Creative leadership? "It's just the norm"

(Ron) Kim Keamy

College of Education, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

College of Education

PO Box 14428

Melbourne Vic 8001

P: +61 3 9919 5388

kim.keamy@vu.edu.au

Kim Keamy is Director of Learning and Teaching (Curriculum & Student Experience) in the College of Education, Victoria University.

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Creativity in teaching and leadership continues to be a topic of interest in education. This article focuses on comments made by a school's leadership team as part of a larger study in which a mixed methods case study design involving the school's leadership team and staff who taught Arts (either as specialist teachers or generalist classroom teachers), was used. The research took place in a six year old Preparatory Year to Year 9 (P-9) school in a growth corridor in metropolitan Melbourne. Staff members in the school provided responses to a questionnaire, participated in focus group discussions and were invited to maintain journals during the course of the study. Comments made by members of the school's leadership team are analysed in this article using perspectives of pedagogical leadership and relational power. The article finds that the school's leadership team model and encourage risk-taking to occur across the school as they promoted the development of collaborative professional learning approaches in their relatively young school. The article concludes that professional learning communities within the school will be well-placed to pursue the collaborative approaches modelled by the school's leadership team to ensure that a school-wide focus on student learning continues.

Creative leadership? "It's just the norm"

Introduction

Inquiry into creativity is a growing area of interest because of the way creativity, with its multitude of meanings, is seen as having a significant role in education. Educators are involved in different aspects of creativity: some might be involved in teaching it; many are creative in the way they do their work.

Globally, creativity is becoming an explicit aspect of educational practice. In Asia, for instance, there is acknowledgement of the potential that creativity has in stimulating students' cognitive development, and their understanding of cultural

diversity and social tolerance (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization 2005). In the United States of America, principally via *Project Zero*, there is growing interest in enhancing learning, thinking, and creativity in the Arts, as well as in humanistic and scientific disciplines (Harvard Graduate School of Education 2012). In the European Union, creativity is referred to in the school curricula of all member countries and is part of the political discourse of many (Heilmann and Korte 2010).

In England, the call for a new balance in education to realise the potential of young people by (re)introducing creativity into the curriculum (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education 1999, vii) was answered with the establishment of long-term partnerships between schools and creative professionals in Creative Partnerships. From its inception in 2002 through to 2011, Creative Partnerships worked with "over 1 million children and over 90,000 teachers in more than 8,000 projects across over 5,000 schools in England", and enhanced academic achievement, reductions in absenteeism, and differences in the extent and pace of change in schools are cited as evidence of the program's success.

In Australia, the location of the study referred to in this article, in the emerging *Australian Curriculum* 'Critical and creative thinking' is considered to be fundamental across all learning areas (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2011). 'Critical and creative thinking' appears as one of seven general capabilities that are expected to assist Australian students to live and work successfully in the 21st Century, thereby realising the goals of the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development & Youth Affairs, MCEECDYA 2008). In 2014, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL 2014) released evidence-based leadership profiles, one of which states that:

> Principals embed a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring research, innovation and creativity are core characteristics of the school (19).

Whilst school leaders "are responsible for creating and sustaining the learning environment and the conditions under which quality teaching and learning take place" (MCEECDYA 2008, 11), it has long been realised that successful leadership can play a highly significant role in the improvement of student learning (Leithwood et al. 2004). This is particularly evident in the way that school leaders "[create] the climate and conditions where teachers could teach and students could learn" (Dinham 2005, qoted in Dinham, Aubusson, and Brady 2008). Furthermore, school leaders strongly influence the likelihood of change in the ways that they shape the organizational conditions necessary for success (Fullan 2001) and when they "exercise moral purpose and personal courage to promote what is best for their students and achievable by their staffs" (Hargreaves 2004, 307). But this is far from a straightforward process. A school's leadership may well generate the pre-conditions for improving student learning, but the contested meanings, the structures that enable and disable reform, and a recognition of the power differentials at play, are amongst the defining elements of a school culture, as Smyth, McInerney, Lawson and Hattam (1999) explain:

> Culture…involves aspects of disagreement, contest, and multiple voices, all of which are operating not so much in opposition to one another, as trying to give expression to their differences. To speak of culture, therefore, is to refer not to something that is inert or static, but to struggle among groups and individuals, all of whom are seeking to give meaning to their lives and actions (7).

A particular perspective on leadership that may help school leaders 'work around' these complexities is creative leadership, which Stoll and Temperley (2009, 66) define as

> … an imaginative and thought-through response to opportunities and to challenging issues that inhibit learning at all levels. It is about seeing, thinking and *doing things differently* [emphasis added] in order to improve the life chances of all students. Creative leaders also provide the conditions, environment and opportunities for others to be creative.

Understanding 'creativity' involves seeing it beyond being a relatively simple binary categorization of Big/High C and little/democratic c creativity (Kozbelt, Beghetto, and Runco 2010; Craft 2001; National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education 1999). There are a range of categories that extend along a continuum between the two poles of *Big C* "extreme forms of originality" and *little c* forms of "everyday creativity" (Fasko 2006; Kaufman and Beghetto 2009). The role and place of creativity in education has changed over time. The *Big C* perspective, for instance, sees creativity as a characteristic that particular people with certain sorts of personalities and behaviours, such as geniuses, possess. Creativity viewed this way becomes an innate quality that is manifested amongst a selected few, or that could be nurtured and encouraged with certain types of people and is not something that could or should be taught to everyone.

A non-traditional discourse of creativity, however, sees the relational dimensions of the concept, and challenges notions that creativity is synonymous with particular types of people or relating to particular psychological and cognitive functions. There is now increasing attention on

> creative *responses* to educational situations…[which incorporates] a *social* [original emphases] view of creativity, since it tends to focus on how creativity may be generated, enhanced and manipulated through social change to enhance educational effectiveness (as well as other measures of cultural effectives, such as economic and general well-being) (Bagnall 2007, 8).

Stoll and Temperley (2009, 69-74) provide nine conditions that they argue creative leaders need to be able to choose from in order to work towards in their school to promote and nurture creativity in others. These nine conditions include stimulating a sense of urgency if necessary; exposing colleagues to new thinking and experiences; providing time and space to facilitate the practicalities; setting high expectations; promoting individual and collaborative creative thinking and design; using failure as a learning opportunity; relinquishing control, and the modelling of creativity and risk-taking. Risk-taking is interpreted by the authors as "experimenting with new ideas" (69), and as Brazeau (2005) considers it, "the risk associated with stepping out of one's own comfort zone and challenging existing paradigms" (542). At a time when a culture of managerialism can see the quality of education being reduced to key performance indicators, and performance is managed according to what can be produced, observed and measured (Codd 2005), and where the work of a teacher involves surveillance, compliance and monitoring (Hargreaves 2000; Sahlberg 2012), finding "creative responses to educational situations" (Bagnall 2007, 8) would seem to be a refreshing approach, although, as Thomson (2011) reminds us, pedagogical leadership and power relationships must not be overlooked in this work.

Pedagogical leadership, as Thomson (2011) sees it, relates to principals who have high levels of expertise:

> [it] does not mean a technical knowledge of methods, but rather a deep understanding of the ways in which curriculum, assessment, grouping, pacing, tools, activities and methods come together in real classrooms which serve particular children and young people for particular ends (268-269).

In her critique of creative leadership, Thomson also expressed concern that power relationships are overlooked in the discussions:

> One key question is whether power is simply exercised OVER others – or WITH them. Thus in the case of creative learning, the matter of who decides whether creative learning approaches should be used, where, how, and with whom is in reality a question of power. A further question of what is done with power, for whom and with what effects, is also important (Thomson 2011, 260).

When considering the associated issues of pedagogical leadership and power in later sections in this paper, I draw upon the concept of relational power, that is, "the building of trust within and across groups in schools…to begin to address and re-dress social and structural inequality in terms of who succeeds and who fails" (Smyth 2006, 292).

With these perspectives in mind, I was curious to explore a link between the role of a school's leadership team and what creative leadership might mean to them. I report here on one school's leadership team who participated in a pilot study conducted by a small research team of which I was a part, into teachers' and school principals' perspectives about creative learning and the Arts. The research took place in a six year old Preparatory Year to Year 9 (P-9) school in a growth corridor in metropolitan Melbourne, in a government school that was already known to me because I had been involved in the placement of pre-service teachers there when working at another university. Almost one thousand students attend the dual campus school, which comprises an Early Years and a Middle Years campus. Approximately 2% of the students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students and 40% of the students have a language background other than English. The school's rating of socio-educational advantage indicates that the school is located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area. By way of comparison, the most equivalent government school in the same growth corridor, a middle years campus of a secondary school, has an almost identical demographic profile. Larger Year 7 to 12 secondary schools in the area have, on average, a socio-economic rating some 30 points lower and a higher proportion of students from a language background other than English, than the school in this study. The staffing profile of the school shows that of the 80 full-time equivalent teaching staff there are 23 teachers in their first two years of teaching; approximately 50 teachers have between three and ten years of experience, and another 21 have more than 10 years of teaching experience.

In this article the focus is on the school leaders' (but not the generalist or specialist Arts teachers') understandings of creativity and how, according to the school's multi-campus team of principals, these influence the creativity pedagogies and creative practices in the school. Aspects of relational power and trust that exist in the school are also considered in the discussion, alongside the contribution of professional learning communities to improved student learning outcomes. I am also interested to see if it is really about "doing things differently", as Stoll and Temperley (2009, 66) say. My own previous research into male leaders in universities who were thought to

perform leadership differently from the mainstream led me to conclude that whereas outsiders (like me) might consider that leaders are doing things differently, for the leaders themselves, these were their usual ways of doing things. Alternatively, the leaders themselves might consider that they are doing things differently to their peers in other settings even though they might not know specifically how their colleagues in these settings go about their work (Keamy 2003b, 2003a).

Design and methodology

The investigation formed part of a mixed methods case study research design with staff who taught Arts (either as specialist teachers or generalist classroom teachers) and the leadership team at the school. The particular focus and aim of the inquiry was to explore how teachers of Arts education and the leadership team in a particular school described and understood creativity, creative learning and Arts learning, although the intention here is to concentrate on the leadership team in the school. (The research design and focus were exploratory in nature and it was considered that even though relationships between creativity and the Arts were considered on this occasion, similar relationships might also be drawn between creativity and other disciplines, which could be explored in subsequent research.)

The study proceeded in phases (informed by the work of Creswell 2007), which included the administration of questionnaires to teachers and the school's leadership team, focus group discussions and the use of journals and email prompts over a six week period. The questionnaire completed by the school's leadership team, which was slightly different to that completed by generalist teachers and Arts teachers, invited participants to indicate the total amount of time they had spent in leadership positions; their vision for improved student learning at the school, and responses to sentence stems that began with the words: "Students learning creatively in an Arts Education class looks / sounds / feels like…".

A focus group discussion was conducted with the school's leadership team, which involved the female College Principal (P1), the female Middle Years Campus Principal (P2), the male Early Years Campus Principal (P3), and the male Assistant Principal (Middle Years Student Management & Wellbeing) (P4). The questions that I put to the principals were adapted from the six interactive variables and the associated central questions in the *Transformation in Action Framework* disseminated by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD 2009, 9). This framework was chosen because of the way that it establishes the connections between variables whilst underscoring the importance of actions that are informed by data about students, staff and curriculum. The six variables and the accompanying central questions are summarised in Table 1, together with the main questions asked in my discussion with the principals.

Table 1: *Transformation in Action Framework* variables and associated central questions (adapted from DEECD 2009, 9), alongside questions posed in the discussion with the school's leadership team.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

These questions were circulated to the principals in advance of our discussion, with the exception of a final question that I asked: "On the basis of what has already been discussed about creativity, are you a creative leadership team?" At no point in the research was a definition of creativity offered. Rather, it was left to the participants to construct their own meaning/s of the term, though it should be noted that even though the principals initially sought to clarify how I was defining 'creativity' in the discussion, they were reassured when I explained to them that my concern was not making judgements according to pre-determined definitions of creativity, but rather, how they utilised the term in their own narratives.

Concentrating on the school as a case is informed by Brady's (2004) use of case methodology, with the school providing the required bounded system in such an approach. This methodology allows investigation and generalizations about how one school's leadership team provides the conditions for creativity to exist within the school. The study is also exploratory in nature, and because of this, is deliberately descriptive because this approach manages to capture the complexities of what is occurring in the school – at least from the perspective of the principals. It is also beyond the scope of this case approach to make comparisons with specific leadership approaches in other schools in the same system, simply because this level of detail cannot be ascertained without replicating the research in 'like' schools.

The analysis of the findings presented in the following section picks up on Thomson's (2011) critique of creative leadership and is framed by White's (2008) questioning of the substantiveness of pedagogical leadership. The analysis has implications for the roles of educational leaders developing school-wide approaches, which are discussed further in the concluding section of the article.

Findings

1. Descriptions and understandings of creativity and creative learning

Initially, the principals commented upon the use of the word 'transformation' in the *Transformation in Action Framework* (DEECD 2009, 9) that I chose as the organising basis for the questions I posed in the discussion:

> *It's not cool to be a transformational leader any more…. [The Department is]*
> *saying that transformational leadership is not what we want in schools.* (P1)

As of February 26, 2015, the document developed by the Department of Education in 2007, the *Developmental Learning Framework for School Leaders*, continues to provide the structure for schools within the Victorian State Schools system "to assist teachers and school leaders participate in professional learning that is relevant to their needs", although this has been augmented by the *Professional Practice and Performance for Improved Learning: Professional Learning and Support for School Leaders and Teachers* (Department of Education & Early Childhood Development 2014b), in which distributed leadership is explicitly described as the designated leadership model for principals to follow. 'Distributed leadership', according to this document, requires principals to build the capacity of their staff – their leadership team and middle leaders in the school – to exercise leadership, which "helps to secure the commitment of all

school leaders to the school's vision and priorities" (Bush and Glover 2012 quoted in DEECD 2014, 31).

In both the questionnaire and in the focus group discussion the principals, in the context of creativity and creative learning, frequently spoke of the capacity-building of the staff who they led and how this was gradually leading to other staff learning how to juggle curriculum expectations and how to resolve situations with students and parents, including being prepared to take some risks in their professional work. The term 'capacity' was used frequently by the principals, though not the related term, 'capability', even though when they spoke of developing their teachers' capacities, they were including developing skills and abilities for the here and now as well as for the future, which is the emphasis of the educational system's use of the word 'capability':

> In its first sense, capability refers to the capacity to perform the work of the profession; capability is both necessary for the performance and enables performance. In its second sense, capability can be said to provide a basis for developing future competence, including the possession of the knowledge and skills necessary for future professional work (Eraut 1994, quoted in Department of Education 2007, 4).

(Instances of when the principals referred to capacity-building are peppered through the excerpts from the discussion in the following sections.)

The research team developed four categories of responses arising from the data generated by all of the participants in the study – generalist teachers, specialist Arts teachers, and the school's leadership team, with these categories being loosely informed by social psychology literature related to coping strategies that individuals use, and which include concepts such as emotion-focussed and problem-focussed coping (Keamy 2003a; Smith and Mackie 1995). In this research, 'action oriented' responses were taken to include those in which there was a sense of something being done or intended to be done; 'emotion oriented' responses included those in which feelings were evoked; 'skills or outcome oriented' responses included those in which there was a production perspective being described, and 'thinking oriented' responses included those with a cognitive element to them.

The principals used numerous expressions to describe creativity, and these included responses that fell into one or more of the four categories:

- Action oriented responses: "*problem solving*"; "*to solve problems in multiple ways*"
- Emotion oriented responses: "*expression*"; "*freedom*"
- Skills or outcome oriented responses: "*the ability to produce something that is unique*"; "*to recognise and use imagination in a structured way*"
- Thinking oriented responses: "*thinking in different ways*"; "*thinking outside the square*"; "*Green Hat thinking*"; "*to think deeply*".

Creative learning, the principals reported in the questionnaire, occurs when:

- "*Tasks are open-ended and ideas are shared and valued*"
- "*Resources are varied*"
- "*You feel positive, supported and empowered*"
- "*You're encouraged to go beyond the limits*"
- "*When there are no correct answers, only possibilities*"

- *"You can see things others cannot!"*

One of the strong messages from the principals was how they saw creativity in the school: it was not accidental; it was purposeful and it was considered. These messages were expressed by the principals when they explained how teachers in the school taught, and they were aware of the support and leadership that was required of them that would help teachers teach in this way. They are considered here against the concern about two over-arching concepts raised by Thomson (2011), that of pedagogical leadership and issues of power.

2. *Pedagogical leadership*

Previously Thomson's (2011, 268-269) definition of pedagogical leadership was provided to underscore the need for a school leader to have a deep understanding of the ways that curriculum, assessment and teaching activities and methods need to come together to assist students. Even if such pedagogical expertise is held by school principals, White (2008) maintains that "school leaders have yet to fully formulate a comprehensive and integrated understanding of pedagogy that will assist teachers to critically reflect upon their pedagogical principles and practice." He poses four questions, which I adopt as framing points for my discussion of pedagogical leadership because of the way in which they reflect Thomson's (2011) sense of "deep understanding":

a) To what extent do school leaders personally need to be immersed in pedagogical theory and understandings?
b) Once armed with the appropriate levels of pedagogical insight, how is this knowledge best integrated into an ongoing process of school improvement?
c) How do leaders support teachers to implement enhanced pedagogical practices within their classrooms?
d) What indicators are there to assess the effectiveness of new pedagogical approaches upon student learning outcomes? (17)

a) Personal immersion in pedagogical theories and understandings

A key word in White's (2008) language is 'immersion' because it conveys much more than school leaders simply articulating what they know about pedagogical theories and understandings. In my discussion with the principals I did not explicitly ask for them to talk about their theoretical knowledge about pedagogy, though it was quickly apparent that they were immersed in the pedagogical expertise of which Thomson (2011) speaks:

The real core number one issue for this school is enabling kids to learn…. We've licensed the kids to dream. That they can do! And that we'll help them do it. Protective risk-taking happens. (P1)

Much of the focus group discussion was spent with the principals providing instances in which they had deliberatively assisted their colleagues to better understand aspects of curriculum, teaching methods, activities and assessment, and in turn, assist the students to take risks and understand their own learning.

When White (2008) refers to school leaders developing their own pedagogical knowledge, he also argues that a subsequent capability is for pedagogical leaders to

strike a balance in their philosophical orientations between curriculum outcomes and effective learning processes. There is strong evidence in this research project that the school's principals have taken on this way of thinking and doing:

> *...the moral purpose as teachers and educators in this school is to provide an opportunity for kids to find out what they're good at and to have a chance to shine. And to ensure we provide the building blocks for our teachers, the capacity building for our teachers, to be able to deliver that.* (P2)

A further dimension of the immersion in pedagogy was the principals' ability to name their own on-going professional learning and their preparedness to articulate their higher order (to borrow from Bloom's taxonomy, quoted in Anderson and Krathwohl 2001) creative capacities in relation to pedagogy:

> *My way of thinking has changed [recently].... Now I'm finding myself starting to put those things into place: 'Yeah, we could do...' I'm finding all of the options are just coming now.... I've always considered myself a good problem-solver, but I'm finding that I'm having so many new ideas or ways to draw on now just because I've been in that situation and working with three other people that have different strengths, you find yourself taking on some of those things when you never have. ... I think it's just mind-boggling the stuff that I've been able to do.* (P3)

b)   Integration of pedagogical knowledge into the process of school improvement

White (2008) argues that it is principals who facilitate a commitment to pedagogical vision, and that they achieve this when they "have the capacity to identify the cultural and structural factors that will enhance or impede sound pedagogical practice" (p. 19). There was evidence in the comments made by the principals that they were actively engaged in this pursuit. Looking at curriculum-level actions, the principals said:

> *We're managing the differentiation of curriculum at a whole range of levels but we're going to be able to tailor that even more for enhancement, extension...* (P2)

> *Although we have structures in place we are the first to champion the cause for change... We're always championing those causes and putting our hands up and supporting all those ventures.* (P4)

This idea of 'championing the cause for change' and 'supporting ventures' that their teaching staff may initiate involves relinquishing control and modelling risk-taking on the part of the principals – key conditions described by Stoll and Temperley (2009) for nurturing and promoting creativity in others. As a point of comparison with other schools, P4 added:

> *Where one of us is a bit conservative about an issue someone else might have had an experience that's a bit outside of the square and will share that and can actually start a dialogue. I find that to be rewarding.... I come from [an established secondary school a short distance away] so everything is creative to me! You also have to look at your previous experience in previous leadership roles.* (P4)

Being a relatively new school provided its own set of challenges to the principals as they shaped the culture of the school:

A lot of it has been continuous practice at that experience across the years… A lot of the teachers, because they've been young, have worked through ways and means of working with parents, working with kids, and so even that was building capacity in them. (P3)

I think we try to balance them out a little in teams. We look at personalities and skills and abilities and really balance them out…. [You've] got to have a mix so there's a balance so we can appreciate each other's skills… (P2)

Yet, as the principals pointed out, there are times when a balancing act is required: *"You can't always be creative because you have a process or something that is mandated you just have to follow. You try and sell it creatively!"* (P2). At a time when "large-scale change grinds most teachers into the dust; they suspect its motives, resent how it is forced upon them without consultation and criticize the excessive pressure and weak support that accompanies it" (Hargreaves 2004, 304), being able to sell the idea creatively; to do something differently, must not only be a skill, but an advantage.

c) *Support for teachers to implement enhanced pedagogical practices within their classrooms*

Gore, Griffiths, and Ladwig (2002), in their research on quality teaching, speculated that experienced teachers were likely to feel confident about providing learning experiences that ensured the intellectual quality of their pedagogy as well as being comfortable in their ability to maintain a supportive environment for their students. This, they considered, was a feature of their experience in classrooms that made them aware of the potential gains from utilising vertical – or deep – structures of knowledge, and is an ideal towards which the principals appear to be moving with all teachers in the school.

The principals in this study, alert as they were to the needs of a largely young teaching staff, provided support for teachers as they began to gain their own levels of confidence: *"With dollars and time we've supported people to take risks."* (P1). The principals also capitalised on the open plan design of the school, in a similar way to that described by Newton (2010) who has noted the close relationship of pedagogy with space and physically comfortable settings, as a platform for teachers to learn from each other:

Whilst we have a set of curriculum outlines and whilst we have a scope and sequence of what you follow in any [key learning area]… we say to them: 'There's no specific direction here that states this is how you present it and this is how you say it… Yes, this is what we need to do but that opportunity for self-creativity and presentation…how are you going to do it?... Other people watch and say 'What are you doing out there? How are you teaching tables out there…?' Everyone's sharing their own creative approaches to things and not only does it empower those people and gives a sense of self-esteem it also give great opportunities for other people…. (P2)

The preparedness of teachers in the school to "seek to impact upon the educational community beyond their own classroom" (Lingard et al. 2003, 50) points to the emergence of teacher leadership in the school. Teacher-leaders, as Lingard et al. see them, are teachers who not only believe that they can make a difference for the students in their own care, but who also see that they can influence activities beyond their own classrooms. That both these things can happen – particularly in a school that is relatively young – is influenced by the modelling provided by the members of the school's leadership team as they develop a collective vision about what is important in the school (Lingard et al. 2003) , as well as collaborative professional learning via a distributed leadership model that builds overall school capacity (DEECD 2014b).

Furthermore, informal peer observation such as in the situation described above, enables teachers to see others in action and is "highly valued as a form of professional learning" (Parliament of Victoria Education & Training Committee 2009, 66-67). The principals have built upon this realisation by encouraging informal peer observation opportunities in the open-plan school. It is beyond the scope of this project to make judgements about the teachers' pedagogical understandings, however in the context of this school, the principals and the team of leading teachings are ensuring that there are many opportunities for teachers to become engaged in deep conceptual understandings about pedagogy (White, 2008).

d) *Assessment of effectiveness of new pedagogical approaches upon student learning outcomes*

The principals spoke at length about the ways in which they have guided the staff in the collection, analysis and use of data in professional learning teams so that the teachers are able to "combine insights on both the 'product' and the 'process'" (White, 2008, 20). This is a further instance of the modelling provided by the school's leadership team of the collaborative approach that they have infused in relation to the performance and development of teachers across the school (DEECD 2014a):

> *In their professional learning teams they will bring the sense of a student to the group…. They will work together with the data to build a sense of the kid and the direction they need to take the child, and from that, they will generalise across 'who else has kids with that sort of issue?' and then build that as well. What that has done has got rid of that knee-jerk reaction to anything. So they base all their changes on the data, rather than seeing a kid do something and say 'Oh that's got to be fixed' because that might just be a one-off. This gives a sense of those deeper purposes and the deeper areas that will support their learning.* (P3)

> *Over the last two years we've worked really hard on shifting that thinking, of really how to analyse the data, and how to use it to have the best impact on student learning and on programs. Based on that data there are programs that have changed; inquiry units that have moved to different year levels or activities that have really changed based on solid evidence…. People are starting to talk a little more confidently. Even as young people they're starting to feel more confident around the usage of data. It's the key area each time we do reviews where everyone says 'I want to keep working on that. I want to learn more. I still don't get it'.* (P2)

The principals' references to professional learning teams points to the relatively commonplace existence in schools of groups of teachers working collaboratively as a learning community. DuFour, DuFour, Eakey and Many (2010) nominate a number of defining characteristics of PLCs (professional learning communities, which are seen to be synonymous at a practical level with professional learning teams). These include having an action orientation in a culture of collaboration with a focus on learning for all; collective inquiry into teaching and learning; a commitment to continuous improvement, and a results orientation.

It is this final characteristic that is significant in this discussion, because it is this that is being tapped into by the principals as they monitor data to ensure that the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches is being assessed and evaluated. What was not clear in the discussion with the principals was whether the evaluation phase was guided by a set of guiding principles or questions, which could include questions around how and when data on student learning are collected; making comparisons in relation to teacher knowledge prior to and following planned professional learning activities, and the timeliness of observation-making prior to drawing conclusions (Department of Education and Training, 2014).

3. *Issues of power*

Thomson (2011, 260) reminds us of the need for school leaders to exercise power with rather than over others. Warren (2005) too, reminds us of the unequal outcomes that arise when unilateral power is used in schools to emphasise power over others, and he argues that relational power is a preferable quest because of the way that it emphasises a different aspect, that of "the 'power to' get things done collectively" (Warren 2005, 138). Smyth (2006) expands upon the concept of relational power and the emergent trust that arises by confronting rather than denying power inequalities:

> Relational power refers to the building of trust within and across a range of groups in schools in ways that enable the development and pursuit of a common vision about how schooling can work for all, including those most marginalized and excluded. It is about using the capacity that inheres in relationships to begin to address and re-dress social and structural inequality in terms of who succeeds and who fails (292).

In this research discourses of relational power are evident:
Relationships built on trust and honesty. I think the honesty's there; the trust we're still working on. And again, it's the newness. We don't have the luxury of having had the series of kids – younger brothers and sisters – where you build the relationship with family. (P1)

This statement, made by the College Principal, points to the relationships that are being developed in this relatively new school between the leadership team, the teachers, the students and the broader school community. Here, the College Principal also reflects upon the relational trust that exists within leadership team within the school:
So we try to model the trust we have with each other and we're now filtering that down and what the staff know is that they don't have to come to talk to me. They all know they will find someone amongst the four of us, someone who will

champion their cause or be their advocate and they go and talk to that person and they're supported. And sometimes we report back to each other on a need-to-know basis but at other times we've had secrets… That's been modelled all the way through the school with teachers and teaching teams so they know they'll be supported with kids and issues, we try as much as possible to put the strategies in place to help them resolve those. (P1)

Achieving this level of trust, however, has not come easily, and has involved considerable contestation of ideas:

We have quite heated discussions. We don't always agree. In fact we very rarely agree. We don't start agreeing but what comes out at the end is a decision about what's the right direction, the right decision for that particular point. The other thing is that if one person is not here and a decision is made, then that decision is never undone. We may talk about other options but it's never 'You made the wrong decision' because it was the right decision based on the data. And we do that with our staff as well. If our year level coordinators make a decision different to what we would have made, we sometimes have to suck it up really hard and spend a lot of time patching up. We don't change their decision…we work through it. (P1)

This contested space is an inevitable aspect of being a learning team, but being able to address the inherent tensions within their team as the principals are doing means that they are engaging in learning conversations (Johnson 2003) that are dynamic, dialogic, situated and complex (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). A consequence of this approach modelled by the principals is that increasingly, the entire staff "*…become[s] more empowered with more responsibility and making decisions. So we're actually filtering up and down the positions, developing those roles*" (P4). The College Principal describes this as a distributive model of leadership, the purpose of which is to increase the capacity of all members of staff:

When we first started they'd come to us and we'd just solve the problem. A couple of years ago we did a [professional development activity] …about us as a leadership team and one of the things we worked on was giving the people the resources to go back and solve it themselves…. That was one of the ways we started building the capacity of the younger members of staff to learn the process rather than just get the outcome. (P1)

Importantly, this hasn't been a one-way street, because in the process of working collaboratively and collectively, the trust and cooperation that has been developed results in increased openness to ideas and feedback from teachers and students:

We're certainly open to ideas and with different people coming in that's always been the case…. 'If you've got things let us know, we'll try those things'. (P3)

We act on feedback too, from our staff and our kids…. You're acting on the voices of the kids; the needs, whereas some things have run their race…OK, we need to shelve it for a little bit. It doesn't mean we karate chop it immediately because there's a lot of discussion that goes at various levels before that change could be made. (P2)

This way of acting collaboratively on the basis of student feedback, which is one aspect of the Education Department's performance development process (DEECD

2014a) appears to have become normal in the process of building a strong professional learning culture via observations, demonstrations and modelling (Cole 2012) and reflective of the Victorian Government's approach to school-based modes of delivery for teacher professional learning (Parliament of Victoria Education & Training Committee 2009), even if it is something that continues to evolve:

> *...on a daily basis, someone around this table is either working with a kid, a family or a teacher to come up with a reasonable solution or outcome that's going to mean someone educationally, socially or just survive. And we do it all the time. We just keep learning.* (P1)

> *We take it for granted…. It's just the norm.* (P2)

This was not the first time in my research history that I had heard this kind of reference to on one hand, participants enacting required approaches in innovative ways, and on the other, participants identifying that these ways of behaving appear as normal ways for them to operate. In earlier research with a group of male academics who were thought by their peers to practise socially-just and collaborative approaches to leadership, similar comments were also made (Keamy 2003a).

Conclusions and implications

Functioning within a managerialist culture in which teachers and principals can be treated as functionaries and where good practice is reduced to a set of pre-defined skills and capabilities (Codd 2005, 201), the principals at this school are prepared to approach these things creatively by doing them, as they considered it, differently. They are strongly immersed in pedagogical expertise, which has been demonstrated by the strong interconnections that they have created between students' learning and the teachers' understanding of all aspects of the curriculum, and they are committed to extending their own professional learning. Through their awareness of the cultural and structural factors in their school that influence pedagogical practice, especially for a relatively young staff, they have found ways to encourage risk-taking and to work collaboratively and supportively with their staff and that this modelling of creativity (Stoll and Temperley 2009) has become the norm for the way they operate.

The approach that the principals take is underpinned by the relationship-building that has grown between the leadership team, teachers, students and the school community, and this has been achieved via modelling of collaborative approaches and a message that staff will be supported – and empowered – as much as possible. This does not mean that there are no contested spaces at the school. On the contrary, the principals readily concede that conflict is a regular feature of their way of operating, but importantly, it is done in a context of mutual respectfulness and trust. In short, they use power relationally (Smyth 2006; Warren 2005) and this is significant in developing a supportive work culture with a positive outlook toward change (Sergiovanni 2005).

By looking at creative leadership through the lenses of pedagogical leadership and relational power as suggested by Thomson (2011), and aided by White's (2008) framing points for the discussion, it has been possible to consider the principals' comments in light of their pedagogical leadership and use of relational power. In the process of this analysis, it is clear that the principals model creativity and risk-taking, they expose their colleagues to new ways of thinking and new experiences and provide

time and space to facilitate the practicalities, they deliberatively relinquish control and promote individual and collaborative creative thinking whilst setting high expectations for student learning, which include most of the conditions for creative leadership described by Stoll and Temperley (2009).

It is the relationship between leadership and student learning that remains uncertain, for as Thomson (2011) states, "much more is required than a simple assumption of causality between creative leadership and creative learning" (266). The principals have provided their perspectives on the work they do, and elsewhere in the research, the teachers spoke about the way they teach for creativity and are creative themselves. What is not known from this study are the relationships between the actions of the principals and the impact of these actions on student learning. What is needed, as Thomson (2011) concludes, is for leaders to "engage in sophisticated dialogue and systematic inquiry into what is happening in real classrooms" (271).

A creative response to the challenge posed by Thomson (2011) is to ensure that one of the top priorities of schools' professional learning communities is that they focus on the results of students' learning (DuFour 2004) by introducing a set of structured principles or questions to frame the evaluation (Department of Education and Training, 2014). In this way, the professional learning communities in the school will steadily develop the expertise to actively research their own progress towards the achievement of these big ideas. Professional learning communities concentrating on pedagogical leadership to improve student learning outcomes and learning with the school as a whole (Hayes et al. 2004), and not just the school's leadership team doing this, will become the new norm.

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