



Love, care, and solidarity: understanding the emotional and affective labour of school leadership

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Love, Care, and Solidarity: Understanding the Emotional and Affective Labour of School Leadership.

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Abstract

This paper explores the emotional work involved in leading schools in marginalised communities, through case studies of Australian and English government-school principals theorised through Lynch's framework of affective justice and the embedded concepts of love, care, and solidarity. Participants demonstrated **solidarity** in their choice of working in these particular schools, which bring with them a higher level of emotional complexity. Their work towards social justice manifests through their **care** relationships when interacting with students, staff, and communities. These interactions, full of emotion, impact the third affective relation - **love**. Findings show the impact of participants' solidarity and care work on their own personal relationships. In exploring the affective domain of school leaders' work, we seek to articulate how principals can be empowered to continue to undertake their solidarity and care work while mitigating impacts on the relationships that are vital for their own wellbeing.

Keywords:

affective justice, affect, educational leadership, social justice

Introduction

School systems around the world are seeing higher rates of stress and burnout in school principals. The average age of principals is rising and, at the same time, fewer people are applying to become school leaders. Concerns have been raised about the attraction and retention of principals in schools characterised by high levels of community poverty, those in rural and remote areas, and those schools who support marginalised students and communities (Heffernan, 2021; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Yan, 2020). Rates of principal turnover and an increasing dearth of people aspiring to leadership is due, in part, to a growing understanding about the personal and emotional toll of leading today's schools. This paper explores the emotional work involved in leading schools in marginalised communities, through case studies of Australian and English government-school principals.

Lynch's (2012) framework of affective justice and the embedded concepts of love, care, and solidarity provide an opportunity to better understand how the work of school leaders plays out in marginalised school communities. Lynch et al. (2009) argue that inequality is evident when the burdens on people who undertake affective labour are unequally distributed. In this case, we see increasing evidence that the burden of leading schools is having an impact on leaders' health and wellbeing, and their own care. As Lynch et al. (2009, p. 1) note, "relations of love, care and solidarity help to establish a basic sense of importance, value and belonging [...] They are a vital component of what enables people to lead successful lives". The value of the work of school leaders is not understated here, and Lynch et al. emphasise the importance of making "sure that the work involved in providing love, care, and solidarity is properly recognised and that its burdens and benefits are shared equally" (p. 2). We see an opportunity here to develop nuanced understandings of principals' experiences in providing and sustaining these relations of love, care, and solidarity, and in further exploring these affective practices that are inherent in the everyday work of school leaders (Lynch et al., 2021).

Previous research has made use of affective justice to explore the experiences of teachers and students in alternative school settings (Mills et al., 2016; te Riele et al., 2017), with a particular focus on teachers' affective labour with students and the importance of that relational work. In this paper, we employ the framework to understand the hidden labour of school leaders and the impact of affective work in their everyday interactions and encounters. We articulate the interactions between each of the aspects of love, care, and solidarity, to better understand how they influence the work and lives of school principals. This exploration is particularly important, given that affective work in education is often rendered invisible (Lynch et al., 2009).

The principals in this study demonstrated **solidarity** in their choice of working in these particular types of schools, which can tend to bring with them a higher level of complexities involving emotion. They came to these schools to make a difference. Their work towards social justice manifests through their **care** relationships and interactions with students, staff, and community members. These interactions, constant throughout each day, are full of emotion. Participants spoke of rage, happiness, shame, pride, fear, anger, and hope. We argue that these emotions and interactions have an impact on the third dimension of affective relations - **love**. Through participants' stories, we see the impact of their solidarity and care work on their own intimate relationships with their spouses, their children, and their parents.

Developing a better understanding of the impact of school leaders' interactions is a vital step in finding ways of preparing leaders to take on these complex and challenging roles. In doing so, we seek to articulate types of support that can empower and enable principals to continue to undertake their solidarity and care work while mitigating some of the impacts on the intimate, loving, relationships that are vital for their own health and wellbeing.

Literature Review

Leadership in Marginalised Communities

A body of research has explored the experiences of leaders in marginalised communities in particular. Schools that face particular challenges in recruiting leaders include rural, remote, and isolated schools; schools that serve communities with high levels of poverty, schools with higher numbers of students with complex needs, and schools with low levels of funding and systemic support (Thomson, 2009). Marginalised communities are disproportionately affected by principal turnover, with research showing the implications of high principal turnover for student academic achievement and engagement, teacher turnover, and community engagement and connectedness (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Kelchtermans, 2017). Marginalised schools are commonly used as ‘stepping stones’ to more desirable locations or promotions for principals, which results in a lack of stability of leadership in schools that need it the most, holding implications for equity and outcomes for vulnerable students and communities (Beteille et al., 2012).

Leadership, Stress, and Burnout

Current data on principal health and wellbeing hold direct implications for the attraction and retention of principals. Principals who are working at sustained levels of stress and intensity are more likely to burn out and leave their schools or the profession altogether (Tikkanen et al., 2017). Principals commonly report the ‘intensification’ of their work, where the pace and intensity of work is perceived to have increased significantly over time, as well as the ‘extension’ of their work into what was traditionally personal time (Heffernan & Selwyn, 2021). Though these issues are most evident in leading communities that have complex challenges, global trends indicate that the intensification and extension of principals’ work transcends context and has been reported to be unsustainable (Wang et al., 2018). Research has established the effects of work stresses on principals’ mental and physical health (Gómez-Leal et al., 2021). Longitudinal research exploring principals’ health and wellbeing has consistently highlighted that principals are at a higher risk of stress, burnout, and ill-health. The all-encompassing nature of the job, expectations of constantly being ‘on call’, and the intense nature of the issues that principals must keep ‘on top of’ at all times all contribute to higher rates of stress and burnout for school leaders (Riley et al., 2021). Other studies in the area have found that principals in marginalised communities are more likely to deeply feel and experience the stresses of those communities (Beusasert et al., 2016), which can result in higher rates of stress and burnout for principals leading marginalised schools. Importantly, the above findings reveal further equity implications for leaders, given that principals in those schools are more likely to be women or from marginalised groups themselves (Whitehead et al., 2018).

Leadership and Emotions

There is a broad spectrum of understanding of the place of emotions in leadership and in education more generally. Research has previously focused on the expectation that leaders

will perform emotional labour to manage their own emotions within complex situations (Arar & Oplatka, 2018; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Maxwell & Riley, 2017). Researchers have also explored the frustrations and emotions evident for leaders who have to balance their own emotional values and restrictive or performative conditions inherent in schooling around the globe, or the issues caused by policy pressures (e.g., Ball, 2003; Day, 2014; Perryman, 2007). What is clear is that there is a long-held understanding that educational leadership can be emotional work (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015). However, this emotional work can be affected by multiple factors.

There is, for example, a substantial body of work that examines the emotional work undertaken by female principals. Some of this demonstrates the ways in which female leaders in primary and secondary schools, especially in times of change and restructure, have to manage their emotions in the light of dominant constructions of femininity being held by their peers, teachers, students and the local communities (see Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Blackmore, 1996). Some considers how such constructions impact on female leaders' future careers (Brescoll, 2016). Other literature explores, for example, the ways in which gender intersects with race to affect female leaders' performances of emotional labour (Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019). Dominant constructions of masculinity also align with many of the ways in which traditional forms of leadership are shaped. However, not all men conform to such constructions of masculinity, and the pressures of leadership can bring with them another set of emotional demands for these men (see for example, Gill & Arnold, 2015). While we consider these factors important and have written about them elsewhere (e.g. Mills & Niesche, 2014), our focus in this paper is more general.

There are countless interactions for a leader each day characterised by emotions. In this project, participants spoke frequently of love, anger, hope, shame, fear, happiness, frustration, and pride. Each of these interactions could be seen as a transaction – the work takes a little more out of the principal's bank of energy and emotional reservoir. We draw upon a corpus of literature that focuses on leadership in marginalised communities and shows that the emotions principals experience and are exposed to can be heightened (Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2019) and can take a toll on the health and wellbeing of leaders themselves (Beauseart et al., 2016). A burgeoning area of critical research focuses on the intersection between leaders' work and their personal lives. Our own recent research has revealed the impact of sustained and deeply intense work on principals' personal relationships, and the way those relationships influence their subsequent turnover intentions (Heffernan, 2021; Oplatka, 2017).

Beyond the research noted in this section, we see an opportunity for more explicit explorations of emotion and the emotional work of leaders more specifically. Kathleen Lynch (2012) notes the importance of understanding how to “sustain our relational life; we need to be educated on how to produce love, care, and solidarity” (p. 15) because care work is so deeply embedded within education. Love, care, and solidarity involve “time, effort, and energy” (p. 11) and are “pleasurable but also burdensome” for those involved; in this case, school leaders. It is this burden that we seek to better understand and articulate in this paper.

Theoretical Framework – Affective Justice / Love, Care, and Solidarity

We make use of Lynch's (2012) notion of *affective justice* to guide our analysis, which is grounded by three main concepts: love, care, and solidarity. We explore each in turn below, explaining how the concept enables an understanding of the work of principals.

The first dimension of Lynch's framework, **love**, is where we can see the impact of leaders' care and solidarity work. The effects of leaders' commitment to care and solidarity work plays out through visible and significant effects on their loving, intimate, relationships. While these are not always negative, the overwhelming effect of the time and energies leaders invest into their work appear to mean that there is a toll which is often being paid through their own relationships and their health and wellbeing.

The **care** work in schools is intense and multi-layered. Leaders undertake care work for their students, staff, and communities. While Lynch (2014) suggests these can be lower order engagement in terms of time, responsibility, commitment, and emotional engagement, we argue in this paper that leaders in marginalised communities who have taken on these roles through a sense of solidarity and moral duty have a deep and profound sense of responsibility, commitment, and emotional engagement with their students, staff, and wider communities. The impact of this is seen in real terms in their work/life balance, long working hours, the emotional demands of their work, and the sacrifices they make through their solidarity work.

Solidarity is described by Lynch as an act of activism in some ways - work that makes a difference and enables a sense of justice, or contribution to a greater good (Lynch, 2014). Solidarity can be a motivator for a leader taking up a role in a school serving marginalised communities, with Lynch suggesting solidarity is often an example of working for people unknown to us, such as the imaginary students and communities that leaders apply to work with to 'make a difference'.

Methodology and Analysis

This study took the form of case studies of 20 school principals (headteachers) in Australia (17) and England (3), who lead schools in contexts characterised by high levels of poverty and complex community needs. The case study approach enabled us to deeply examine the phenomenon of school leaders' work while taking their unique contexts and experiences into account (Yin, 2013). The study was not comparative in nature. Rather, we sought to identify patterns of experience for school leaders across different contexts. We note that these cases are situated within a shared global policy and discourse context for school leaders. Australia and England (along with numerous other countries) share similar policy and discourse contexts including an explicit and ongoing focus on school improvement. Further, schools in

Australia and England have similarly formalised autonomy for school leaders to make local decisions, which is accompanied by increased external accountabilities and constraints that steer their work from a distance (e.g., Keddie, 2016). These shared policy and discourse conditions have been shown to result in a highly pressurised working environment for principals, leading to increasing concerns about attracting and retaining principals in the profession (Heffernan et al., 2022).

We conducted semi-structured interviews remotely and in-person during 2018. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each, adopted a ‘conversation with a purpose approach’ (Woods, 2011), and questions sought detail about participants’ experiences of leading schools in marginalised communities, their career trajectories, principal work and workload, and participants’ future plans as leaders. The participants were diverse in terms of their gender, age, and cultural backgrounds. The career trajectories they described were also diverse, with some taking up leadership roles early in their careers and having many years of experience in the principalship, while others had been in their positions for less than a year at the time of our interviews. Australian participants were contacted through cold-calling emails to all principals within two school districts with high numbers of marginalised communities, and English participants were contacted through our professional networks.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis. This was an iterative process, where we sat and read the transcripts together, immersing ourselves in the data and discussing the themes as we generated them. We analysed the data deductively, being guided by the theoretical framework and our research questions in our reading of the transcripts. It was clear that emotions were a recurring theme within the interviews, and we noted the ways the leaders often brought up their own families and personal relationships in their comments without any prompting from us. We discussed the affective nature of leadership, but this alone was insufficient in helping us to explain or understand the particular challenges being faced by leaders in these contexts. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2021), researchers’ theoretical assumptions must be made explicit, and our analysis was informed by Lynch’s (2012) notions of “love, care, and solidarity”. Lynch’s concepts enabled us to understand the motivations of school leaders in the study and move beyond a simple examination of the challenges of the role. The discussion section is organised into themes representing love, care, and solidarity, highlighting the challenges and impacts of school leaders’ ‘love’ and ‘care’ work, and then concluding with ‘solidarity’ to explore their motivations for continuing on with the role.

Research Context

This study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed the landscape of schooling and had a significant impact on educators and school leaders in particular. Research has already emerged that shows the additional challenges faced by school leaders during COVID in relation to increased workloads, significant physical and mental health impacts, and increased complexity of enacting rapidly changing policies and meeting competing priorities with dwindling resources (Longmuir, 2021). It is beyond the scope of

this paper to speculate about the impact of COVID on these data, so we focus our contribution on further developing an understanding of the work involved in leading marginalised school communities.

The communities within this study were characterised by high levels of poverty, students with complex needs, and higher rates of teacher turnover or challenges in recruiting staff to teaching positions. The Australian case studies were undertaken in schools which, at the time, were collectively pursuing a school improvement agenda (the state is not being identified due to ethical approval conditions), which focused on student achievement on measurable targets in the areas of literacy and numeracy in particular. Issues of wellbeing for principals, teachers, and students have increased in visibility in Australia in the time since data in this study were generated, and school systems have introduced programs to address rising levels of concern about mental health and wellbeing for educators (Riley et al., 2021). The English case studies were undertaken with head teachers from the Greater London area, who worked in communities that served large proportions of students eligible for free school meals (a measure of socio-economic status) and faced particular challenges relating to attraction and retention of staff, as well as high levels of complex community need.

Findings and Discussion

In the forthcoming sections, we analyse the interview data through the three lenses of love, care, and solidarity. We focus in greater detail on ‘love’, because the stories shared by participants were consistently about the effect their work had on their own personal relationships and their families. Principals’ ‘care’ work not only represented their work with the students, staff, and communities in the schools they led. It also represented their relationships with their colleagues and support networks, which has been shown to have a significant positive impact on principals’ turnover intentions and perceptions of their ability to remain within schools even when the work is challenging (Heffernan, 2021). We conclude with ‘solidarity’ - themes from interviews that showed why principals chose to work in schools serving marginalised communities, and why they continued in their role.

Love

We focus in this section on three recurring themes that were raised by participants - the impact of the principalship on their relationships with their own parents, their relationships with their spouses, and their relationships with their children. The emotions that arose during these conversations ranged from pride and joy to guilt, fear, and regret. Participants relayed positive and negative stories of their experiences in this intimate sphere of relationships and discussed the ways their relationships have influenced their choices to become principals, their wellbeing, and their future plans and turnover intentions.

Principals’ Relationships with their own Parents

Participants shared stories about their relationships with their own parents and a number of participants described how being a principal was an important source of pride for their parents. Participants who were the first in their families to go to university in particular

described their family's sense of pride about their work in schools. One participant reflected on how it shaped his own intention to remain in the principalship:

I come from quite a working-class background, the first member of my family to go to university and I think my dad was very – you know, when I got a headship, he's like, "That's incredible. How can anyone in our family ever achieve that?" This was the kind of mindset of – I'd gone further than probably had been expected of me from a family point of view. Personally, that influences your own thinking a bit.

Other participants who were also the first in their families to attend university and become headteachers reflected on the way their family's pride and investment in their profession brought with it a sense of pride as well as holding pressure for if something were to happen to their position. One participant in particular, an educator who identifies as a BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic heritage) woman, was discussing the issues of racism inherent in the appointment and management of headteachers. She described BAME women headteachers as having far more difficulty being appointed to the headship, being held to higher standards than their colleagues, and being more likely to be asked to leave their position for issues that other headteachers would not. This is reflected in research that has explored the sexism and racism inherent in recruitment procedures, resulting in a principalship that is largely homogenous and does not reflect the diversity of the teaching profession (Miller, 2020; Thomson, 2009). She described the intertwined nature of family and community relationships with experiences of pride and shame for Black women leaders who have lost their position after suffering from stress and burnout:

And, the shame – shame within the community and family shame [for principals who lose their jobs]. So, for me, and for my parents – every time I've been successful, it's always felt like it was a big thing for my family. I was the first one in my family to go to university. I was the first one to get that leadership position. So, if I fail, it's incredibly shaming within the family, as well. And, that's why I see – the number of Black leaders I've spoken to who've ended up being asked to leave, or being persuaded to leave, going through quite acute mental health problems.

Participants' loving, intimate relationships with their parents shaped their experiences of aspiring to leadership or to remain within leadership roles, due to the sense of pride expressed by their parents - but also, as described above, due to the potential shame for principals who opt-out of the role. We draw attention back to our previous discussion about the experiences of principals in schools located in marginalised communities, who are more likely to be women or leaders from marginalised groups (Whitehead et al., 2018), and who are more likely to feel and experience the stresses felt and experienced by their communities more viscerally (Beusasert et al., 2016). This puts women and principals from marginalised groups at much higher risk of stress and burnout, and is a social justice issue in and of itself. When considered through the lens of affective justice, there is a clear implication that the care work being undertaken by principals in these schools is having a potentially negative impact

on their own health and wellbeing and that reflects the burdens that Cantillon and Lynch (2017) suggest need to be distributed more equally.

For other participants, the death of a parent served as a catalyst moment for their own reflections on their work, and caused them to re-evaluate their working practices, their career intentions, and their own health and wellbeing. One participant described realising they were stressed and burnt out, and “I realised that I was either going to do something about it, or I was going to die, literally”. They described going to see their father three months after he retired from his own job, and was in hospital:

He said, “Do you see me lying here?” I said, “Yeah, I can see you lying here.” He said, “Do you know why I’m here?” I said, “Well, you’re sick, Dad.” And, he’s like, “Yes, but do you know why I am lying here?” I said, “Just tell me.” And, he said, “Too much work, not enough play. What I want you to do is to go into school tomorrow, call a board meeting, and just tell them all to fuck off.” I was just like, “Fantastic!” [...] He died very quickly – about two days after that. So, he never got to enjoy life because he’d worked hard all his life. And then, I was there, having this conversation with him, and he’s like, “Okay. You’ve been warned. You’ve chosen not to listen.” [...] So, then, I had a really good, long think about what I needed to do about me.

They were not alone in having that experience and re-evaluating their own working practices and intentions. Another participant described how the loss of their father during a period of their own stress and burnout gave them a new perspective on their work. He took time off to care for his father in his final days and spoke explicitly to the school’s staff members about the importance of changing priorities and working practices. He described a staff meeting where he said ‘you do not put the job ahead of your families’, and then reflected that it was important that he had been able to ‘live’ that by taking time off from his role to care for his father. Soon after, he changed his work habits to leave earlier in the afternoons, changed his diet and exercise habits, and prioritised his own health and wellbeing in ways he had previously not felt able to do. These stories represent catalyst moments that prompted participants to take stock of their lives and reconsider their priorities, shaping their future practices accordingly.

Principals’ Relationships with their Spouses and Partners

A commonly recurring theme within interviews was about the negative impact of leading a school on participants’ own relationships with their spouses or partners. We heard stories from participants that the stress, high emotional intensity, and extension of the principalship into their own time had negative consequences for their relationships. Some participants noted that the work was responsible for the breakdown of relationships, while others observed patterns in their colleagues and were using their relationships as a barometer for when they would leave the principalship.

One participant described their long working hours as having been partly responsible for their divorce:

I've got a broken marriage, and I'm sure [work] had a significant impact on that. Not a dysfunctional broken marriage, like my husband and I are separated but quite amicably. We just grew apart, and part of the reason was I just wasn't properly there enough [...] it certainly impacted on family life. I became a very self-orientated person. My life revolves around school and travel and not much else... and the garden and not much else in between.

These findings echo previous research that highlighted the impact of long working hours on a principal's own family (Oplatka, 2017). One participant described the way the emotionally-taxing work of leading their school had consequences for their marriage and they described a moment where they were surprised by their partner's response to them considering applying for a new school:

Yeah, it does affect your family. I was thinking about applying for a new position and the first thing my husband said to me was, "That's okay. As long as you don't become more of a - what was that he said? As long as it doesn't affect you and you come home and take it out on us". His statement was something along the lines of that. He said, "If you're going to do that, I'll go. I'll leave". And it's like, holy moly, so it does affect family.

Other participants described seeing their colleagues' marriages break down due to the intensity and stress of their work. They noted that "every principal I know has ended up divorced. I think that that's maybe a consequence of what's happening in the principalship realm, that they just end up under so much stress that it breaks down their marriages". They described using their marriage as a barometer for when they would need to leave the principalship, saying "if it starts to affect my marriage, I'll walk away". The burdens involved with this affective work are often hidden and vital to better understand. Lynch (2014) notes the injustice that occurs when affective work is hidden, and in these stories we see the effects of that often-hidden labour on participants' own loving relationships.

Principals' Relationships with their own Children

Participants also spoke at length about how their work as principals impacted on their relationships with their own children. There was a clear sense from participants that without conscious - and often-difficult - actions, the work involved in leading a school would detract from their own parenting and time with their own children. For example, one participant described a colleague who was distressed because she felt unable to be a good headteacher and a good parent at the same time:

[She] sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. It took a little while just to stop crying. And, she said she feels like an inadequate mum because she can either be a mum or she can be a head teacher. But, she wants to be both. And, she can't get it right, and she just felt so awful. I felt really sad for her because why shouldn't she be both?

Some of the more experienced participants reflected on times when their own children were younger, and the impact they later realised their work had on their relationships:

School dominates everything. I work here during the day and then I tend to go home and start again about half past seven and finish hopefully by twelve, and that's just standard... for me... not saying that's standard for someone else, that's just me by nature. What's the impact on that, on family? Huge. [...] My kids who are now 25 and 27 will very much recognise that I wasn't particularly a hands-on mum in many ways.

Participants described actively working to change their lives and approaches to work after realisations that they had not been spending enough time with their own children. One participant shared his story of being overworked and reaching a crisis point:

I had a period when I was about 34 where [...] my work-life balance was shot and my kids were very young [and] it was just untenable. And I, at that point, developed anxiety and started getting panic attacks and saw a counsellor for a while and it really gave me a bit of a wake-up call [...] that was probably one of the best things that ever happened, because, you know, I saw a counsellor [and] the key thing that came out of that was your relationship is the thing that keeps you sane [...] with your family and with your wife and that needs to be a priority. You need to just keep sight of that.

It is not just the long working hours that come with being a principal that impacts on participants' loving relationships. The emotional intensity of the job also held consequences for principals' ability to sustain emotional connections outside of work and was having direct connections for participants' intention to remain within the role. One participant described difficulties in their loving, intimate relationships with their partner and their children because of the intensity of their work. They said:

I mean, just the fatigue factor, the emotional factor [...] if I've gone home and I've had a really bad day and I've been abused, I either don't want to talk or see or do anything on a personal level with my husband. He'll often say, "I want a hug" and I'll say "I don't want to be touched". I'm not going to take this again. Because they just come through the door at a hundred miles an hour all day long [...] And he said to me, "We used to hug all the time and now you don't hug". The kids say to me, "Mum, you don't hug us anymore". It's like, no, I don't because I just want my space now. [...] Like, that is your intimacy with your partner, but it's also your intimacy with your kids. And one of my kids one year - they sent me an email and said, "Hi, mum, I don't see you at night so I thought..." - when they realised they could get me on the [work] email. Yeah, they sent me an email, "Just saying hello and checking in with you, making sure you're okay". So, yeah, that's what it's like.

Importantly, that participant noted that they did not have the same challenges or experiences when they were a principal in a more advantaged school. This highlights the particular

challenges faced by principals in these schools as well as having direct consequences for issues of affective justice for the people leading these schools, who are doing this important and challenging work. The importance of this type of affective work was underscored in previous research, which highlighted the value that teachers placed on affective work in alternative settings with students who had experienced trauma and were marginalised from mainstream schooling systems, but also the acknowledgement that it is ‘hard work’ (te Riele et al., 2017).

Care

The caring relationships leaders develop in these schools are significant and vary in their intensity and emotional engagement when working with students, staff, and communities. In particular, these relationships were most evident in principals’ discussions about their support networks with colleagues at their own schools.

Principals’ Support Networks with Colleagues

The importance of support and collegial networks has been established in the leadership literature (Heffernan, 2021; Mahfouz, 2020). These sentiments were evident in the interviews in this study, where participants spoke about the importance of trusting and caring relationships with colleagues to help alleviate some of the pressures and uncertainties of leading a school.

Some participants spoke about trying to encourage a work/life balance within their school culture, and the importance of the affective work of caring among and for each other:

So what we do is we work really hard to actually look after the staff so that they know that they’ve got an issue or meeting with a prickly parent, there will always be an admin person with them. They never have to do any of that alone. [...] We work really hard to actually say well you’ve got to have that work/life balance. I don’t want you sending emails at 10:30 [or] 11 o’clock at night, and I don’t want you doing the work then. I want you spending time with your own family. [...] So you push really hard on that support because then those beginning teachers have got [someone] who will take them under their wing and so when they have those bad days and they’re ready to call it quits and whatever, they’ve got someone who’ll put an arm around them and say we’ve all had shit days like that, talk me through what happened, what you think caused it and what will be different next time and how you can stop it happening. And [they] take on that sort of nurturing role as well.

The principal described this as being successful in “greatly reducing” teacher turnover and enabling a sense of community and support within their school. Other principals reflected on the importance of being able to be vulnerable and trust their colleagues, noting that:

I’ve got a good group of people here, and if I really want to [...] cry on someone’s shoulder, I’ve got colleagues here that I can do that with, without feeling any... not

that I ever am crying on their shoulders, but I've got people who [...] I know I can drink wine through the night if I had to and whinge and complain and throw things or do whatever, and she'd be great. I've got my whole leadership team I trust, my admin team I trust.

The importance of trust and affective care work was evident in principals who had experienced such cultures in their own careers and worked to develop them in their own leadership:

I was lucky enough to work under a principal [previously] who was extremely collegial, and I guess as a role model for me, a very supportive principal who was able to sit down with, you know, when we'd had a really hard day we had a bottle of scotch in that cupboard, and we brought the scotch out with the coke. Not even that I drank scotch. But we brought it out and we'd have a scotch after school and go, "God that was a tough day," and then we'd let it go and we'd go home. It was just this nurturing supportiveness, and being able to debrief with one another. Having absolute trust in your team, so that when you'd had a really hairy day you could just go, "ugh", with people who understood. And I suppose I've sort of carried that on in my own leadership, in being able to do that for my staff as well, bringing them altogether, making sure everyone's feeling okay about what's happened; and being able to talk about it; being able to laugh about it, and then being able to move on. Having that openness that people can feel that they can come and just go, "I'm really not happy about this," or "I'm really not comfortable about this," or "I'm really worried about this." So that there's that opportunity for talking, and talking it through.

The work described by principals was emotionally intense, at times exhausting, and high-stakes. Lynch (2020) describes the importance of relationships for bringing meaning, warmth, and joy to life while sustaining wellbeing. The caring relationships that were developed within their school and with other colleagues were a vital part of participants being able to sustain their own leadership, supporting others, and being able to continue in a role which is at once taxing and rewarding.

Solidarity

We use Lynch's notion of solidarity as a way of seeking to understand why leaders have chosen to work in these schools, and why they remain in the role when the work is described as being so challenging and having clear impacts on their loving and caring relationships. The core, consistently recurring theme for principals is that their solidarity work is borne from a desire to make a difference for students, which is reflective of much of the literature about teaching and leading for marginalised school communities (e.g., te Riele et al., 2017; Mills et al., 2016).

One participant described their office and said that written on their wall is the question: "if we don't make a difference for these kids, who will?". They elaborated that they enjoyed the

challenge of their work, though it was beginning to cause them health problems (increased blood pressure as a result of the pressure they faced in their role). “I think we all want to make a difference and to meet the challenge.” They noted that they work in schools serving marginalised communities because they sense that they can make a bigger difference for young people than they could in a more advantaged school: “I think intellectually you want to make a bigger difference, and [...] I possibly will [move to a more advantaged school] in a few years [...] but while I feel energised and know I’m making a difference I’ll [stay].”

There are limits to participants’ solidarity, and for some participants the challenges were beginning to outweigh the benefits. There were clear tensions evident for some participants who described material benefits of the position as being unimportant, but at the same time referred to their feeling that the remuneration for the role was insufficient:

If I put up with daily abuse, I will [leave the role]. I don’t need the money anymore [...] So, what is the incentive for me to get abused, to work long hours, to have my family affected? [...] but at the same time I'm not in it for the money. If I was in it only for the money, then yeah, I would probably leave. But I'm not in it for the money. I’m in it because I actually enjoy it and I want to make a difference for those kids who might be in a situation that I was growing up. I want to know that if that was my child that somebody would be there fighting and battling for them [...] But for me there is a different value system. It's not based on money, but there does come a point where you think, is it worth the impact on your family and the impact on yourself when the remuneration - I could be doing something else for the same amount.

This sentiment does reflect themes in other research findings which suggest that remuneration for the role is a point of tension across the profession - the issue of balancing material benefit alongside a vocational call to ‘make a difference’ is a tension in care-based professions which are often poorly-paid (Lynch, 2014). However, there is a clear recognition that there is the potential for exploitation when this type of work is seen as a ‘calling’, rather than a profession which requires highly specialised knowledge and skills. The rewards described by participants extended to the sense of pride and community when students succeed, or when the school experiences success as a community. One participant noted:

I love my [students]. When a kid gets a good outcome here it’s something to truly be celebrated because nothing is gifted. I guess just an anecdote around it though but one of the most lovely things is when you go to a year 12 graduation here there are still a large number of students graduating who are the first in their family to graduate year 12 so there is a very special feeling around that [...] to see their young people graduate is just wonderful. When that happens that is just amazing. [...] improvements are really hard fought, really acknowledged and celebrated by the teachers and the school community so that’s really something very special to be part of. Our kids do it tough but they tell it how it is and I like it. Most of them just want to be loved and cared for.

The motivations for the solidarity work being undertaken by principals is evident in these stories, which provide us with insights into the reasons principals seek to work in these schools, but also the affective practices that sustain their work in these roles even when there are documented effects on health and wellbeing and the other affective spheres of their lives beyond the school gate.

Conclusion

Increasing attention is being paid to principal stress and burnout and their impact on attraction and retention, particularly in schools serving marginalised communities. Higher levels of stress and burnout are evident in these particular schools, where principals are more inexperienced and are more likely to be women or leaders from other marginalised groups - placing those leaders at a higher risk of burnout than their colleagues in more advantaged schools.

We have offered new ways of theorising the work being undertaken by school leaders in complex school communities. Lynch's notion of affective justice helps us to understand some of the impacts of working for justice for students in these communities but, importantly, it also offers us some insight into their motivations for doing so in the first place. In doing so, we highlight the inherent issues of justice for leaders and educators themselves. We contribute to a long body of literature that explores principals' experiences of leading schools. We have developed detailed and nuanced insights about the particular challenges and rewards of leading schools in marginalised communities in Australia and England, which offer important lessons beyond these contexts.

In particular, our findings about the solidarity work being undertaken by leaders indicated a tension between remuneration and a recurring sense of a higher calling, vocation, or making a difference for young people. Work intensification and extension is being experienced differently when accompanied alongside a sense of making a difference and fulfilling a higher calling. This is an important finding of our work, in which we caution against assuming solidarity as a sole reason for entering an increasingly challenging profession, and continuing in work when it has a measurable detrimental impact on principals' health and wellbeing. Attention needs to be paid by education systems to the impact of the work on leaders, and care taken to find meaningful and real ways to reduce issues of workload, work intensification, and work extension for principals so that they can thrive in their work and so that steps can be taken to reduce some of the negative consequences of the role highlighted in this study.

Lynch et al. (2009, p. 236) note that affective labour does not operate in isolation - it also influences economic, cultural, and political spheres. They contend that affective systems enable people to more effectively engage in these other spheres of life and work. We believe that a deeper understanding of principals' motivations and experiences is a key step in addressing ongoing and increasing concerns about principal turnover and attraction in schools located in marginalised communities. The complexity of their work, driven largely by

solidarity in making a difference for young people, is evident in their loving and caring relationships and that work needs to be valued, with principals given the support and tools needed to be able to thrive in their work.

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