact on her leadership. With the expansion came change, with what had been a small school with a small number of staff now expanding to have a larger number of staff in a short period of time. There was a sense of trying to maintain the connections from before the growth happened. Syd described how the staff had formed groups, those that were there at the beginning and those that joined afterwards. She described how the two groups had very little in common and would often stay separate to each other. This was creating a tension between wanting to maintain the relationships that she had but also accepting the idea that with growth will come change. For Syd the growth of the school was having a significant impact on her leadership as she grasped how to lead her areas with more staff involved:

When we were smaller it was easier to get everyone on board, but now we are bigger it is not as quick.

The growth in the local area was also changing the dynamics of the community around them. The connections with so many new families were hard to maintain as was understanding the diverse expectations each family had of the school. Rapid growth had created a culture of uncertainty which was impacting on her leadership creating a feeling of unease and change.

Syd also discussed the impact conflict was having on her leadership. With new staff expressing conflicting ideas she was finding it challenging to help them understand the school way of doing certain things. For Syd this was a learning experience in dealing with differing views while still building and maintaining connection and relationship.

I learnt I could say 'No', that I could say I disagree and why I disagreed.

Syd reflected that during this time she had to think really carefully about why they did things in certain ways so that she could explain it to others. This was a sentiment that was shared by Lee in that new people into the school provided her with an opportunity to explore why things were done in certain ways and check as to whether those ways were still valid. Countercultures created learning opportunities for both participants which strengthened their leadership skills in the process.

For Lee the culture of the school gave her a sense of establishing the type of teacher she wanted to be. It enabled her to bring her personality to the job in a way that was authentic. She described thus:

I've been able to flourish, I've been able to do my thing. I've been able to grow, make mistakes. You fall down, you get up and cry and all of the above. To be able to stretch and know who I truly am. And be able to share that with others, to truly be true to myself. Yeah. And not thinking it's wrong because that's how this training (teacher training at teachers' college) was.

The tension for Lee was internal with her views of what a traditional educator should be as opposed to the educator she actually was. In her view the traditional construct, i.e., a view whereby the teacher has a boundary that separates them from the student and places them above the student in status, created tension in who she was, however, the culture of the school helped her to put the traditional view aside and lead in a way that she felt was authentic. For example, Lee described how they hug their students so that their students know that they love them, even though hugging is something that the participant felt was not encouraged in education, as it was seen as something that was not professional between being the teacher and the student. For Lee being able to be herself was liberating as an educator and leader in the school.

Lee also noted the connection between the students' lives and their lived culture in the community and the culture of the school. For Lee ensuring that they lead in a way that built a culture that was the same as what their students experienced outside of the school was important. This meant that the connections with family influenced decision making in the school. For example, when explaining why they have no homework Lee said:

Their homework is to go home and be with their families, do the son and daughter thing.

The last cultural aspect influencing leadership that Lee explained was that the school culture was based upon Vā fealoa'i. She explained that this:

Refers to the spaces between places and people and the mutual respect and reciprocity needed to maintain them. It refers to the tapu nature of these spaces and the sacredness of the relationships [...]

Vā fealoa'i encompasses the tradition of collective mutual respect or 'ava fatafata'.

Lee felt that the principals of the school allowed her the space for her in her leadership which enabled her to develop her leadership. Her style, therefore involved building on this culture and allowing opportunities for her teachers to lead in areas where they had expertise. For example, she stepped back during 'praise and worship' and a teacher with a passion for music led this part of the day. The teachers in her team then reciprocated this by providing opportunities for their students to lead. This was evident during the poowhiri ⁶which was run entirely by the students.

For both participants their leadership was affected by the culture in the community and the culture being created due to COVID-19. They both acknowledged the impact the pandemic had on their leadership as well as cultures within their communities and schools. For Lee the culture of the school led her to finding a teaching and leadership style that was authentic for her. While Syd is experiencing change and uncertainty that provided opportunity for reflection and new learning in her leadership.

Barriers to developing and maintaining culture

Barriers to developing and maintaining school culture shared by the participants largely fell into structural and relational categories. The majority of the barriers were external to the participants. However, both participants acknowledged barriers within themselves as well. Some of the barriers were common to both participants while others were individual to them and their situation.

The first barrier described by Syd was the growth of the school. With rapid growth, Syd felt that it was harder to induct new staff into the culture of the school and it was

⁶ Poowhiri (spelt in tainui dialect) is a traditional Maaori welcome for visitors.

harder to build close familial connections with the larger staff. Therefore, there was a separation amongst the staff while those connections were built. This was also true for the connections with the students and their families. With a heavy influx of students and families into the school there were many new people to connect with and familiar connections took time to build. Syd also acknowledged the new people had no connection with the area. They were people that had moved recently into the area and therefore didn't have the generational connection that other schools might have.

Our school is really changing, you know, we have new staff, and they don't really mix with the other staff..., and then there are all these new people to the school, and we don't really know them or their families. So, it's hard to keep us, you know, our family. [Syd]

Adding to this was a second barrier with the design of the buildings. Each hub in the school had an area that was like a kitchen. As a result, each of these areas had their own facilities that meant staff did not need to go to the staffroom to get coffee etc. Syd felt that this meant staff tended not to go to the staffroom at breaks meaning the opportunities to build familial connections were reduced. Staff tended to congregate within their own areas and so connections were harder to build with each other. To build familial connections Syd felt you had to have opportunities to sit and chat, the way the staff were using the building design meant that these 'chats' only happened within their own hubs and not with the wider staff.

Both participants acknowledged how hard it was to develop and maintain culture with people who had differing beliefs and values and when staff were rigid in their thinking. Syd described a situation of working with one person,

When working with someone who is so rigid, I had to build the skills to speak up... learn how to say I don't agree with that.

Bringing new people into their schools and helping them to understand the culture of the school was a challenge for both participants. While they both acknowledged that new people had value with the new skills and thinking they brought, it was challenging when their thinking was so different to the school's way of doing things.

Likewise, staff that were not connected to the culture were a barrier as well. Staff with counter beliefs and values were hard to change and cater for which created conflict for the leaders. Syd stated:

When they believe they can use it (physical education) as a carrot, I just don't even know what to do with that.

Both participants shared that they thought the senior leadership teams of schools had an important part to play with these members of staff and that if they weren't 'backed' by them then this would be a barrier to moving forward. Both participants noted that this could be a challenge with students and their families as well. If they came into the school thinking a certain way, this could cause problems if it did not align with the school. Syd felt this was something that might happen within their school as the community moving into the subdivisions were very different to the first group of students that were in the school. They had different expectations of the school, and this was challenging to navigate.

COVID-19 was another barrier that both participants felt prevented the development and maintenance of culture in their schools. It reduced opportunities to build connections and a sense of belonging. This impacted on staff relationships with each other and with the students. This was particularly important with new staff and students that did not have the connections and relationships prior to COVID-19. Both participants discussed that not only had the time in lockdown had an impact but also the restrictions once being back on site had been a challenge. They felt that the restrictions of masks and distancing were not conducive to a family type culture but placed boundaries in the way of developing connections.

Lee thought one of the biggest barriers to their school culture development was the traditional construct of education and teachers. She explained that when making decisions about who she "let into the school" to provide experiences for the students or to support teachers in their development, whether it was professional development providers, external supports for learning, or even just visitors to the school, she looked very carefully at who she allowed in. When first approached by an organisation to work with the school, she would find out about the organisation and meet with them before letting them work in the school. One example she gave was of an organisation

that wanted to teach the students about relationships, but because the organisation wanted to have the girls and boys together for the lesson, she decided they could not come. Organisations that had the traditional view of education and teaching were often not allowed in.

To come to this school, you have to understand who we are. We just don't let anyone in. [Lee]

The school had to navigate external systems and views that were not designed for a school that operates outside the norm of mainstream schools. Due to the school being a special character school, aspects of the way the school ran were different to those in a state school. However, unlike private schools they still operate within the state system. Lee felt that to protect the culture of the school she needed to ensure the people coming in would not impact negatively on that culture.

Syd also discussed the barrier of time. She felt that to develop and maintain culture you needed time— “time to develop, time to adapt”. It was hard for her to lead change when it was happening fast and there was a lot happening at one time. She also thought that having time to collaborate with teachers to support their development in their practice was important. When she did not make supporting others a priority then the likelihood of change was less. In the description of one of her events she discussed the power and change that happened when she made the effort to work alongside a teacher who saw PE as ‘carrot’ or reward. She could see that the same change in behaviour did not happen with the teachers that she did not do this with. Syd expressed that when there is a lot happening in the school and she has her own class to teach and prepare for, it is hard sometimes to find the time to support others, especially if she wasn't given the time to do it.

Affordances to developing and maintaining culture

It is of interest that the affordances described by the participants were almost all ‘relational’ rather than ‘structural’ and they did not necessarily coincide with the barriers identified in the section above. For the purposes of this section, the affordances have been grouped firstly with those that are interactions, or about relationships connecting with people, the relational aspects, and then secondly the

affordances related to processes, resources, buildings and timetables, or the structural aspects.

The first affordance shared by both participants was also the one that was most common through their shared stories. It was the common theme of all their examples of leading culture. This affordance was connection, connection to each other and connection to the culture.

Connection is so important, it's how we function, it's part of our body. [Lee]

Connection was seen as the most important aspect for them as leaders when leading culture. Without it both participants believed they could not develop and maintain culture. They as leaders had to be connected to the culture of the school and connected to their staff, they had to believe in what the school was doing. It was when this was strong that the decision making, and structure all aligned to support others. Supports for connection building that were often discussed were time and opportunity. Purposefully making time and creating opportunities to build connections with each other was believed to be an essential support for leaders to help others to connect with the culture. But alongside this there had to be a willingness to want to connect by every individual within the school.

The second affordance that is related to connection was passion.

Passion about what you are driving helps get other teachers on board with whatever you are passionate about. [Syd]

Both participants believed that they had to be passionate about the culture of the school and the direction the school was going in to motivate others to also be the same. They believed that when teachers and students saw leaders that were passionate, that this would encourage them to participate as well. Passion for the culture of the school shows a strong belief in what is occurring therefore the participants felt that this provided certainty for those around you.

Connection and passion were the two main affordances discussed, however the participants also discussed structural supports that helped these two things. The first of these supports were the support of the principal of the school. It appeared that both participants felt that it was important to have the support of the principal. They believed if the message of support was strong from the principal, then they were less

likely to encounter resistance from others. Syd affirmed *“You can’t lead without the support of the principal.”*

Another support they discussed was making sure decisions felt right. In describing this both participants were clear that the decisions being made had to align to ‘fit’ the culture of the school. Lee discussed how the previous student conference event had felt wrong because they couldn’t connect with the parents. When they changed the event to fit the culture of the school, the event felt right.

We had a lounge room where parents could just sit around and have coffee, and we could just chat with them... I think it was the first time that I actually enjoyed running the evening. [Lee]

When decisions were made that aligned to the culture of the school both participants felt that there was connection which motivated them to follow through.

Another structural support as discussed earlier was purposeful time and opportunity to build connections with each other and to support others to do the same. Both participants discussed schools being very busy places and so if there wasn’t thinking put into building connection then it might not occur by itself. Lee discussed the purposeful decision to start each day with an event that brought the school together and connected them to each other. This event was seen as the core for culture building, giving time to do the things the school valued most so that the culture could be developed and maintained. Time and opportunity were also important for supporting others to engage in the culture. It was in these moments that the participants thought leaders could show their passion and connection to the culture of the school, which in turn would encourage others to do the same. By modelling what was expected they saw themselves as leading by example.

The last enabler was consistent and clear messaging. Both participants felt that when the message of expectations was clear and consistent from everyone then there was no confusion. They both thought this needed to come from the principal of the school first and then everyone else needed to do the same. They thought this was especially important for the students and the community. It needed to be clear what the culture was so that people could make decisions that aligned. But they both acknowledged that describing culture was really hard to do and words often left room for

interpretation. The messaging also needed to be genuine and true, which they believed strengthened the connection to the culture. Both participants felt you would be able to tell if people didn't really believe in what they were doing and that would affect the culture. Therefore, they felt those delivering the messages of culture, leaders within the school, needed to be speaking their truth.

Participants in this study believed that true connection to the culture was the most important thing for developing and maintaining it. They believed that while there were structural supports that could be put in place that would help, you first needed true connection with the culture. This could not be manufactured, it had to come from the leaders of the school.

Summary

Leadership and culture building was not something either of these participants had thought about before. They both were uncomfortable discussing the leading of culture as they saw it as the domain of the head of the school. However, in the time between the two interviews both participants began to notice that they did in fact take actions that supported culture development within the school. They both described their school culture using types and although they both used the word family, the view of what that meant was different. They saw that connection with the culture was the most important thing, but also acknowledged that the culture of the school had to operate within a wider culture of the community and sometimes this impacted negatively on the school culture.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

The previous chapter presented the findings from analysis of data collected over the course of the study. In this chapter the themes discovered in the findings are discussed, and links made to the literature. This chapter is organised in sections according to the research question:

1. How do middle leaders describe and justify their school culture and possible sub-cultures?
2. In what ways do middle leaders describe the impact school culture has on the way they lead?
3. What are the barriers and affordances that middle leaders traverse when attempting to influence any perceived interrelationship between their leadership practice and school culture?

As discussed in the methodology one of the limitations to this research was the use of only two participants, meaning this research cannot be generalised, but provides areas for further discussion and future exploration.

Describing culture

Creating a description of culture is complex, as the words used to describe culture are open to each individual's interpretation and 'culture' also includes feelings and connections that often do not fit into sentences. In describing their schools both participants in this research started by sharing the journey of the school and the context, the decile (a level given to schools based on socio-economic factors), where it was located, the demographic of the students, and other specific facts about the population of the school. For the participants, explaining the history was important for understanding the present. This surface information was important to the participants to share and according to Lunenberg (2011) begins to tell others about the culture of the school.

In this research both Lee and Syd used the word 'family' to describe their culture, yet the two cultures of the school were very different. The use of 'family' as a descriptor is a form of 'type-ing' as described by researchers (Bell & Kent 2010; Lunenberg 2011;

Wilson 2002). Lunenberg (2011) describes a 'family' culture as an environment where concern for each other is important and commitment to the students is above and beyond the norms of the job. Everyone works together to ensure everything is completed. Schools that are 'families' are nurturing, friendly, cooperative, and protective. This was evident in Lee's description that "*Love doesn't stop at 3 o'clock.*" The idea that caring for students is not something that is 'switched on and off' but is something that is part of who teachers and school leaders are evident here. The idea of using a 'type' to describe a school allows members to describe the school to others in a simple way that gives them clues as to what can be expected within the school. However, in the case of this research, both participants used the same type. However, the cultures were different. So it is uncertain that type-ing actually helps with understanding culture. According to Lumby (2012), such descriptions can only hint at the culture of an organisation. The use of metaphoric language gives the illusion that the complex nature of schools can be captured in a word or phrase but, in reality, this language reflects imprecision in thinking. The use of the word 'family' did produce some commonalities across the two schools. The relationship between members of the school was seen as the most important thing, and that was evident in their stories. However, in that the cultures were very different, the use of the 'type-ing' of 'family' to describe the culture produces ambiguity when other information is not given. Therefore, the use of typing as 'family' gives only an indication of the relationships within the school and did not give a clear picture of the culture of the schools. 'Type - ing' gives an indication of the leadership style and expectations, but without the detail of what that leadership looks like.

In describing the culture of the school, both participants referred to the relationships and connections between staff and students, and between staff members. The closeness of the relationship was a defining factor of the 'family' culture. Describing culture by using 'family' shows that both participants see culture as the way people interact with each other, and the structures and organisation of the school either support or hinder the interactions and connections. Bell and Kent (2010) also assert that culture is the relationship between the goals of the group and the social connection. For these participants the social connection was given the most attention in their descriptions while the purpose of the group was only touched on. While the

purpose of the group was education of young people, the teaching of content was only hinted at and neither participant mentioned academic success. Therefore, it would seem for these participants the culture of the school was about the connections and relationships more than the goals or purpose they were all there for. The purpose or goal of the group was not shared and this could have been because they knew I had knowledge of this already. When telling stories, the speaker will adapt to the person listening, adding in, or removing information based on what they think the listener already knows (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). It would therefore seem that within the leadership of the school with a 'family' culture it would be important to prioritise building connections with different members of the school.

One of the themes that appeared in both participants' descriptions, was the use of values language. Values are considered to be one of the core aspects of culture. (Schein & Schein, 2016). The culture of a school is grounded in the values it upholds. A leader who impresses that every student is important shows the values of human dignity and worth. (Kaplin & Owings, 2013) For Lee, faith and love were two strongly embedded values of the school culture. Expressing the values of the culture as part of the description advocates the organisational and individual principles by which the school operates, making it easier for members of the school to recognise who they are and how they can contribute to the organisation.

Another key theme of describing culture was evident in Syd's description of culture. This was the idea that a description of a culture is a point in time within the school. Her use of language that indicated a temporary state, i.e., 'currently', 'right now', 'transitioning' in her description shows that culture is an ever-evolving cycle and not a static idea. The sharing of what things used to be like shows an awareness that the culture is changing. Culture is too complex to be static, the social equations i.e., the staff, students, and community actions alter the culture. It is therefore more appropriate to think of culture as fluid (Kruse & Louis, 2008).

In summary when describing the culture of their schools, both participants used language that indicated 'type-ing', however the type only gave surface level information about the culture and oversimplified the complex nature of culture. Therefore, the two participants used the same type to describe two very different cultures. Categorising a culture in one box or another therefore seems to be an

inaccurate way to define culture. According to Weller (1998) the description of the school forms a unique image, it conveys to the public and the students what the school represents or what its mission is. For these two participants the description did describe what the school represented to some degree but more so described the relationship between the members. In reality describing a school culture is extremely difficult and 'type-ing' suggests the school culture is one idea, when in reality it is many things. Clear articulation of the culture supports new members to engage in the culture (Bell & Kent 2010; Lumby 2012; Weller 1998). However, using 'type-ing' as the means to do this is inaccurate.

Leadership's impact on culture

The first key idea that was identified in the participants' stories was the level of awareness they had of their leadership of school culture.

Both participants had limited views on their leadership impact on culture but in the time between the two interviews both participants noticed the impact they had. According to the literature (Haiyan et al., 2017; Harris 2018; Schein 2010) members of a group are only conscious of a small number of ways that their actions shape culture. After discussing culture in the first interview, it brought culture into the conscious thought of the participants, meaning the leaders noticed the behaviours and actions they were taking. The actions the participants shared in their interviews were only connected back to culture in reflection, and therefore their actions at the time were not deliberate actions connected to culture development.

One key idea was the building of trust which supports a positive school culture. Lee's story about opening up the 'va' to allow others to lead showed trust in her colleagues. Literature (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Hollingworth et al., 2018,) suggest leaders build trust by encouraging teachers to have autonomy. Lee opened up spaces or 'va' for her teachers to lead within the school which in turn built a culture of leading and of trust amongst the staff. This culture flowed into how teachers interacted with students building trust in their ability to lead as well. For both participants the trust they built was the foundation of their relationships, and the vehicle by which they were able to form tight bonds with the people around them. According to Edwards-Groves et al., (2016) relational trust is a resource by which leaders make staff feel good about their

work environment and colleagues. They go on to say it is only built through day to day repeated social exchanges, trust is grown over time. The emphasis these participants put on establishing trust strengthens their connections with the people around them and assisted in the development and maintenance of school culture.

Another key idea was use of role modelling to provide an example to others. Syd described working alongside another staff member to develop their teaching practise in physical education. By working alongside teachers in their lessons of physical education she was able to model the expected behaviours and the expectation that physical education was valued. Modelling is one of the ways new members are able to establish what the effected behaviours are (Kondra & Hurst, 2009). They mimic what they see and observe rewarded behaviours or behaviours that gain social belonging. Leaders actively modelling expectations is a deliberate act that supports culture development and maintenance. In the case of Syd, it supported their colleague to engage in behaviour that aligned with the school culture and value the school placed on physical education. However, in this situation other teachers in the same area still did not engage in changing their behaviour and continued to use physical education as a reward. Therefore, in this situation modelling only affected the behaviour of the teacher directly worked with. In Lee's modelling scenario of opening up space or 'va' so that others could use their strengths and lead, the modelling led to others doing the same. In this scenario the culture of open space for others to lead filtered to the students as well. Therefore, it would appear that modelling can be an effective tool for culture development and maintenance, however it would appear that there are other criteria that sit alongside to explain why in one situation it worked and in another situation it did not (Haiyan et al., 2017; Kaplin & Owings 2013; Schein & Schein 2016). Leaders who model expected behaviours and values are more successful in developing school culture. However, modelling, which is a way to influence others can only occur when the person doing the modelling has social power with those they are trying to influence (Mette, 2020; Schein & Schein, 2019). Therefore, modelling can be an effective tool if the person has social power or status within the group.

Another key theme from the participants was the need for middle leaders to have time to support those around them. This is particularly important in primary schools where schools are not resourced to provide extra release for middle leaders. Building and

developing culture is not a quick process, it takes time a focus. Syd's example of working alongside a teacher to support their development and practise shows when time is given to support culture can be developed. Likewise, flexibility in resourcing of time allows middle leaders to ensure things that are valued are given the time to be done well. Both participants ensured they gave time to the things the school valued. In the research completed by Liddicoat et al., (2018) the timetable for languages in the school was considerably less than other subjects in the school. This created an environment where languages were deemed of lesser value. This coincides with what Syd saw when they noticed physical education in the school got less time and was undervalued by a group of staff. By then giving physical education more time and supporting staff to engage in the teaching, they were able to ensure the culture of the school was lived and that physical education was valued.

The last theme from the participants was the importance of shared events in developing school culture. The shared events discussed by the participants were not academic related events, but events that brought people together to celebrate and connect. Both participants shared stories where they created shared events that supported the development of the school culture. For Lee changing the way the conferences with their parents ran so that they could build connections and strong relationships with their whaanau supported their family culture. Involving food and opportunities for informal conversation to occur strengthened the bond created. Researchers (Harris, 2018; Kaplin & Owing, 2013; Kondra & Hurst, 2009; Schein 2010) all stress the importance of shared experiences in developing culture, stating that shared experiences develop a sense of being a group and being connected. For these participants the events they created were about creating opportunities to connect and build relationships. For them it was the connections that were the important outcome of the events. This was particularly important for Syd who felt there was a lack of connection between new and old staff, and for both participants during COVID. Creating opportunities to connect both with each other and the culture of the school would appear to be a crucial element for leadership in developing and maintaining culture. Therefore, these events are an important part of school culture, which makes them just as important as academic learning. Leaders in schools need to value these events even when there is pressure from the busy school environment.

As discussed in the literature review there was an importance of alignment between the initiatives, structures, processes, and school culture to support the development and maintenance of the school culture. Several of the stories told by these participants indicated that their actions were to align what was happening at a particular time with the school culture. The actions of modelling worked for one of the participants but not the other while connecting with the other members of the organisation seemed to be an impact action they both took. Modelling would appear to need social influence, and social power seems to be a factor in the ability for leaders to develop and maintain culture, however this is an area that could be explored further. Both middle leaders appeared to develop their understanding of their leadership and its impact on culture over the course of the interviews. According to Hollingworth et al., (2018) and Kaplin and Owings (2013), middle leaders are positioned well to develop relational trust and influence culture. However, it is also evident that there is limited understanding of culture development by middle leaders and a misunderstanding as to the part they play within, and it highlights the need to up skill middle leaders in this area.

Culture's impact on leadership

In researching culture Kondra and Hurst (2009) and Lumby (2012), discuss culture as evolving, and organisations are influenced by both internal and external cultures that change the way their members behaviour and operate. In the case of these two participants, they both reflected on external cultures and their own internal cultures that influenced their leadership.

The first external influence on both participants was COVID-19 and the response to a global pandemic. The rules and regulations that were put in place over this time created a culture in New Zealand that impacted significantly on schools and leaders within schools. Connection was a crucial component of both cultures in the schools, and the importantly a belief that face-to-face connection was stronger than over online. The conditions set by the pandemic, restricting face to face contact severally impacted on both participants' leadership, altering their ways they connected with the team members and their students. Research (Corrine, 2022; Relija et al., 2023) on COVID-19 impact on schools shows educators worked longer hours when working from home and stress of learning to teach in a different environment, this created burnout

and impacted negatively on job satisfaction. The biggest challenges were adaption and separation or lack of social connection. For these two participants it created feelings of being isolated and removed from their connections. While both participants tried to recreate face to face events for connection in online platforms, they both agreed they were less effective. What the pandemic has shown is that school cultures and leaders are influenced by significant events that happen in their communities. That successful school cultures can adapt and are resilient to those impacts.

Another culture that impacted on the participants leadership came from Lee. For Lee the traditional school model was another external culture that was influencing their leadership. The traditional ideas of teachers with the separation between student and teacher made Lee feel like they had to leave a part of themselves behind when at school, however the culture of the school they were now working in made them feel like they could be their whole self and they didn't have to keep themselves slightly removed. The choice of the school to sit outside the traditional culture of schooling, for Lee was a support them being the type of leader they wanted to be rather than the leader they thought they should be. However, this influenced Lee in her leadership as she saw herself as someone who needed to protect the rest of the group from this outside influence. A criticism of school cultures is when principals act as protectors of their schools, preventing distractions from external influences. Deep seated changes in school cultures are unlikely to occur without bonds with external cultures, which puts schools at risk of having stable but fragile cultures (Kruse & Louis, 2008). Researchers (Bassett, 2016; Bell & Kent, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2009) all found examples of external cultures that changed the way leaders operated. The culture of the Education Review Office and the Ministry of Education are specifically named as having influence on leadership in schools. The research (Bassett, 2016; Bell & Kent, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2009; Kruse & Louis, 2008) would suggest that is almost impossible to prevent external cultures from influencing the school and it is suggested that to do so would have a negative impact. Yet Lee's stories indicate that this school is doing this, and it is having a positive impact on students and their achievement.

The opposite of the above was seen in Syd's stories where external culture of the community was significantly impacting on her leadership. For Syd this rapid change meant the school was in a position of transition and the focus of this leader was

supporting new staff and families to engage in the culture of the school. The rapid growth made it hard for this participant to build strong connections with everyone. Bell and Kent (2010) and Lumby (2012), discuss that schools cannot escape the pressures from external cultures. They assume that changes in communities and globally impact on school leadership and the decisions that they make. This was the case with this participant who was noticing the impact the change in the community was having on the school. Like Lee, this was viewed with some negativity as well. Therefore, it would appear that external cultures are seen as a negative impact on leadership by these middle leaders giving a sense of needing to preserve the school culture. This was echoed when discussing the introduction of new staff.

The idea of protecting the culture was also explored when discussing new staff and conflicting ideas and values. Syd was developing her leadership of culture when dealing with new staff who had conflicting ideas. She had to develop the skills of influencing people to act in certain way in align with the school values and beliefs while also trying to maintain connections with staff they were acting against that culture. Teachers and students have conflicting beliefs with the school, then they can opt out of behaving in the expected ways and choose to group outside of the expected norms (Bell & Kent, 2010; Wilson, 2002). In the case of Syd because a significant number of new staff had joined the school these subgroups were forming that were challenging to work with. This significantly impacted on her leadership as she developed the skills to work with them. However, the other side to this is that it indicates a need to protect the school culture from new ideas and indicates that middle leaders see their role in culture as ensuring staff conform. This shows a resistance to new ideas and change and again that idea of needing to protect the culture of the school.

For both participants there were internal sub-cultures that were affecting their leadership. They both acknowledged that support new staff who bring their own culture with them into the school was a focus of their leadership in that moment. For Lee they were reflecting on what they did as it came quite naturally to them but didn't necessarily come naturally to the people they were working with, therefore they were having to reflect on why they did certain things so that they could explain it to others. For Syd, they were having to develop new skills particularly in dealing with conflicting

views. Lumby and Foskett (2011) discuss that misalignments between individuals and the organisation culture provides challenges that can inhibit success. The idea of needing to protect the culture and have staff conform was a belief that appeared to influence their leadership and thinking around other cultures.

Barriers to developing and maintaining culture

Both participants in this study were experiencing barriers to developing and maintain culture. They were able to identify barriers that were both structural and interpersonal. While some of the barriers were similar, many were particular to the context of the school.

The first barrier identified by both participants was COVID-19. The global pandemic prevented connection building which was a key component of both schools' cultures. COVID impacted on the school's ability to hold shared events and to engage in rituals and ceremonies that maintained culture. Kondra and Hurst (2009) assume that rituals and ceremonies allow organisations to pass on expected behaviours and values. COVID prevented this from happening, which hindered the passing on of school culture particularly to new staff and students who hadn't experienced it. The separation COVID-19 created impacted significantly due to the high reliance on connection as the base of both school cultures, but it also made it harder to ensure staff conformed. When working from home there was less control leaders could use. It was also found that the pressure and tension created by the shock of a sudden pandemic created a desire to return to pre COVID-19 (Mikusva et al., 2023). Sudden change creates uncertainty and therefore there is a need to hold on to the known.

Sudden change was also seen in the barrier effecting Syd. For Syd the rapid growth in the school was a barrier. Syd stated that it was hard to maintain close connections with the larger group of staff, but that also rapid change left no time for culture development that took time. Researchers, (Bell & Kent, 2010; Kaplin & Owings, 2013; Kondra & Hurst, 2009; Lunenburg 2011,) all assume that storytelling, rituals, ceremonies, and heroes are the vehicles by which culture is transmitted. Syd believed that with the rapid change happening in the school, there was less focus on these things and with the large portion of new staff there was a higher risk of these ideas being lost, if it wasn't made a focus of leaders. When there is a culture that relies on

relationships and conformity, large amounts of new staff or students disrupts the culture.

Another barrier that effected relationship connection was the building design that Syd described. In the new buildings each block was built with an area a bit like a kitchen. The original plan for this was so that students could participate in cooking lessons. However, an unintentional outcome was that teachers in the blocks had facilities that meant they did not need to go to the staffroom, creating subgroups of teachers that connected within their hubs, but not with the wider staff. This was creating a barrier in developing close connections between staff in the school. Wilson (2002) found that when there was a misalignment between structures and processes with the culture, it inhibited participation. When a culture is built on connection and relationships then the building design needed to support this. When designing building, looking at the culture of the school and considering how each design feature will impact on it, is important. It would appear that even minor features like kitchenettes for classroom cooking can have a significant impact on culture.

Another barrier both participants discussed was conflicting beliefs and values. This appeared to be a significant barrier for both and was one that they felt they lacked the skills to overcome and felt they needed the support of the principal to make progress. They didn't feel they had the status to deal with these situations. For both these participants the power and status sat with the positional leaders rather than the social leaders. Mette's (2020) case study suggests that positional power is not very effective in changing culture. This is supported by Kaplin and Owings (2013) who also say the middle leaders are positioned better to influence teachers than senior leadership due to the closer proximity to the practise of teaching. While both participants put the need for them to have support due to the absence of power and status, it could just as easily be due to the lack of skills they had identified in dealing with conflict, and they perceived their principals as having these skills. Literature (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Grenda & Hackmann, 2013) suggests that middle leaders are often good classroom teachers and professional development in leading adults is often needed to support them in leading culture. However, the idea of needing power and status to navigate instances of conflict, again links to the idea of conformity and the need to control influences on the culture of the school.

The last barrier discussed was also connected to controlling the influences on the school culture. The misalignment between traditional education culture and the culture of the school as described by Lee was a barrier for her. The traditional education culture came from the experiences of the parents of the students, whom many went through schooling in various pacific islands, and from the processes and rules set out by the Ministry of Education. Lee described the school was very particular about who 'they let into the school', and as a leader had, had to ask educational groups, and professional development providers to leave when their values did not align. Lee felt she needed to control the influences that entered the school to preserve the culture of the school.

The barriers inhibiting the culture development described by these participants were largely individual to their circumstances, while there were some that were consistent across both participants, there were more that were individual. Therefore, when discussing the barriers to culture development and maintenance one needs to consider the context of the organisation as what may be a barrier for one might not be a barrier to another. Gomez et al., (2011) states that one must be careful when looking at what makes a successful school culture. You cannot mirror from one school to the next without taking into consideration the context of the school and community. Therefore, it would appear that while there will be some barriers that are consistent across schools, research into barriers needs to include the context as well.

Affordances to developing and maintaining culture

While barriers prevent the development and maintenance of school culture, affordances support it. The affordances discussed by both participants were more consistent across both participants than the barriers were. Both participants discussed similar ideas around what they felt supported the development and maintenance of their school cultures.

One of the affordances across the two participants' perceptions of their own schools was the need for principals to support middle leaders. Supported by allowing them the freedom and flexibility to make decisions that contribute to the culture of the school and supported in dealing with conflict when changes were met with resistance. The interesting contradiction that appears in this idea is that the middle leader's

themselves wanted autonomy, however they wanted conformity from other members, and they saw that they achieved this when they had the support of their principal. For the two participants the positional power that the principal holds was seen as an influence over other staff. This perception contradicts studies (Kaplin & Owings, 2013; Schein & Schein, 2019) who state social power holds more influence than positional power. However, it is understandable that they would have this perception given that principals and Boards of Trustees are the only ones with powers of employment. The structures and process of schools are often top down, in that the principal head of the school, Liddicoat et al. (2018) state that structures naturally determine the culture in a school. Therefore, the structure of having the principal as the head would lead to the thinking that they need to be seen to be supportive for influence to occur. This links to another affordance discussed by the participants which was clear and consistent messaging.

Clear and consistent messaging was an affordance mentioned by both participants. They discussed the idea of “everyone being on the same page” (Syd). From the stories they told, it can be inferred that they were referring to the idea of having a clear idea of what was expected, as they believed it made it easier to make decisions that aligned when they knew what it was, they were aiming for. As Weller (1998) discussed a clear vision of what the school stood for conveyed to staff, students, and community the unique image of the school. Members being able to articulate this ensured that the culture was maintained. Having a clear explanation of the school culture was something these participants identified as helpful. Although as seen through their own descriptions, not a simple exercise. However, this also indicates once again the need for conformity and protection of the culture. The idea of clear consistent messaging sends a message of everyone needing to be the same. Also, the clear explanation of this is our culture helps protect the culture and keep it the same.

As discussed above a clear understanding of the culture was seen by the participants as something that was helpful to them in making decisions. This was due to the next affordance, aligning decision making to the culture. This affordance was significant in Lee’s story about conferences, where they described making decisions that “felt right.” Having alignment across what they were doing and the culture for both participants gave them a sense of doing the right thing, and it also gave them an external support

for dealing with resistance that allowed them to maintain their relationships, as seen in Syd's story of deciding on the school production. Gomez et al., (2011) and Haiyan et al. (2017) both found that alignment was the crucial element for culture. That when alignment wasn't in place culture became espoused rather than lived. For the participants this alignment made the decisions they made natural.

The next affordance both participants referred to was time and opportunity to engage in the expected culture, whether this was in everyday ritual and ceremonies as shared by Lee or in allocated time for support like discussed by Syd. It was seen by both participants that culture development took time and opportunities to engage in the expected behaviours. Researchers, (Harris, 2018; Kaplin & Owings, 2013; Kondra & Hurst, 2009; Schein, 2010,) all express the importance of shared events, rituals, and ceremonies to bond members together and show case the culture of the school. It is through these shared experiences that membership is developed and a connection to the culture is made.

This leads to the most important affordance as voiced by both participants, and the most significant theme found in this research, which was connection. According to stories told by both participants it would appear connection with the culture and connection with the people was the most important thing for culture to be developed and maintained. For the leaders themselves they felt they needed to be connected and passionate about the culture, and it needed to fit with them as an individual for them to lead it well. They also felt that they needed a strong connection with the people they worked with, that meant they knew them as more than just colleagues or students, but that they knew them as people. Connection was not something that came out strongly in the literature considered in this research. There was however a theme of alignment that ran through most of the studies considered. Haiyan et al (2017) discussed that alignment between relationships, structures, values, and the school culture were important. The focus from these participants on connection could come from their culture being 'family' based. One of the identifying features of a family type culture according to Lunenberg (2011) is the strong connection, so it is understandable the connection would be important. For these participants connection for themselves and connection for others was repeated in all the stories they shared.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Introduction:

This chapter highlights the conclusions of this study and discusses the recommendations. It also explores possible limitations of the study. Lastly it concludes with my own reflections of the study.

An overview of this research

This study aimed to explore middle leaders' perspectives on the interrelationship between leadership and culture. The study used an interpretivist paradigm, using qualitative approaches to data collection. Data was gathered through two narrative semi-structured interviews. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do middle leaders describe and justify their school culture and possible sub-cultures?
2. In what ways do middle leaders describe the impact school culture has on the way they lead?
3. What are the barriers and affordances that middle leaders traverse when attempting to influence any perceived interrelationship between their leadership practice and school culture?

Conclusions

The first conclusion from this study is the idea that school culture is complex and multi-faceted and therefore cannot be defined by a simple phrase or 'type'. Defining a school culture starts with a clear understanding of what the culture is, and this may not fit into a simple sentence. In reality, the clear understanding is complicated to gain due to the need to define feelings, values, and beliefs that determine members' behaviour. It may be more appropriate to think of culture as an evolving organism, rather than a singular idea. Lakomski (2001) refers to culture as being fluid, a paradox between creating stability and variability. This idea was reinforced by the data gathered in this study. The participants articulated a sense of change occurring within the culture of the schools. Therefore, the idea of identifying a school culture as a singular idea is redundant. Culture is too complex to reduce to a simple idea and could possibly be more fluid than static.

The second conclusion relates to the transmission of culture which is done using processes, structures, stories, heroes, and rituals. The structures and processes within a school would appear to be the vehicle by which a culture is taken from being espoused to a living identity. The ceremonies, stories, rituals, and heroes who model behaviours ensure that the culture is visible and support new members to understand the culture. However, these same structures and processes also create a vehicle to ensure conformity and provide an element of control and power. This was evident in the way the middle leaders expressed their support of new staff. The middle leaders perceived that the induction of new members into the organisation was one of their fundamental roles. However the way it was expressed also indicates a resistance to new ideas which could prevent progress. Lakomski (2001) identifies that resistance in organisation creates stagnation and prevents change that improves performance. This idea of conformity and the need to protect the culture from outside influences and changes that are deemed as threats to the status quo is key to the actions leaders then take. The middle leaders demonstrated a protectiveness of the culture and actively worked to maintain it. Power and status were used to influence and gain conformity, as was preventing threats from having access to the school. Protecting the culture of the school gives a sense of not being open to new ideas which could prevent the school from learning better ways to operate, which inevitably would negatively impact on student achievement.

Another conclusion from this study was the importance of connection. This was the element that was expressed the most by the middle leaders and appeared to be the most crucial element of culture development and maintenance. The connection between each individual and the culture itself is what was felt was most important. When the culture fits the individuals and the individuals fit the culture, it becomes natural. It is the human element of culture that was voiced the strongest by the participants. Researchers (Bell and Kent, 2010; Wilson, 2002) also found connection to be crucial for student participation in culture. They found that when students related to the culture of the school, they were more likely to participate in school life.

The final conclusion from this study was that the role of culture development and maintenance sits with all leaders within a school - however there is still a strong emphasis put on the principal as the key person. Even through the study, the

participants developed a deeper understanding of their role in culture development it was still heavily influenced by the idea that the domain of culture sat primarily with the principal and their part was to support rather than create. This is not surprising given the amount of research that focuses on principals leading culture and the limited amount of professional development for middle leaders in this area. Both participants identified a need to upskill in this area.

Recommendations:

The conclusions from this study lead to several recommendations to widen the understanding of school culture.

The first recommendation for schools is to think of school culture as an evolving idea rather than a static one. This prepares the members of the organisation to be flexible and open to new ideas. There is a balance leaders should develop between having uniformity in the way a school approaches concepts but that balances this with an openness to what is new and could change.

The second recommendation is that professional development on school culture needs to support middle leaders to understand they have a crucial role in leading school culture within their teams. Middle leaders should develop an awareness of culture and in particular, whether they are displaying the protective nature seen. Being able to discern when the protectiveness is needed and when it is not would be a valuable skill.

The last recommendation is that middle leaders reflect regularly on their leadership actions and the impact they have on school culture and the impact the culture is having on them. Becoming cognisant of their actions and the effect would support their development but also support schools to embed positive school cultures.

Possible limitations:

A possible limitation of this study was the small number of participants in the study. The small sample would suggest that the outcomes of this study may not be representative of middle leaders across New Zealand. However, this is to be expected in a small study and the objective is not to be able to generalise, and therefore does not affect the validity of the study.

A second limitation could be the use of only two interviews, especially due to the reflection participants participated in while doing the study. However, due to working full time and the boundaries that COVID-19 created, further interviews were not able to take place.

COVID-19 could also have influenced the outcome of the study further, due to the rapid adaption's schools had to undertake when placed in lockdown. It is unknown whether this could have impacted on the perceptions of the middle leaders, especially their focus on connection and protection. This could have been enhanced by the lack of connection and sense of safety felt by many during the pandemic.

Future research:

As a result of this study a few ideas could be explored further with research into the following areas:

- An interesting subject to look further into would be the idea of protection and connectedness and whether this is common across middle leaders or a factor of the 'family' type culture.
- A second area for further research would be this idea of culture being fluid and how does an organisation balance the need for some things to be the same with adaption and change for improvement.

Final thoughts:

In summary leadership and culture intertwine or, as described by Kaplin and Owings (2013), are two sides of one coin. The actions of leadership influence the culture, but likewise cultures influence the actions of leadership. The development and maintenance of culture within schools is a complex process that all leaders should engage with and have a key role to play. At the beginning of this process my hope was to obtain actionable ideas that would enable middle leaders to become proactive in the development and maintenance of culture. However now, even the use of the word maintenance seems incorrect. It gives the connotation of retaining the status quo. Having specific strategies and ideas to develop culture may not be as helpful as I once perceived.

While there are actions leaders can take that support members of an organisation to participate in a set of behaviours and values these are ultimately ways to control and

create conformity. This is understandably needed to some extent within an organisation but should be viewed in this way. Could culture building at its simplest form just be seen as a mechanism to control the members of its organisation and therefore the role of leaders is to balance the need for some uniformity with adaption and evolution.

However what this study has also shown is that culture within a school is part of a larger culture of the community, the region, and New Zealand. The actions of leaders are influenced by culture both internal and external to the school. The way the middle leaders saw the principal as crucial to culture but not themselves could be an indicator of the influence external forces have had on the leadership in the middle. Therefore as a leader of the school how do I counter that influence to ensure the middle leaders do see culture development as important and part of their role. This study has shown that possibly the starting point is purely to bring to the forefront through conversation and reflection.

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Appendix A: Facebook post

Kia ora Middle Leaders,

My name is Rebecca Bills, and I am currently completing a Masters in Educational Leadership at AUT. As part of my studies, I am completing a research project for a thesis on the topic of the interrelationship between leadership and culture. Within this topic I am particularly looking at the perceptions of middle leaders in Auckland Schools that were opened in the last 10 years. This project has ethics approval from AUT and is supervised by Dr Alison Smith. I am looking for two middle leaders from two different schools to participate in my study. If you think this might be something, you are interested in please email me on rebbur87@aut.ac.nz for more information about the study.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Ngaa mihi,

Rebecca Bills

Appendix B :Participation information sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

18 October 2020

Project Title: The interrelationship of leadership and culture: Perceptions of middle leaders.

You are invited to participate in a research project that will gather the stories of middle leaders and their experiences of leadership and culture. I am an experienced educator who has taught for 13 years. I was a Syndicate Leader for 3 years and have been a Deputy Principal.

What is the purpose of this research?

The aim of this project is to critically examine the role that middle leaders play in developing and maintaining school culture. The final results of this project will form a thesis for the completion of my Masters in Educational Leadership.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Participants are being recruited based on their suitability for the project. You have received this information sheet because you are regarded as someone who fits the inclusion criteria for my research approach.

The inclusion criteria for this study are you are currently a middle leader in a school within the Auckland area and the school does not include students in Years 11-13. The school you work in was built in the last 10 years. You do not work at the same school as the other participant.

Due to the nature of the research design there is only a need for two participants in the study. Therefore not all volunteers will be required.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

Participants will be involved in a narrative interview of about six questions. After this interview you will be asked to collect 3-4 artefacts that show leading culture. This could be in the form of photos, agendas for meetings, minutes for meetings, etc. These artefacts will not be published in the final thesis but will be used in a second interview to prompt stories and discussion on leadership and culture. The interviews can be completed face to face at your school, face to face at AUT or via zoom depending on your preference.

What are the discomforts and risks and how will they be alleviated?

It is expected there will be very little risk to the participant. You may find taking part in the research enjoyable. It is possible others may be aware you participated in the research especially if you choose to be interviewed at your workplace site, however what you reveal to the researcher will be kept confidential to the researcher and his/her supervising lecturers. Pseudo names will be used for all participants, and terms that identify the school will be deleted.

What are the benefits?

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research, but it may help improve the quality of research conducted in an area with which you are associated. Your involvement contributes to my postgraduate qualification.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your confidentiality will be preserved because you will not be identified in the final thesis. You will be identified either by a pseudonym. Your privacy can also be maintained by choosing to have the interviews take place on AUT South campus rather than at your site of work. If you choose to complete the interviews over zoom, I will maintain your privacy by using headphones and a private room.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The cost associated with participation is your time. You can expect that your involvement will take approx. 1 hour for each of the interviews.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please consider this request and if you are interested in participating please contact me within a week of receiving this information sheet. If I have not heard from you by then I may follow up my invitation a second time.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

A summary of the results of the research will be emailed to you at the completion of the thesis. The final thesis will also be available through AUT library.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, *Alison Smith*, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of ATEC, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Rebecca Bills rebbur@aut.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on _8th April 2022_____, ATEC Reference number 20/366_.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Project title: The interrelationship of leadership and culture: Perceptions of middle leaders.

Project Supervisor: Alison Smith

Researcher: Rebecca Bills

I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 18 October 2020

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.

I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.

I agree to take part in this research.

I wish to receive a summary of the methodological findings (please tick one): Yes No

I would like my interviews to take place (please tick one):

At my place of work

At AUT in a meeting room

Via a zoom video call

Participant's signature:

.....
.....

Participant's name:

.....
.....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 8th April 2022 AUTEK Reference number 20/366 Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix D: Interview questions

Interview Questions for First Interview:

1. Can you tell me about your role in the school, what are your responsibilities, and core jobs?
2. How would you describe your school's culture or atmosphere, climate?
 - Can you give me examples of what you mean?
4. Can you talk me through a time when you contributed to the development of culture in the school?
 - What things do you do that contributed?
 - What was the impact of your actions?
5. Can you talk through your leadership practise and how it has been developed?
6. How do you think the school culture has influenced your leadership practise?
Can you explain some examples of what you mean?

Interview Questions for Second Interview:

1. Can you select one of your artefacts and explain the story behind that artefact and how it shows your contribution to the school culture?
2. What aspects of your actions do you think had the most impact and why?
3. How did this event impact on your leadership practice and why?
(Repeat questions for each artefact)
4. Reflecting on your artefacts and actions what do think the barriers are for Middle Leaders in relation to school culture?
5. Reflecting on your artefacts and actions what do think the affordances are for Middle Leaders in relation to school culture?

Appendix E: Ethics approval letter

8 April 2022

Alison Smith
Faculty of Culture and Society
Dear Alison

Re: Ethics Application: **20/366 The interrelationship of leadership and culture: Perceptions of middle leaders**

Thank you for your responses to the conditions for the amendments to your ethics application..

The amendment to the data collection and recruitment protocols have been approved.

Standard Conditions of Approval.

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEK in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEK prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEK Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEK Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.
8. AUTEK grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted. When the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all ethical, legal, and locality obligations or requirements for those jurisdictions.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEK Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee