Leaders' and Teachers' Lived Experience of Change: Re-Culturing a School Through Positive Education.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis titled, Leaders' and Teachers' Ways of Being-In Change: Re-culturing a School Through the Introduction of Positive Education, does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Jennifer Cook

Date: 9th December 2024

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I would like to thank my colleagues and friends at 'IRHS', without whom this research would not exist, who not only gave of their time so that I could interview them, but who so enthusiastically embraced positive education in the school, and whose hard work, commitment, energy and collegiality made it work! In particular, thank you to 'Gavin' who entrusted me with the task of overseeing positive education in the school.

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Abstract

The term 'positive education' was first used in 2008 (Norrish, 2015; Seligman, 2011) and refers to the practical application of the skills and concepts of positive psychology in an educational setting. Coming from the field of psychology, most of the current research has a quantitative orientation, focusing on evaluating various positive education interventions directed towards students. In contrast this research took a qualitative approach to tell the story of change in a school and explore the ontological experiences of leaders and teachers, as school staff embedded positive education. As deputy principal of the school and in charge of positive education, as an informed researcher, I sought to open an understanding from an insider's view of one school's journey of cultural change. I adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, combined with autoethnography. My research interest was the lived experiences of leaders and teachers 'being-in' an organisational, pedagogical and curriculum change process.

The research lens was turned first towards the change journey as a secondary school re-cultured itself through the 'implementation' of positive education. It then focused on the lived experiences of seven leaders and teachers of the school as they were exposed to significant cultural change. The study offers an autoethnographical representation and a phenomenological rendering of one school's experience of cultural change. Through autoethnography, open interviews and semi-structured conversations with leaders and teachers, I capture the storylines of change, sharing the phenomenological narratives of the experiences that emerged. This research offers a new dimension to the scholarly conversation about positive education and organisational change because it provides insight from lived experience into the impact on leaders and teachers of one school's positive education change journey which was from 'the

ground up' in contrast to most 'top-down' change processes encouraged in the past and now. It surfaces how the agenda in reconstituting approaches to change and teachers' and leaders' professional and personal identities and workload can have an impact on teacher wellbeing as consequence of how change is enacted.

Glossary

ABS   Australian Bureau of Statistics

AI   Appreciative Inquiry

AITSL   Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

DfE   Department for Education (South Australia)

GGS   Geelong Grammar School

IRHS   Inner Regional High School

NAPLAN   National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy

OECD   Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

PESA   Positive Education Schools Association

PERMA   Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning & Achievement

PISA   Programme for International Student Assessment

SA   South Australia

SACE   South Australian Certificate of Education

SIP   Site Improvement Plan

WHO   World Health Organisation

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1 Chapter 1: Introducing the Research

1.1 Introduction

This research focuses on positive cultural change in a school, brought about through the 'implementation' of positive education, as seen through the experiences of teachers and leaders in the school. The school was previously thought of as a toxic place that staff wanted to leave and had a 'bad reputation' in the community. The research occurs against a current background of concerns about teacher attrition and wellbeing and the impact of current neoliberal policies in schools on teacher professional self-image. This research addresses these concerns by exploring a school's initiatives to re-culture using positive education through capturing teacher and leader voice. My research offers a new dimension to the scholarly conversation about positive education and organisational change because it provides insight from lived experience into the impact on leaders and teachers of a school's positive education change journey. It surfaces how the agenda is reconstituting professional and personal identities, workload issues, and their core business.

1.2 The Impetus for this Study

The Phenomenon of Interest

For many years I have worked at Inner Regional High School (IRHS), as a teacher, in middle leadership, as an Assistant Principal and Deputy Principal. In my time at the school, I have seen it go from a toxic, dysfunctional environment that staff were looking to leave to a flourishing school in which staff wish to stay. This change did not happen overnight. It began with an opportunity that was offered to a new principal of the school in late 2011, one which he felt he

had to take up. That opportunity was to be the pilot school for the South Australian Department for Education (DfE) working with Adelaide Thinker in Residence, Professor Martin Seligman, to implement positive education in the school. Before committing to this path, the principal, Gavin, put the opportunity to staff to make the final decision. Staff were almost unanimously in favour and took up the challenge to embed positive psychology concepts and skills across the whole school. As the first Australian school to adopt this approach without substantial money behind it for implementation, the school had to break new ground in developing ways to access the research and concepts behind positive psychology and embed them into the schooling life.

What happened next was something I have only experienced once in over thirty years of teaching. Positive education was grown in the school from the ground up through the collaborative effort and enthusiasm of the staff. Not only did they work in teams to develop a whole school explicit positive education curriculum, the staff also embedded positive education into the regular curriculum and into school policies and practices. IRHS became known nationally for the work the school had done to embed positive education into all aspects of school life. At the same time as staff were working together to design how positive education would look in the school, the culture of the school was changing. From being a school where relationships were fractured and people kept to themselves it became a school where relationships were positive and valued, where staff shared and collaborated willingly, where the wellbeing and resilience of staff and students mattered. I became interested in how the change had come about and curious to know what the perceptions were of the teachers and leaders of the school, leading me to take up this research. I wanted the story of IRHS to be told. At a time when most school change is top down and mandated this grew organically from the ground up. It was a

re-invigorating experience which was eagerly engaged in by the majority of the staff. I was impressed by the willingness of staff to take up the challenge of building positive psychology into the mainstream curriculum, into their practice and into developing our own positive education curriculum.

Whilst it is important to note that it cannot be assumed that what worked at IRHS will work in another context, and I express caution to not present the IRHS change journey as a guide for others to follow, I believed that there were lessons to take from the processes the school followed in eliciting staff voice as a catalyst for positive cultural change in schools. I wanted to find out what the teachers and leaders of IRHS experiences of change and positive education had been and share them.

Positive Education

Positive psychology scholar, Martin Seligman implores educators to "imagine that schools could, without compromising either, teach both the skills of wellbeing and the skills of achievement." (Seligman, 2011, p. 78). This was the vision that he presented to South Australia as part of his Building the State of Wellbeing, deriving from the recommendations emanating from his time as Adelaide Thinker in Residence, 2012 to 2013. Seligman argued that teaching students the skills from positive psychology would provide an "immunisation" against mental ill-health (Seligman, 2013).

Positive education is an "umbrella term used to describe empirically valid interventions and programs from positive psychology that have an impact on wellbeing" (White, 2016, p. 2), covering any research-based wellbeing initiatives in an educational setting (Knoop, 2013;

Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Slemp et al., 2017; White, 2016). It is an emergent scholarly field (Kristjansson, 2012). Emerging from the field of psychology, the vast majority of studies have been quantitative, focusing on the results of controlled studies of program trials with students. There has been a call for more qualitative research (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Waters & Stokes, 2015) to provide insight into the experiences of individuals, offering improved understandings of positive education interventions. So far there is very little scholarly research that considers the lived experiences of school staff within a positive psychology organisational change agenda (Waters & Loton, 2021). I argue as teachers are expected to be the deliverers of positive education, there is a need to hear their voices and understand their experiences within this agenda. As the former IRHS Assistant Principal for Positive Education and Pedagogy, and current Deputy Principal for Student Services and Whole School Wellbeing, I have led the positive education initiative at an organisational, pedagogical and curriculum level since 2013. From my perspective and anecdotally there has been significant cultural change in the school, with school wellbeing data indicating an improvement in not only student wellbeing but also staff wellbeing (see Appendix S).

1.3 Aim

This qualitative study examines the lifeworld (van Manen, 1990) of leaders and teachers as a school undergoes significant cultural change through the 'implementation' of positive education. Taking an approach that combines autoethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology, my research aim was to explore the lived professional experiences of leaders and teachers as the school was collaboratively 're-cultured' through committing to a whole of school change by embracing positive education. It sought to understand the phenomenological nature of the lived experience of staff, including the role of leadership in this organisational change agenda.

At a time when political and bureaucratic demands are being increasingly placed upon schools to perform, making school reviews and technologies of accountability the new normal, teachers are under more pressure to perform. More performativity leads to increased workload, doing more with less in compliance to the national standards agenda (Ball, 2003; O'Neill & Snook, 2015). Whilst positive education has been promoted with students in mind it could have potential to disrupt deficit systemic views of leaders and teachers by offering a strengths-based approach to change, utilising an appreciative lens of leader and teacher work (Hoy & Tarter, 2011). This disruption of deficit views certainly appeared to be one of the key impacts of implementing positive education at IRHS, one which I was interested in exploring further. The aims of this research therefore were to develop:

- Understandings of cultural change within a positive education agenda
- Lifeworld understandings of leaders' and teachers' experiences of change within a positive education agenda.

1.4 Overarching Research Question

The specific research question is: What have been the leaders' and teachers' lived experiences of change as a secondary school implements positive education?

Through this question I seek ontological understandings of what "the nature of this lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 42) was really like for those involved. What did being-in-change mean for their personal and professional ways of being? How did they experience change in the school? What was the nature of that change? Van Manen (1990) says that "phenomenological research projects do not simply raise a question and possibly soon drop it again, but rather that we 'live' this question, that we 'become' this question" (p. 43). "A

phenomenological question must be 'lived' by the researcher" (p. 44). As the leader of positive education at IRHS I have 'lived' my research question for over ten years, as I have been in change with the rest of the school community.

Underlying Question

The research was guided by an underlying question: What has been the impact of the introduction of positive education into a school?

Underlying the overarching question of teachers' and leaders' experience of change is the desire to understand what the impact of positive education was on staff and the broader community of IRHS, and how this fed into teachers' and leaders' experiences.

1.5 Positioning Myself in the Research

I present an insider view of the experiences of staff as a school undergoes intentional cultural change through the implementation of positive education and an outsider view through my position as researcher. I am very much aware that my role in this change journey means that I come to this research with fore-understandings (Gadamer, 2013), and possible influence over potential participants. By using hermeneutic phenomenology, a method that is about discovery and has no fixed path (van Manen, 1990) in its method, in addition to autoethnography, I hoped to develop deeper understandings of the essence of leaders' and teachers' work during a significant change journey. This research contributes a greater understanding of the experiential nature of being-in change that involves a school wide initiative, to the current positive education research field, as it takes a qualitative approach to look at the impact on, and experiences of staff.

I argue that autoethnography and hermeneutic phenomenological research approaches allow a shared understanding of the experiences of leaders and teachers caught up in the cultural change agenda to emerge. Through an insider view of one school's journey and conversational semi-structured interviews with leaders and teachers, an understanding of the essence of staff experiences has emerged. Van Manen (1990) suggests that one's personal lived experience is a "logical starting point for phenomenological research" stating that "my own life experiences are immediately accessible to me in a way that no one else's are" and "that one's own experiences are also the possible experiences of others." (p. 54). This deep involvement and lived experience of the phenomenon of interest allows a richer understanding than could come from an outsider doing observations and interviews (Coghlan, 2013). As an insider, I have a more nuanced understanding of the context and experiences of the process of school change undertaken at IRHS. According to Coghlan (2013), "insider research offers a unique perspective on systems, precisely because it is from the inside. Insider researchers are 'native' to the setting and so have insights from their lived experiences" (p. 126). My pivotal role in this change journey provides this "unique perspective", which an outsider coming in for a short period of time and relying on interviews and focus groups, would lack.

As an insider researcher it is important to position myself in the research. I have not only been part of the implementation of positive education at IRHS, since 2013 I have led the work. I have run staff positive education professional learning at IRHS and many other schools, organised and presented at positive education conferences and facilitated the work done by the staff of IRHS to embed positive education into their practice. My personal experience is part of the story. As a result, I have had to be aware of my own bias, pre-conceptions and assumptions. Conducted as

insider research, the objective of this study was to provide a space for the missing teacher voices in the positive education literature.

1.6 Introduction to Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Autoethnography

I came to this doctorate as the principal of IRHS and I were working with David Giles and Andrew Bills from Flinders University as critical friends through the early days of our implementation of positive education. We all had a strong belief that there was story to tell from the work that we were doing. As I considered the potential of doing a doctorate, David Giles introduced me to hermeneutic phenomenology, an approach to social inquiry that is a search for "objects of experience rather than … a description of the experiencing subject" (Crotty, 1998, p. 83). As a critique – a questioning of what is taken for granted, rather than a description, I thought it was a fit for my question which was at the heart of my intention to engage in a doctorate: what the experiences of change were for teachers and leaders in the school.

Through reading van Manen, I began to understand hermeneutic phenomenology as an approach to research and felt that it was appropriate for my proposed study. Van Manen (1990) says that "to truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the centre of our being" (p. 43). My experience at IRHS resonated with my beliefs and values about teaching and school leadership and had left me with a strong sense that there was something to learn from what the school had been through. For me this came from the centre of my being. I was already immersed in it.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with understanding "the life-world, or human experience as it is lived" (Laverty, 2003, p. 26). It involves a reflective process in which the

researcher needs to put aside their pre-existing understandings (as best as possible) and revisit the things they take for granted, to discover new meanings (Crotty, 1998). It is an immersive process, requiring the researcher to reflect deeply, to dwell with the phenomenon of interest, allowing new understandings to emerge. Heidegger's linking of phenomenology with ontology and his idea the we need to "rid ourselves of our tendency to immediately interpret" (Crotty, 1998, p. 96), and Gadamer's belief that we cannot free ourselves from our history and that our understandings come from a "fusion" of past a present as "they are always already there" (Crotty, 1998, p. 101), both resonated with me strongly.

Van Manen (1990) refers to hermeneutic phenomenology as primarily a writing (and re-writing) exercise. I have always been a writer, I write to plan, to understand, to clarify, to share. Giles (2008) describes the process as "a writing activity that involved writing – reading – re-writing – re-reading of a written statement" (pp. 91-92), which again resonated with me. The concept of writing to understand is something that I have done throughout my career. Taking it further, to a deeper level, using writing to reflect, to uncover the taken for granted or hidden, was a comfortable and challenging concept. Phenomenology appeared to offer an approach to social research that allowed in-depth understandings to emerge from our shared experiences at IRHS.

The decision to include autoethnography came as a result of realising I had significant aspects of the 'insider' experience I needed to include in the investigation to open that to scrutiny and reflection. After conversations with my supervisors, I read about autoethnography and I explored the method further reading Adams et al. (2015), Ellis et al. (2011), Rogers (2016) and Wall (2008). It seemed to compliment hermeneutic phenomenology, as it was also concerned with

how one experiences the lifeworld, offering "an insider's perspective on practices, meanings, and interpretations of cultural phenomena/experiences" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 31). Context was important to understanding the cultural change journey at IRHS and it seemed that autoethnography provided the avenue to include the context in a meaningful way as "an insider can describe the nuance, complexity, emotion and meaning of these experiences as s/he has lived them" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 31). Being able to use elements of my story to provide context and illuminate the journey the school had undertaken seemed a useful addition to my research.

1.7 Significance of this Inquiry

As opposed to the more common top-down approach to school change, this study looks at a successful ground-up approach to changing school culture. At a time when teacher attrition is an issue world-wide (McCallum, 2021) and wellbeing concerns a major cause for teachers leaving (Rahimi & Arnold, 2024) this thesis provides an example of how one school turned its culture from one of negativity, lack of trust and disconnection to one of collegiality, trust and care. It shows how teacher and leader wellbeing can be addressed through a school-wide approach that values teacher voice, wellbeing and resilience.

1.8 Fore-understandings of Positive Education and Change Processes

Due to my role in the school leading positive education, and my personal experience of the implementation of it I came into this research with fore-understandings. I believed that there was a story of positive school change to tell. From my experience and casual conversations with others the implementation of positive education had been strongly beneficial to the school community, providing an avenue for healing and rebuilding the school.

I also came into this research with strong ideas about change processes in schools, although these were not in relation to how we went about implementing positive education. These were rather directed against top-down, mandated change processes, where staff and school communities do not have a say. I have a strong belief in democratic decision making and giving staff a voice and do not believe that top-down processes get the best out of school staff.

1.9 Ethics Processes

In this study complete anonymity was not possible due to the position of IRHS in the positive education community. This was made clear in the information and documentation provided to participants before they committed to being interviewed. To preserve the anonymity of participants as much as possible the name of the school, district, all participants and any person associated with the school mentioned in this thesis are pseudonyms.

As deputy principal of the school there were a number of other ethical considerations that had to be in place for my research to ensure integrity. As I was only interviewing staff, I only needed a letter of approval from the principal to go ahead with my research (see Appendix I) to meet Department for Education guidelines for researching your own school, however I had to be aware of the potential impact my leadership role in the school could have on participants. To address this, I made the whole school aware of my research through staff bulletin notices (see Appendix J), then rather than asking for volunteers myself one of the school's administration officers asked for me by putting out a general request to all staff (see Appendix K) and asking that those interested reply to her. She then passed names on to me. This was to prevent anyone from feeling obliged to say yes just to accommodate me. Further protection for staff was provided by only asking for permanent teachers to volunteer, as contract teachers could feel

under pressure to oblige me as their employment can depend on the school executive. Volunteers were provided with information about the process (see Appendix C) and a consent form to sign if they agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were negotiated with participants. Following recommendations from the ethics committee I offered to hold interviews offsite, however all but two participants preferred to have them at school after hours, either in their classroom or office or mine. I have a strong, positive relationship with staff at IRHS, am an active union member and am often the executive member teachers will come to when they have concerns about decisions in the school, knowing that I am open to critical feedback. Because of this I did not believe that teachers would simply tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.

1.10 Structure of Thesis

In chapter two my thesis provides essential background information to the study along with relevant literature, before reviewing three key areas of literature that underpin the study in chapter three. Literature reviewed covers the current ideological landscape in education and its impact on leaders and teachers, school culture and positive education. Following the literature review I look at methodology in chapter four. This is followed by chapter five, 'My Story', my autoethnographical findings. Chapter six provides stories from leaders and teacher of IRHS, broken into themes of 'Starting from Strengths', 'Creating a Shared Story', 'Importance of Care' and 'Taking it Home'. This is followed by discussion in chapter seven broken into two key sections – 'Taking Action' and 'Making Meaning'. Chapter eight concludes the thesis, including recommendations for practice and possibilities for further research.

1.11 Conclusion

My research came about from my desire to tell the story of school change at IRHS and my curiosity to explore and understand how it came about. Using autoethnography and hermeneutic

phenomenology I discovered a story of school change and culture that I invite you to explore

with me over the remaining thesis.

2 Chapter 2: Making Change

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is included to provide an overview of the journey of cultural change that occurred at IRHS. It forms the background for the rest of the thesis. The overview is interwoven with relevant literature.

2.2 Background

'Dysfunctional' School

As a middle leader in a school, I experienced a catastrophic collapse of senior leadership that led to what many staff refer to as the lowest possible point of their careers, a time when morale was as low as it could get in the school. As the only government high school (a secondary school funded and run by the state government) in the fastest growing non-coastal district in Australia (Inner Regional District Council Regional Schools' Consultation 2022) student numbers were dropping, community perception was poor, and staff were looking to leave. An incoming principal attempted to bring about change, using top-down methods and a 'stick' approach, along with lines such as 'we are only as good as the weakest link'. As a result, staff became defensive, shut down and retreated into their classrooms. Although pockets of excellence and collaboration existed within some learning areas, the school was fractured, social events rare and poorly attended, and community perception lowered even further. The next principal, distressed by what he saw and heard from staff, students and the community during his first year at the school, was determined to bring about change.

In December of 2011, after the school year had finished, this principal visited the head office of the education department to discuss the physical needs of the school and how to address the negative school culture. His reasoning was you should always ask – they can only say no. During this visit he was offered the opportunity for IRHS to be the Department for Education (DfE) focus school for the Adelaide Thinkers in Residence residency of Martin Seligman, introducing the concept of positive psychology in the state.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology has come to the fore through the work of Professor Martin Seligman, who in 1998, when elected chair to the American Psychology Association, declared his intention to devote his presidency to promoting positive psychology internationally (Diener, 2009). Positive psychology seeks to understand what allows some people to show resilience and even growth when faced with adversity, whilst others flounder (Seligman, 2011). From this understanding positive psychologists develop strategies to build this resilience in all people (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Terjesen, et al., 2004). Positive education has come to refer to applying these understandings and strategies in an educational setting (Knoop, 2013; Kristjansson, 2012; Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). There are key elements that are core to positive education – positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, achievement (PERMA) and building on strengths (Norrish, 2015; Seligman, 2011). When implemented authentically in a school these elements help create a culture that values the wellbeing of individuals, coming from an appreciative, strengths-based perspective (Waters & White, 2015).

The Change

Within two years staff and students were collaborating and speaking positively about the future of the school. Within three years, community perception had changed, and school enrolment numbers started to grow. Within four everyone had forgotten that students used to refer to the school as a 'povo' (impoverished) school that you only went to if you couldn't get in somewhere else. How were we able to facilitate such change in the school and how was it sustained? My reflection revealed to me the importance of teacher wellbeing as a component of the change process.

Teacher Wellbeing

Teacher wellbeing is not only important for teacher job satisfaction and hence retention, research is showing that it also linked to student achievement (Granziera et al., 2023; McCallum, 2021). Student engagement and academic outcomes are improved when their teachers have high wellbeing. One of the reasons for this is that teachers with high wellbeing develop more supportive, caring student-teacher relationships and classroom management techniques (Granziera et al., 2023; McCallum 2021; Molyneux, 2021; Virtanen et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers with high wellbeing are more likely to have energy and effort to put into their planning and practice, providing a more engaging classroom experience for their students (Granziera et al., 2023; McCallum, 2021)

Research indicates that teacher wellbeing is impacted by outside pressures – departmental and government neoliberal accountability measures (Ball, 2003; Fuller, 2019; Heffernan et al., 2022), media representations (Barnes, 2022; Heffernan et al., 2022; Mockler, 2020) and community perceptions (Heffernan et al., 2022). Teacher wellbeing is also impacted by the climate and

culture of individual schools (Cann et al., 2022; Granziera et al., 2023; Heled et al., 2016; Law et al., 2024; Lee & Louis, 2019; Rehal & van Nieuwerburgh, 2022; Williams et al., 2015; Wrigley et al., 2012), which is why teachers in some schools flourish despite external pressures, and others flounder.

In 2020 the number of people reporting either depression or anxiety rose significantly due to the COVID-19 Pandemic (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2022). Mental health illness presents as one of the greatest causes of lost productivity and diminished quality of life in Australia (SA Health, 2020). This is clearly an issue for teachers with stress being responsible for 50% of teacher illness (Lovett & Lovett, 2016). In 2022 Australian youth rated mental illness as one of their top three issues of concern, (Leung et al., 2022), an average of nine Australians take their own life on any given day (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2023) and suicide is the leading cause of death for males and females aged 15 to 44 (ABS, 2023). In addition, COVID-19 has impacted the mental health of both adults and adolescents, increasing these already high levels of mental illness (Bera et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Nearchou et al., 2020) and causing an increase in children and young people demonstrating trauma (Brunzell et al., 2022). Teachers are not immune from mental health concerns and one of the key reasons they give for leaving the profession is stress and burnout (Rahimi & Arnold, 2024).

Despite the importance of looking after teacher wellbeing and the high incidence of stress neither the Australian Government issues paper on teacher workforce shortages (2022) nor the action plan (2023) mention stress or wellbeing. The issues paper has identified the problems around teacher retention as the status of the profession and working conditions, which includes

workload, salary and casual employment (Australian Government, 2022). Under working conditions there is no mention of stress, rather that workload and complexity of the job have increased over time. These concerns inform the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (Australian Government, 2023). Under Priority Area Three – Keeping the teachers we have – a range of measures are provided to examine workload, reduce administrative tasks, improve professional learning opportunities, increase the number of highly accomplished teachers, improve mentoring and induction for new teachers, "develop and support career pathways which value teachers" (Australian Government, 2023, strategy 15), improve support for the implementation of the national curriculum, investigate how best to utilise support staff and pre-service teachers in schools and assess initiatives to retain teachers. Under none of these strategies is there any mention of stress, burnout, wellbeing, care or resilience. This is despite research clearly indicating the significance of these issues (Hine et al., 2022; Windle et al., 2022) in retaining teachers. If we are serious about looking after our teachers, keeping them in the profession and performing at their best we must acknowledge and address teacher stress and mental health.

WHO, (2022), defines mental health as:

> a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development. Mental Health is more than the absence of mental disorders. It exists on a complex continuum. (World Health Organisation, 2022).

Keyes, (2007), explains this continuum with his complete mental health model, noting that: "the absence of mental illness is not the presence of mental health, flourishing individuals function

markedly better than all others … the absence of mental health – a condition described … as 'languishing' – is as bad as a major depressive episode" (p.95). For Keyes mental health is "not merely the absence of mental illness but the presence of something positive" (p.98).

In their review of studies of initiatives addressing teacher wellbeing Berger et al. (2022), found that of the nineteen initiatives evaluated only three did not have any positive effect on teacher wellbeing indicating that adopting wellbeing initiatives is worthwhile. The most effective initiatives promoting wellbeing in the workplace appear to be those that are targeted at both the individual and organisational level (Berger et al., 2022). Despite this most education wellbeing initiatives look at wellbeing on an individual level rather than at an organisational level. Further to this, they tend to address the symptoms, rather than the cause of the stress (Berger, et al., 2022).

One of the key components of the change that happened at IRHS was the development of a whole school focus on building wellbeing and resilience, not just for students but also for staff. The change was enacted through valuing teacher voice and engagement in the process and developing a culture of affirmation and care.

2.3 The Change Process

The change process occurred through authentic, collaborative leadership. This change did not come from the 'top down'. Although the Department for Education were aware of the issues in the school, they did not directly intervene, rather they offered the new principal an opportunity to be involved in the next Adelaide Thinkers in Residence Program with Professor Martin Seligman as the focus or pilot school for implementing positive psychology. Nor did the principal impose

this opportunity on the staff. He gave the leadership team time to read about Seligman and positive psychology and only with their full support did he put the opportunity to the rest of the staff to either endorse or refuse (Alice; Gavin). For the first time in many years the staff felt that they had a say in what was happening in the school, giving them a feeling of being valued and trusted. They said yes, almost unanimously. Not many knew much about Seligman and positive psychology, but everyone knew something needed to change (Alice; Barry). Only one staff member voted against the initiative, not because they were against positive psychology, or did not want to see change in the school; they had ethical concerns about working with Seligman due to his previous work experimenting on animals (Gavin). The teacher was excused from any activities involving Seligman and supported in their stance (Gavin).

2.4 Appreciative Inquiry

The very first experience of positive psychology was an abridged appreciative inquiry run by the principal and then deputy on day one of what schools call 'Week 0', the week before students return to school at the beginning of each year. They put two simple questions to the staff – what do we do well at IRHS? And what are we proud of at IRHS? This was not primarily an intellectual exercise, there was a large portion of it that related to feelings. For the first time staff were asked to focus on the positive instead of the deficit and the table conversations and brainstorming were considerable (Ruth). Two huge charts were produced, and staff members suddenly realised that they had things to be proud of and celebrate in the school.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) comes from the work of David Cooperrider and colleagues and has been shown to be successful in turning around failing businesses and organisations (Whitney, 1998). A full AI works through a cycle of exploration guided by the "4D's" (Cooperider &

Whitney, 2005, p.15). It begins with 'Discovery' – exploring the best of what is, which is what the questions put to IRHS staff explored. The second 'D' is 'Dream' – which invites participants to imagine the best possible future for the organisation. 'Design' – follows dream, where participants work together to plan their ideal and in the final 'D' – 'Destiny' participants begin a process of building and sustaining that ideal. At this stage the focus in the school was on discovery.

By focusing on the positives and planning how to improve, stakeholders engaged in AI are energised and more likely to be motivated and enthusiastic, sharing ideas and practices (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider et al., 2008) and building on elements of what already 'works' well. Traditional deficit change models encourage defensiveness, vulnerability and a discourse of blame, shutting down sharing and motivation (Arnold et al., 2022; Whitney, 1998). The AI approach marked a significant change in the headset of IRHS staff. Appreciative inquiry was simply the start of a complete re-culturing of the school, using positive education as a basis.

2.5 Positive Education

Positive psychology is the study of human flourishing (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Harvard Medical School, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Seligman, 2011; Seligman, 2013; Sheldon & King, 2001). Psychologists working in this field seek to understand what allows some people to go through adversity without succumbing to mental illness. They have noticed how some people grow through adversity, and on the basis of this phenomenon, seek to develop interventions that can help build this resilience for all people (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Terjesen et al., 2004). The term *positive education* refers to the practical application of the skills and interventions from positive

psychology in an educational setting (Knoop, 2013; Kristjansson, 2012; Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). It reportedly was first used in a conversation between Martin Seligman and senior staff from Geelong Grammar School (GGS) sixteen years ago (Norrish, 2015; Seligman, 2011).

There was no model for the school to follow in implementing positive psychology and very few resources available (Gavin). It was necessary for the school to build it 'from the ground up' which was a good thing to allow for the inclusion of all staff in the planning. To enable this, we facilitated the attendance of as many staff as possible to any *Thinkers in Residence* events and presentations offered as part of Seligman's residency. This included hiring buses to take the entire staff, teaching and non-teaching, and the governing council of the school to hear Seligman speak at the Festival Theatre one evening at the start of his residency. Students were taken to hear him speak at a daytime presentation and targeted staff attended other daytime events. These staff members then shared what they had heard and learnt with other staff. Articles by 'positive' psychologists were shared with all staff via emails and a library of positive psychology books gradually developed. When Seligman visited the school staff and students were able to volunteer to hear him speak and ask questions.

Representatives from local community organisations who worked with youth and other schools in the district were also invited to these sessions. Community knowledge was tapped into with local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) social workers and psychologists with knowledge of positive psychology providing voluntary evening sessions for staff, which were opened up to local primary school staff and community members. These were well attended. Every possible opportunity was utilised to expose staff to the ideas and concepts

behind Seligman's 'positive education' concept. A grant was applied for and won to send half the staff to train at GGS. GGS was the first school to implement positive education in Australia (Norrish, 2015), and the first in the world known to taken a holistic school approach. They worked with Martin Seligman and other experts in the field of positive psychology for a year before implementing a school wide program. In 2013 they began to offer a four-day positive education teacher training program based on their experiences. The following year another grant was used to bring GGS to IRHS to provide training for the rest of the staff, who had been unable to go to Geelong. By the end of four years every staff member, teaching and non-teaching, in the school had undertaken considerable professional learning in positive psychology and we had started to develop our own staff professional learning program for newcomers to the school. As teachers began to learn about the research-based practices of positive psychology some began to want to trial these in their classrooms. At first, we were cautious as we were not psychologists and did not want to do any harm through implementing positive psychology initiatives incorrectly, but at his second visit to the school Seligman said that we needed to take what we had learned and make it work for IRHS, so we let interested staff start trialling practices that leant themselves to implementation in a school setting.

2.6 What happened

The year 8 team were keen to develop a pastoral care program based on Character Strengths, relationships and mindsets, all from positive psychology, so they ran with it. As positive education leader in the school I provided resources and feedback and kept informed about what was being developed to make sure that it was true to the research, and no-one was doubling up, leading eventually to the development of a positive education curriculum scope and sequence for the school. The staff who had been to Geelong came back enthused and full of ideas. They

became the driving force behind the development of a year 8 – 12 year level program, based on positive psychology (see Appendix M). All of them, and some staff who had not been to Geelong, wanted to be on the positive education committee that I was establishing to support this work in the school. Of course, so many (roughly half the staff) was not reasonable, so we developed sub-groups with specific foci who reported back to a central committee. Once the GGS team had been to the school and trained the remaining staff there began a whole school curriculum change that saw positive psychology concepts and practices embedded into every subject in the school (see Appendix N).

Different teams of staff were collaborating to develop programs that would bring positive education to life in the school (Alice), working through the 4D cycle of AI, and a practice of working together, sharing resources, ideas and curriculum developed in the school (Barry). This continued and has been carried through to all curriculum development and review as part of normal practice in the school. What was happening as staff worked through the dream, design and destiny stages of AI was the development of practitioner action research. It was never formal or identified as this at the time, and rather than starting from a 'problem of practice', staff were starting from the school's strengths, as identified through AI, and building on these. As opposed to being led from above, the usual managerial approach, this process grew spontaneously out of the enthusiasm of numerous staff members to learn more about positive education and embed relevant strategies into their practice. I suspect that if we had said that we wanted teachers to undertake action research we may have had the usual pushback of 'we don't have time for this' however because this grew from the teachers themselves, and was never formal or named, this was not the case. Even those who were cynical about positive education got involved because

they were a significant minority and peer pressure was a motivating force – and even most of them eventually found something that resonated.

The value of this practice of collaboration was significant as it spread from the work on positive education to general curriculum and school development work. Collaboration and open sharing became part of 'how things were done' in the school (Barry). Positive education became embedded into every subject taught in the school and policies and procedures were reviewed with a positive psychology lens. It became embedded into every meeting and assembly through gratitude practices, appreciation of others, strength-based change processes and themes for presentations, and a regular part of professional learning.

Our student leaders learnt how to use appreciative inquiry and regularly ran AI Summits to plan their goals for the year as student leaders in the school. Prior to Covid, student leaders from other schools were invited and these summits were well attended (see Appendix P). Our student leaders also ran AI sessions for staff – usually when the focus was something strongly student related. AI became the default approach to planning and change in the school. Whilst it was sometimes a challenge to avoid falling into habitual deficit modes of working during the dream and design phases there were always staff members (or students) to redirect us to the strengths-based approach.

In his first year at the school the incoming principal had quickly established 'values' for the school as previously, there were none, and no vision statement. Talking with students and staff he chose to focus on 'Respect' – 'Respect for others, respect for self, respect for property and

respect for the school' – because respect was so obviously lacking, particularly respect for self and respect for the school. Once the cultural change brought about by positive education was fully embedded into the school we worked with all staff, students and parents to develop a vision statement for the school – ***To inspire young people to become active citizens who can achieve their full potential and flourish.***

The plan was to immediately move on to collaboratively develop new values for the school aligned with the vision statement and culture that had been developed. This was delayed by a couple of years due to the disruptive arrival of COVID but eventually the work went ahead, and new values were developed to replace the hastily constructed 'respect' values.

Inner Regional High School vision statement is underpinned by the following values:

Respect

Resilience

Perseverance

Community

The influence of positive psychology on the school's vision and values was clearly apparent.

Although initially the Department for Education supported our work to implement positive education a change in government in 2018 and subsequently department leadership, saw it cease to be valued or even acknowledged and occasionally even discouraged. Despite this we knew that it mattered to our students, staff and our local community, and the work remained a priority in the school and a key element of our site improvement plan (SIP).

We ensured that we covered all department mandated expectations – preparing thoroughly for all school reviews, preparing for and facilitating NAPLAN, participating in all central professional learning programs, and preparing the new Department mandated SIP with its two goals – one literacy and numeracy. When I introduced this plan to our governing council they were distressed, as they did not believe it covered what we valued as a school and community, which our current school plan did, nor did our staff and students, so we always added a third goal, one for wellbeing, which was consistently glossed over, briefly acknowledged or sometimes even ignored by our regional leaders (see Appendix O).

At the same time, against this background of neoliberal managerialism, we maintained a program of developing and reviewing our positive education curriculum, positive education professional learning, staff meetings focussed on appreciating and valuing staff, and the embedding of positive education throughout the school, maintaining a focus on what our school community had made clear they valued.

> As leaders, we relate to others in the context of the many uncertainties that we have limited to no control over; relationships included. What becomes critical for leaders within this uncertainty is the need to have a shared sense of purpose for our schools and educational organizations, as well as the tenacity to align current and proposed practices against this purpose. Of importance here is the leader's ability to read and intuitively respond to lived experiences events as they are unfolding (Giles, 2018, p. 50).

The principal responsible for introducing positive education moved to another school after twelve years and a new principal has recently been appointed to IRHS. In his first term in the school, he workshopped with staff about directions and priorities and one of the things they saw as important to retain in the school was positive education. As the science coordinator said – it is part of who we are and how we do things.

2.7 Conclusion

Over a period of two years IRHS went through what was clearly a significant change in how the school operated, how it was led, and how teachers, support staff, students and the community perceived the school. This changed way of being in the school was then nurtured and supported for over ten years. My lived experience of being-in this change is that how the change was implemented was as important in changing the culture or 'feel' of the school as positive education was as a catalyst. Over the remaining chapters of my thesis, I will explore the nature of this change and how it was experienced by the participants in this study.

3 Chapter 3: Reviewing the literature

3.1 Introduction

According to Dibley et al. (2020) "hermeneutic phenomenologists do not, like descriptive phenomenologists and grounded theorists, aim to refrain from engaging with the literature to avoid influencing the study, but to be 'always-already' connected with and informed by the literature" (p. 41). The main purpose of engaging with the literature "in hermeneutic research is to provoke thinking" (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p.14). Rather than presenting facts it is "to take the reader on their own journey of seeing, that they too may have their own call to think" (p. 21). This requires being attuned to what the literature is saying and being open to new ideas and thinking that emerge from it.

This literature review will initially establish the context of the study in the current global educational landscape, followed by an exploration of the key themes of school culture and positive education that speak to the study. My intent is to provide a scholarly background to the research, as well as identifying gaps in the current literature. I also hope to make apparent my journey of thinking as I engaged with the literature.

The impact of current neo-liberal policies in education on school leaders' and teachers' work and their sense of professional way of being and personal identity provides the essential context for this thesis. The influence of culture in educational settings on teachers' lived-experience of their work is set against this agenda. Positive psychology and its implementation in schools is

explored, addressing questions pertaining to what positive education is, why it is considered important in current times and the current body of research from the field.

3.2 Neo-liberalism as Context of Education and Improvement

Introduction

In seeking to understand leaders' and teachers' experiences it is necessary to understand the professional climate in which they work and the conflicting pressures they juggle. There is an increasingly data driven, centralised control playing out in education that places pressure on leaders and teachers to perform against narrow quantitative data sets. These neoliberal policies in educational management and the tensions these create are a major contributor to teacher stress (Ball, 2016b; Connell, 2009; Heffernan et al., 2022; McCallum, 2022; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024; Schaefer et al., 2014;). Neoliberalism is a term used to refer to the "capitalist reform through free market economic and social transformation" (Fuller, 2019, p.31). In education Fuller (2019) argues it is associated with "the privatisation and marketisation of the education system and the devaluation of professional knowledge" (p. 31), leading to managerialist, top-down practices. Under managerialism in education curriculum, policies and practices have become steadily more centrally controlled with little, if any, consideration of context, making it much harder for teachers to respond to local or individual needs. For many teaching is not a profession as much as a calling, which they go into because they want to make a difference (Hanlon, 2022). This reimagining of teachers' work has created additional stress and tension between what teachers believe and what is expected of them.

Managerialism in Education

Over several decades managerialist approaches to education have been embraced across many OECD countries, with consequent measurement and standards-based impacts on leaders' and teachers' work. According to Davies and Bansel (2007), neoliberal government policies like 'let the market decide', that treat teachers and leaders as policy objects rather than subjects and measure their performance based upon high stakes testing regimes, have been gathering momentum in schools since the 1980's. "Education policy was redefined to serve economic interests" (Wrigley et al., 2012, p. 96). This approach sees schools and universities reinvented as competitors in an educational marketplace, with education commodified as a good that can be bought just like any other industry (Connell, 2009; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Sachs, 2001). According to Ball (2000) under this system "(some) educational institutions will become whatever it seems necessary to become in order to flourish in the market. The heart of the educational project is gouged out and left empty. Authenticity is replaced by plasticity" (p. 10).

My research examines the development of a positive education approach as the driver of school change, in a school I worked in. This was not about the school trying to "flourish in the market" (Ball, 2000, p. 10), having created a fabricated 'plastic' image. The genesis of the change to positive education, from my research and experience, seemed authentic, connecting people who were previously disconnected. My investigation explored how, through positive education, the school attempted to reverse previous processes, processes that did result in relationships amongst staff and students being "gouged out and left empty" (p. 10). Previous processes in the school were about image and managerialist compliance with department policy, which embedded superficial relationships.

Neo-liberal education policies do more than commodify education, they create a paradox, using the language of decentralisation of control from government departments to schools, whilst putting in practice processes to enforce compliance with centrally imposed agendas (Ball, 2003; Sachs, 2001), leading to the adoption of narrow qualitative measures of educational quality with little to no consideration of context (Fuller, 2019; Jenlink, 2017; Lewis, 2017) or connected relationships within the school. One such measure is the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test, an annual test used across Australia to assess students (and schools) according to State and National standards, another is the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing program, which not only measures the performance of schools against schools in their own country, it ranks countries internationally. Teachers' work is thus under scrutiny against national and international standards set by quantitative point in time standardised testing of students. This concept of being 'constantly seen' is an increasing reality for educators today as they find themselves monitored and measured by these technologies of compliance and control. (Jenlink, 2017). "It is the fact of being constantly seen … that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault, 1995, p.187, cited in Bourke et al., 2015). In this climate of data driven accountability teachers and leaders are being coerced to meet centrally determined targets, that pay seemingly little attention to context (Selwyn, 2011). Blackmore (2004) traced;

> …the emergence of a particular bureaucratic discourse in the 1990s that, combined with specific strategies, re-shaped the identities of teachers, parents and students, and created a structure for 'downloading responsibility (and therefore blame) for outcomes to schools' (p. 273).

Within this systemic audit culture, quantitative data under the guise of an 'evidence-based' mantra, is highly valued, driving school and district reviews, with qualitative data, the stories

behind the numbers, often missing in action. Technology is being used to strengthen this control and accountability, "intensifying the managerial control of schools" (Selwyn, 2011, p. 473), rather than supporting schools. Fuller (2019) suggests that this "marketisation, managerialism and performativity of neoliberal education reforms damage education on a global scale" (p. 32). Biesta (2009) observes that "the past twenty years have seen a remarkable rise in interest in the measurement of education" (p. 33), and questions:

> Whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure. The culture of performativity in education – a culture in which means become ends in themselves so that targets and indicators of quality become mistaken for quality itself – has been one of the main 'drivers' of an approach to measurement in which normative validity is being replaced by technical validity (p. 35).

The focus on measurement and data has changed what is looked for and valued in education.

According to Ball (2016b):

> The first-order effect of performativity is to reorient pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes and are a deflection of attention away from aspects of social, emotional or moral development that have no immediate measurable performative value… (p. 1054)

For many teachers this requirement to focus on centrally collected data from standardised tests is seen as distracting them from their real work.

> The requirement to produce data for external scrutiny appeared, in teachers' eyes, to have shifted the emphasis from assessment for learning… towards assessment practices that emphasised performance rather than learning. (Cameron & Lovett, 2015, p. 156)

Impact on Relationships in Schools

Within a managerial policy orientation, professional accountability is moved from being self-imposed by the teaching profession itself, to being a top-down standardised system (Jenlink, 2017; Sachs, 2001; Selwyn, 2011). Teachers' "professional identity thus is a set of attributes that are imposed upon the teaching profession" (Sachs, 2001, p. 153). This pressure has changed the

nature of teaching and the identity of teachers (Ball, 2003; Bourke et al., 2015; Connell, 2009; Jenlink, 2017; Sachs, 2001; Thrupp, 2013). It has also changed relationships in schools, and educational communities, leading to hierarchical structures in which "the principal has moved from the role of senior colleague to one of institutional manager," with teachers "placed in a long line of accountability" (Sachs, 2001, p. 152). This creates additional stress on the relationship between teachers and principals, and principals and regional offices, as school leaders become managers who must walk a line between meeting departmental expectations and responding to real contextual needs (Ball, 2003; Giles & Yates, 2014; Sachs, 2001; Thrupp, 2013).

As a result principals in schools face daily challenges in trying to adhere to mandated expectations whilst not becoming subsumed by them. "I find that one of the most fundamental challenges of my job is trying to avoid becoming incorporated into market modes of thinking" (quote from correspondence with a US principal, Ball, 2016a, p. 1134). This was the struggle faced by the principal of IRHS when maintaining positive education in the school whilst adhering to mandated DfE requirements.

Neoliberalism in Australia

In Australia, neoliberal education policies have been universally embraced. "Australian education policy has, increasingly since the 1980's, reflected neoliberal economic and political thinking" (Angus, 2015, p. 396), which claims that "market competition forces schools to continuously improve their standards" (p.395). Angus argues that rather the reverse is the case and market choice has damaged education. Alternative educational ideas are quashed, and context is seen as unimportant as schools need "to meet and exceed mandated standards in high

stakes tests" (p.400) and schools are ranked according to their performance in highly limited data sets. These policies have a "major impact on school and teacher cultures" (p. 402).

Impact on School Culture

The culture created in schools by 'audit culture' (Connell, 2009, p. 217), does not encourage leaders and teachers who are prepared to take risks to respond to their local context but rather coerces teachers to conform to centralised expectations of them (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2007; Bourke et al., 2015; Connell, 2009; Sachs, 2001; Selwyn, 2011). Curriculum is narrowed and students who do not 'fit in' are alienated and unwelcome. Alternative ideas and ways of doing education are not valued (Angus, 2015; Ball, 2000; Fuller 2019; Rigney (ed), 2022; Wrigley et al., 2012).

Under neoliberal education policies and the "audit culture" (Connell, 2009, p. 217) that has emerged, the individual expertise and "the humanist model of the good teacher" (p. 218) are no longer valued. As Ball (2003) puts it: "Performance has no room for caring" (p. 224). "Teachers' work, and teacher education (is codified) in such a way as to make them auditable and allow control at a distance" (Connell, 2009, p. 222). Efficiency, productiveness and managerial skills that can be readily measured are given precedence. "In regimes of performativity, experience is nothing productivity is everything" (Ball, 2016b, p. 1054) **"…** it is now possible that the teacher in all of their complexity and individuality becomes a '3' – the ultimate reductionism of humanity to quantity".

Impact on Teachers Sense of Self

This commodification of education changes how teachers think about themselves and their work.

Teachers are represented and encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who calculate about themselves, 'add value' to themselves, improve their productivity, strive for excellence, and live an existence of calculation. (Ball, 2003, p. 217)

This reimagining of a 'good, professional teacher' into one who performs according to managerial expectations and produces 'strong' data impacts how teachers collaborate and work together. Social relations are disrupted as teachers are forced into competition (Ball, 1997).

As we adapt ourselves to the challenges of reporting and recording our practise, sociality and social relations are replaced by informational structures. We all know and value others by their outputs rather than by their individuality and humanity. It is not that performativity gets in the way of 'real' educational work: it is a vehicle for changing what real educational work is! (Ball, 2016b, p. 1054)

Teachers are also at risk of becoming seduced by the system into reinventing themselves into puppets of performativity. As Ball (2000) says: "There is something very seductive about being 'properly passionate' about excellence, about achieving 'peak performance'" (p. 10).

Furthermore, according to Ball (2003) managerialism and performativity in education does not simply impact on what educators do, it changes who they are. Teachers' sense of self – both professional and personal – is impacted. Fuller (2019) argues that "the teaching profession has sustained attack on mind, body and soul" (p. 32). This is expressed in an email sent to Ball (2016a) from a teacher he was in correspondence with:

My first introduction to 'accountability' was a (thank you for the excellent results) talk with a head teacher which kind of finally burst the bubble and destroyed any romantic idea I had that teaching was an art and honourable profession. It became very much a numbers game and I had to sail close to my moral and ethical boundaries to do well (p. 1133).

According to Ball (2016b) there is "a growing ontological insecurity; Both a loss of a sense of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do" (p. 1054) amongst educators,

faced with navigating the thin line between what they value as educators and what they are required to do as part of the education system. He asks: "What kind of self, what kind of subject have we become, and how might we be otherwise?" (2016a, p. 1133).

Concluding Thoughts on Impact of Neoliberalism on Teachers and their Work

Through reviewing the literature on neoliberal and managerialist policies in education I sought to establish the current context within which teachers and leaders work. This establishes an argument that there is something to be addressed in the current management and culture of the school system. It presents a picture of a system that undermines, rather than enhances, not only the work of teachers and leaders but also their sense of being and their ways of being-with-each-other.

3.3 The Impact of School Culture

Introduction

The impact of school culture is critical to my research, looking as it does into the change of culture that occurred at IRHS as it introduced positive education into the school. This was a consistent thread through my interviews. In this section of the literature review I was seeking to explore what is known about the impact of different school cultures and what type of culture is conducive to a positive learning environment.

What is Culture

The concept of culture can mean different things to different people. Some researchers use the terms climate and culture interchangeably, however McChesney and Cross (2023) make the distinction between them using research from Gruenert and Whittaker (2015) "[who] argue that

school climate describes what we do (our values and beliefs in action) and may change relatively rapidly within the bounds of existing culture, whereas school culture describes why we do it (our underlying values and beliefs) and only changes slowly" (p. 789). This is a useful way of looking at school culture for the purposes of this research. Deal and Peterson (2016) explain:

> Although hard to define and difficult to put a finger on, culture is extremely powerful. This ephemeral, taken-for-granted aspect of schools, too often overlooked or ignored, is actually one of the most significant features of any educational enterprise. Culture influences everything that goes on in schools: how staff dress, what they talk about, their willingness to change, the practice of instruction, and the emphasis given to student and faculty learning.

> Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up overtime as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges. This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools. This highly enduring web of influence binds the school together and makes it special (p. 163).

The relational nature of schools and their school cultures are constantly in a state of flux, with different sub-cultures existing side by side in the same school (Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Therefore, the importance of understanding and taking into consideration human relationships in a school is essential to understanding and building school culture (Adams, 2013; Giles & Yates, 2014). School culture impacts all members of a school community, affecting student and teacher wellbeing and engagement in and with learning.

> While taken for granted and subliminal, an organisation's culture has a significant influence on the everyday experiences of those that participate in the environment. (Giles & Yates, 2014, p. 103).

The role of leaders, particularly the principal, in establishing the culture of a school is widely recognised in the literature (Cann et al., 2022; Deal & Peterson, 2016; McChesney & Cross, 2023; Rehal & van Nieuwerburgh, 2022;). According to Law et al., (2024) Sinek tells us that "… the main question [successful leaders ask] is *why* something should be done. This leads then to the question of how to do something, and finally, what to do. It is less what they do but much

more how and why they do what they do" (p. 2), aligning practice with values, ethos, and underlying motivation.

The Impact of School Culture

There is general agreement amongst researchers that the culture and/or climate of a school has a major impact on staff engagement, wellbeing and sense of belonging (Cann et al., 2022; Heled et al., 2016; Law et al., 2024; Lee & Louis, 2019; Rehal & van Nieuwerburgh, 2022; Williams et al., 2015; Wrigley et al., 2012), with its flow on impact on students. A positive culture leads to greater trust, collaboration, willingness to take risks and embrace change, and achievement, whilst a negative school culture leads to a loss of collegiality and resistance to change (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Heled et al., 2016; Lee & Louis, 2019). Cameron and Lovett's longitudinal study of promising early career teachers indicates that the culture of a school is an equally important factor in teacher job satisfaction, engagement, and realisation of potential. Teachers in this study reported the importance of feeling valued, being part of the decision-making process, and learning and working collaboratively. Cameron and Lovett concluded:

> …teachers are most likely to thrive … in strong collaborative cultures that foster teachers' belief in themselves as learners and that prioritise teacher wellbeing (2015, p. 161).

Teachers will feel more supported and be more resilient in an environment that values teacher wellbeing, care, and resilience (Granziera et al., 2023; Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024). Moreover, if a school culture puts energy into building teacher wellbeing the school itself will benefit as the teachers will be more positive, develop stronger relationships with students, have more energy and be more willing to collaborate and implement

change (Granziera et al., 2023; Hine et al., 2022; Lovett & Lovett, 2016; McCallum, 2021; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024; Virtanen et al., 2019).

A negative school culture leads to staff who are resistant to engaging with new ideas, are negative towards and about colleagues, feel hopeless (Deal & Peterson, 2016) and lack the energy to put into teaching and learning (Granziera et al., 2023), and are more likely to consider leaving the profession (AITSL, 2024). According to Hine et al. (2022), teachers are more likely to thrive when they have "respectful and inclusive leadership and workplace cultures that embraced diversity and valued collaborative approaches."

The Impact of Neoliberalism on School Culture

The type of culture created through the impact of neoliberal policies in schools is contrary to the types of culture indicated in the research as being conducive to both teacher and student engagement with learning. Teachers are unwittingly caught up in promoting this agenda (Smyth et al., 2003), even when they are attempting to "implement more egalitarian ideals" (Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p. 378).

In discussing neoliberal policies and culture Deal and Peterson begin their book on school culture with "'If only schools would be run more like businesses with more accountability and data to measure results.' It is a phrase we hear all too often. It haunts many school principals and teachers, making them feel like they're missing something or following the wrong path" (p. 1, 2016) before going on to look at several successful businesses that illustrate the point that it is not attention to data and accountability that led to these successes but a strong, positive culture where the 'why' is crucial to the business ethos.

This is supported by Williams et al. (2015) who observe "business has shifted from a concentration on financial capital to a concentration on human capital (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002) suggesting that an organisation's people are critical to its innovation, performance and competitiveness" and that "increasing evidence from the field of positive psychology suggests that optimal levels of wellbeing influence positive outcomes for employees and organisations" (p.1). Their research, and that of others (Cann et al., 2022; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Lee & Louis, 2019; Wrigley et al., 2012), supports the premise that a positive school culture will have far more impact on school improvement than top-down accountability measures.

Enabling School Cultures

Adams (2013) positions the importance of a culture of collaboration, collegiality and trust as central to building capacity, and teacher and student efficacy and learning. In his study of capacity building in schools, Adams identified the importance of 'collective trust' between all members of a school community – leaders, staff, students, parents – as an essential element in allowing schools to work together and take the risks necessary to improve practice. Neoliberal "carrot and stick" (Adams, 2013, p. 376) approaches to increase accountability and raise standards, encourage fear and a tendency on the part of teachers to retreat into their classrooms, reducing collaboration and collegiality, whilst investing in understanding and building social relationships in schools will increase trust, promoting collaboration and building capacity. Wrigley et al. (2012) also identify collaboration, strong ownership, and collegiality as crucial in implementing school change, as well as a "clear sense of the direction and aspirations of the school as a whole, including wider community involvement." (p. 101) and a "shared sense of educational purpose" (p. 102).

Metaphors to Discuss Culture

Some researchers use metaphors to discuss the impact of culture in schools. Rehal and van Nieuwerburgh (2022) in their study of human flourishing use an 'ecological model' as a metaphor and found that "the flourishing educator (tree) is sustained by the sun (leaders earning trust), water (leaders demonstrating trust), and soil (leaders prioritising educator flourishing)" (p. 39). Connelly et al. (1997) use the concept of the landscape to discuss and understand "teachers' personal, practical knowledge" (p. 672), what goes on in schools, and the impact on teachers. They use the landscape analogy "because it captures the exceedingly intellectual, personal, and physical environment for teachers' work" (p. 673) and the role of "space, place and time" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 151). In their work they acknowledge that teachers' work is not bound by the classroom, that there are other parts of the 'landscape' in which they work and/or which are affected by their work. These include common places in schools – staffrooms, offices, foyers, carparks; and space outside school – homes, colleague's homes, social places. "A rich, deeper, more narrative understanding evolves from studying what we term the professional knowledge landscape. To understand teaching, we need to understand it in a complex environment." (Connelly et al., 1997, p. 673)

Within this landscape they discuss different stories that help develop an understanding of the layers of influences impacting on teachers' professional work. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; 1996). Among these stories are "scared stories", those that come from 'above' – theorists, departments of education, policies; "secret stories", the story of practice that teachers embrace freely within their own classroom; and "cover stories", the stories teachers tell about their practice in shared and public spaces, in which they seek to appear to "fit within

the acceptable range of the story of school being lived in the school" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 25). There are also 'school stories': school stories told about individual or groups of teachers; the story of the school as told in the local community, by other schools, within education departments; the school story as promoted from within the school – often by the school principal and leadership team. These stories all impact on a teacher's professional and personal life. This analogy has been useful to draw on for this thesis.

Concluding Thoughts on Impact of School Culture

Lee and Louis (2019) point out: "school culture as it is experienced by adult professionals is largely ignored in today's policy conversations in spite of accumulating evidence from multiple studies and countries that it is associated with student learning" (p. 92). They go on to conclude their research paper with: "In conclusion, we believe that there is a need to shift the policy conversations toward understanding how a strong culture plays out for sustaining school improvement" (p. 92).

How culture played out in the school was essential to understanding the change journey at IRHS and central to the stories told by participants. This section establishes the argument that there is much more to be done to understand the type of school culture that enhances engagement and learning for both teachers and students. It demonstrates that current educational policies promote a culture that is contrary to the type of culture research suggests to be central to promoting active engagement by teachers, and provides some of the elements to be looked for in a productive school culture.

3.4 Positive Psychology and Positive Education

Introduction

Given the focus of my research on leaders' and teachers' experience of change when positive education is implemented in a school, developing a deep understanding of positive education directed the final area for my literature review. This required looking not only at the literature around positive education, but at its base – positive psychology. In this I not only sought to explore what positive psychology and positive education are, but also what is currently known about how positive education has been experienced by leaders and teachers in schools.

Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology was formally founded in 1998 when Martin Seligman was elected chair of the American Psychological Association and declared that he intended to dedicate his presidency to promoting positive psychology. According to Seligman et al. (2009): "almost everything is better now than it was 50 years ago" (p. 294), but people are generally less happy and mental illness is on the increase. Hence, Seligman saw a need to study the aspects of psychological health that built resilience and wellbeing. From this understanding positive psychology has endeavoured to develop research-based skills and strategies that can be taught, which when practiced will help individuals to increase their wellbeing and become more resilient (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Wellbeing is defined in a variety of ways by researchers, Seligman uses the acronym PERMA, (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships (positive), Meaning and Accomplishment) (Seligman, 2011), which has been widely adopted in South Australia because of his residency, but there are other definitions. A simple one from Huppert and So (2011) is "feeling good and functioning well".

Although it was Seligman who has popularised positive psychology and led the relatively recent world-wide interest in the field, it is not a new concept. The term 'positive psychology' was first used by Maslow as a chapter in his book in 1958 (Hoy & Tarter, 2011), and many of the ideas of the humanist psychologists are reflected in positive psychology. Positive psychology can be traced all the way back to the philosophers of Greece, through John Locke and William James (Diener, 2009; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Pawelski, 2003). Despite this long historical tradition today's positive psychologists have distanced themselves from humanist psychology, considering their methods to be lacking in scientific rigour (Froh, 2004), leading to a focus on quantitative research methods.

Criticism of Positive Psychology

Critics of positive psychology have claimed that it extolls one personality type over another (Miller, 2008) and that its positive/negative language is "separatist" (Held, 2004, p. 10). Whilst Miller (2008) questions both the philosophical and research basis of positive psychology, Held (2004, 2018) has no argument with the research and interventions arising from it, rather with the designation "positive" and "negative". Wong (2011) also raises the issue of the positive/negative dichotomy in positive psychology, whilst supporting the importance of positive psychology to "answer the fundamental questions of what makes life worth living and how to improve life for all people" (p. 69).

Miller takes a narrow view of positive psychology, claiming that the science extolls "a cheerful, outgoing, goal-driven, status-seeking extrovert" (p. 591) In his critique Miller has likened positive psychology to 'self-help'. He has focused on a more widely promoted aspect of positive

psychology's messaging whilst not acknowledging others, which a more nuanced reading of the positive psychology literature would reveal (Held, 2005).

Held (2004) acknowledges the value of much of the research from the field of positive psychology, but takes issue with the implied problem of negativity, the criticism of humanistic psychology by positive psychologists as unscientific, and positive psychologists' separation of the field from the rest of psychology, calling for a more "integrative message" (p. 11). Held (2018) further argues that the "positive/negative dichotomy" (p. 334) of positive psychology is "ambiguous" and "inconsistent". Whilst calling the goal of positive psychology "laudable" (p. 335), she calls for the abandonment of the terms 'positive' and 'negative' in favour of a more comprehensive view of psychology. This reflects a comment from Diener (2003), who puts forward the proposition that if positive psychology does its job, it will no longer need to be 'positive psychology' but rather part of psychology as usual.

Positive Education

"Imagine if schools could, without compromising either, teach both the skills of wellbeing and the skills of achievement. Imagine Positive Education." (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 293). This notion comes in response to a world-wide increase in mental illness and suicide (WHO, 2018).

Positive education is the implementation of the concepts and strategies from positive psychology in an educational setting. The concept behind it is that if we want to improve resilience and wellbeing on scale these skills should be taught to children and young people in schools, via the teacher (Knoop, 2013; Seligman et al, 2009). This follows the US Army 'train the trainer' model,

where drill sergeants are taught positive psychology interventions which they then teach to their troops (Seligman, 2011).

An ongoing anecdotal criticism of positive education is that it is only for the rich. This has been compounded due to the well-publicised implementation in schools such as GGS and Saint Peters College. There have also been questions about the ability for it to be useful across cultures as well as differing socio-economic circumstances. In his research Adler has worked in different countries and cultures, across many socio-economic levels to implement positive education on scale concluding that "independent of social, economic, or cultural context, teaching well-being in schools at a large scale is both feasible and desirable" (2016, p. vi).

Research into Positive Education

A useful paper to get an overview of literature on positive education is the review of positive education science in research literature from 1904 – 2016 by Waters and Loton (2021), in which the authors identified key words and word stems to search for and identify research literature covering the topic of 'positive education'. In it they identified the "presence of positive education terms over a 100+ year period" (p. 1). Over this time there has been a small but steady growth of positive education in both psychology and education research, with it occupying 7% of the literature at the time of the review in 2016, with increased growth since the naming and promotion of it in 2009. Most of these studies have focused on college students (American term) and secondary school students. Methodology has favoured quantitative methods, "consistent with the initial calls from founders in PP [positive psychology] for the field to distinguish itself from other earlier positively oriented movements by focusing on empirical science" (Waters & Loton, 2021, p. 17).

The study identified that whilst "mental health interventions for students have been researched for more than a century" the majority of the early studies were "deficit oriented" (p. 2) focusing on targeted treatment of individuals. Gradually there was a shift that included "universal prevention" and "health promotion" (p. 2). The prevention programs were primarily for students considered to be at risk of developing mental disorders, whilst the concept of "promotion programs" for all students, regardless of where they sit on the mental health spectrum, is a more recent development, growing considerably since 2000 (Keyes, 2002). A 2020 review by Owens and Waters of positive psychology interventions in schools identified that many of such programs aim for both prevention and promotion (67%). Programs that target either prevention or promotion only are evenly spread at 18% and 16% respectively. (Owens & Waters, 2020). According to Waters and Loton (2021) positive psychology has played a key role in "education-based mental health research" (p. 3) since its launch by Seligman in 1998.

Waters and Loton (2021) claim that this research provides useful insight into the broad range of topics covered in positive education and identify that the many different mental-health promotion approaches that have developed since 2000 have more commonality than differences. This is a significant point as it speaks to the assumption by some that positive education is a specific program or approach when it is rather an umbrella term used to cover many different approaches to implementing wellbeing science in an educational setting.

This review of the literature found that over 86% of papers were empirical studies. 94.9% were quantitative, 3.3% mixed and only 1.8% qualitative, supporting earlier calls (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Waters & Stokes, 2015) for more qualitative research in the field. 96.5% of the studies

focused on students with only 5% looking at school staff and 3.6% including parents (NB some studies covered more than one group). The most common foci were student characteristics and student learning outcomes. Classroom instruction, pedagogy and curriculum featured next, but in a significantly smaller number of studies. School culture, school policy and government policy featured in less than 100 of the over 2800 articles analysed in depth. Whilst studies identified the age of students, they rarely included the context. The authors conclude: "qualitative research and studies that investigate context and systems in positive education will help expand the field" (Waters & Loton, 2021, p. 19). This identifies clear gaps in the literature in terms of research methods, foci, and contextualisation, which this thesis addresses.

Whilst this review was comprehensive in nature (covering over 100 years, initially identifying 74,496 papers, and analysing 2,805 papers in depth) it was collated in 2016 and does not cover more recent publications. According to Waters (Edutech 2023 presentation, Melbourne) positive education research studies have continued to expand in literature representation, therefore some of the gaps identified in this paper have begun to be addressed. Despite the exponential expansion of positive education literature described by Waters (2023) research addressing teachers' experiences of positive education is still sparse, as is qualitative literature and literature that addresses context.

School approaches to Positive Education

GGS was the first school in Australia to adopt positive education and the school that gave the initiative its name. Geelong took the Seligman approach of "Learn it, Live it, Teach it, Embed it!" (Hoare et al., 2017, p. 56). All staff at GGS were trained in positive education and training

was also provided to interested parents and community members to ensure a consistent message – 'Learn it'. The GGS approach is documented by Norrish (2015) and Hoare et al. (2017).

'Teach it' refers to teaching an explicit positive education curriculum, 'Live it' refers to staff taking it into their own lives and practice and role modelling the use of positive education initiatives, 'Embed it' refers to including positive education components into all aspects of school life - the regular school curriculum, school policies and ethos, meeting procedures, sports coaching, so that it becomes part of everyday life.

> Organisational literature emphasises the need for targeting both micro levels (eg, explicit Pos Ed lessons to provide the opportunity for students with the skills and competencies to support their own wellbeing) and macro levels (eg, school leadership committing to reviewing and updating policies to mirror the tenets of Pos Ed) for sustainable change to occur. (Hoare et al., 2017, p. 64).

Hoare et al. stress that each context is different and that schools should consider their individual "context, specific need, available resources and other key factors" (p. 57) when implementing positive education. They describe the implementation process followed by GGS, potential barriers schools may face, and the implications for practice. They conclude by saying that:

> sustainable Pos Ed is implemented through: sharing opportunities to learn and engage in the science of wellbeing, enacting evidence-based wellbeing practices in unique and authentic ways, providing students with dedicated time to discover and explore wellbeing, and developing school-wide policies and practices to support wellbeing over time (p. 66).

Whilst Hoare et al. provide an overview of the concept of "Learn it, Live it, Teach it, Embed it" as put into practice at GGS they do not provide any outcomes or student or teacher voice.

Norrish (2015) provides more detail in her book on the GGS journey. Although teacher and student voice are recorded through the book the focus is on student responses and outcomes, not personal reflections on what positive education may have provided for the teachers themselves. Only two quotes give some sense of the impact on teachers.

> At the end of the first nine-day training course, there was a fantastic buzz about the group. You could see how it resonated with people. I had presumed this was going to be an intellectual exercise that people would engage with on a cognitive level. This was not like that. There was an intellectual element, but there were also emotional, psychological, and personal elements. That caught me by surprise: that people could see there was a way of changing their own lives through this (Simon Meek, principal, quoted on p. 20).

> When you are making such a commitment to positive education it needs to be authentic. It can't just be taught; it also has to be lived. (Simon Haigh, Head of Barrabool House, quoted on p. 36)

A case study by Waters and Johnstone (2022), looking at pre and post COVID wellbeing in one school is one of the few papers that takes a qualitative approach and includes teacher voice. The school implemented a whole of school approach to embedding positive education, with the goal to make it part of the DNA of the school with a common language and understanding across all aspects of the school community. This follows the approach of GGS, as described by Norrish (2013; 2015) and Hoare et al. (2017).

The school had just completed well-being testing of staff and students when COVID-19 hit, putting them in an excellent position to complete before and after assessment of the positive education interventions implemented. With the onset of the global pandemic the school (Ravenswood) was conscious of the need to provide support for students' mental health and resilience during lockdowns and remote learning. The paper aims to "provide a descriptive case study of one school's positive education approach before and during the COVID-19 pandemic"

(p. 64). The paper outlines the processes taken by the school to embed positive education approaches across all aspects of school life using the SEARCH (Strengths, Emotional management, Attention and awareness, Relationships, Coping, Habits and goals) framework (Waters, 2019) and PERMAH (H added to PERMA and standing for Health). All staff, teachers and ancillary, completed the SEARCH training, with follow up professional learning. This is a useful addition to the literature, which often focusses on the outcomes with only brief mention of process.

Although the paper includes teachers' voice they discuss the impact of the initiative in the school, rather than any personal impact, with comments like: "At my former school, we took a scatter gun approach to positive education. We did a lot of good things, but it was piece-meal. The SEARCH framework has allowed us to know that all the girls are getting a consistent message, no matter what year level" and "Because we all speak the same language, we can talk to them about their well-being in ways they understand." One teacher referred to it as a "way of life" (p. 70), hinting at it going beyond the school. The study concludes that:

> having a positive education framework, training all staff, having both students and staff well-being initiatives and cultivating a common language for positive education are core processes that create a sustained and adaptive culture of wellbeing (p. 72).

The approach taken by GGS and Ravenswood is supported by research into positive education approaches. Reviews into the PENN resiliency program, an eight to twelve week program for adolescents based on the adult version of the program and designed to be run in schools often by outside facilitators, have shown that although participants show improved wellbeing, school attendance and improved grades in Maths and English in immediate post program testing (Challen et al., 2011; Gillham & Reivich, 2012) any impact on depression and attendance had

been lost at twelve months post program and by two years all impact had gone. A further review of the PENN resilience program, implemented in the United Kingdom as the UK Resilience program concluded that there was "no evidence that universal PRP or its derivatives reduce depression or anxiety and improve explanatory style… therefore large-scale roll-out of PRP – in its current form – cannot be recommended." (Bastounis et al., 2016, p.46). They recommended that there was a "need for optimizing teachers' capacity to deliver such programs" and that teachers "capacity and enthusiasm are critical for the delivery and sustainability of such programs" (p. 46). This indicates that the short-term intervention approach does not work in the long term and a more embedded, integrated approach, such as that taken by GGS and Ravenswood is called for to have long lasting impact on students, and any impact on staff. This is supported by increasing research showing that if the teachers are not role modelling and 'living' the skills they are teaching, the impact is likely to be minimal (Adler, 2016).

St Peters College in Adelaide also took a whole of school approach to embedding positive education, seeking to create a 'positive institution' (Waters & White, 2015). The school used appreciative inquiry (AI) to develop a collaborative, strengths-based approach in the school, involving all staff in the process. AI is an approach to change that focuses on what an organisation does well and builds on this to improve, rather than looking at what is wrong and trying to fix it. Through using AI staff were involved in decision making and had ownership of what was developed. As a result of using an appreciative lens there was an increase in collaboration across staff groups in the school who would not previously have worked together and an increase in staff noticing what was going well in the school and what students were doing right.

Allison et al. (2021) argue that positive education must move beyond individually focused positive psychology interventions to a focus on "collective flourishing" (p. 395) due to the interconnectedness of human beings. "Various studies demonstrate that wellbeing occurs as a group phenomenon" (Allison et al., 2021, p. 396). They claim a need to "move towards seeing the classroom as a system that can build or detract from flourishing" (p. 396) and advocate for each teacher to be "a change agent who curates his/her classroom in ways that support both learning and wellbeing." They argue for teachers to create an environment in their classrooms that fosters student wellbeing.

> Various socio-ecological factors have been found to shape student wellbeing, including the school environment (Goldspink et al., 2008), classroom climate (Walker, 2011), teacher wellbeing (Gu & Day, 2007), teacher-student relationships (Cornelius-White, 2016). The emotional environment that occurs among peers (eg sense of care, respect, trust among students) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2017) and a climate of connectedness (Allen et al., 2016a) (Allison et al., 2021, p. 396).

Much of what is discussed in the paper is consistent with good teaching practice with the addition of integrating practices that intentionally build wellbeing. The focus in this paper is on the classroom, as opposed to whole of school practice, and how teachers can build an environment and practice to support student wellbeing in their own classroom. It does not include teacher wellbeing. From the few recent studies that have emerged with a focus on teacher wellbeing we start to get a glimpse of the impact positive education can have on staff.

Impact of Positive Education on Teachers

In a study investigating the impact of teachers participating in a brief strengths-based program on the social and emotional outcomes of their elementary students, seven teachers cofacilitated a ten-week strengths-based positive psychology program with their classes. Three of the seven also undertook a teacher-based strengths course. Whilst most teacher reflections collected during the

study were classroom based all three teachers who completed the strengths-based course reported feeling positive changes in their own happiness and in their relationships with their students (Headley, 2018). Of the four who had only co-facilitated two said they would continue to implement practices with their students, but none reflected on their personal experiences. This would appear to indicate that it is not enough to expose teachers to positive psychology interventions through classroom practice facilitated by others; to impact their wellbeing it is necessary to provide wellbeing training targeted to the teacher.

In her study of introducing teachers to new ways of utilising their signature strengths, McCullough (2015) found that participants' work-place satisfaction and feeling of flourishing improved over the course of the intervention, even more significant was a decrease in stress levels.

Finney's (2020) study focused on the impact of positive education practices on students and found that the initiative also benefited the culture of the entire school. The principal reported increased teacher collaboration and a warmer, friendlier more caring school climate. Teachers reported that there was a decrease of student behaviour issues, an improved school climate and an increase in teacher and student voice. This did not happen overnight, with the principal pointing out that it took two years before the school had gained complete 'buy-in' to positive education from staff and the community.

Other studies have shown that teachers experience both personal and professional growth after completing positive education training. (Brunzell et al., 2022; Rahm & Heise, 2019; Sandholm et

al., 2022; Waters & Stokes, 2014). Given that teachers are the most significant influence on student learning that we can control (Hattie, 2003) and "high levels of wellbeing are associated with the additional benefits of improving teachers' professional performance," (Rahm & Heise, 2019, p. 1), and teacher retention is an issue world-wide (McCallum, 2021), investing in building teacher wellbeing would seem to be essential.

Teachers involved in a Finnish study (Sandholm et al., 2023) participated in five days of positive psychology-based training, which incorporated opportunities to plan how to implement what they were learning for themselves into their teaching. Data was gathered via learning diaries and a questionnaire. Participants reported that positive education supported improved student relationships, relationships with students and a more positive atmosphere in their school. Whilst many benefits participants reported were work related, participants reported using positive education in emotional and social situations. Over a third of participants "described having more positive thought patterns overall, and that it was easier to hang on to a positive perspective in challenging times" (p. 245), a quarter felt that they had developed professionally, and many reported an increased awareness of their own wellbeing. Some participants also reported increased collegiality and sharing between colleagues following the positive education training.

> We have become better at seeing each other and giving feedback. We try to point out the positive things that have happened during the week. Try to solve problems together. Feels like we have a warmer and more positive atmosphere at school (Sandholm et al., 2023, p. 246, participant quote).

The study also looked at challenges teachers faced during the project. Whilst most participants did not list any challenges those who did found a major one was the time and support provided in

their workplace. For some the response of leadership in their school was an obstacle, supporting the need for a whole of school approach to implementing positive education.

A German study (Rahm & Heise, 2019) focusing on teacher wellbeing involved teachers in one full day and a series of training exercises designed to build subjective wellbeing over a five-week period, found that teachers in the study showed a "significantly higher increase in *frequency of positive emotions…life satisfaction…*and *flourishing*" (p.9) than a control group. They also showed a correspondingly significant decrease in negativity and emotional exhaustion. The improvements in the participants' wellbeing continued to be recorded at 1 month, 2.5 months and 5 months post intervention, however further comparison with the control group was not carried out at five months. Comments from the participants include: "I can perceive good things in my environment better than before the training," "I experience more positive emotions than before the training," "I can handle negative emotions better than before the training," "I have become more satisfied through the training," (p. 12). Whilst this study provides evidence of benefits to participants of participation in the training teacher voice is minimal, relying on more quantitative data from survey analysis.

Among the few studies that include the voice of participants are Waters and Stokes (2015) qualitative study of two gratitude interventions, a gratitude diary and a gratitude letter, with school leaders, and Brunzell, Waters and Stokes (2022) paper on teacher perspectives when learning trauma-informed pedagogies. Participants in Waters and Stokes 2015 study reported positive aspects and challenges of both interventions trialled but overall, the study found both

interventions beneficial to their wellbeing, by allowing them to "better balance the positive and negative aspects of work in a way that broadened their perspective of school," (p.15).

Participants commented:

> If not for the gratitude exercise, my mind would have been stuck, ruminating on the fight I had to break up in the school yard. Instead, after that incident, I made myself walk through the grounds and deliberately notice all the things to be grateful for: the children who were cooperating and playing in a friendly manner, the teachers on yard duty who were laughing with the students, the student who had cleaned away his rubbish.

> When I consider how I can make a difference in my own school, I have come to the realisation that I need to stop focusing my attention exclusively on how I can fix what is wrong about the school and also concentrate on what is right about it, what is working well and how we can make it even better (p. 10).

> On some days I actually had difficulty finding three good things that happened in my day and I certainly did not have the presence of mind to savour these moments (p. 11).

The final comment reflects the principal challenge participants reported.

Brunzell, Waters and Stokes 2022 used interviews and individual journals to track teachers' experiences when undertaking Trauma Informed Positive Education (TIPE) training. The results showed two groups: teachers who employed their learning both personally to improve their own wellbeing, and subsequently in their teaching practice; and teachers who only employed their learning in the classroom, focusing on their students. At the end of the study the first group reported improved self-regulation and wellbeing. One participant said: "I feel like [TIPE] is more about us than it is for [students]" (p. 6). Another reflected on how his attitude "becomes contagious" (p. 7). Teachers who only implemented TIPE in their practice without taking it on for themselves reported improved relationships with students but "reported either no change or decreasing wellbeing at work" (p. 5).

These studies show positive results following training teachers in positive psychology interventions for themselves and support the need for more research to be done on the impact of positive education on teacher wellbeing at a time when student and teacher distress and trauma have been rising as a result of the impact of COVID-19 (Brunzell et al., 2021).

Concluding Thoughts on Positive Education

The link between positive psychology and education only began to emerge in research after 2010, and when IRHS began its journey there was limited discussion about it (Kristjansson, 2012). Despite promising short-term results, any long-term impact had yet to be determined (Challen et al., 2011; Kristjansson, 2012). At IRHS we were primarily reliant on positive psychology research and had to work out how to apply it in a school setting ourselves.

Reviewing the positive education literature identified a clear space within which my research sits – the lack of research on the impact of implementing positive education on leaders and teachers in schools. Emanating from the field of psychology, most research on positive education to date has privileged quantitative methods despite calls for more qualitative studies (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Waters & Stokes, 2015) and has focused almost exclusively on the impact of strategies on students. It is essential that leaders' and teachers' voices be heard, given their critical role in the positive education agenda. This research addresses these concerns by exploring a school's initiatives to re-culture using positive education through capturing teacher and leader voice data. My research offers a new dimension to the scholarly conversation about positive education and organisational change because it provides insight from lived experience into the impact on leaders and teachers of a school's positive education change journey. It surfaces how the agenda is reconstituting professional and personal identities, workload issues, and their core business.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to provide context for my thesis in the literature and explore key concepts of neoliberal education practices, school culture and positive education. I have sought readings from a wide range of sources and perspectives and included those that have 'spoken' to me as a researcher, teacher, and leader. I hope these have taken readers "on their own journey of seeing" (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 21).

Through my review I have developed an argument for the importance of my research by placing it in the context of the current educational climate and identifying how it adds to the existing literature in the field of positive education. In the first section I established the current ideological context of education and sought to unpack current neo-liberal, managerialist educational policies and their impact on teachers' and leaders' life worlds. The second section explored questions of what is culture? How do leaders impact on culture? What is the potential impact of culture on teachers and leaders? and what is an enabling school culture? The third section looked at defining positive psychology and education, the history of the field, critiques, and an overview of current research, establishing the gaps in the research.

My study gives voice to a critical element in the positive education agenda, which has had little attention given to it in the research to date. It looks below the surface of leader and teacher behaviours to unearth the hidden meanings and experiences of the phenomenon of a changing school culture to the leaders and teachers involved, seeking "understanding about the essence and the underlying structure of the phenomenon" (Merriam & Tidsell, 2016, p. 24). In doing this

it gives voice to the leaders and teachers, who are critical in implementing positive education and

school change but have been largely overlooked in the research to date.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

I came to doctoral research with a story to tell. A lived story of school cultural change, which was embraced by staff in a way I have never seen before or since in over thirty years of teaching. This change came about through the implementation of positive education in a school. I was pivotal to this change, facilitating it, encouraging it, and nurturing it, but whilst I 'led' the change, I did not control it. In this chapter I describe my role, involvement, and my own reflexive thinking about the research.

4.2 The Change

The change at IRHS came from the teachers and support staff themselves. They became the driving force that enabled the change to happen. The new culture at the school grew from the ground up through the enthusiasm and positive energy of the staff. I have been integral to this collaborative journey and as such I see myself as Blaikie's "Mediator of Languages" (2010, p. 51), where the researcher is not a detached observer, but is actively engaged in interpreting the accounts provided by participants in the study. My role implicates me in subjective bias, and possible influence over potential participants. Whilst it is essential that I am aware of my own bias and potential blind spots I am part of this change story. It is important that I remain open to the bias and assumptions that I bring to the research. "Who one is as a researcher is fundamental to the thinking of research" (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1390), "from the very outset we put aside any claim that our research will be objective, simplified, scientific concepts of truth" (p. 1391), as according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) "all qualitative research is interpretive" (p. 23). I will

need to be conscious of this as I record participants' stories in order to be true to each individual's experience.

Due to my being central to the change in the school I sought appropriate research methodologies that would allow my lived experience of being in change to emerge as part of the research. Autoethnography, a method that "begins with a personal story" (Wall, 2008, p. 39) and gives "voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding" (p. 38), provided the opportunity to incorporate aspects of the story and context that would enrich understandings and give a clearer picture of the cultural change that occurred. Hermeneutic phenomenology, a method that seeks to uncover hitherto hidden meanings (Smythe et al., 2008; van Manen, 1990), involves deep reflection and interpretation, and "attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld" (van Manen, 1990, p. 11), was the ideal methodology to use to uncover the rich experiences of teachers and leaders through this change. The two research approaches, hermeneutic phenomenology and autoethnography, speak to one another, allowing greater possibility for rich understandings of how a change agenda is implemented in a school and its impact on leaders and teachers. In this chapter I explore these methodologies and their application to this research thesis.

4.3 Theoretical Framework

Research on positive education has privileged quantitative methods, and a positivist stance, coming from the field of psychology. This study seeks to add to this emerging body of knowledge by providing a qualitative autoethnographic account of one school's change journey, prior to using a phenomenological approach to seek leaders' and teachers' experiences, to allow the essence of their stories to emerge, underpinned by "the belief that knowledge is constructed

by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23).

Cresswell (2009) describes the use of two paradigms in this qualitative study as a "sequential transformative strategy" (p. 212). It involves two phases – the first using a theoretical lens of social science theory (autoethnography) to establish the context. It then moves into lived experience phenomenology with the selected participants. This gives voice to diverse perspectives in the context of an organisational change agenda. The research explores greater understandings about the impact of positive education on the leaders and teachers engaged in this whole school agenda. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of positive education at a particular school as experienced by the participants than possible with a single method approach.

Adams et al. (2015) describe autoethnography as a "research method that uses a researcher's personal experiences to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences" (p. 1). It does not reveal a 'truth' but rather allows one to explore different interpretations of a situation to develop deeper understandings (Rogers, 2016). This "intersection between the personal and societal… offers a new vantage point from which to make a unique contribution to social science" (Wall, 2008, p. 39). By incorporating my personal account of the school's implementation of positive education, I was able to explore aspects of the change journey that might otherwise remain hidden, which add insight and context to the interviews. By using autoethnography I was able to 'witness' and identify things that an outsider may miss (Ellis et al., 2011). This helped to open a wider range of perspectives and understandings.

Autoethnography is used to give context to the study, exploring the implementation and impact of positive education in one school from an insider perspective.

In seeking to understand leaders' and teachers' lived experiences of being in change through the implementation of positive education, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was appropriate as it "offers a method for accessing the difficult phenomena of human experience." (Giorgi, 1997, p. 238). This approach "calls into question that which is taken for granted" (Crotty, 1998, p. 82) allowing new understandings and interpretations of the phenomenon in question to emerge, providing deeper insights into change in schools as experienced by those expected to implement it. Unlike Husserlian phenomenology it does not require a 'bracketing' of the researcher's experiences but acknowledges the impossibility of this, using those experiences to inform the process and provide insight in the search for meaning (Gadamer, 2013). Therefore, my role in this change became part of the story.

Phenomenological research is "discovery oriented" (van Manen, 1990, p. 29), in which the researcher seeks new, or hidden aspects of the phenomenon of interest, seeking "something that does *not* show itself initially and for the most part, something that is *concealed* in contrast to what initially and for the most part does show itself" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 33). Giles (2008) describes the phenomenological researcher as being "part of the contemplative research process" (p. 80) "attuned to my prejudices and their influences as well as the movement of the phenomenon." This reminded me that I was part of the story and needed to be aware of my fore-understandings and how these influenced the way I read people's stories and how they may cloud or reveal the phenomenon. My role as researcher was to engage with the nature of change

as experienced by leaders and teachers in a school to unearth that which is often hidden or overlooked. I was seeking ontological understandings of the human experience of being in change.

4.4 Methodology

Autoethnography

Autoethnography "offers nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about *particular* lives, experiences and relationships rather than *general* information about large groups of people" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 21). It provides "insight into social experiences that we cannot observe directly, because the experiences occur in their own time, uninterrupted by a researcher's presence" (p. 32). By using autoethnography I was able to provide insight into pivotal moments of lived experience that gave background to my phenomenological research, which could have been missed by an outside researcher. According to Coghlan, (2013), insider researchers are "immersed in the 'swampy lowlands' where problems are messy and confusing" (p. 122). As an insider researcher I have what Coghlan calls "practical knowing" (p. 124), which is human experience in a particular setting. Although messy, insider research, using autoethnography, allowed me to research and write "from the lived, inside moments of experience" allowing me "to describe an experience in a way that 'outside' researchers never could" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 31). This insider knowledge allowed me to provide insight into key staff experiences at IRHS that form a basis of understanding to the stories of teachers and leaders that emerged from the phenomenological stage of the research.

The autoethnographic phase of the research was designed to provide the context, which I saw as important to underpin the stories that may emerge. I began by reflecting on my own experiences

of the change journey and kept an ongoing reflection throughout the research using a journal. I

also kept a record of relevant happenings in the school that spoke to the research in some way,

and reviewed artefacts such as the IRHS positive education blog. By incorporating my personal

account of the school's implementation of positive education, I was able to explore aspects of the

change journey that may otherwise have remained hidden, which added insight and context to

the interviews. Aspects of the findings in the autoethnographic phase of the research helped

inform the focus in the semi-structured phenomenological interviews phase.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

> From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we
> experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings (van
> Manen 1990, p. 5).

According to van Manen (1990) "phenomenological research begins with the lifeworld" (p. 7).

He recommends starting from one's own experiences as these "are immediately accessible to me

in a way that no one else's are" (p. 54). This sat well with my intended research as I wanted to

explore the shared journey we had been on at IRHS and uncover teachers' and leaders' lived

experiences of it. In undertaking hermeneutic phenomenology, I sought to go beyond

description, seeking the essence of the experiences described, the hidden meanings and

understandings, the taken for granted and overlooked. "Phenomenological research is a lived

experience for researchers as they attune themselves towards the ontological nature of

phenomenon while learning to "see" pre-reflective, taken-for-granted, and essential

understandings through the lens of their always-already fore-understandings and prejudices (van

Manen, 1990)" (in Giles, 2008, p. 78).   This required stepping back and allowing space and time

for deep reflection, dwelling with stories I had gathered. Crotty (1998) stresses that the "initial

attempt to contemplate the immediate phenomenon" will not be the last (p. 85). This was certainly the case as I worked back and forth, writing, reflecting, reading, and rewriting.

"Phenomenological research/writing … requires a high level of reflectivity, an attunement to lived experience" (van Manen 1990, p. 114), in which the researcher attempts to "break free and see the world afresh" (Crotty, 1998, p. 86). This central concept of putting aside what we think we know and understand to allow space, through writing and reflection, for new understandings to emerge was significant to me and came through again and again in my reading on phenomenological research (Laverty, 2003; Smythe et al., 2008; van Manen, 1990). There is a Merleau-Ponty quote that I read early in my exploration of hermeneutic phenomenology that captures this concept really well for me – that if we break free from our preconceptions it awakens a "wild-flowering world and mind" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 181, quoted in Crotty, 1998, p. 80). For me, this has been a touchstone to remember, particularly when attempting to undertake my research when working full-time as the deputy principal in a large inner-regional school through Covid. In the end I took a year's study leave to allow time for focusing my thoughts on my study, reflecting and writing, to allow space for the essence of participants' experiences to emerge. There is no set procedure or path to follow in doing hermeneutic phenomenological research, "the method of phenomenology is that there is no method" (van Manen, 1990, p. 30), rather the researcher is led by the research, using methods appropriate to the phenomenon of interest.

Giles (2008) describes phenomenology as philosophy and method brought together "in an ongoing dialogue" (p. 80). It is not "understood as a set of investigative procedures but rather as

methods that are contingent upon the phenomenon in question." He describes it as unlike any other research approach, as a "turning towards the phenomena rather than a preoccupation with research techniques" (p. 80). This lack of prescribed steps to follow may have daunted me, but I found that through conversation with my supervisors, reading and reflection on my processes I did not feel that there was any lack of direction – often next steps would come to me as I worked.

4.5 Strategy and Design

The phenomenon in question was leaders' and teachers' lived experiences of change as a school consciously re-cultures through the implementation of positive education, a change I was part of. The focus is the experiences of change by leaders and teachers, the context is one school's cultural change using positive education as a catalyst. This guided the plan for my research. This research involved one secondary school, Inner Regional High School (IRHS). The selection of this school was based on the experience of implementing positive education over the past twelve years. Focusing on IRHS alone was due to the unique position of IRHS, being the first public school in SA to fully embed positive education. This included reviewing policies and procedures with a positive education headset, developing an explicit positive education curriculum and embedding aspects of positive education into the regular curriculum. Previously similar work has only been done by a limited number of elite private schools with substantial funding to support the initiative. A maximum of 12 leaders and teachers, including myself, were to be interviewed. The criteria for selection were that all were leaders and teachers at IRHS who had been involved in positive education over a period of at least three years. I hoped to include some who were at the school before positive education, as well as some who had joined the staff since its implementation.

The study sought to understand the leaders' and teachers' experiences of change through semi-structured interviews with each individual staff member. Indicative questions were provided to participants prior to interviews to allow them time to consider their responses. During interviews, the participants were be encouraged to talk freely, with questions used as prompts when necessary to seek out their stories. This "less-structured format[s] assume[s] that individual respondents define the world in unique ways," (Merriam & Tidsell, 2016, p. 110) allowing different stories and experiences to emerge. Following the interviews a thematic analysis of leaders' and teachers' stories was used to look for emergent themes, initially working with one story at a time, then looking for themes that were common across the stories. The stories were pulled together using a table to provide an overview, assisting in identifying common threads and key themes (see Appendix F).

As an insider researcher I brought to the research my own prejudices and opinions. I became part of the research. Working with the stories, I was conscious of my fore-understandings or preconceptions. As the leader of positive education in the school I am very aware that I have a predisposition to view it in a positive light for the school. Both from my own observations, and those of staff and visitors to the school, the culture and tone of the school improved significantly from 2012 (the introduction of positive education) on. Student academic achievement and the perception of the local community about the school also improved, which was seen in higher South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) grades, greater SACE completion, higher grades in the middle school leading to raising the grade point average used to determine academic achievers (see Appendix Q) and increasing enrolments in the school (see Appendix R). In my thirty plus years as a teacher and leader I have never been involved in a change process

that enthused and energised such a large proportion of the staff as did the 'implementation' of positive education in the school and that more than ten years on teachers voted to be something they wanted to retain in the school. Therefore, I have a strong preconception that positive education brought about positive change in the school (included in chapter one). Dilbey et al. (2020) say "all understanding is interpretation in which we come to know through our own perspectives on the world – perspectives that are inclusive of our historical experience and taken for granted knowing" (p. 114). Many of the stories participants told were experiences that I had shared or was aware of. The shared nature of the change at IRHS is an essential part of the story. Positive education was not engaged with by one person working in isolation, it was a school wide initiative, 'grown' by staff members working together in small groups, teams, and whole staff collaborations. "Human experience occurs while interacting with others within a situation, one that is always changing, yet common meanings and shared experiences reside" (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 117). Whilst knowing all of this, it was important that I allowed the participant's voices to speak through their stories. I needed to be careful that I did not put my own experiences and presuppositions into others' stories. Seeking feedback from others on my interpretations and stories helped to avoid this. My involvement in a hermeneutic circle of analysis (Gadamer, 2013) with my participants and supervisors as the research data unfolded offered a check on my bias.

One of my fore-understandings was that teachers had taken what they had learnt from positive education into their own lives. I had expected this to dominate the conversations. Whilst it was certainly the case that all had taken aspects of positive education home it was not the dominant thread through the stories participants shared with me. The dominant thread was the impact of positive education on the culture of the school.

My fore-understanding about this was that implementing positive education had brought about positive change in the school. As I wrote and read, and re-wrote and re-read, as I discussed the stories and themes emerging with my supervisors and colleagues, I realised that it was much more nuanced. The 'how' of the implementation was as important, if not more so than the 'what'. Whilst subtle this concept changed my thinking and new signposts began to emerge from my reading of the interviews. I began to question what was different about how positive education had been implemented in the school and compare this with the more common top-down managerial model used when implementing DfE mandated changes.

When working with teachers' stories I found Clandinin and Connelly's (1998) concept of "stories to live by" (p. 149) useful. I recognised the "secret, sacred, and cover stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 24) as I read interview transcripts. 'Cover' stories, those that teachers tell in the communal areas in schools in which they present themselves as fitting in with the expectations of the school as being competent and capable, were present, but less frequent than stories of the school. I also recognised school stories, the 'story of the school' as it is told by the community, and the 'school story' as seen and promoted by those who work in the school. These concepts resonated strongly with me as I worked with the data and became a useful way to consider the stories that emerged from my interviews.

4.6 Research Participants

In the end seven leaders and teachers from IRHS, including myself, were interviewed. The criteria for selection were that all were permanent leaders and teachers at IRHS who had been involved in positive education over a period of at least three years. To collect a variety of experiences, participants were sought who had been at the school before the implementation of

positive education, and some who had come to the school since. Key leaders such as the principal and wellbeing leader were invited to be interviewed. Others were from various stages in their teaching career. The final participants were a mix of teachers and leaders who had been in the profession from over thirty years to some who had been teaching for less than ten. I have known all the participants for at least seven years, some for over twenty years and one for over thirty. No support staff were interviewed for the purposes of this study. I began by reflecting on my own experiences of the change journey and kept an ongoing reflection throughout the research using a journal. Aspects of the findings in the autoethnographic phase of the research helped inform the focus in the semi-structured phenomenological interviews phase.

Interview	Pseudonym	Age Range	Gender	Years teaching	Years at IRHS	Role at IRHS
1	Alice	45 - 55	F	25	19	Assistant Principal
2	Barb	60 - 70	F	40	20	Curriculum Leader
3	Barry	55 - 65	M	30	14	Wellbeing Leader/House Leader
4	Mandy	25 - 35	F	10	10	Teacher
5	Trish	40 - 50	F	20	8	Curriculum Leader
6	Gavin	50 - 60	M	25	11	Principal
7	Ruth	55 - 65	F	30	20	Deputy Principal

Figure One: Table of Participants

4.7 Collecting Stories

The stories of leaders and teachers were collected through semi structured interviews, with follow up meetings with the participants to check the accuracy of the transcripts and to discuss the emergent themes presenting. I planned for interviews to run for half an hour to an hour, but

found that as we got talking, they often went overtime. I always checked with participants about continuing and they were all happy to do so. Although I offered to hold interviews offsite at coffee shops or pubs, as advised by the ethics committee, most teachers preferred to be interviewed at the school, usually in their office or classroom. Participants were provided with sample questions prior to the interview, but whilst these were used for guidance the interview was led by the conversation and rarely stayed true to the questions provided. Due to the emergent nature of the research, the following questions are indicative of questions that featured in the interviews. Further examples of questions are in Appendix G.

- What have been your experiences as a leader and / or teacher as the school has implemented positive education?
- How have you embedded positive education in administration; curriculum; pedagogy; assessment; school culture?
- What have been the leaders' and teachers' experiences of being in specific organisational change?
- Can the involvement in positive education be a matter of integration rather than an addition?
- How have leaders and teachers engaged with the philosophy and/or practice of positive education?
- How have new staff been authentically engaged with an alternative philosophy?
- What is the nature of leaders' and teachers' experiences of the implementation of positive education in the school?
- What has been your best moment as a leader/teacher?

It was important that I remained open and allowed the conversations to lead me, rather than being led by the questions. Crotty (1996) describes phenomenological research as "leading of the researcher by the phenomenon" (p. 68). I followed stories as they unfolded and allowed questions to emerge from these as the process evolved.

Following the interviews participants were provided with the interview transcript and each story from the interview. These were then discussed either in person or in one case over the phone as the participant had moved away. The follow-up conversations were informal and took between fifteen minutes to half an hour. The stories were derived from the initial interviews with some being added to or amended after conversations with the participants. Further input was provided by participants through ongoing casual conversation in person and by email, often as participants thought of further ideas they would like to add, whilst this did not greatly impact the final crafted stories, they provided insight and guidance for my reflections on the stories as they emerged.

4.8 Discovering themes

A thematic analysis of leaders' and teachers' stories was used to look for emergent themes, seeking what spoke and told the story of their experiences. Initially each story was treated independently, paying attention not only to what was said, but what was left unsaid. Emergent themes and storylines were identified, however as I engaged with the stories more deeply and the phenomenon emerged, these themes changed. Giles describes the phenomenological approach as "starting from a particular story and extrapolating an interpretation that progressively moves to reveal ontological understandings" (2008, p. 83). It is here that what Smythe et al. (2008) describe as: "a journey in 'thinking' in which researchers are caught up in a cycle of reading-writing-dialogue which spirals onwards", will truly begin. It is "through such disciplined and committed engagement insights 'come'" (p. 1389).

I was looking to go beyond description, seeking the essence of the experiences described, the hidden meanings and understandings, the taken for granted and overlooked. Van Manen describes hermeneutic phenomenological research as being "fundamentally a writing activity"

(1990, p. 7). It is in writing that the researcher reflects on the storylines that have emerged and explores the phenomenon. This is also supported by Crotty (1998) who says: "in phenomenological research the researcher writes to understand" (p. 65). It is in the writing and reflection that new meanings and understandings emerge. "Working with the data is an experience of 'thinking'," "to play along is to go with the thoughts that excite, confuse, perplex. It is to let thinking find its own way, to await insights that emerge" (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1392), seeking hidden meanings, (Giles, 2008). At this stage of the research, I engaged deeply with the stories, writing and rewriting to develop the "high level of reflectivity, an attunement to lived experience" that van Manen (1990, p. 111) says is required, and keeping a record of my thinking in my journal. It is through the writing that the phenomenological researcher engages deeply with the phenomenon, allowing new insights and meanings to emerge.

> If we can free ourselves from the noise that tells us all that is already known as information then we may find ourselves amidst the clearing, the open space where thoughts are free to play and roam, where fresh insights emerge, shyly. (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1391)

Engagement with the philosophical literature assists in "the contemplation and deliberation on the stories of lived experiences," (Giles, 2008, p. 83), allowing the researcher to reflect deeply and reach for that which is always just beyond our grasp (Heidegger, 1968, in Giles, 2007). In this the researcher becomes immersed in the research, as they engage with the notion of being. At this stage I began reading Heidegger and Gadamer of an evening, making notes as ideas struck me and reflecting on how these related to my research. For a time, I struggled with the interpretive writing, finding it hard to let go of the descriptive. Van Manen (1990) describes this as getting so involved in chasing the question of "what is it? What is this phenomenon in its whatness?" that "one gets stuck in the underbrush and fails to arrive at the clearings that give the text its revealing power" (p. 33). Part of this was a lack of ability to find time to reflect deeply on

the stories whilst still working fulltime in a completely immersive job. Through discussions with my supervisors, taking leave and continuing to write, think and rewrite I began to work through this, giving "uninterrupted listening" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 481) to the interviews, and new understandings and ideas came to the surface. It was here that the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 2013) really became clear and came into play.
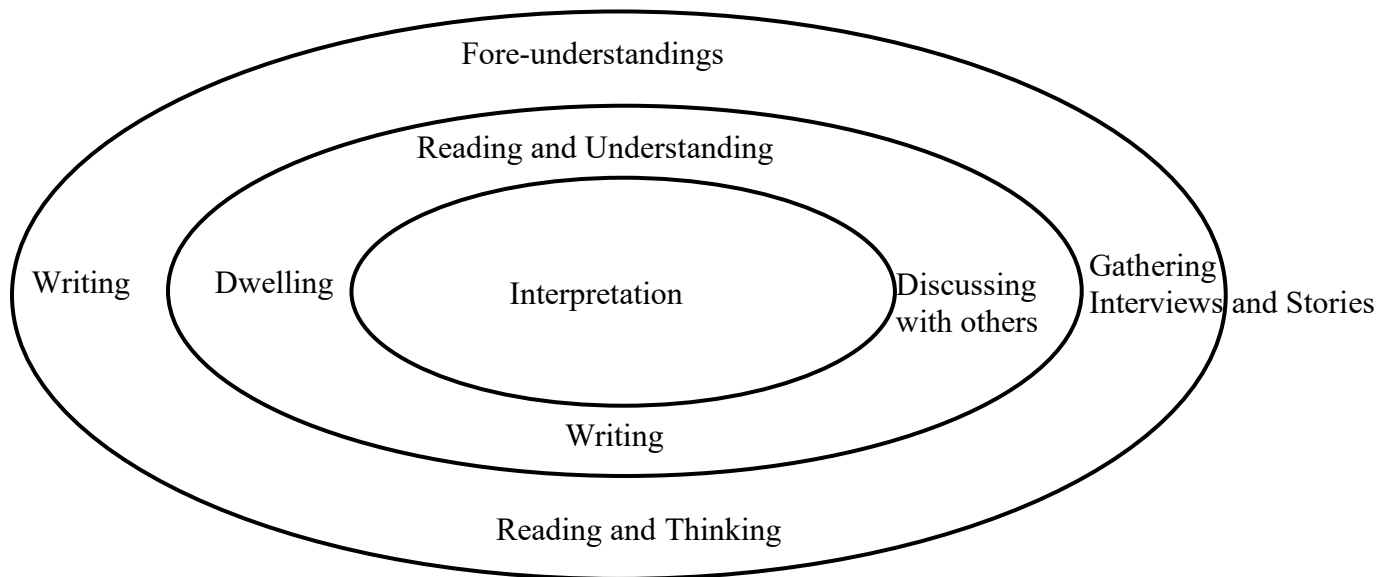
Figure 2: The Hermeneutic Circle as followed in my research

Through this immersive cycle of writing and reflecting, van Manen (1990) indicates that the hermeneutic phenomenological researcher:

> attempt[s] to accomplish the impossible; to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal. (p. 18)

It is through this deeply reflective writing that the essence of leaders' and teachers' experiences of change began to emerge.

4.9 Limitations and Delimitations

The greatest delimitations of this study were the confinement to the experiences of a single school and my role in the school as deputy principal and the leader responsible for positive education in the school, which could have influenced the way in which participants responded to questions. However, the respectful relationships I have with staff, my long union affiliation, and the fact that staff will come to talk things over with me when they have a grievance about decisions in the school gave me confidence that they would be honest in their answers. The time frame to undertake this work, and working fulltime throughout the research period, limited the number of participants it was possible to include. A further limitation was the ethics requirement for sourcing participants, which prevented me from actively inviting participants to target a wide range of perceptions. As I was limited to those who volunteered via the school administration officer it is possible that the full range of opinions in the school was not reflected in the sample interviewed. Furthermore, participants' understanding of good schooling may be impacted because the 'new normal' of the school is now so enmeshed in positive education. My own exposure to the process of change in the school and to the theory and practice of positive education could have limited my interpretation of the data.

4.10 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Throughout this research I have been conscious of the need to ensure that my research is rigorous and stands up to scrutiny. This has been particularly important given my central position within my research. According to Ellis et al. (2011) the application of reliability, validity and generalisability has to be applied differently in autoethnography than in quantitative and many other qualitative research methods. Reliability becomes focused on the credibility of the 'narrator', validity is about whether the story is possible and believable, and generalisability

focuses on whether the story talks to others about their experiences and whether it is useful. Adams et al. (2015) suggest that autoethnographies need to have "narrative rationality" which consists of "narrative fidelity" and "narrative probability" (p. 94). That is the story needs to be consistent and believable, and it needs have relevance and usefulness for others. According to Wall (2008) autoethnography needs to have "credibility, transferability and usefulness" (p. 46). I have used feedback from others – both staff at IRHS who were involved in the incidents included, my supervisors and through conference presentations to ensure that my narrative has reliability, validity, and generalisability. It is supported by a journal of significant 'moments' in the school's positive education journey, a public IRHS positive education blog, through which we shared our work with others, and personal and school documents. In many ways the reliability and rigour in hermeneutic phenomenological research is determined in similar ways. "In post-positivistic research, rigour refers to the trustworthiness, credibility and dependability of a study and to the transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, 1958)" (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 149).

The concept of the 'phenomenological nod' (Giles, 2008; van Manen, 1990), as a measure of trustworthiness in hermeneutic phenomenology, refers to the ability of a study to speak to the reader, it provides "an affirmation from the reader that the meaning revealed from the lived experiences of others in the study have resonance with, or make sense to them" (Dilbey et al., 2020, p. 117). Smythe et al. (2008) describe this resonance as "the hallmark on trustworthiness" (p.1396). "The phenomenological nod confirms for me that I have been writing in a way that suggests I am approaching understandings that are shared by others" (Giles, 2008, p. 99).

Whilst working on my thesis I have been actively involved with the national and international positive education network. I have regularly presented at conferences and been privileged to work as a training provider and mentor for other schools, both in SA and interstate, as they implemented positive education. Although my research has been contained to one school, I frequently been given feedback of how our work at IRHS resonates with and inspires others, providing me with what Smythe et al. describe as 'graced moments'.

> We believe that the hallmark of phenomenological research is graced moments, when there is a shared sense of belonging to the insight that seems to go beyond what was said, yet is felt and understood as 'being true' (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1396).

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research methods and processes used in this study. Although I came into this research with a basic plan, I have allowed myself to be fluid and be led by the research, as I have worked with teachers, leaders, and my own stories. It has been through writing, re-writing, reflecting and discussions with my supervisors that paths have emerged to follow. I have been conscious of my pre-conceptions and expectations through all stages of my research. Being aware of and including my experience of the phenomenon has helped me to 'orient' myself to it (van Manen, 1990). It is also something that I have had to critically consider when interpreting others' stories.   It has been important to approach these with an openness to the other person, whilst "situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 281). As I reflected and worked with the stories, themes began to appear, they merged and changed until several key themes became dominant. These themes will be explored through the remaining chapters of this thesis.

5 Chapter 5: My Story

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I use autoethnography to provide more focused and nuanced insight into the experiences of staff through the processes of change described in Chapter Two. According to Adams et al. (2015):

> if our task as researchers, as social scientists, is to study the social lives of humans, then we cannot relegate elements of human lives or experiences to the periphery, nor can we bracket out the ways our lives and experiences are intertwined with our research projects and participants (pp. 8-9).

As an 'insider' researcher I am an integral part of this story. My background and experiences cannot be 'bracketed' away from the research (Gadamer, 2013). My background and experiences inform and add richness to the research through my understanding of the nuances of context and meaning. Without the context and background information that can be provided from an auto-ethnographic perspective, some of the significance of the stories uncovered may be lost.

I am aware that as assistant principal and then deputy in charge of positive education in the school I come with a positive bias to the research focus. "In doing autoethnography, we confront the tension between inside and outsider perspectives, between social practice and social constraint" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 1). Being aware of this, I attempt to present a representation and interpretation of both my own and others' experiences at IRHS through the cultural change that occurred following the introduction of positive education. This will not be an 'objectively true' reality, as there are always already many different interpretations and understandings that come from any given event (Rogers, 2016). Through reflexivity and connectivity, I seek to

provide a deep insight into my own and others' lived experiences as IRHS went through change brought about by the implementation of positive education.

5.3 A divided school

I began working at IRHS in 2003 at the off-site alternative learning centre. I arrived at a 'divided' school. The principal and deputy had serious differences and some of the staff were divided into two camps. Most were just trying to do their jobs and not get involved. Whilst attending a conference during my first year at the school I was told by the deputy to watch my back as the principal was not to be trusted. I was glad that my role was off-campus. I was only at the school for staff meetings, which rarely lasted longer than fifteen minutes, and were often finishing up by the time I arrived. Like most staff I kept my head down, focussed on my classes and did not get involved. Tensions between the two eventually reached a crisis point, which one of my participants describes as the lowest point of her teaching career, when "staff morale was as low as it could go" (Alice). During this time the entire executive team were in and out on stress leave with coordinators stepping up into roles and no one knowing from one day to the next who would be on site.

One staff member told me that it was like *Days of Our Lives* (an American television soap opera), and you could not afford to be away from the school for a day in case you missed the next instalment. Whilst we understood that the regional office was working with the principal and deputy no one was communicating with the staff, who were effectively collateral damage. My office at the school was shared with the school's Occupational Health, Welfare and Safety (OHWS) officer, and we worked together in 2005 to compose a letter to our regional office asking for support for the staff who were struggling. In response our regional director visited the

school on the last day of the school year and assured a meeting of all staff that the situation was in hand and would be resolved before the next school year. It was not.

For over six months in 2006 the middle leadership team, of which I was a member, kept the school running. What was happening had a fallout effect on students and community perception, and numbers in the school started dropping. I live in the district and at social events I was accustomed to having people comment: "You work *there*! I've heard that's really tough, a really bad school. How do you do it?"

When the entire executive team eventually moved on from the school a new principal was appointed. The staff were still reeling from the past few years, some had left teaching, some were struggling with their mental health, most had retreated into their classrooms and were getting on with their jobs in isolation. The new principal came with a hard-line agenda to pull staff into shape, which did further damage to an already hurting staff. Her actions seemed to indicate that she believed the staff had been the issue and needed to be brought to heel. She established a deficit model of school improvement and staff members felt that they were being held accountable for things that were outside their control. There was a dominant discourse of blame and a lack of trust in the school. If you questioned it, you were called into line. Teachers withdrew even further into their classrooms, focussing on their teaching but with little collaboration. The school image in the community continued to flounder and enrolments continued to go down. Students started referring to the school as a 'povo' school and said that only those who could not get in anywhere else came there. I, and many other leaders, started

looking to apply elsewhere. The Department for Education sent a team in to work with the school and address the issues, but nothing changed.

In this principal's third and final year in the school the school community was hit by multiple tragedies. A student was involved in an horrific murder in one of the small local towns, another committed suicide, another student's father committed suicide and one of the school's most popular students, an academic achiever and highly accomplished sportswoman, was killed when she was driving to school on one of the local country roads. As if this was not enough her boyfriend's mother (he was also a student at the school) signed him up to a gym to help him manage his grief. As he was leaving one evening two past students drove to the gym, whether to meet him or not we are not sure. Whilst there they did a wheelie in the street, lost control of the car and hit a light post. They both ran off unhurt, but the light post fell on the boy who had been at the gym just as he was leaving, giving him permanent brain damage. At the same time four staff members had partners with cancer, three staff members had surgery for brain tumours and a contract teacher committed suicide.

I have often reflected that if you had seen all of this on a soap opera you would have thought it ridiculously over the top and unbelievable. One of our year 12 music students started crying when singing *Another Angel in Heaven* for her final assessed solo performance, and could not complete the assessment. I was SACE coordinator at the time and had a carte blanche from the SACE Board to implement whatever special provisions were needed. Special provisions in the SACE are provided when misfortune prevents a student from completing the full requirements of their final assessments. A range of measures are available for use and include using school

grades in place of exam grades when the student is unable to sit or complete their exam, having extended time to complete exams, or reducing school based assessment requirements. I remember being rung by the SACE Board special provisions manager to ask about one of my requests just as I was about to get in my car to go to the funeral of the girl who had died in the car accident. I told her I could not talk then and why. I may have come across as a bit 'short'. That was when she gave me the go ahead to put any special provisions that were needed into place.

For a team of staff who felt undervalued and unsupported the impact of these tragedies was severe. An example of the stress staff was under occurred when one teacher arrived late for an exam supervision. When she crossed paths with the teacher she had taken over the supervision from in the staff corridor later that day, the two had words, which descended into a screaming match with both breaking down. One pulled all the notices off the pinup boards in the corridor, went home in distress and never taught again. Whilst this reaction was severe, we were all struggling.

While the two school counsellors were working hard, they were both new that year and did not have established relationships with staff, students and families. DfE counsellors were in the school on a regular basis but were not used a lot. Staff members withdrew still further into their own small networks within the school, social occasions became non-events, and there was not as lot of conversation between staff members. Students however pulled together. I saw students who would not usually have anything to do with each other hugging, checking in on each other and just sitting together by the school memorial for the student who died in the car accident.

Students were also checking in on staff members to see how they were doing – and staff members were being strong for and supporting students, and in some cases parents. I remember the principal calling a staff meeting early one morning to tell us about the student suicide. Immediately after delivering this news, she told us that she had won a principal position at a new school and would be leaving at the end of the year. It was incongruous – we had just been told that a student had taken his own life and yet so many of us were now feeling a weight had been lifted from our shoulders. It felt obscene to feel that way under the circumstances.

5.4 Time for Change

It was into this shellshocked school that Gavin arrived as our new principal. It was his first appointment as a principal and he spent the first year listening to students, staff and community members and getting a sense of what was happening. It was during this year that I won an assistant principal role in the school. At the end of his first year Gavin met with the Head of Schools in the Department for Education to discuss how he could 'turn the school around'. He wanted to tap into the Head of Schools experience of turning a struggling school with a bad reputation in a large country town into the school of choice in the town.   It was because of this meeting that the school was offered the opportunity to be the Department's focus school for their involvement in Professor Martin Seligman's upcoming time as Thinker in Residence in Adelaide and we were introduced to positive education.

One of my participants commented that the staff were looking for something, another that things had to change, and positive education offered change. Certainly, when presented with the opportunity during the week before school started in 2012 the staff of IRHS voted overwhelmingly in favour of the school to taking up the opportunity offered.

Staff were introduced to positive psychology through the very basic appreciative inquiry run by Gavin and the then deputy which I have already mentioned in chapter two. These two questions: what do we do well at IRHS? and what are we proud of at IRHS? had an immediate impact on the atmosphere in the school. There was an excited buzz in the hall as teachers and support staff discussed the questions, a positivity and energy I had not felt in the school before. For the first time in many years staff were focussing on what they did well and what they were proud of, and you could feel the enthusiasm as they discussed the questions. The two charts which were produced were pinned up in the staff corridor by the entry to the staffroom and stayed there for a long time as a reminder that we had things to celebrate. By the end of our first year working with positive education in the school our student numbers were starting to grow. Parent numbers at Open Nights increased, enrolment inquiries improved, and the community perception of the school started to change. After two years I was hearing: "you work there! I've heard there's good things happening at that school." Anecdotally, regional support services staff who visited the school on a regular basis told us that the school felt calmer when they visited. Staff were re-engaging with each other, and collaboration was increasing. Student voice increased and relationships with students were improving.

Personally, positive education resonated with much of what I already did and believed, both personally and professionally. It was affirming, in that there was research behind much that I already incorporated into my practice, and it was educating as we learnt so much more. In particular, two quotes from Chris Peterson resonated with me right from the start: "Positive psychology is not a spectator sport" (2006, p. 25), which I will explore further in a separate section, and "other people matter" (Peterson et al., 2008, p. 19). For me teaching is all about

relationships, being-together-with others in the world, working together as a staff for our students, working with students to empower them and give them a voice, and this quote reflected how I felt. I was very positive about the work the school was doing and excited to see the way the majority of staff were getting involved and taking our positive education learning into their way of being in the school. I believed that there was a new energy and enthusiasm amongst staff, but whilst I was conscious that the school had changed the impact of that change really only struck me when I saw the reaction of one of the middle leaders in the school who had gone on extended leave during Gavin's first year. Like many others Stephanie was unhappy at the school and intended seeking a position in another school when she returned.

When Stephanie returned from leave a year later, she found a very different environment from the one she had left. Just after her return we held a staff meeting. Under the previous two principals, staff meetings had been very short, executive run affairs and no one was encouraged to ask questions or put forward opinions. Teachers were given information and expected to comply. At this staff meeting we were discussing what I believe was the introduction of Positive Behaviour for Learning in the school. It was a vigorous meeting with a lot of debate and sharing of ideas and opinions, all of which were given time and value, as had become practice in the school. At the end of the meeting, I returned to my office, pleased with the staff involvement in the discussion and the ideas that had ensued. I found the staff involvement in the school that was developing inspiring and invigorating. I was working at my desk with some of the ideas that had come from the meeting when Stephanie entered and shut the door. I could see she was excited as she said: "That was amazing! People wouldn't have talked like that twelve months ago!" She did not leave the school. The change she observed gave her a new energy and enthusiasm for IRHS

and she became an integral part of the school's leadership team. Stephanie's excitement when she came into my office after the staff meeting has always stuck with me. What was significant to me about this interaction was the dramatic change in the school that she had seen from just twelve months previously. Those of us in the school knew that the school story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999) had changed, moving from a story of negativity and not being good enough (Barb; Barry; Gavin), to a story of the school as a place of collaboration, sharing and working together (Alice; Barry; Gavin), where people cared for each other and the students, where wellbeing and resilience mattered, (Barb; Gavin; Mandy; Trish), but because we had been part of the change it had been a gradual process, and we were not fully aware of how extensive the change was. For Stephanie the contrast was clear and the change dramatic. It affirmed for me that the culture in the school had really changed and improved. Our way of being-together and doing things in the school was a stark contrast with how things had been only a little over twelve months earlier. This gave me confidence and a strong conviction that we were on the 'right' track.

This was again affirmed in 2016 when I went to a workshop with Peggy Kern from Melbourne University about the language of positive education (2016 National Positive Education Schools Association (PESA) Conference, the Peninsular School, Victoria). She talked about working with a school in NSW where the students referred to their school as the 'povo' school. I had completely forgotten until then that that was what IRHS students used to do. I remember them saying to me: 'Why do you care? Don't you know this is a *povo* school miss? You only come here if you can't go anywhere else.' This attitude distressed me, and I would always try to present a different, positive perspective, but the term was pervasive. However, both the term and

negative image about the school had so completely vanished over the four intervening years that I had forgotten students used to talk like that! This was another key moment that reminded me of the stark contrast between where the school had been and where it now was. It made me more keenly aware of what we had accomplished in the school and how precious it was, giving me pride and a strong sense of achievement. Another affirming incident took place later in 2016. Bob, our previous district head of support services, who had been in the role for the first three years of implementing positive education before moving on to another district had contacted me. He was going to be in the district and wanted to drop in to see how positive education was progressing in the school. When Bob arrived, I had a parent with me, so he went to make himself a coffee in the staffroom. I walked in to find him talking about positive education with a teacher I considered to be one of our more resistant to the change. As I approached, I heard the teacher say: "What you have to ask yourself is where would we be without it!" I was amazed by this comment, as I had thought that this teacher was negative. Instead, he was explaining how good the implementation of positive education had been in the school. It helped me to realise that what I had seen as negativity was a lack of confidence in his own enactment of positive education. Once I had realised this, I provided him with additional support and resources, he began to seek my feedback on what he was doing and became more confident.

5.5 Something for Everyone

Since positive education is not a program, and because our staff were encouraged to follow Seligman's mantra of 'Learn it! Live it! Teach it! Embed it!' teachers were able to engage with different aspects of positive education, or wellbeing science, that resonated with them. This was seen in the way teachers worked together to develop our explicit positive education program. A core group mapped out a scope and sequence for it, then each year level team fleshed out the

details, with teachers choosing to work on the topics that they connected with. Year level managers and I ensured that they kept to the research.

In most teams everyone found something that they wanted to develop, but two members of the year eleven team, one the teacher mentioned in the last story and one who was openly critical and cynical of positive education, were reluctant to be involved, complained and initially resisted participating, yet they became the co-designers of one of the most successful aspects of the year eleven program. Both the year eleven team leader and I spent time with them trying to find an aspect of the program they were interested in. As the first term topic was not proving successful, we gave them the option of choosing another topic. The year ten course finished with altruism in term four with students doing volunteer work in the local community. They decided that they wished to build on this. They designed a term of work during which the year elevens opted for activities to produce items for sale at a local market. The proceeds from this were sent to support an African school. This project involved significant organisation and out of hours work to support students at the market, which they did willingly. I was impressed by the time and effort they put into the work. It gave the year eleven's a real buzz, especially when we got photos from the African school showing us how the money had been used! These teachers had found a way to use skills they had, one in making things, the other his involvement in the market, to support a concept from positive education of doing things for others, that allowed them to engage deeply with the program and gave the students a real sense of pride and accomplishment.

5.6 Not a Program

In conversations with DfE personnel and teachers from other schools it became apparent to me that many people had the misconception that positive education refers to a specific program that

you implement – probably linked to Martin Seligman and the University of Pennsylvania. This is not the case. Positive education is a broad term that can be used for any application of positive psychology/wellbeing science in a school. Whilst there are a few research based, quality programs that can be used, to have any lasting effects it cannot be a program that you run for a short period of time, it must be ongoing and fully embedded into the school (Adler, 2016; Challen, et al., 2011). It is understandable that time poor teachers are often keen to be given the 'program' so they can implement something without having to do any extra work, but for positive education to be effective it has to become part of *how* they do things. I have mentioned a quote from Chris Peterson (2006) putting this very clearly, which struck me when we first started to work with positive education in the school and has been a mantra of mine ever since: "Positive psychology is not a spectator sport" (p. 25). This is also reflected in the 'live it!' of Seligman's 'Learn it! Live it! Teach it! Embed it!' (2011). One of our Maths teachers captured this in the quote below from the IRHS public blog:

> Although I was taken by the idea of positive psychology when I attended the first lecture by Professor Martin Seligman early 2012 and have been keen to take up every opportunity to develop my understanding in the area since then, it has been with the catch cry 'give me strategies to implement this in my classroom'. In looking for the ways this applies to my Maths and Science classes I have been entirely focused on strategies. My four days of Positive Education training changed this for me. To effectively implement this in our school we as teachers need to live it. Its most powerful use is in our daily interactions and conversations with our students, and with each other. Worksheets and classroom activities will only be effective with the force of our example and those hundreds of little conversations behind them, giving them conviction (Teacher, IRHS, 2013).

This also came through a couple of years later when I was seeking feedback from students about positive education in the school in preparation for a conference presentation. They talked about the difference between the teachers who simply taught positive education and the teachers who 'lived' it. For them some teachers exemplified positive education, and in their classes, you got

the benefits, some teachers were just going through the motions without conviction and in these cases, students turned off. They explained that it was not what the teachers taught so much as how they went about their practice and that in some it came through in everything they did. In 2018 one of our science teachers put it more simply when talking about positive education in the school and said: 'Positive education is just what we do and who we are'.

This was reassuring for me, as I was aware we had lost some of the 'shine' and enthusiasm that had been part of the implementation of positive education. What we had instead was a way of being and doing that exemplified what positive education was about. It is not about a program that you implement, it needs to be in the DNA of the school. It is about being attuned to those around you. It is about having strong relationships and care for others. This interconnection and what happens between people is what is important. Only when our relationships are authentic and caring can we truly make a positive impact on both others', and our own, lives. Positive education for me thus relies on an ontological state of being caring and authentic in the moment with ourselves and others and throughout one's professional work in the complexity of life. This is what Peterson's (2006) "Positive psychology is not a spectator sport" (p. 25) is about.

This *way of being* is often forgotten in the academic literature on positive education. The empirical formula is there but the ontological state of being required to ignite change is often glanced over or taken for granted. This state of *being* is therefore fundamental to my thesis about school re-culturing and positive change. When this ontological way of being is deeply understood and lived, teacher's work guided by the altruistic design and philosophical intent of positive education will be seen and felt, as with the teachers students saw as 'living it'. Without

this ontological state of being, any attempt to deliver on positive education will be lacking because it will be empty of a genuine way of being with students and staff. Unless embedded into the school staff and students will sense a lack of authenticity and care. They will see it as meaningless and perhaps become cynical. In other words, any attempts to inculcate positive education into schooling life will be devoid of its essential life-infused inner core (a way of being) and will be read by staff and students as such, making it just another set of empty departmental words.

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shared some of the stories from a journal I kept over the years as we implemented, embedded, reviewed and renewed positive education in the school, to provide an insight into the experience of change in the school. The implementation of positive education at IRHS had a significant impact on the school, as the stories shared have shown. Many of the concepts of positive education resonated with why teachers came into the profession in the first place. For some this experience was affirming, for others it opened new ways of being in their work. Even those who were openly critical and cynical found something that they could relate to and embrace. In the next chapter I will explore the lived experience of the implementation of positive education of individual teachers and leaders through their stories.

6 Chapter 6: Stories from Teachers and Leaders

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I sought to set the context for the stories of teachers and leaders that emerged from my interviews. In this chapter I reflect on teachers' and leaders' stories, sharing essential ontological understandings of the phenomenon of their lived experience of change that emerged through the interpretation of their stories. The chapter will provide examples from the stories to illustrate themes and understandings that have emerged, referencing relevant literature that signposts understanding. The headings used indicate themes that have emerged through the process of interpretation.

- *Starting from Strengths* will explore the impact of the introduction of appreciative inquiry and taking a strengths-based approach on staff and the way they connected with change within the school.

- *Creating a Shared Story* looks at the development of positive relationships, collegiality and the growth of a culture of collaboration that grew as a result of working together from the ground up to design what positive education would look like in the school, leading to a culture of collaboration and sharing that spread across all aspects of school life.

- *Importance of Care* investigates how a lack of care impacted teachers' emotions and the development of a culture of care led to improved wellbeing and a growth in commitment to the school.

- *Taking it home* discusses how teachers engaged with positive education in their personal lives and the impact that it has had beyond the school gates.

6.2 Starting from Strengths

A key feature of positive education is focusing on each individual's strengths and building on these (Seligman, 2011). This redirects focus from negative attributes to positive, and helps to provide a positive way of being and living. Closely related to this is appreciative inquiry – a positive, appreciative change model for organisations.

In this story Ruth talks about the introduction of appreciative inquiry into the school and the dramatic change it had on how staff viewed themselves and the school.

Appreciative Inquiry (Ruth)

> I'll say the school was in a really bad place. It had become quite toxic. Then we had a principal come in who seemed to think that the staff needed to be whipped into line. It was the last thing the school needed – that negative, 'we need to fix all these problems' approach. It just made people retreat even further into their shells. Then Gavin arrived and after a year we introduced positive education.
>
> It was like a restart. Right at the very beginning we did an appreciative inquiry, as an introduction to positive education. We were asked two questions: What are we proud of at IRHS? and What do we do well at IRHS? And it was such a turn-around from this berating that we're not good enough, that we're not doing our jobs properly, and that there are all these issues. You could actually feel it in the staff – hey, we actually do all these things well, and we could do this even better. And that move from that deficit view to that appreciative view made all the difference in the culture of the school. And actually, just from that, even if we hadn't done anything else, if all we had done was to use appreciative inquiry, that turned everything around.

For Ruth the whole atmosphere of the school changed when appreciative inquiry was first introduced. The toxicity and negativity of previous experiences in the school were washed away through staff being asked two simple, appreciative questions. She felt an immediate restorative benefit that was experienced amongst the staff from the first two AI inspired questions. An energy and enthusiasm developed as staff began to see that there were things to celebrate in the school and positive things to build on. The use of two simple appreciative questions raised morale and induced positive feelings about being part of the school community. Ruth saw that AI made all the difference to how staff were feeling and interacting – the whole 'feel' of the school changed. Suddenly staff realised that they did have things worth sharing and being proud of, and that these could be built on to improve. The move away from looking for problems and trying to fix them energised staff and motivated them to get involved in changing the trajectory of the school. It brought staff together and changed their way-of-being in the school from disengaged and despondent to engaged and proud. This shift from negative to positive emotions provided energy, enthusiasm and impetus for staff to get involved in change. They found a new story of the school (Clandindin & Connelly, 1998) was possible, one that valued and appreciated their work.

Whilst appreciative inquiry provides a positive, energising model for change, the appreciation and affirmation of individuals is also important in building a culture that nurtures and supports the wellbeing and resilience of teachers (Rahimi & Arnold, 2024). In the following story Mandy tells of how she wants to grow 'old and grey' in the school, due to its focus on wellbeing, care and making teachers feel 'seen'.

Growing Old and Grey (Mandy)

> I grew up in this community and had a really bad perception of the school. My ideas about the school changed when I did my final pre-service teaching placement here. Then I got the opportunity to work here as a graduate teacher the following year and I was really keen. I love working in this school. I love that we have positive education. It is a really nice framework for living and teaching. I've never known anything else as a teacher. Now I am in this position I really hope that I never move on from this school. I'd like to work here until I am old and grey.

> I especially enjoy those moments when leaders organise activities where we acknowledge the strengths or what we appreciate about other staff. So much of what we do feels invisible and not seen, it is nice to realise that what I do is appreciated and seen. And I enjoy giving that affirmation to others.

Mandy's previous negative pre-conception of the school was changed when she came to IRHS as a pre-service teacher and discovered how care and wellbeing were valued in the school, embracing staff and students alike. As a teacher she has never known anything but positive education approaches, and she has taken it on as a sustaining approach to living and working, feeling herself to be 'at home' in the school and taking what she has learnt there into her way of being-in-the-world. The time given to staff to share the strengths seen in and appreciation of others is precious to her. It is an acknowledgement of what is often done isolation from other adults. It brings the staff together in an affirmative, collegiate way, ensuring that they feel seen and appreciated. Mandy loves this aspect of the school. It makes her feel validated. It makes her want to stay.

In the following story Barry tells of how moving from a deficit to strengths-based approach impacted on his work with children at risk.

Building on Strengths (Barry)

> As a school counsellor and sub-school-leader most of my work is with students at risk. I've always been able to build strong positive relationships with students. It is something I have always valued, but I had a traditional approach when working with students who had a

problem or had done the wrong thing – I would start from the problem, or behaviour and discuss how to fix or change it.

When positive education was introduced to the school I stood back. I wasn't negative about it, but I wasn't sure what it could offer so I let other people jump in and try things out and waited to see what happened. I went to all the trainings offered of course, so I knew what it was all about, I just didn't see how it could work at IRHS.

In the end I was a pretty quick convert. I realised how much it supported my job. It explained some of the strategies that I already had, and it gave me new strategies. One that really resonated with me was starting from strengths. Focusing on positive strengths and positive attributes and working from there, instead of what a kid had done wrong… it was a no-brainer! That was my 'aha' moment, when I saw what positive education could offer my work with kids.

When you make a connection and build a relationship through identifying character strengths, you've got a start, and you can move forward. Instead of focusing on the negatives you start from their strengths and how to move forwards. And the kids come back for it, because they know you aren't going to dwell on the negatives, on what they've done wrong, you're going to look at what they're good at and how to build on it. And they'll come and see you – even when it's to tell you that they've done something wrong!

It became common practice across the school – starting from strengths and building from there. It has just become how we do things at IRHS. I even use it in my private life – I consciously work through my strengths when I am doubting myself or my decisions. I wish I had known this stuff way back – not only professionally, but personally. I could have really used this in my life back then.

Barry was hesitant about the introduction of positive education at IRHS initially and did not really see its relevance to his way of working. He already had a story to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) that he embraced – one of building strong relationships with even the most challenging students, and did not see what positive education had to offer. However, he made the connection when he was introduced to Seligman's and Peterson's concept of Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It clicked with him, allowing him to see what positive education had to offer him in his work, his way of being. He recognised that using strengths as a starting point and building from there, would strengthen the already positive relationships he built with students and improve his work with students at risk. Once the click had happened, he became excited about the possibilities and eagerly integrated into his work much that he had learnt through positive education professional learning in the school, building it into his story to live

by. Once the click had happened, immersing himself in a strengths-based approach became obvious and a natural way of working. He eagerly developed new ways of working from strengths and building strengths into the curriculum that he enthusiastically shared with staff.

Starting from a student's strengths and using these to plan a positive path to move forward rather than focussing on past mistakes and how to fix them built greater relational trust between Barry and students and made the students more willing to seek his help, even when they had done something wrong. For Barry, who values relationships and connection, this was significant. Barry not only took to this approach in his work, but also in his personal life. It has become a natural part of his way of working, living and problem solving and he regrets not knowing about strengths and appreciative approaches much earlier in his life as he believes it would have helped him handle difficult times in the past much better. Not only in his own work and life did Barry see the positive outcomes of taking a strengths-based approach. He saw it across the school. As IRHS embedded a strengths-based approach into common practice and it became the way of doing things in the school, he saw stronger relationships develop between teachers and students and teachers and teachers, and greater relational trust grow in the school. It became a way of working across the school as most of the staff engaged with this new narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). It provided a narrative for teachers to interpret how to relate to students. The positive education approach used in the school built and reinforced a culture of working with young people from their strengths, rather than focussing on negatives. It became a pathway for re-storying the school.

It was not only in school that teachers at IRHS have found the values of taking an appreciative, strengths-based approach, this story tells of taking the appreciative approach home.

Care at Home (Barb)

> I realise that I have become more open about sharing emotions and stuff than I was before. I was good at talking at school, at cheering the kids and staff, but when it came to my husband and family, I probably never said all the things I should have. So, I've made a point to be more appreciative, more grateful, and share my emotions at home.
>
> And it's been really good with my husband. He's had to give up his career due to an injury and we have spent a lot of time talking about what his strengths are and what he's good at so that he feels validated. And he's in a good place.

Barb has taken what she has learnt at IRHS to heart, becoming more open, and sharing about her emotions with her family. Previously, she often neglected to let family know what they meant to her, now she has come to realise the importance of open sharing of her gratitude, emotions, appreciation and care for her family. She has embraced this learning and makes sure she is more affirming at home. This and a focus on strengths has brought validation and affirmation to her husband, giving him a positive outlook to what had been challenging changes in his life.

Through these stories the value of replacing the previous deficit approach in the school with an appreciative one is highlighted.

6.3 Creating a Shared Story

When positive education was introduced at IRHS, there was no central curriculum, no program, no model for what it should look like. The school had a mandate to explore how it might be developed in a government secondary school. When Seligman visited the school in 2013, he told teachers that they needed to develop an IRHS version of positive education, what he called a 'holden' version, (Seligman, teacher round table, IRHS, 2013), as opposed to the Rolls Royce

version implemented in private schools. This gave staff the opportunity to develop how positive education would look in the school in a collaborative, collegiate manner. The school staff were trusted with this work, giving them energy and enthusiasm that was not present for centrally mandated initiatives that were being implemented at the same time.

In this story Gavin, the principal, discusses the importance of the implementation of positive education being a collaborative effort rather than a top-down initiative.

Stepping into the Unknown (Gavin)

I was in Head Office (of the Department for Education) with the then deputy just before Christmas, at the end of my first year as principal. I'd been doing a lot of soul searching about what could be done to improve the school and was hoping to at least get some support for some of the physical improvements that were needed. While I was there, I was invited into a meeting about the Adelaide Thinkers in Residence Program and Seligman's residency. At the end of the meeting, I was asked if we would like to be the departmental focus school for the residency. Honestly, I didn't even know who Seligman was, but I said to my deputy: 'I think you have moments when you are given an opportunity, if you don't embrace it, you may lose, you'll lose'. I'm always one for jumping into things, so, I said yes. But right from the start I knew it had to be a joint decision, something the whole staff went into together.

It was the Christmas holidays, so we bought enough copies of Seligman's book Flourish for every leader in the school and sent it out to them for reading over the holidays. We rang them to say we have an opportunity to work with Seligman next year and we want to discuss your thoughts at the start of the year. If the team wasn't interested, we wouldn't do it.

We met with the leaders before the start of the school year and they all had a chance to say what they thought and discuss the opportunity, and, in the end, I think every one of them said: 'Let's do it!' The next thing was to put it to staff, and we had to say: 'Look, we've got this opportunity, but we don't really know what it will look like. There's not a lot of information.' And we told them what we knew and almost everyone voted to say yes!

Going back to the Department I asked them what the parameters were, and they said there were none. It was a new initiative/concept, and they didn't know what it should look like. There was no model. So, we got all our staff, even the grounds people, to as many Seligman events as possible and he visited the school a couple of times, but it was really up to us. We learnt together as we went along. I was learning with the staff, we had collective learning. It wasn't about me as a leader, it was about the school and all the individuals in it.

There was a real willingness from staff to make it work. Positive education really resonated with why people become teachers in the first place, and they were keen to work together to implement it into the school. There were great conversations happening around the school, staff were opening up and working together. I remember one of our hardest, most traditional teachers telling me that it was the best year of teaching they had ever had. Teachers felt better about their work. They were talking positively, and it was a nice place to be.

And I think the thing that really resonated with me was us being able to do our own thing, not having any parameters. I feel that if we had been restricted, we wouldn't have got anywhere, or at least not to where we are.

Taking on his first principal position, Gavin had arrived to find a school in need of major cultural rebuilding. This may have caused him hesitation (Sellar, 2012), a moment of pause, when he questioned himself and the situation. He had not jumped in quickly to make change in the school. In this moment of 'hesitation' he had allowed himself a "suspension of action and reflection" (Sellar, 2012, p. 63), and had asked questions about the school and the community. He had taken time to listen, observe and learn about what was and had been going on. Then at the end of his first year he went to head office to ask for support in the school and was offered the opportunity to be the pilot school for positive education. Whilst there was a lack of information about what this might mean Gavin felt compelled to give it a try as the opportunity seemed too good to pass up and he knew something momentous needed to be tried. Throughout his interview Gavin used the term 'we'. It was important to him that implementing positive education was not going to be a top-down initiative. He understood that the staff at the school were hurting and needed to be given the final say in how the story of the school should evolve. He understood that they needed to be empowered, that to be successful it needed to be a shared, collaborative effort. Teachers needed to be connected to the change. Had he not taken time to learn about the school he may have overlooked this in his eagerness to bring about change.

Because there was no model to follow, no set program and no parameters to the work, the school team were trusted to develop how it should look in the school. This kind if trust is rare in neo-liberal times and it revitalised staff, giving them back their love of teaching and allowing them to work together to develop something that was truly relevant and contextual. Gavin believes that there developed a consistent attitude across the school that we were in this together for the betterment of our students. This was possible because of the trust shown in the school by the Department. It was known that the school was in trouble, yet nothing was being done – quite possibly because no one knew what was going to make the difference. Certainly, no standard intervention was going to work. When they were given an opportunity to try something new it was important to him that they went into it together. He did not see it as his achievement – it was the achievement of the whole staff.

This culture of deep collaboration, trust and sharing is rare in schools, where often teachers jealously guard their 'intellectual property'. In the next story Barry tells of seeing a culture of sharing and collaboration developing in the school that he had not seen elsewhere during his long career.

A Culture of Sharing (Barry)

> I think the biggest thing has been the change of culture of the student body and staff, and their methodologies in teaching the kids and working together. The collaboration, with groups of staff planning it and making it work, not letting it defeat us when it didn't, was outstanding. There was the sharing of resources, sharing of knowledge, sharing of practice that developed, and not just within our school, we shared our work with other schools.
>
> The practice of sharing materials now, here at IRHS, is just amazing. In many schools that just doesn't happen. But our positive education program and positive attitude and teaching resources and curriculum plans are just shared across the school. That sharing has become entrenched at IRHS.

Because positive education is part of the culture of the school new teachers are incorporated into it. It's now an engrained culture in the school, new staff are sort of coerced by sheer force of numbers, to participate and then join in. That tends to be a good thing. They see the rewards and the benefits. And they've always got somewhere to go for resources. It makes transition into the ethos of the school, or the culture of the school, that much easier because people will share their resources, and they'll talk to you about working with them.

Barry values how the culture of sharing materials and resources has become the way things are done at IRHS. It is accepted, even expected practice to share and collaborate. It is in the school's DNA, has become a way-of-being in the school. He has immersed himself in the positive attitudes and connections that have grown in the school through developing positive education together and how this has flowed on into an overall culture of working together. This has led to "*authentic* alliances" where teachers are "devot[ing] themselves to the same thing in common" as their way of "being-with-one-another" in the world (Heidegger, 2010, p. 119). There is trust in the school that allows people to collaborate and share freely, as well as allowing them to fail without fear when trying something new. This has built connections and a sense of belonging within the school community. It also eases transition into the school as resources and knowledge are freely shared. For Barry this is an amazing achievement, rare to come across in schools, and his pride in this shows through his in words.

Because there was no program or model to follow for implementing positive education the teachers at IRHS worked together to develop how it would look. In this story Alice discusses working with two different curriculum teams to implicitly embed positive education into their teaching.

Teaching It! (Alice)

I really enjoy professional learning, so I loved all the opportunities we had and made the most of them. I loved the intellectual challenge of working out how to embed what we had learnt into the curriculum. I think it is really important to teach positive education both

implicitly and explicitly. If we build it into our teaching, we are reinforcing the whole notion and making those connections. It made a whole lot of sense to me.

I was in two different teams, and they were very different. The physical education team were a bit of a challenge as many of them had an attitude of: 'We already do this. We get young people engaged and achieving. We're all about building persistence and resilience, teamwork, leadership and courage.' So, it was a struggle to get them to see the need to be more explicit – it was a gradual process, having lots of individual conversations about how raising things like fixed and growth mindsets, or using strengths, could be built into lessons.

The HASS team were completely different. I was able to share my enthusiasm, and they were happy to get involved. They collaborated enthusiastically and came up with really creative ideas about how we could include teaching about positive education in the curriculum – in all subjects. Geography was a bit of a struggle and I'm still not sure about what we came up with, but Home Economics liked it and incorporated something similar into Hospitality. Everyone worked together and shared their ideas and resources.

Alice enjoyed professional learning and was enthusiastic about developing ways to embed positive education in the curriculum. She saw the importance of applying it in subjects so that students were exposed to it both explicitly and implicitly, seeing it applied in different situations. She immersed herself in the work, enjoying the challenge of it and finding it exciting and energising. Her lived experience of working with two different teams to do this was quite different. One was a joy to work with, the other frustrated her. Both teams saw the relevance of positive education but whilst one was enthusiastic and creative in working together to work out how embed it, the other team did not feel the need – believing that they did it already and did not need to change. With the first team the experience was exciting and rewarding for Alice, with the second team it was a slow process of chipping away at entrenched attitudes to reveal new ways of seeing things.

The collaboration at IRHS was taken beyond the school, being shared with other schools and the local community. A school's story can be negatively impacted by the story of the school (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998) told in the local community. Gavin was very conscious of this and invited the community to be involved in the school, as told in the next story.

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Including the Community (Gavin)

> In my first year in the school, I was devastated by stories of students having their bags searched in shops, when friends in different school uniforms did not, of students not even being considered for jobs because they went to IRHS. I knew I needed to change the reputation of the school in the community. I had made sure I developed good relationships with the Mayor and local MP's and other identities. So, when we had this opportunity, I had the notion to go beyond the school.
>
> My full vision was to have this seamless approach where the students went from positive education in the primary school, to the high school and into the community. I didn't keep all the opportunities we had just for IRHS. When we were able to get places at a Seligman event, I would offer some to our feeder primary schools, to the local private schools, to the District Council, to other organisations in the community who worked with young people. In the back of my mind I had the concept of: 'It takes a village to raise a child'.
>
> And it really changed the community perception. They were interested in what we were doing, involved, and they could see the benefits of it. It brought them into the school, and they saw the good work going on, they could feel the positive atmosphere.
>
> It changed the community perception of the school, and the kids started getting jobs in the local community and they weren't ashamed to wear their uniforms in the district, they were proud!

Gavin was distressed by stories of students being treated as 'lesser' because they wore the IRHS uniform and wanted to change the low opinion of the school held by the broader community. He understood the importance of the perception the local community had of the school and went out of his way to build connections and bring the community into the school. He sought to change the story of the school and included the community in the journey of change as a way of building important connections and understandings by inviting community organisations and other schools to be involved in the work to implement positive education. This brought them into the school and the narrative about the school began to change. He was seeking to align the school story with the story of the school (Clandinin, & Connelly, 1996). After only two years Gavin was rewarded as a positive attitude to the school began to develop and parents began wanting to send their children there. He felt good knowing that students were no longer ashamed to go to the

school but instead wore their uniforms with pride. He took pride in seeing students gaining employment in local businesses and being regarded more positively in the community.

Many of the initiatives that are implemented in schools are top-down, mandated by the education department or government and managerialist in manner. These are the 'sacred stories' of Clandinin and Connelly (1996), the ones that come from above, do not consider local needs, yet schools must make work. They have no connection to context, and usually no flexibility to be adapted to context. When it came to the implementation of positive education at IRHS there was no program and no guidelines as no one knew what it should look like in a school. There was just a broad concept to work from, allowing staff to work together to develop the IRHS 'holden variety' of positive education through a process of collaboration and informal participatory action research. This gave them ownership of the process.

6.4 Importance of Care

The stories in this section demonstrate the contrast between the culture of the school before positive education was introduced and after, as well as an example of using a positive education approach to change students' perspectives on their own lives. Participants who had been at IRHS for an extended period of time discussed how negative the school had been, how there was a lack of care and connection, and the impact this had on teachers' wellbeing. They all told stories of how the school had changed after the implementation of positive education to a culture of care, where wellbeing and resilience were important. Participants joining the school after positive education was fully embedded talked about valuing the culture of care and focus on wellbeing, resilience and relationships in the school.

Alice talks about working at IRHS through a period of conflict and negativity and how the introduction of positive education presented the opportunity for positive change.

Recovery from the Lowest of Lows (Alice)

> Reflecting on the years 2005-2006 I think that was the lowest point in my teaching career. The principal and deputy didn't get on. It was horrible, morale was so low, you can't get any lower than that. Everybody was having to step up and fill the holes in leadership and waiting on every four weeks or so to find out if they were coming back to the school or not. Then we had those short-term principals. It was a very difficult time.

> Then Gavin came and asked us if we endorsed being the pilot school for positive education. He said he didn't know much about it, but we would get all these resources to go on a journey together and find out what's involved. I knew we needed to change things, I'm a pretty positive person, and I always love professional learning, so I was behind it. Pretty much all of the staff said yes.

> I found that it changed how I related to students. I became more relaxed. I have a bit of a temper, but learning from positive education has allowed me to step back and not let things phase me as they used to.

> Positive education became the point of difference in the school. We had parents coming to have a look at the school and choosing to send their kids there. It changed the school.

Alice experienced the lowest point of her teaching career at IRHS at a time the school was in crisis and staff morale was at rock bottom. It was a very negative time, due to the uncertainty and lack of connection and care in the school, deeply impacting how staff felt about themselves and the school. When positive education was offered, she was eager to take it on. She valued that Gavin asked the staff if they wanted to go ahead with it and talked about going on the journey together. She immersed herself in professional learning, relishing the challenge of learning something new and developing ways to embed it into practice in the school. She enjoyed the change in the school, the learning together, the stability and the change of focus. It had a positive impact on Alice; she found that it improved how she related to students and gave her strategies to manage her temper. It not only changed Alice's way of being and working in the school, it

brought people into the school and parents began to choose to send their children there. Alice is proud of what IRHS staff achieved together.

As with Alice, Barry discusses how the negativity in the school had an impact on teachers' eagerness to take on positive education in the next story.

Hope for a New Direction (Barry)

> Just before I came to the school it had been through a lot of change, some of it not particularly positive. I came into the school and there was a lot of negativity and disengagement, both amongst the students and the teachers.
>
> I think positive education offered the opportunity for both kids and staff to have a starting point which was positive, it focused on positive character notions, positive influences in life, rather than focussing on the negatives that we'd had recent experience of. It was a perfect opportunity because of where the school was, and people reached out for it and made it work. It offered teachers the opportunity to look forward, rather than back at what had happened in the past.
>
> There was a change of culture, relationships got stronger, they became more productive.
>
> Positive education had a massive impact on IRHS. People came from a 'glass half full' perspective instead of it being negative. It involves developing strategies for getting kids to move forward and overcome blocks - 'You haven't achieved certain things yet, what do we need?' The way the kids learn, and the teachers teach, relationships and connections grew. It was successful because we were on common ground.
>
> And so, it caused internal change in culture, and then ultimately the outside culture, the community saw the school in a different light, and saw it achieving, and what it was achieving with students. We did a lot of accessing data, wellbeing data, academic data, and attendance data. And that all reflected the change in culture. Kids wanting to come to school. They were engaging with their learning. They're wanting to achieve. When I first came to the school there weren't many kids getting academic awards and they only had to get a B+ average, well it's now an A-, otherwise we were handing out too many awards. But that shows, that's just a typical example of how the culture has changed here about achieving personal best.
>
> It changed the culture of the entire school, and how the community saw the school. It built pride in the school. It made us unique.

When Barry arrived at IRHS he was aware of an atmosphere of negativity, where teachers and students were disengaged and disconnected. Their recent lived experiences had resulted in a

situation where it seemed that teachers had lost their enthusiasm for teaching and students were not interested in learning. To Barry it seemed that the school community had a sense of not being good enough and giving up. The school story and the story of the school (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998) were stories of not measuring up. Positive education was taken on almost eagerly and Barry believes this was because it offered a complete contrast to where the school was at the time.

The school community 'reached for' positive education, desperate for IRHS to be a better place. Barry saw the combination of the disconnected sense of being in the school community and the timing in their journey as conducive to eager acceptance of change, particularly a positive, strengths-based approach. Staff and students valued and embraced an approach that started from positives and strengths and built on these to move forward, as opposed to focusing on negatives and trying to fix the deficits. This was a perfect situation for an overwhelming acceptance of something new within a school. Barry is excited about how teacher and student morale grew due to the appreciative focus of positive education. Teachers began re-engaging with their lives as teachers. Students became more engaged and positive about the school. The new focus was positive and re-invigorating. He is proud of the improved academic achievement in the school and how each year the cut-off for awards had to be raised a little higher. He values the significant cultural change that occurred both within the school and in the way it was seen by the community.

In this story Barb talks about how relationships between teachers improved as a result of the implementation of positive education.

Culture of Care (Saying Hello)! (Barb)

> I hated IRHS I when started here. I felt that it was all about image and no substance. I took offence to having to reprimand students for not wearing the right shoes, when I knew that they couldn't afford them, and I argued about this with the then deputy.

> In particular, I disliked sitting through meetings twice a week where teachers spent the entire time unloading about how bad the students were and slamming them for their behaviours. I struggled not to get angry. Then positive education was introduced, and it really resonated with me. It validated much of what I do intuitively – gave it a name and research to back it up.

> You could see the change when teachers would come back from doing pos ed T&D, they would be so excited and enthused – sharing ideas and focusing on wellbeing and building resilience – so different from the old days.

> You can see the difference. People actually smile and say hello and will have conversations with you, whereas before I would make a point of saying hello, I always do that, and it was quite difficult because people would pretty much look at you as if to say: 'Why are you saying hello?'

> Now people are saying hello. They are actively having a conversation with you. I think that's been really, really good.

> People trust each other more now and will have vulnerable conversations with leaders and each other, working out how they can move forward and build relationships. This is an important change. There are regular meetings that focus on staff wellbeing. Other positive changes are staff collaboration and sharing, the development of student voice and a focus on student wellbeing and support.

> I work in the off-site program and in the past, it was simply seen as the place to unload the naughty kids and many in the rest of the school weren't interested in what we did there. Teachers are now asking us how we do things and wanting to learn from us about strategies with challenging students. They are interested to learn and share ideas.

> Now when someone posts something bad about the school on Facebook there will be responses saying how well the school is doing, that the school cares about resilience and wellbeing and that this is because of positive education in the school. It's nice that this change has occurred.

Barb felt out of place in a school that had a negative atmosphere and worked from a deficit view. She hated the atmosphere. Being a positive person who values relationships, she was trying to build connections but found that people were unwilling to respond to simple greetings and did not communicate or share. This was incongruous with Barb's strong social justice beliefs and

care for others, staff and students, and connected way of working as a teacher. Her way of being, her story to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) were at odds with the culture of the school.

Since the introduction of positive education, a culture of care has developed in the school. This aligns with Barb's way of being. She values that wellbeing of staff and students is prioritised, relationships in the school are stronger and there is a greater sense of trust. She sees staff excited about the learning they are doing and eager to share ideas. Student and staff voice is sought after and valued. She is happy that staff members are now confident to have vulnerable conversations with each other and leaders. There is a culture of sharing, collaboration and learning from each other, allowing a new story of the school to develop and giving teachers space to develop new stories to live by. The changes align with Barb's practice and beliefs. She appreciates that staff respond to greetings and stop for conversation, interested in learning from each other. As a result, she is in a happier place and now feels at home. She sees that the school has come a long way since the introduction of positive education. This is not only seen within the school, but in how community members will defend the school if anyone comments negatively on it.

Developing a practice of gratitude is a significant aspect of positive education, with studies showing that it can decrease levels of depressions and anxiety and build resilience (Emmons & Stern, 2013). In the next story Barb talks about the challenges of introducing her students to the concept of gratitude and the change it made in their lives.

Things to be Grateful for (Barb)

> Building resilience is a major focus of my work. The students I support are really 'broken'. I was able to teach gratitude to my father and thought: "if it works with my father, who is stubborn and grumpy, it's going to work with kids".

> The students in the off-site program have a real sense of entitlement, as if they were owed all the food and support that we provide for them, and I was getting annoyed about it, so I started to teach gratitude through my SACE English classes.
>
> Initially it was a real struggle as most of the students felt that they had absolutely nothing to be grateful for. It was the hardest thing I have ever taught. I thought it was really sad that my students could not come up with an automatic response of things they were grateful for, as I find it so easy. I realised that I had overlooked where they were coming from and had to go right back to basics – things like a blanket and a roof over your head.
>
> There is a point when it is like flicking a switch and the students start to recognise that they have things to be grateful for – even as simple as appreciating the beauty around them. Once this happens, they start to realise that things aren't that bad, and their resilience grows.
>
> I remember going for a walk with a student, and the student pointed out a flower they liked and said: "I've walked past this flower a hundred times and never looked at!", or a student who came in one morning to show me a photo they had taken of something they saw beauty in. It was hard work but finally, I started to see some joy being brought into what are often very sad lives.

Feeling frustrated with her student's sense of entitlement, Barb took the concept of gratitude and embedded it into her work with students, working to shift them from that space of entitlement to one of gratitude. Gratitude is part of Barb's way of being and she was really sad to discover most of her students did not believe they had anything to be grateful for in their 'broken' lives. It was a struggle, and she went back to the basics of shelter and warmth as things we take for granted but should be grateful for. Her students had their own "stories to live by" (Clandinin, & Connelly, 1996) stories of disadvantage, failure, lack of value, disappointment. By shifting their perception to see things in their lives that were good and encouraging them to savour these, Barb was able to support students to develop new stories of themselves. She believes it is like flicking a switch and the students start to recognise that they have things to be grateful for – even as simple as appreciating the beauty around them. Once this happens, they start to realise that things are not that bad, and their resilience grows. Barb gets joy from seeing the students reach this point – when they begin to share simple things, such as the beauty around them, that they have

found to be grateful for. Seeing her students smile and find positives in their lives provides Barb with a sense of satisfaction and happiness.

Coming into the school when positive education was fully embedded, the next story tells of how Trish felt when she came into the school.

Living it! (Trish)

> I came to IRHS when positive education was well on the way to being fully embedded. You could see it in the school in how relationships came first, and the care as well. I have always valued relationships in my work, so I felt at home in the school.
>
> You could really see how teachers were 'living it' – adopting the learnings from positive education. There is a real sense of caring for each other, and real trust in the school. I see the teachers being more thoughtful and considerate in how they deal with difficult students too, how they solve issues. They come up with creative solutions that show their care. Each teacher does it slightly differently, but it all comes back to having authentic, respectful, caring relationships. It's just the norm in the school. So for example, Harry was in there with his house group and a student came in late, and it's a student that's notorious for getting themselves into a little bit of trouble, or just a little bit of mischief, and he welcomed the student into the classroom, and they were part of the task that was happening, and then once the students were set up, he pulled that student aside and just showed that real care and empathy for why that student was late. It was not about being told off, and not ridiculed and pointed out in front of the whole class, it was having respect for that student to pull them aside and actually care for them as to why they were late, and how can we improve that in the future. It was about that relationships stuff. I think it would look quite differently if they didn't have that positive education background, because – I'm just thinking for example with Sally, she's got a really tricky cohort, a young cohort, and again that same student is in her class with his friend. And so, instead of making them feel like they're not wanted, or making them feel like they're a huge inconvenience, she's found some meaningful tasks for them to do, to buy them a little bit of space outside the classroom, but also have an important job to do, so going and emptying the recycling bins, which is something that needs to happen in a class room, but it's a way that she can give them something that's respectful but a break when they need to burn off some energy. So just things like that, and I think that kind of encompasses what positive psychology is about.

Arriving at IRHS a few years after the implementation of positive education, Trish found a culture that values care and relationships, one that she can relate to. She feels at home and affirmed in the school. She can see how the focus on relationships and care has led to a high level of trust in the school – between teachers and between teachers and students. This is

demonstrated through authentic care and positive relationships. She witnesses teachers taking the time to find creative, non-punitive ways of working with difficult students and sees that this is the way-of-being in the school. Trish attributes this to the positive education professional learning all teachers participate in and appreciates having the opportunities this has provided.

In the previous story Trish mentions 'living it'. According to Seligman (2011) you have to 'learn it, live it, teach it, embed it'. The concept is that you cannot teach positive education effectively without taking it into your own life. In. the next story Mandy describes what this means.

Wellbeing Matters! (Mandy)

> I've never known anything but positive education in a school. I think I am really fortunate in that. Right from the beginning I really loved the fact that wellbeing was valued here. Positive education is a great framework to teach from, but it isn't just that. It's hard to explain. It's a wholistic approach to support your own wellbeing. You're always living it and teaching it, and you do it in so many ways. I think it's about being interested in the whole person who walks into your classroom. It's also a really nice framework for living and looking after your own wellbeing. And it's based on research!

As a teacher Mandy has never known anything but a school with positive education at the core of how things are. It is embedded into her practice and her way of being as a teacher. She feels that it is all encompassing – not something you do, although there are elements of positive education she has put into her practice – it is how you do things, who you are as a teacher and a person, how you live and relate. Building positive relationships are a key to this. Being there for the whole person. Knowing students as individuals and making time to check in on them. It is a holistic approach. Mandy sees it as so much more than just a framework to teach from. She has taken it into her life, believing that it effects how you present, how you interact, how you live, how you look after the wellbeing of yourself and others. She relishes this approach. For Mandy it has become her story to live by, her way of being in the world.

In the next story the Gavin reflects on what he found on arrival at the school as principal and the change that was brought about through the implementation of positive education.

Looking Back (Gavin)

> I believe that being the DfE focus school for positive education was one of the best decisions I ever made, one of those pivotal moments in time. In hindsight this opportunity was probably just this moment in time that changed the whole DNA of the school, but also staff, students and so many flow on effects.
>
> Something was lacking in the school, there was no nurturing, no love and the introduction of positive education provided a pathway for long term, significant change.
>
> When I left the school two years ago it was a completely different place to the school I arrived at. It had become a place where staff and students wanted to be. Professional learning, self-development and growth were valued for staff and students. Relational trust had been developed, leading to psychological safety in the site and removing the feeling of 'them and us' that had existed between staff and students and staff and executive. Wellbeing of staff and students was prioritised. Practices in the school encouraged strong relationships, care, openness and conversation.
>
> It was an immersive experience of change built collaboratively. Staff had ownership and leadership of the process leading to staff empowerment and as a by-product, student agency. The result was deep cultural change that was maintained through ongoing nurturing and maintenance. Looking back, you can see the changes in how staff interact. It has actually been a wonderful journey.
>
> I am sure that having no parameters made a huge difference. Had the school been restricted, or directed I do not believe it would have got anywhere, but because we could do our own thing it made the change possible.
>
> You don't get these opportunities very often. We were given a chance, and we didn't waste it. We built it into the DNA. We made it stick.

Looking back Gavin believes that taking on positive education became the catalyst for lasting, positive, significant change at IRHS. It changed the culture to one of caring and trust, and the school became somewhere people wanted to be. He believed IRHS achieved a consistent view across the school that everyone was working together for the betterment of the students. For Gavin the key factor in the success of the initiative was the trust shown in the school by the Department for Education. The department knew the school was in trouble, and it is quite possible that they were unsure of how to address it, being aware that any standard intervention

would not be sufficient. He was offered the opportunity to work with the Thinkers in Residence program at a time when more trust was given to schools to act contextually. For many years immediately following the Seligman residency this trust was replaced by a top-down, managerialst improvement agenda where context was considered irrelevant and schools were told what they needed to do, based on a narrow quantitative data base. This approach would not have worked for the situation at IRHS.

The trust and lack of parameters or direction about how positive education should be implemented showed a belief in the school that empowered teachers and allowed the school community to work collaboratively to develop what positive education looked like at IRHS, providing the environment for genuine participatory action research, which grew organically from within the staff, rather than being imposed on them, creating what Peterson (2006) refers to as an 'enabling institution', one that "treat[s] people as individuals and not just as a pair of hands. In the case of employees, this means giving them the autonomy to be innovative (p. 289)". The cultural change in the school was a result of collaboration, learning and sharing, and led to a collegiate way of working and being in the school that is now embedded in its DNA.

6.5 Taking it home

All the teachers interviewed believed that they had benefitted both personally and professionally from learning about and embedding positive education. In this section participants talk about taking elements of positive education into their personal lives.

In the following story Gavin reflects on how he believes it supported his growth as a leader.

Personal Growth (Gavin)

> It's more than a cultural thing, it's a very personal thing. It's for individuals as well, not just how we do things at school, it's how we do things as individuals as well. A lot of what I learnt from positive education resonated with me. I have taken a lot of concepts into my personal life. I naturally gravitated towards strengths, as these concepts are more concrete and easy to work with. I've also found the concept of being mindfully present significant. Being mindfully present has helped me to become more aware of the impact of my actions on others and hence I am calmer and more considered, acting with mindful intent.

> Using strategies from positive education to debrief and manage difficult things has become part of my routine practice. An example is 'panning for gold' – this has been useful in coming to a new site and recognising the good things in practice there.

> I think I have had real growth as a leader as a result of learning about positive education and taking concepts and strategies into my professional life.

Gavin has seen how learning from positive education has affected individual staff members on a deeply personal level. Personally, he has found that it has impacted him deeply. He has taken much of what he has learnt into his life, believing that he has benefitted from this on a personal and professional level. Many of the concepts and strategies resonated with him and he has built them into his way of being as a leader and a person. Gavin believes that taking on these concepts and skills led to real growth for him as a leader, affecting him on an ontological level, allowing him to develop in ways that benefit him and those around him. He has developed a narrative for himself as a leader (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), that embraces aspects of positive education in his practice and manner of relating and being-with-others. Moving to new site as principal, he has found using strategies from positive education a great way to identify the new school's strengths and this appreciative focus has helped him settle in.

In the following story Barb shares using an adapted version of a strategy learnt from positive education, the gratitude journal, with her father.

The Ripple Effect (Barb)

> Dad, he's 83, and he's really sick and just sits in his chair all day and I got fed up with going home every night and he'd be crying, and he'd spent the day crying. So, I gave him the strategy of coming up with three things every day that made him smile. He said: "I'm not doing that" and I said: "You will do that, and we'll tell mum, and you're going to report to me when I get home. It's your homework." We ended up laughing and I wasn't sure if he'd do it.
>
> Anyway, when I went in the next day, he was sitting there quite happy, and he said: "I've got three things that made me smile". He'd told mum and he wanted to share them with me, so I said: "Okay". And he told me the three things, and I thought okay, I bet that doesn't happen again.
>
> He's been doing it religiously since that day. Sometimes he shares with me, and somethings are just between him and mum. And it has changed his headset from the glass is half empty to it's actually half full!

Barb has found that positive education has flowed on to her personal life, giving her strategies to support others around her. Using strategies she has learnt she has been able to bring joy into her father's life. Whilst he used to cry every day, he now looks for things that make him smile and this has made him much happier. As Barb builds the wellbeing and resilience of her family through being caring, emotionally open and appreciative, it has a flow on effect for her own wellbeing.

In the next story Alice talks about using positive education in her personal life, both at school and home.

Strategies for Life (Alice)

> I struggle a bit with depression and anxiety and have found strategies we learnt from positive education have helped me to cope and manage my emotions better. I remember Gavin seeing that I wasn't in a good place at work one day and asking: "How easy is it to go from a negative place to a positive place?" The question stayed with me as it made me realise that I am the only one who could change where I was heading emotionally, but it was not an easy thing to do.
>
> I learnt to recognise when I was getting into a dark place and could then work through it and think more positively, quickly turning things around before I reached that dark place. One

strategy that I've found helpful, and I've shared with others, is 'three good things' – looking for things to be grateful for each day.

When I first retired and wasn't getting as much relief work as I had hoped for, I became really down and found myself in a very dark place. I realised that I needed to do something about where I was, so I went through the elements of PERMA, from positive education, to see which was missing in my life. This helped me to realise that I had lost my sense of meaning and so I began to come up with strategies to bring more purpose into my life, such as raking my elderly neighbour's leaves and taking guided tours in a local, historical town. Small as these may seem they helped.

Alice has embraced strategies from positive education in her private life. She recognises the value that they have to short circuit her depression and anxiety, using them when she feels herself spiralling so that she does not go into "that dark place". Being able to move herself from a negative to a positive place has given her confidence to cope with the difficult transition to retirement. Using strategies and concepts from positive education she was able to identify and address what was missing in her life through this transition, bringing meaning and purpose back into her life.

In the next story Mandy describes how she found positive education helped her cope with the stresses of her first year of teaching, at a time when her personal life went through some upheavals.

Starting Out (Mandy)

Positive education had been in the school for two to three years when I arrived, so I have never really known anything else as a teacher. Initially I had a half hour induction into it, so I was just keeping ahead of the explicit year 9 positive education course I was teaching to my care group, learning about it as I went along. Later in my first year I did a four-day positive education professional learning that the school offered. I got a lot out of positive education from both sources both professionally and personally.

Personally, it was very timely, I was at the beginning of my teaching career. The first year teaching is really enjoyable, but there is a lot of inherent stress in that for anyone and also, I'd just had a romantic relationship breakdown and found myself back living with my parents.

It was really interesting because I took a lot of what I was learning, what I was about to teach my students, into my life and it was really helpful for me in that period of time. I used several strategies I had learned from positive education to support my wellbeing. Each evening, I would go for a walk, and I would start by thinking about three positive things from the day. Next, I would revisit my goals, which I had set after doing a goal setting exercise with my year nines, and I would check off my progress towards them. By then I would be in a place to clear my mind and finish my walk, being mindfully present in my surroundings.

Mandy embraced concepts from positive education in her life, using them to care for herself in her beginning stages as a teacher, conscious of the importance of care for self. She found that by using these strategies she was able to navigate an emotionally stressful time in her life, when she felt lost and challenged. The strategies she used helped prevent her from becoming stressed and overwhelmed and she was grateful that she had the knowledge and skills to manage. The benefits of taking positive education practices into her way of being and living have been far-reaching for Mandy.

6.6 Conclusion

Human experience occurs while interacting with others within a situation, one that is always changing, yet common meanings and shared experiences reside (Dibley, et al., 2020, p.117)

The focus of this chapter has been on the lived experiences of teachers and leaders at IRHS and the stories that have come from these. In my interpretations I have tried my best to capture what was happening in participants' lives on a deep, ontological level. No interpretation can fully do justice to the depth of feelings of these teachers and leaders, but the hermeneutic method allows some of their feelings and experiences to emerge. The implementation of positive education in the school had both a professional and deeply personal impact on all those interviewed. All believed that the school had improved significantly because of this work. All believed that the school had undergone a significant cultural change, leading to staff wanting to stay at the school,

students being proud to go there and community members having a more positive view of the school.

Throughout participants' stories there is a narrative of creating a new story to live by in the school (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), a new story of the school. It was a new story that was developed collaboratively and valued by the staff and sustained over time in the school. It was a story of the school as a place of collaboration, where staff shared and worked together (Alice; Barry; Gavin), where people cared for each other and the students, where wellbeing and resilience mattered, (Barb; Gavin; Mandy; Trish). Individual's stories changed too, for some they were able to align their existing private stories with the emerging new school story, others developed new narratives to live by. The culture of a school is critical in how teachers feel about their work. Prior to the introduction of positive education IRHS had a negative culture, with a deficit view. The impact of this culture on teachers should not be underestimated. It comes through strongly in several stories. Teachers with lived experience of the trauma that caused the issues describe hating it, of morale being at the lowest of lows, those coming into the school in the years soon after describe finding teachers and students who were disengaged and disheartened.

All teachers told stories of a very different culture that emerged at IRHS after positive education was implemented. Teachers coming to the school when it was fully established tell of a school where relationships and care are valued, where teachers collaborate and share. It is apparent from all stories that this change of culture had a positive impact on how they went about their work, how they related to each other and to students and how they felt about themselves. It also had an

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impact beyond the school, changing how the community perceived IRHS, and how participants

managed challenging situations in their lives.

7 Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I set out to explore the experience of change as lived by the leaders and teachers of one school following the introduction of positive education. Central to this has been the concept of school culture. As discussed in my literature review, the concept of culture is a contested one and hard to define, yet it influences everything that happens in a school and how the school community feel in and about the school (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Rather than culture van Manen (2016) talks about the 'atmosphere' of a school: "Atmosphere is the way in which space is lived and experienced" (p. 75). This captures the emotional quality of culture that is central to the IRHS experience, a concept I have drawn on in my discussion.

This chapter pulls together the stories and themes that have come from my autoethnographic and hermeneutic phenomenological research into leaders and teachers lived experience of change through the implementation of positive education. It seeks to make visible new ontological understandings that have emerged about the impact of the introduction of positive education in a school and its subsequent impact on teachers and leaders in the school, whilst inviting readers to consider what else may yet to be revealed.

7.2 Taking Action

7.2.1 A Toxic Culture

The culture of a school has an impact on all involved in the school – teachers, leaders, support staff, students, parents and the community. It not only affects the professional lives of staff

members, it has a carry over into their personal lives and self image (Ball, 2003; Ball, 2016a, 2016b; Fuller, 2019). It can be the reason why some teachers choose to leave the profession, and others choose to stay (Rahimi, & Arnold, 2024; Ingersoll, 2002). In 2005-6 IRHS was a school in crisis. In the subsequent years, measures put in place to resolve the situation had led to a negative, toxic atmosphere (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*). Staff were 'going through the motions' but lacked energy and enthusiasm, with students who were disconnected and disengaged (Barry, *Hope for a new direction*). When schools become toxic, staff become resistant to engaging with new ideas, are negative towards and about colleagues, feel hopeless (Deal & Peterson, 2016) and lack the energy to put into teaching and learning (Granziera et al., 2023), and student academic achievement suffers (Granziera et al., 2023). This was the experience at IRHS.

7.2.2 Reaching for Change

When positive education was put to the staff of IRHS as an opportunity almost all said yes (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). There was an overwhelming belief amongst the staff that the school needed to change, and this provided an avenue for that change (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Barry, *Hope for a new direction*). As it was introduced some staff jumped in eagerly, feeling affirmed, renewed and/or revelling in new learning. Others stood back to watch, whilst yet others remained resistant or even openly cynical. This mix is a normal change response (Kotter, 1997), what was unusual was the speed with which so many staff members became enthused and involved, wanting to help drive the initiative further, as described in Chapter Five, and the fact that ultimately everyone seemed to find something that resonated with them on a personal level. Whilst the introduction of positive education was the agency for change the success of the initiative in turning the school

around lies as much, if not more, in the processes used in its implementation (Gavin, *Looking Back*). As there was no model to follow, the school did not plan ahead, but used emergent planning (Bamford & Forrester, 2003; Burnes, 2004; By, 2005) with leaders and teachers learning together along the journey, and the processes developing as they learnt. I will explore these processes further in the rest of this section.

7.2.3 Building on Strengths

"To change an organization is to change the nature and quality of participation and interaction among the many organization stakeholders" (Whitney, 1998, p. 314). This cannot be done without engaging the stakeholders in that change in a meaningful way. Traditional change models identify a problem and then try to solve it. The problem with this model, particularly in organisations such as schools where it is all about the people, is that this deficit model frequently uses the language of blame and inadequacy rather than focusing on solutions. In the deficit model people see criticism, become defensive and retreat into themselves. They do not become involved, looking for solutions. "Human systems grow in the direction they persistently ask questions about" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 9) and in the deficit model as people focus on what is wrong, they discover more that is wrong and become even more disheartened.

> Consider, for example, two ways you as a manager might welcome new employees. If you ask that they tell you of difficulties they encounter as they get acquainted with their new colleagues and new job, you are, no matter how well intended, planting seeds of difficulties; and you will most certainly hear about them. If on the other hand, you request that they seek to discover what contributes to their new work group's high levels of cooperation and success, you are planting seeds of learning about cooperation and team success. On a daily basis the agenda for organizational performance, learning and change is established through inquiry and dialogue (Whitney, 1998, p. 315).

In schools the deficit model often translates into conversations with students that start from what they have done wrong and move on to how not to do it again. With teachers it can be looking at

less than ideal results and having a conversation about why they were not better and how to improve them. On a whole school level, it looks at what is not working and trying to fix it. This model can leave people feeling hopeless and as if they are the problem. It causes them to become hesitant about putting forward suggestions, depletes energy and people shut down (Armstrong et al., 2020; Whitney,1998). An appreciative, strengths-based approach has the opposite effect. One of the first things done at IRHS when implementing positive education was to change the narrative from 'what do we need to fix?' to 'what are we doing well?'

It is apparent from my research that adopting this appreciative, strengths-based approach (Barry, *Building on strenghths*; Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*) was central to the success of IRHS in turning around a negative, failing school to one that staff and students were proud to be part of. Prior to 2012 all attempts to make change in the school had come from a deficit perspective – looking for the problems and trying to fix them (Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*). One of the first things undertaken at IRHS was to ask the staff two simple, appreciative inquiry-based questions – what do we do well at IRHS? and what are we proud of at IRHS? The staff at the school experienced immediate restorative benefit from their first two AI inspired questions, beginning a process of healing for the staff. This became the first step in a move to taking on appreciative inquiry as the 'go-to' change model in the school.

At an organisational level appreciative inquiry is a strength-based approach to change that offers a positive approach to change as opposed to the more traditional deficit approach (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). It assumes that every organisation, (even a school in crisis), has something to be proud of, something that works and that these strengths can be built on to improve and grow. AI

invites people to share achievements, strengths and potential, seeking to identify the 'positive core' of the organisation. This creates a dialogue, energy and excitement to build on for change (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

> AI is about changing attitudes, behaviours, and practices through appreciative conversations and relationships – interactions designed to bring out the best in people so that they can imagine a preferred future together that is more hopeful, boundless, and inherently good. (Fry, foreword to Cooperrider et al., 2008, p.vii)

AI does not ignore issues it turns the approach to addressing them upside down. By focusing on what is working and building on it to improve, instead of focusing on what is wrong and how it can be fixed, the people in the organisation become involved and enthusiastic about looking for solutions and improvements. The focus is on building on what an organisation does well rather than fixing what it does badly, hence removing any concept of criticism, blame, guilt and defensiveness. "By assuming the best of people, organisations and relationships, AI leaves deficit-oriented approaches behind and offers affirmative processes for organization development" (Whitney, 1998, p. 315).

> Key appreciative strategies include: 1) reframing problems into possibilities and threats into opportunities; 2) seeing the strengths and successes of individuals, groups, and organizations; and 3) increasing curiosity and removing judgment. These strategies help individuals and systems shift their paradigm from a deficit-based perspective to a growth or strength-based perspective (Armstrong, Holmes & Henning 2020, p. 1)

Because of this redirection of focus Arnold et al., (2022) believe that the "strengths-based approach of AI research can provide a restorative, energizing and transformative space for staff – even in the COVID-19 pandemic" (p.6).

> Because AI is not only a research tool but also the intervention, there can be an immediate benefit for everyone who takes part. AI builds people up because it reminds them of what inspires them, keeps them going, and what they are proud of. It builds resilience, engages the creative side of their brain, and helps them to be more trusting and relational. Sharing these often untold stories of success can make their achievements seem more real. Feeling positive about their achievements can give them the confidence and energy to face other challenges. (Arnold et al., 2022, p.5)

AI is not only a strength-based approach, it is strongly collaborative, enabling:

people to connect emotionally with their situation, consider others' perspectives and change how they see their situation, enabling them to see new possibilities and take action. It has the potential for transformational change as people start to see compelling images of what could be – and are inspired to act (Arnold et al., 2022, p. 2).

Adopting AI at IRHS changed the atmosphere of the school from one of blame and inadequacy to one of possibility and involvement. The use of a strengths-based approach was extended beyond AI to how teachers worked with students and each other (Barry, *Building on strengths*). It changed the nature of staff meetings as noticed by Stephanie (Chapter Five). Teachers no longer felt they were being targeted as responsible for the issues in the school, they felt they were part of the way forward and as such were emboldened to put forward ideas and raise questions and concerns. This led to the change that Stephanie saw so clearly when she returned from leave and experienced the stark contrast between the staff meeting then and what they had been like before she had left.

The importance of being seen, appreciated and validated is core to teachers' sense of self-worth and is often undermined by media representations (Barnes, 2022; Mockler, 2020;) and neo-liberal approaches to education policy (Ball, 2003; Blackmore, 2004). When IRHS introduced appreciative inquiry as a way to move forward, and professional learning encompassed Seligman's and Peterson's Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) staff at the school developed new ways of seeing themselves and the school, a new story of the school developed (Clandinin, & Connelly, 1996), one which was affirming and validating, and teachers began to develop new, more positive stories of themselves.

7.2.4 Relational Leadership

IRHS had experienced a period of ineffective leadership, followed by a top-down managerial approach. To bring change to the school, and allow staff to feel safe, it was essential that leadership was responsive to staff and created an environment of trust. To be able to support teachers in this way a school principal needs to be authentic and relational (Begley, 2006; Giles, 2018; Giles & Bills, 2017; Karadag & Oztekin-Bayir, 2018; Tsemach and Barth 2023). According to Branson (2007) "authentic leaders are said to act in accordance with their personal values and convictions thereby building essential credibility, respect and trust" (p. 225).

> More specifically, authentic leaders are described as 'those individuals who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and high on moral character' (Avolio et al., 2004: p. 4, quoted in Branson 2007, p. 227)

Sparrowe (2005) expands this further to include the regard in which principals hold their team:

> But being true to self is no more likely to result in value-centred or principle-centred leadership. What then matters in relation to positive principles and values are the regard leaders demonstrate for their followers and the esteem they hold for themselves. The two are inextricably related… Authentic leadership, then, is reflected not only by being true to self but also in the positive regard leaders hold for their followers and the positive regard of followers for their leader (p. 433).

Authentic leadership then is not simply about being aware of one's own values, ethics, motivation and being true to these, it is also about valuing and being sensitive to those one leads (Begley, 2006). This ties in with the work of Giles for whom principals must be relational, recognising that schools are all about the people. As Giles (2018) says: "To be human is to relate. We are not just human beings in the world; we are beings *together* in the world" (p. 47).

> In the increasingly complex role of *being* an educational leader, it is critically important that leaders explore their own experiences of their relationship with others such that a growing sensitivity and attunement to unfolding relationships develop. (Giles, 2018, p. 5)

Whilst it is not possible for a principal to ignore mandated policies and procedures, authentic principals balance these centrally mandated requirements with local, contextual needs, remaining attuned to their community and staff, facing daily challenges trying to adhere to mandated expectations whilst not becoming subsumed by them (Ball, 2016a). Whilst neoliberal government policies place management as 'the' role of the principal Giles (2018) sees the need for a different emphasis in an effective school leader:

> Schools and educational organizations are not businesses in the first sense. Rather, their mandate should be the fullest formation of every human being: a holistic mandate. My preference is an 'ELm' [E=education, L=learning m=management; capitalisation indicates prioritisation] approach to leadership development. In this approach, the aims, aspirations and philosophy of education are primary and to the fore, and in support of leadership practice that has an alignment with the educational aspirations. (p. 5)

In this he does not remove managerial responsibilities. Without these a school would cease to function, but he shifts the priority of the principal's role so that education and learning come first. These will flourish when delivered in a way that is relevant and responsive to the local community and school. "Educational leaders need sensitivity to the organisational culture in their local contexts to know how best to progress the educational project of schooling" (Giles & Bills, 2017).

In the implementation of positive education, the principal of IRHS was clear about his own values and perspectives, and sought staff input and opinions throughout. He did not impose, he asked (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*), learned and worked with staff to grow the initiative from the ground up, giving students, teaching and non-teaching staff ownership of what developed. He also included our local community and their perspectives (Gavin, *Including the community*). This aligns with what Begley (2006) describes as needed in leadership:

> An integrated image of leadership and management that is more in keeping with current times is a values-informed leadership – a form of leadership that acknowledges and accommodates, in an integrative way, the legitimate needs of individuals, groups, organizations, communities and cultures – not just the organizational perspectives that are the usual focus of most leadership literature (pp. 570-571).

One of the results of this approach was the growth of staff and student voice as noticed by Stephanie in the staff meeting when she returned from leave. Amongst the most common reasons given for planning to leave/leaving the teaching profession is not feeling valued, not trusted to do their jobs, and not having a say (Ingersoll, 2002; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024), by giving staff ownership of not only whether to implement positive education, but how it would look in the school leadership ensured that the staff of IRHS felt valued, trusted and empowered. Students also benefit from having a voice, developing a greater sense of ownership, belonging and engagement when they feel that they have a say in what happens in the school (Anderson et al., 2019; Cook-Sather, 2020). Both staff and student voice grew from the implementation of positive education in the school. This was not initially something that was done consciously, it just started to emerge and as it did, it was fostered and built on it.

7.2.5 Growing from the Ground Up

One of the most common reasons given for planning to leave/leaving the teaching profession is not feeling valued, not trusted to do their jobs, and not having a say (Ingersoll, 2002; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024), yet current managerial policies in schools favour top-down policies and curriculum that schools are mandated to implement without consideration of teacher's knowledge of context, (Ball, 2016a; Biesta, 2015; Selwyn, 2011). This local knowledge is not valued, and teachers are no longer trusted to 'do their job'. They are monitored and held accountable via centralised, quantitative measures (Jenlink, 2017; Sachs, 2001; Selwyn, 2011).

The implementation of positive education at IRHS was in stark contrast with these neoliberal practices.

One of the most important aspects of how positive education was implemented at IRHS was the role of staff. Staff were not only trusted – in contrast with neoliberal practices where teachers are no longer trusted as professionals (Ball, 2016b), they were entrusted with the task of working out how positive education could work in a government high school. This allowed them to work together, feeling that their work was valued and recognised. Because there was no program and no parameters the school had the freedom to develop how positive education would look (Gavin). This led to the emergence of participatory action research by the staff. Storen (2024) describes action research as:

> a methodological framework for fostering professional development, enhancing school development, and generating both practical and theoretical knowledge. Action research is research where the main aim is to improve a situation and where the researcher in various ways (1) participates in the actions that are being carried out, (2) reflects on the experiences and (3) uses reflections and additional data for (a) knowledge production and for (b) planning improved actions. (p. 2)

There is an element of action research in all teaching. Teachers develop curriculum, plan how to deliver it, deliver, reflect, adjust, on a regular basis. This is part of the routine of teaching. For some it is a deeply reflective, deliberate process, for others it is more mechanical and unconsciously done. When it came to implementing positive education at IRHS this process became more focused and intentional, although it was never known as 'action research'. Critical practitioner research occurs when the routine planning process of teachers is taken further to challenge existing constructs in schools and facilitate change. As opposed to the regular improvement cycle of teaching, practitioner action research is "deliberately and systematically

undertaken" (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 2). This action is usually focused on a change that practitioners wish to address and according to Anderson et al. is "best done in collaboration with others" (p. 2). It is a reflective process, is often cyclical in nature and can be political, with potential to have a much broader impact beyond the group involved in the research (Henthorn et al., 2024). Although never identified as action research this was what was happening at IRHS. Henthorn et al. (2024) suggest that to be effective practitioner research should be embedded into regular practice: "Practitioner action research is more likely to be effective when it is part of teachers' professional identity and becomes embedded in planning and practice rather than a sporadic activity" (p. 170).

The staff at IRHS were provided with time to work together on planning, developing and reviewing the positive education year level program and its inclusion within regular subjects (Alice, *Teaching it!*; Barry, *A culture of sharing*). This was through staff meeting sessions, professional learning days and release time. Staff were provided with professional learning and research and resources to work with, and time was dedicated to sharing what each group was preparing so that we were learning from each other and developing common understandings and language about positive psychology. The strength of this development was that it was initiated from the staff, not imposed from leadership.

> It has been argued that practitioner action research can help teachers to promote positive learner outcomes and contribute to more effective systems but only if it facilitates teacher agency and is not imposed from above (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009) (Henthorn et al., 2024, p. 170).

Through this process of participatory action research staff at IRHS were collaboratively creating a new school story to live by, one that all had a part in developing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

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The new story was one of sharing, collaboration, and collegiality, one of working together and one of care for staff and students, in which wellbeing and resilience were valued. This new story came through in all interviews.

7.2.6 Working Together

As a result of staff working together to develop how positive education would look in the school a culture of sharing and collaboration developed in the school (Barb; Barry; Gavin).

> Relational cultures are experienced 'with' other staff. Shields (2009) noted that a mutuality of support is more likely where teachers are professionally affirmed and a willingness to change is grown (Giles & Bills, 2017, p.132).

From the action research into positive education and using appreciative inquiry a culture of collaboration and sharing developed in the school, moving it from teachers working in isolation behind closed doors to a practice of developing learning programs and units of work in collaboration with others and regularly sharing more broadly with the staff as part of our professional learning program. Classroom doors were opened as visitors became welcome. A genuine interest in what others were doing, and a generous willingness to share ideas, practices, resources and units of work, became common across the school (Barry, *A culture of sharing*). The implementation of what was called the 'Unconference' twice a year became the celebration of this sharing culture. At the Unconference staff members volunteer to give fifteen-minute presentations of work they have been doing either in the classroom or for their own growth. The presentations vary from new technologies you can use with your students to yoga for relaxation and stress relief and are highly successful and valued by staff (see Appendix S).

7.2.7 Developing a Culture of Care

Research into teaching has traditionally focussed primarily on cognitive and pedagogical aspects (Zembylas, 2003) yet teaching is an emotionally demanding and draining profession (McCallum, 2021; Vo et al., 2022). Most teachers go into the profession because they care but are inadequately prepared for the toll this can take (Molyneux, 2021). School culture, societal expectations and politics can all impact teacher emotions (Vo et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2003). The impersonal nature and demands of managerialist policies of performativity in schools is often at odds to teachers' values (Angus, 2015; Ball, 1997, 2016b; Sachs 2001) and imposes administrative duties that are frequently seen as unnecessary and taking teachers away from their core work of teaching and learning (Ball, 2016a; Connell, 2009). As Ball (2003) puts it: "Performance has no room for caring" (p. 224). If schools wish to retain and support teachers, they need to provide an environment that values teacher wellbeing and mental health, (Heffernan, et al., 2022) and supports their emotional labour. Whilst schools cannot entirely escape centrally driven priorities these can be mitigated by giving time to local, contextualised priorities and activities that promote teacher care.

Whilst the coffee cart or afternoon tea is a nice idea and appreciated it is at best a 'bandaid' measure. To truly address teacher wellbeing, it needs to be seen as a priority in the school and built into regular practice and professional learning (McCallum, 2021; Vo et al., 2022). In a case study of a teacher wellbeing initiative McCallum found that teachers believed it important that all schools should have teacher wellbeing programs embedded into practice.

> It was identified that when teacher wellbeing is prioritised at school, teachers show higher levels of wellbeing. Professional learning on wellbeing was useful, but it needs to be sustained, contextual, and authentic both at the school and system level. Teachers across all levels need support from leadership. Making teacher wellbeing a priority contributes to

sustained best practice and needs to be specific, contextual, and part of whole school culture (McCallum, 2021, p. 728).

In their research into the benefits of positive psychology interventions for teachers, Vo et al. (2022) identified six key elements that seem to contribute to the efficacy of interventions in supporting teacher wellbeing:

- Allowing teachers to choose whether and what to be involved with – giving them autonomy
- Making interventions relevant to context so that they are explicitly targeting a school or groups of teachers and their needs/interests
- Working in groups so that interventions foster building connections and relationships with colleagues
- Regular professional learning and weekly meetings
- Embedding the interventions so that the atmosphere of the school is supportive

Consistent with this research IRHS began the positive education journey with staff, following Seligman's recommendation that you need to 'learn it and live it' before you can teach it (2011). Staff were not learning about a wellbeing program for students, they were learning about the skills and practices from positive psychology that research has shown to be effective in building wellbeing and resilience and encouraged to take these on for themselves before starting to explore how they might be built into their practice with students. To maintain this, professional learning on wellbeing became a regular part of the school's meeting cycle. Regular sessions to facilitate the appreciation of others were also built into meetings (Mandy, *Growing old and grey*). The importance of strong relationships both within staff and between staff and students were the basis of much of the developmental work.

Concluding Thoughts on Taking Action

The lack of parameters and the emergent nature of the implementation of positive education at IRHS enabled staff to take ownership of what it would look like in the school (Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). This allowed a practice of collaboration, sharing and innovation to develop in the school (Barry, *A culture of sharing,*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown)*. Critical to the success of this was the creation of a safe space by leadership (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Heled et al., 2016; Lee, & Louis, 2019). Staff members were trusted with the work. They were safe to experiment, to fail and to try again. This led to the growth of an atmosphere of collegiality, trust and safety in the school, which Trish noticed when she joined the staff (*Living it!)*. Whilst the processes may have been central to the success of the implementation of positive education, the importance of positive education itself should not be overlooked. The focus of positive education on building wellbeing and resilience, strengths, appreciation, gratitude and care was central to the healing, restorative impact of the experience and underpinned the way change was implemented at IRHS.

7.3 Making Meaning

Introduction

> It is assumed that teachers spend their time in classrooms. To this we add our interest in teachers' work outside their classrooms, as well as taking into account the landscape of their personal lives… All of these aspects are interwoven with all other aspects of the landscape. Nothing is clearly separated. Everything makes a difference to understanding her as a teacher (Clandinin & Connelly, 1997, p. 673).

Teaching is not a profession that stops at the classroom door, or even at the school gate. For many it is a 'vocation' (Zembylas, 2003). What happens beyond the school is as important in a teacher's sense of being as what happens within the school. The implementation of positive education at IRHS not only changed the atmosphere of the school, it had a significant impact on

both the professional and personal lives of the leaders and teachers in the school. It affected all aspects of their 'landscape' (Alice; Barb; Barry; Gavin; Mandy).

7.3.1 Being-Together-in-the-World

For the staff at IRHS the implementation of positive education was more than an intellectual exercise, it was a restorative journey and there was a deeply emotional component to it. This was underpinned by the school taking an appreciative approach to change and started with the first two AI questions. This heralded the beginning of a journey of reconnection with each other, the students, the school, and the community (Barb; Barry; Gavin; Ruth). Despite the impact of neoliberalism in which: "performativity individualises and fragments, and leave us, most of the time, to struggle alone with our doubts and fears" (Ball, 2016b), teaching is a highly relational profession (Giles, 2008) and this sense of being-together-with had been largely lost in the six years prior to the implementation of positive education (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!*; Barry, *Hope for a new direction*). Through the stories of teachers and leaders, and my autoethnographical account, a story emerges of moving a school from a place of disconnection and hopelessness to one of connection and possibility (Barry; Gavin; Mandy; Trish).

According to Peterson et al. (2008) "other people matter" (p. 19). Whilst not one of the themes in my findings the importance of the development of positive, trusting relationships and being-together-in-the-world was woven throughout the participants' stories and underpins each of the themes (Barb; Barry; Gavin; Trish). These relationships were initially encouraged through the implementation of a strengths-based approach to change (Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*), fostered by giving the staff the choice about whether to go ahead with positive education (Alice, *Recovery*

from the lowest of lows) and then the trust to develop what it would look like in the school (Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*), and nurtured through ongoing practices of affirmation and collaboration (Barb, *Culture of care {saying hello]!*; Mandy, *Growing old and grey*). According to Giles (2008):

> Humans relate and indeed, to be human is to relate. Moreover, humans are always in relationship. There is a relational connection between people that is essential to our shared humanity (Heidegger, 1996). In this way, "Dasein has its being as being-with- others" (Collins & Selina, 2006, p. 63). Heidegger (1996) refers to the primordial existence of Dasein's "being-with-others" as Mitda-sein (p. 107). Mitda-sein refers to an almost subliminal connection between people. The ontological nature of being-in- the-world is as "being-together-in-the-world"; alternatively, "the world is always already the one I share with others" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 118). (p. 102)

As a result of past experiences most staff at IRHS had lost their way of being-with-others in the world (of the school) on any but a superficial level (Alice; Barb; Gavin; Ruth). Without this relationship between each other the atmosphere of the school was negative, staff members lacked cohesion and any sense of belonging and connection, leading to several seeking to leave. Positive education prioritised relationships. It brought people together in an appreciative, affirming way, allowing people to regain a sense of being-together-in-the-school (Barry; Gavin; Mandy; Ruth) . People felt different about their own being, and their being-with others. Participants highlighted the change in the way people were relating with each other, and the growth of relationships and sense of being-together-with in the school (Barb, *Culture of caring [saying hello]!*; Barry, *Hope for a new direction*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). This was important in developing an atmosphere of collegiality and trust at IRHS and building staff wellbeing and positivity about the school, which research shows to be critically important in building a culture that allows schools to implement change successfully, (Adams, 2013; Wrigley et al., 2012)

7.3.2 The Importance of Strengths

The introduction of an appreciative approach and the use of strengths at IRHS was a significant aspect of reconnecting the space between staff, allowing for relationships to heal and grow and being-together-with one another to become normal practice in the school (Barry, *Building on strengths*; Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*). This started with the first two AI questions and is woven through every participant's stories. An aspect of this was the implementation of affirmation practices in the school, which acknowledged and celebrated staff members achievements, big and small (Mandy, *Growing old and grey*). This helped staff to feel seen and valued, an important aspect in building teachers' resilience, sense of self-worth and commitment to stay on in the profession (McCallum, 2021; Molyneux, 2021; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024). Teaching is an emotionally demanding profession (McCallum, 2021; Molyneux, 2021; Vo et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2003) and often undermined by media and government portrayals (Barnes, 2022; Heffernan, et al., 2022; Mockler, 2020; Molyneux, 2021). The atmosphere created in the school that made affirmation and appreciation of others a common practice built positive ways for teachers being-together and counteracted the often, negative stories of teachers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) that can occur in schools. As the sense of being-together-with each other grew so too did a commitment to the school and a desire to stay at IRHS (Mandy, *Growing old and grey*). The concept of working from strengths, be it with students or staff, became all pervasive across IRHS, helping to build connections between leaders, teachers and students, and an atmosphere of trust (Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!*; Barry, *A culture of sharing*).

The practice of starting from strengths and showing appreciation had a profound impact on all participants, moving beyond the school and into the life worlds of participant's personal lives,

who told of how they had utilised strengths in their personal lives to resolve issues (Barry, *Building on strengths*; Gavin, *Personal growth*). This is consistent with other research showing that teachers who take on strength-based practices have higher levels of work satisfaction, lower stress levels (McCullough, 2015) and are calmer in their response to students (Headley, 2018).

7.3.3 A Shared Story

Prior to the introduction of positive education, the staff at IRHS had lost all sense of being-together-with each other (Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!*; Barry, *Hope for a new direction*). Participants talked about the toxicity of the school, of how morale was as low as it could go and about how hating it, how people would not respond to greetings and the negativity of meetings (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!*). Those coming in to the school later spoke of coming into a school where staff and students were disengaged and disconnected, of feeling as if they were walking on eggshells, as if something momentous, and possibly terrible, was about to happen (Barry, *Hope for a new direction*; Gavin, *Looking back*). As the school moved to an appreciative, strengths-based approach the barriers between people began to dissolve and a new way of being-together-in-the-world began to emerge, fostering positive, collegiate relationships (Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!*; Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). There was an excitement and energy about the staff, leading to great conversations happening across the school. Participants shared stories of the collaboration amongst teams to work out how to embed positive education into practice and into the curriculum (Alice, *Teaching it!*; Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*).

As an atmosphere of trust and collegiality developed a culture of working together, sharing ideas and resources emerged. The staff at IRHS felt empowered and excited by the possibilities. They began to develop a real sense of being-together-in-the-world as they put energy into working together and revitalising the school. In many schools, teachers jealously guard their intellectual property, reluctant to share what they have put so much into developing. The collaborative culture that grew out of being-together-with each other to develop how positive education should look in the school led to a different, more relational way of working becoming normal practice in the school (Barry, *A culture of sharing,*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*).

Being-together-with each other has several benefits. Relationships are an essential part of work in schools (Giles, 2008; Giles 2011; Giles et al., 2012; Sellar, 2012) and a collaborative, collegiate atmosphere builds teacher wellbeing, trust and sense of belonging (Wrigley et al., 2012). Furthermore, research by Allison et al. (2021) indicates that wellbeing is group phenomenon so that building a culture of sharing and valuing wellbeing across the school influences and benefits the whole school population.

The trust created by a positive, collaborative school culture supports school change as teachers are more prepared to take risks and try new ideas (Adams, 2013; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Heled et al., 2016; Lee & Louis, 2019). Current neoliberal policies in education and their focus on accountability and results from narrow data sets, on the other hand, reduce the willingness of teachers to take risks, inducing anxiety and causing teachers to retreat into their classrooms rather than collaborate (Adams, 2013). As Wrigley et al. (2012) identified, it is collaboration,

ownership and collegiality combined with including the broader community that allows school change to happen.

Building a sense of being-together-with the community beyond the school gates was also important to the change at IRHS (Gavin, *Including the community*). A school is often impacted by negative stories of the school in the local community (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996), and this was particularly true of IRHS. Gavin consciously set out to re-story the school by bringing the community in, involving them in the process of implementing positive education and building relationships beyond the school. This allowed the excitement and pride that staff were feeling about the changes they were implementing to be seen and shared and a new story of the school developed in the local community, one that was positive and affirming.

7.3.4 A Caring Community

Teaching is a profession built on caring relationships, which makes it an emotionally demanding profession (Granziera et al., 2023; Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021; Molyneux, 2021; Vo et al., 2022). The majority of teachers go into the profession because they care and want to make a difference, (Hanlon, 2022; Molyneux, 2021; Zembylas, 2003), but many are not prepared for the emotional toll that comes with it (Molyneux, 2021). It is not only classroom practice that impacts teacher emotions, school culture, media portrayal of teachers, societal expectations, departmental policies, and politics all play a part (Vo et al., 2022; Zembaylas, 2003). If we wish to build the resilience of our teachers to manage these stresses we need to care for them. It is through care that connections are created and strengthened, that relationships grow.

> Since being-in-the-world is essentially care, being-together-with things at hand could be taken in our previous analyses as taking *care of* them, while being with the Dasein-with of others encountered within the world could be taken as *concern*. Being-together-with is taking

care, because as a mode of being it is determined by its fundamental structure, care (Heidegger, 2010, p.186). (Dasein is roughly translated as the question of being)

As a result of implementing positive education and establishing an appreciative, strengths-based culture, care developed in the school (Mandy, *Wellbeing matters!*; Trish, *Living it!*). Care for other staff, students, selves. It is through care that an atmosphere where it is safe to fail is developed, enabling innovation and creativity (Adams, 2013; Cameron & Lovett, 2015; Williams et al., 2015). For many of the participants positive education offered a positive way forward for IRHS and brought people together. Positive education became the impetus for change, allowing leaders and teachers to let go of past experiences and develop new ways of being-together-in-the-world.

The change in how people in the school related to each other is seen clearly across all interviews and in my autoethnography. Long time teachers at the school valued the way people were now relating to each other (Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!*). Those coming into the school when positive education was fully embedded, were caught by the atmosphere of IRHS, by the valuing of relationships and care, the prioritising of wellbeing and resilience (Mandy, *Wellbeing matters!*; Trish, *Living it!*). Participants saw care in how the teachers managed their more difficult students, coming up with creative, respectful ways to work with them (Trish, *Living it!*). It was also seen in their interactions with each other, in the value placed on care, relationships and wellbeing in the school.

This is the essence of the 'live it' component of positive education, or as Peterson puts it the concept that "positive psychology is not a spectator sport" (2006, p. 25). For many of the staff at

IRHS the professional learning from positive education had a deep personal connection, it was more than something to be enacted in the classroom, it was something to take into their own lives, increasing their awareness of care for themselves and for others, and the importance of the relationships they built (Alice; Barb; Barry; Gavin; Mandy; Trish).

> Relating as beings-together-in-the-world, we show our care for others as an "existential" of our living (Young, 1998, p. 59). Such care is an essential structure of life and "embodies Dasein" (Inwood, 1997, p. 52). Similarly, care is being "already-in, plus being amidst, plus being ahead" and primordial to our everydayness (Young, 1998, p. 59). Dasein's being-in-the-world as "care" involves an orientation or relation to others. One expression of care is solicitude which is the care for other people (Inwood, 1997) (Giles, 2008, p. 102).

If we are serious about looking after our teachers, keeping them in the profession and performing at their best it is essential that we care for them and their mental health. Teachers will feel more supported and be more resilient in an environment that shows it values teacher wellbeing, care and resilience (Granziera et al., 2023; Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024). According to Hine et al. (2022) teachers are more likely to thrive when they have "respectful and inclusive leadership and workplace cultures that embraced diversity and valued collaborative approaches." They also found that teacher wellbeing initiatives were most successful when they were supported by leadership and built into the culture and practice of the school. At IRHS caring for teachers and their wellbeing and resilience was embedded into school practice, leading to teachers valuing being at the school and wanting to stay (*Growing old and grey, Wellbeing matters,* Mandy).

7.3.5 Beyond the School Gate

Teaching is an all-encompassing profession that does not end at the school gate. It becomes tied to our sense of self and being (Ball, 1997, 2003, 2016b; Fuller 2016). A toxic atmosphere at work will have carry over effects at home. Positive education offered mediating effects and

strategies for managing stresses, not only in the school, but also beyond the gate. All participants in my research reflected on how they had taken positive education into their personal lives (Alice; Barb; Barry; Gavin; Mandy; Ruth; Trish). From a first-year teacher struggling with the stresses of a beginning teacher to a veteran of forty years, not coping with retirement, it provided strategies that built resilience and a positive way forward.

Each of the participants found aspects of positive education that resonated with their way of being, supporting their wellbeing, and took these into their way of doing things. They all talked about taking what they had learnt from positive education into their personal and professional lives. Even the most hardened teachers found the experience revitalising (Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). This is consistent with findings from other research which indicates that the impact of introducing a holistic positive education program in a school not only benefits teachers professionally, it has a carry over into their personal lives and wellbeing (Headley, 2018; Norrish, 2015; Rahm & Heise, 2019; Sandholm et al., 2023).

Concluding Thoughts on Making Meaning

There is very little research that focuses on the impact of positive education on teachers in schools, but what there is shows that when teachers engage in positive education professional learning, they gain both personal and professional benefits in terms of stress levels, subjective wellbeing levels and relationships (Brunzell et al., 2022; Headley, 2018; McCullough, 2015; Rahm & Heise, 2019; Sandholm et al., 2022; Waters & Stokes, 2014;).

My research indicates that the impact of the introduction of positive education at IRHS was a renewal of the school, a healing of staff and students and a rebuilding of the relational

connections between staff, students and the community that had been lost (Barb; Barry; Gavin; Ruth). It was a deeply emotional experience for those who had been through the previous toxic culture and almost like a 'homecoming' for those joining the school when positive education was fully embedded (Mandy, *Wellbeing matters!*; Trish, *Living it!*). The importance of caring relationships, the concept of being-together-in-the-world, is woven throughout participants' stories and underpins each of the themes uncovered.

7.4 Conclusion

Throughout my interviews there were several words that kept recurring – relationships, care, trust, resilience, wellbeing, appreciation, gratitude and strengths. These are not words generally used when discussing school improvement and yet in discussing the cultural change in IRHS, leading to improved school image in the community, improved student achievement, increased enrolments and increased engagement by staff and students they were used frequently by participants. This change did not come from an outside program that was implemented over a few weeks then moved on from – it was very much something that was developed from the ground up within the school, becoming a way of being rather than a program delivered. According to Kotter (1996): "Change only sticks when it becomes 'the way we do things around here', when it seeps into the bloodstream" (p. 14). For IRHS it became part of the DNA of the school. There was strong staff engagement and support for the change (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Barry, *Hope for a new direction*: Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). This was important as genuine "transformation requires sacrifice, dedication and creativity, none of which usually comes from coercion" (Kotter, 1996, p. 32). Because staff had ownership of how positive education was developed in the school, they had a strong commitment to maintaining it.

All staff, teaching and non-teaching, were given access to as much professional learning, research and information as the school could provide and together developed positive education from the ground up (Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). It became fully embedded and 'lived', leading to cultural change in the school that became a way-of-being, resulting from taking a strengths-based approach and putting relationships first. How things were done was as significant as what was done. Positive education has been developed prioritising the wellbeing of students. It has not focused on teacher wellbeing, yet looking back it turned out to be a brilliant way to address the toxic environment of a failing school and turn around the way teachers were feeling about themselves and the school.

For the teachers and leaders of IRHS the impact of introducing positive education was a positive renewal of the school and its culture. Their lived experience of this change, as shared in their stories, was one of starting from strengths and rebuilding relationships and collaboration in the school. The school became a place that valued care, and teachers and leaders learnt skills to support their own wellbeing and resilience both at work and at home.

For the leaders and teachers involved in embedding positive education at IRHS it was more than a program for student wellbeing – it had a restorative, healing impact for staff and was engaged with at a deep, emotional level. It not only healed the staff, it turned the school around, leading to the creation of a new story of the school, both within the school and in the community (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). The building of connections and a sense of belonging was central to developing a positive atmosphere at IRHS, one where teachers were able to thrive and grow, being-together-in-the-world, safe to be innovative and creative in response to local needs. This

atmosphere that emerged in the school was not the result of any one aspect of the work that was done, it was the result of how the processes and the means all fitted together.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

In this thesis I have dwelt with the stories of *being-in-change* as experienced by leaders and teachers of IRHS. It is a change I have also lived, and my experience is interwoven with theirs. The significant change, coming during a time of increased managerialism and centralised control of educational practices and schools (Bills et al., 2024), has been a refuge of self-determination within and for the school, and a way for the school community to determine its own story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), one of collaboration, sharing and working together (Alice, *Teaching it!*; Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*), of the school as a place where people cared for each other and the students, where wellbeing and resilience mattered, (Barb; Gavin; Mandy; Trish). Change is a constant in education (Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Students and families of students move through a school, leaders and teachers come and go, communities evolve, and new initiatives, policies and processes are imposed from above. These all impact on the culture and priorities of a school, leading to change. Not all change is good, and what is seen as good by some may not be by others. Previous change at IRHS had been almost universally experienced as toxic and soul destroying (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Barb;, *Culture of care [saying hello]!* Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*). The process for the introduction of positive education led to change as something uplifting, positive, exciting and inviting (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Barry, *Hope for a new direction*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). The culture or atmosphere of a school is significant in either facilitating or hindering change (Cann et al., 2022; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Lee & Louis, 2019; Wrigley et al., 2012). As my research has uncovered, so too is how the change is implemented.

Effective change only occurs when there is a personal commitment from staff, collaboration and co-operation (Adams, 2013; Kotter, 1996; Wrigley et al., 2012). For this to happen there needs to be a culture where there is trust, so that it is safe to take risks and try innovations (Adams, 2013). Teaching is an emotionally charged occupation (Heffernan et al., 2022; Lovett & Lovett, 2015; McCallum, 2021; Zembylas, 2003) and it is essential that change processes support teachers, who are expected to drive the changes.

I argue that a more nuanced understanding of and approach to change in schools is needed to be inclusive of teacher wellbeing. It is critical that we consider how change is implemented in schools as well as the nature of the change. A more relational, collaborative approach is needed. In this conclusion to my thesis, I summarise my journey, revisit the research question, suggest recommendations for practice and explore opportunities for further research.

8.2 A Phenomenological Journey

Living the Research

I came to this research wanting to explore the impact of implementing positive education in a school, and in particular seeking ontological understandings of the lived-experiences of leaders and teachers being-in change as positive education was implemented. To do this I chose a combination of autoethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology as my research methodology using interviews. This methodology allowed me, as an insider researcher, to really get 'in amongst it' to conduct my research. "Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research" (van Manen, 1990, p.36). My lived-experience led me to the research and to research approaches which became lived-experiences themselves. According to Giles (2008) and van Manen (1990), hermeneutic phenomenology is 'lived' by the researcher,

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and this has certainly been my experience. For several years I 'lived' with the stories of participants, conducting the first few interviews just before COVID and the final few more recently. In quiet moments, early in the morning, gardening or driving, ideas would unexpectedly find me. I learnt to keep a notebook handy at all times!

As my research progressed there would be times when I was uncertain about the direction I was taking. In these moments I would return to reflecting on participants' stories and allow the thoughts to find me. Most recently I was struggling to find direction for writing this chapter. My husband and I went camping in the Flinders Ranges for a long weekend with friends, taking a break I was not sure I could afford from my writing. I was sitting on my camping chair early one morning, looking across at the dry creek bed and river red gums, sipping my tea with my notebook in my lap when I had a moment of clarity, an awakening of "the wild-flowering world and mind" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.181, quoted in Crotty, 1998, p.80), and was able to start writing. These moments of clarity can only come from deeply immersive, reflective living with the research, and allowing the time and space for them to find you, the 'dwelling' stage, from my hermeneutic circle.

Returning to the Research Question

This research came about because of my lived experience as a middle then executive leader in a school that was transformed from a struggling, toxic school that teachers wanted to leave (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*), and the community looked down on into a school that focuses on strengths, has a strong culture of collaboration and sharing, and values care, wellbeing and resilience; one that teachers want to come to and stay (Mandy, *Growing old and grey*), one that the community values (Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!,* Barry*, Hope for a new direction*).

This change was brought about through the introduction and establishment of positive education in the school, and I was curious to look more deeply into how it was achieved and more specifically the experience and perspective of the teachers and leaders at the school. Coming from this curiosity the research question was: What have been the leaders' and teachers' lived experiences of change as a secondary school implements positive education? With a secondary question of: What has been the impact of the introduction of positive education into a school?

What I Discovered

I began my research with fore-understandings based on my personal experience and observations at IRHS. My fore-understandings through my role as deputy principal, were that positive education had brought about positive change, leading to an improved culture in the school, and that teachers and leaders had engaged with the concepts from positive education at both a professional and personal level.

My research confirmed that positive education was indeed perceived as a catalyst for positive school change resulting in improved collaboration (Barry, *A culture of sharing*), increased engagement and commitment to the school (Gavin, *Including the community*; Mandy, *Growing old and grey*), stronger relationships and care (Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!*; Trish, *Living it!*), a more positive reputation in the district (Barb, *Culture of care [saying hello]!*, Barry*, Hope for a new direction*; Gavin, *Including the community*) as well as an increase in student academic achievement (Barry, *Hope for a new direction*). Participants had engaged deeply with positive education and taken elements of it that resonated into both their professional and personal lives (Alice; Barb; Barry; Gavin; Mandy; Trish). All believed that they had grown as a result of their learning about positive education. However, as I lived with participants' stories

and the autoethnographic accounts from my journal new, deeper ontological understandings emerged about the phenomenon of being-in change. It became apparent that the way in which positive education had been introduced into the school was as important, perhaps more so, than what had been introduced.

My research provides a picture of one school's experience of change processes that enthused staff about the process, leading to increased staff voice, morale and commitment; empowering them by giving them the choice to go ahead with positive education or not and trusting them to develop how it would look in the school (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Gavin), *Stepping into the unknown*. The processes to achieve this were aligned with positive psychology – appreciative inquiry as opposed to a deficit change model (Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*); leadership learning about wellbeing and resilience alongside the staff (Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*) and all encouraged to apply it for themselves before considering how it would work for students; facilitating participatory action research and providing access to any professional learning and resources that were possible. These were processes that encouraged collaboration, built relationships and ownership amongst the staff.

There was a sense of pride that came through as participants told me their stories. Pride in the strengths-based approach taken across the school, in the practices of collaboration and sharing that had developed as a result of processes used to implement positive education, the fact that these processes and the outcome had not been pre-determined but had grown from the staff learning and working together. What also became apparent is that positive school culture is fragile and precious and needs ongoing care and attention. It is not developed quickly; it needs

time and ongoing nurturing to develop it initially, and then to keep it going. The positive, collegiate culture which developed at IRHS because of implementing positive education, was nurtured through over ten years of ongoing development, professional learning, evaluation and re-development which had engaged the staff deeply through the processes of change. It was not a quick program that was implemented and then moved on from to the next initiative, it was embedded into the DNA of the school.

Other People Matter

Emerging from my research was something that seems commonsense but is often overlooked and that is the importance of healthy, respectful relationships at all levels in a school. This underpins everything else. Humans are relational beings. Positive relationships are a core element of a person's wellbeing (Peterson et al., 2008; Seligman, 2011; Waldinger & Schulz, 2016), they are also "essential to the experience of education" (Giles, 2015, p. 161). The type of culture that encourages collaboration and innovation is built on trusting relationships and care. This was fostered and valued at IRHS, through the self-directed process of change (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). When relationships are fractured, as they had been at IRHS, it has a negative impact on the functioning of a school that extends beyond those involved and ultimately can impact the entire school community, leading to a toxic atmosphere. Toxic cultures in schools lead to staff becoming disconnected from each other, the school, and their students, and resistant to change (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Teachers lack the energy and motivation to put into their work and in the case of IRHS, are looking to leave. This has a negative impact on student achievement (Heffernan et al., 2022), and community perception. Rebuilding relationships at IRHS did not come from a 'bullying' 'stick' method (Adams, 2013). What was evident was relational leadership (Giles, 2018; Sparrowe,

2005), sensitivity and care for the wellbeing of those involved. My research demonstrated the power of developing school initiatives from the ground up, using democratic processes, as opposed to the usual managerial top-down approach

8.3 Contribution to Knowledge and the Literature

As a qualitative study of teachers' experiences of positive education, a field of study where only 5% of the literature looks at teachers and only 1.8% is qualitative (Waters & Loton, 2021), this study is unique in providing insights into the ontological experiences of leaders and teachers as a school introduces positive education, prioritising the voice of the participants. Through reflecting on teachers' and leaders' experiences, as related directly to me, a powerful story of school change through the implementation of positive education emerged. For participants the experience was significant and brought about both professional and personal change at an ontological level. This is consistent with, and adds to, the small number of other findings about the impact of positive education initiatives which have included significant learning about positive psychology for teachers (Brunzell et al., 2022; Finney, 2020; Headley, 2018; McCullough, 2015; Norrish, 2015; Rahm & Heise, 2019; Sandholm et al., 2023; Waters & Johnstone, 2022;).

All participants in my study experienced change in the school as something positive that changed the way-of-being in the school, bringing staff together to collaboratively alter 'how things were done' at IRHS (Alice; Barb; Barry; Gavin; Mandy; Ruth; Trish). Of particular significance are the understandings that emerged from teachers' and leaders' stories about how the culture of IRHS was turned around and why the change process was successful. Whilst there is a lot of research available about school culture and the impact of different types of culture in schools

there is not a lot available about enacting cultural change in schools. What is available are primarily books targeting school leaders and focusing on a top-down perspective of school culture and change. Whilst the leadership of a school is pivotal to the culture of a school (Cann et al., 2022; Deal & Peterson, 2016; McChesney & Cross, 2023; Rehal & van Nieuwerburgh, 2022), my research has shown that successful, immersive whole school change comes about through a collaborative process that engages all members of the school community and grows organically from the ground up, contributing to the understanding of successful, sustainable school change processes.

At a time when neo-liberal policies in education favour a top-down approach to new initiatives and change in schools, IRHS was entrusted to develop how positive education would be implemented in the school (Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). Through using strengths-based, affirming approaches that came from positive education, and including staff in decision-making, the school was able to effect a complete change of culture that actively engaged almost the entire staff, transforming the school from a place that teachers and leaders wanted to leave to one in which they wanted to stay (Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Looking back*; Mandy, *Growing old and grey*). With teacher attrition an issue for many countries across the world (McCallum, 2021) we need to address the reasons teachers leave and want to leave – not having a voice, not being valued as professionals, not being trusted to do their job, not trusting leadership, and the emotional toll of the work (Molyneux, 2021; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024). Research shows the importance of fostering environments that value and promote teacher wellbeing (Cameron & Lovett, 2015; McCallum, 2021; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024). Participants in my research identify

this as being one of the things they valued about the changed culture of IRHS (Mandy, *Wellbeing matters*; Trish, *Living it!*).

I have listed a range of important aspects that were identified in my research. I discuss these briefly as a summary of the contribution of my research to the field:

- Starting from an appreciative lens

- Relational Leadership

- Giving Teachers a Voice

- Participatory Action Research

- Care for Wellbeing

- Learn it, Live it, Teach it, Embed it!

- Rethinking positive education

Starting from an Appreciative Lens

A major finding from this study was the impact of introducing appreciative inquiry at IRHS. It immediately led to the excited engagement of staff and a change in atmosphere of the school (Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*). This is consistent with research into AI identifying that when we start from an appreciative lens – looking at what is working and how to build on this to improve, it changes the narrative to one that is positive and energising, "building capacity for school improvement" (Waters & White, 2015, p. 20) as opposed to the deficit model for change, in which we can become enmeshed in the problems, leading to the language of blame, defensiveness and a lack of energy for enacting change (Arnold et al., 2022; Whitney, 1998).

Participants found the continued use of a strengths-based approach to change engaged staff in openly sharing and working together to improve the school (Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). Other uses of strengths-based practices in the school led to improved relationships with students, increased affirmation and appreciation of staff and an improved sense of being-together-with each other amongst staff members (Mandy, *Growing old and grey*), aligning with research from positive education, identifying that when teachers engage in strengths-based practices they report increased levels of wellbeing, greater workplace satisfaction, stronger relationships and more focus on what students are doing right (Headley, 2018; McCullough, 2015; Waters & White, 2015).

Authentic, Relational Leadership

Important to the success of implementing positive education at IRHS was the attitude taken by Gavin, the principal. From his and other participants it was clear that from the start he saw it as a shared initiative that would only go ahead if staff voted for it (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). He was open with staff from the beginning and learnt and grew alongside them. This came through strongly in his stories, referring constantly to we, not I. Participants referred to the trust in the school, and that it was safe to take risks to try out something new, and to be vulnerable, knowing that the leadership would support the learning that was happening (Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Trish, *Living it*). This came from the relational approach taken by leadership, leading to a culture that allowed staff to feel safe to innovate. Research indicates that the culture of a school stems from the leaders (Cann, et al., 2022; Deal & Peterson, 2016; McChesney & Cross, 2023; Rehal & van Nieuwerburgh, 2022). Authentic, relational leadership, with clear goals and transparent motivation, working collaboratively with staff, students and parents to determine the vision, values and priorities in the school, is essential

in building the trust and connection needed for staff to feel safe to take risks and try out new ideas, collaborate to improve the school, feel valued, and feel connected, leading them to want to stay (Cameron & Lovett, 2015; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024; Wrigley et al., 2012). This is consistent with my findings.

Giving Teachers a Voice

Another factor important to the success of the cultural change at IRHS was the trust given to teachers. They had the final say in whether to go ahead with positive education and were entrusted to work together to develop how it would look in the school (Alice, *Recovery from the lowest of lows*; Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). Too often change in schools is implemented without consideration to context. Current neoliberal policies in education lead to a top-down management approach (Bills et al., 2024; Fuller, 2019; Jenlink, 2017; Lewis, 2017) where practices that 'work' are adopted from others without critical appraisal of their suitability for the individual site (Lewis, 2017). These supposed 'improvements' frequently cause damage and "isolate and undermine particular schools and teachers" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 27).

Rather than imposing from above, teachers and leaders at IRHS were given a voice about what they were taking on. The teachers knew their local context, their community, and the needs of their students, and were respected enough to be given the final say in what was needed to support improvement at their school. When teachers are given a voice and are part of the decision-making process, as they were at IRHS, they will be more motivated to put the energy needed into making change work (Kotter, 1996; Siebert et al., 2011).

Participatory Action Research

Significant to the success of implementing positive education at IRHS was the culture of collaboration and sharing that grew in the school as a result of teachers having a voice and being trusted (Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*). Every participant in my study discussed this as a strength that had developed in the school. Because there was no model to follow and no parameters to the project staff felt they were being valued and trusted enough as professionals to develop the program for their context and their community. This allowed them to grow positive education at IRHS from the ground up.

Although teachers were not asked to take part in action research, and the word was never mentioned, this was what was happening organically as groups came together to design how positive education would look in different parts of the school. A new, common language developed from positive psychology, resources such as books, professional learning and time were provided, and the meeting, timetabling and other structures of the school were redesigned to make the change sustainable.

Rather than presenting a program to implement, where the end result was pre-determined, and the path to it laid out, IRHS allowed for emergent planning (Bamford & Forrester, 2003; Burnes, 2004; By, 2005), so that how positive education looked was designed by the staff of the school. By using emergent planning and informal participatory action research the staff had ownership of how positive education would work at IRHS.

Care for Wellbeing

The focus on care and building wellbeing and resilience at IRHS was highly valued by participants in my study and a key reason some of them gave for wanting to stay at the school (Mandy, *Growing old and grey*; Trish, *Living it!*). Starting from 'strengths' became part of how things were done, changing deficit views to more appreciative ones about students, each other and the school and helping build relationships and self-esteem (Barry, *Building on strengths*; Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*). Developing a regular practice of 'strength' spotting and affirmations of each other amongst staff helped them to feel 'seen' and appreciated, building a culture that shared and celebrated achievements (Mandy, *Growing old and grey*). Building regular sessions into professional learning that focused on teaching staff research-based skills for building their own resilience and managing their wellbeing not only improved staff wellbeing, it also made them feel valued as their wellbeing was seen as a priority (Mandy, *Wellbeing matters!*).

If you search for information about teacher wellbeing on official education department websites, you will find that it is lacking. Despite numerous reports on teacher stress and burnout and concerns about teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2002; McCallum, 2021; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024), there is very little attention being given to it in official policies and practices. If we are serious about teacher attrition more focus needs to be given to creating environments in schools that care and foster wellbeing and resilience.

Learn it, Live it, Teach it, Embed it!

Every participant in my research told of how they had taken aspects of what they had learnt from positive education into their own lives, finding aspects that resonated with their way of being, supporting their wellbeing and resilience, and taking these into their way of doing things (Alice;

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Barb; Barry; Gavin; Mandy; Ruth; Trish). For one it was gratitude practices, another mindfulness, others found focusing on strengths beneficial, for another it was building activities that gave her meaning into her life. Like me, each of them found that "positive psychology is not a spectator sport" (Peterson, 2006, p. 25) and reflected on how it had helped them manage challenging situations both in their professional and personal lives. They all expressed the benefits of learning about positive psychology and taking it into their lives before teaching it to others. This aligns with Seligman's mantra of 'Learn It, Live It, Teach It, Embed It' (Norrish, 2015; Seligman, 2011), which is epitomised in what happened at IRHS and underpins any significant school change, particularly when relating to wellbeing. This is supported by research that shows that wellbeing initiatives are most successful when they are embedded into the school culture, becoming part of the DNA of the school (Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021; Vo et al., 2022).

Positive Education

My research findings are consistent with research from other schools into the experiences of teachers and leaders as a school implemented positive education. Like Ravenswood (Waters & Johnstone, 2022) and GGS (Hoare et al., 2017; Norrish, 2015) the school took a holistic approach to the implementation of positive education. Following Seligman's (2011) Learn it! Live it! Teach it! Embed it! approach the school began with teachers, ensuring that all staff members participated in an immersive four-day positive education training that focused on positive psychology for themselves before turning the lens to focus on students on day four. This was followed up by regular, ongoing professional learning in positive education concepts, and the implementation of school-wide strength-based practices. All participants in my study believed that they had benefitted both professionally and personally from learning about positive

education. They all valued the focus on building positive relationships and felt that collaboration, collegiality, appreciation and trust had grown in the school as a result of the appreciative lens that came from implementing positive education in the school. It offered mediating effects and strategies for managing stresses, not only in the school, but also beyond the gate (Alice, *Strategies for life*; Barry, *Building on strengths*; Mandy, *Starting out*). In addition, positive education provided a model to introduce change that focused on strengths and built on positive characteristics from the ground up, rather than focusing on deficits and trying to implement change from the top down.

8.4 Recommendations

Growing School Change from the Ground Up

One of the biggest strengths of what happened at IRHS was the enthusiasm and involvement of staff in implementing positive education in the school. Because the practices were grown from the ground up teachers had ownership of them, tailoring them to the school needs and community. Under neoliberal education policies most school change initiatives are mandated from the top-down, with little attention, if any, to relevance and context. Whilst teachers will comply with top-down mandates they are less likely to have energy and motivation for the change (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Lee & Louis, 2019) and will not have ownership. Furthermore, according to the ClassCover survey 'mandates' are one of the top five reasons teachers gave for leaving the profession (Hanlon, 2022). At IRHS teachers embraced the challenge to implement positive education, leading to the emergence of a culture of collegiality, collaboration and sharing (Alice, *Teaching it!;* Barry, *A culture of sharing*; Gavin, *Stepping into the unknown*), the type of culture that is more likely to enact sustainable change (Adams, 2013; Wrigley et al., 2012).

From this I recommend giving teachers a voice in change initiatives to be taken on in a school. This respects their local knowledge of what is needed and works for their community and gives them ownership of the change. Following such decisions up with an appreciative inquiry focusing on the chosen change, will provide an energising, collaborative approach to developing the first part of an emergent plan. Allowing staff to then take charge over developing elements of the plan through AI and a strengths-based version of participatory action research shows continued respect for their local knowledge and expertise and further encourages collaboration, building collegiality and participation in the process.

Nurturing School Culture

School culture is fragile and precious. As seen at IRHS it does not take a lot for it to become toxic. The development of a caring, relational culture at IRHS took time and hard work. All participants in my study valued the culture that was developed and saw it as something to be preserved. From their experiences it is apparent that a positive school culture needs care and maintenance. Too often new, centrally driven initiatives are put out to schools with a short period of support and resourcing and then left as the next 'best' thing comes along. Genuine change, particularly cultural change, takes time. It needs to be prioritised over many years, reviewed and adjusted as needs and cohort change. Once enacted it is important to recognise that a school's culture is precious and fragile. It needs ongoing nurturing to be maintained. I recommend that attention be paid to nurturing positive cultures in schools through showing that it is valued by providing staff with ongoing professional learning, reviewing and adjusting practices regularly and ensuring policies support the established culture.

Care for Teacher Wellbeing

Teaching is a caring and emotionally demanding profession (Granziera et al., 2023; Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021; Molyneux, 2021; Vo et al., 2022), which most teachers choose because they want to make a difference, (Hanlon, 2022; Molyneux, 2021; Zembylas, 2003). Current neoliberal policies in educational management and the tensions these create are one of the major contributors to teacher stress (Ball, 2016b; Connell, 2009; Heffernan et al., 2022; McCallum, 2022; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024; Schaefer et al., 2014). My research is consistent with that of others which shows that teachers value a culture that cares for them and prioritises their wellbeing and resilience (Hine, et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021; Vo et al., 2022), and are more likely to stay in the profession if in schools with this sort of culture despite being impacted by many of the same pressures as teachers in other schools, (Rahimi & Arnold, 2024).

Consistent with my research all positive education initiatives targeting teachers reviewed in this thesis reported positive results, the most successful being those that involved a whole of school focus and implementation. Positive education is not a program, but the implementation of research-based wellbeing initiatives in schools and can, in fact should, look different in each school. Research indicates that for positive education (or wellbeing science) to have any long-term impact it needs to be fully embedded into schools (Adler, 2017, 2016; White 2016) and teachers need to be trained to deliver it. This research has focused on benefits to students. I go further and argue that positive education has the capacity to build teacher wellbeing and resilience if embedded in a school using the approach of 'Learn it, Live it, Teach it, Embed it' and supported with ongoing professional development that focusses on teachers applying it for themselves before developing how to implement it for students. I argue that a closer look needs

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to be given to the advantages of embedding positive education practices in schools as an avenue for building teacher wellbeing and resilience and an affirming school culture. "There is much potential for positive education in Australia, but care needs to be taken so that it becomes a core part of education as a whole, not simply a short-lived fad" (Slemp, et al., 2017).

8.5 Possibilities for Further Research

There are many areas for further research from this study, some of which I mention in this section.

The use of Appreciative Inquiry in Educational Settings

The introduction of appreciative inquiry had a significant impact on the staff of IRHS (Ruth, *Appreciative inquiry*), helping them to begin healing from the trauma of past issues in the school. This may have been a case of the right tool at the right time and place. Further research into the impact of employing appreciative inquiry in schools could look at its benefits as a change model in educational settings on a broader scale.

Ontological Understanding of the Impact of Change in Schools

Whilst there is a lot of research into the impact of culture, educational policies and practices and leadership models in schools, and some into change processes, there is room for more research into the impact of change in schools. Schools are constantly changing, and it is important to understand how change effects those working in schools. Through further research into the lived experiences of staff when undergoing change in schools a more nuanced ontological understanding of the impact of change could lead to better change processes and models and better support for staff through change to be developed.

The Impact of the Implementation of Positive Education in Schools on Teachers

As mentioned earlier in my thesis this is a neglected area in the field of positive education research. Further work is needed to fully understand the benefits or otherwise of introducing positive education for teachers and leaders. Given the need to care for our teachers and build their wellbeing and resilience, and the issues around teacher attrition, this is a key area for further study.

Care for Teachers

Expanding on the need to provide care for teachers' wellbeing and resilience is the need for further research into this aspect of the educational experience. Through their stories participants in my research discussed how much they valued the care shown to teachers in the school and the focus on building their wellbeing and resilience (Mandy, *Wellbeing matters!*; Trish, *Living it!*). This is an area of research that is crucial for supporting teachers to stay in the profession.

8.8 Concluding Thoughts

Despite ongoing research into teacher attrition going back two decades, and a world-wide shortage of teachers, education department policies do not seem to be making serious endeavours to address the main reasons teachers give for leaving – stress, burnout, not being valued as a professional, unsupportive work environments (Ingersoll, 2002; Rahimi & Arnold, 2024). Teaching is a caring profession and as such, it is essential that we care for our educators (Lovett & Lovett, 2016: Zembylas, 2003). My research has shown that taking an appreciative, strengths-based approach to change allows teachers to feel valued, 'seen' and affirmed. Entrusting teachers to develop how change will look in a school through an ongoing emergent approach gave them ownership. It was apparent from the research that when a school values care,

relationships, wellbeing and resilience, teachers want to stay. This focus also created an atmosphere that encouraged collaboration, engagement and a commitment to the ongoing development of the school (Wrigley et al., 2012). Whilst positive education was the catalyst for change at IRHS, and the principles of positive education underpinned the approach taken in the school, the way it was implemented was as important as what was implemented. Through giving staff members a say in decisions about school directions, trusting them, and providing them with the necessary resources to make change, IRHS addressed many of the reasons teachers leave the profession and showed the way for a collaborative, emergent approach to change that builds staff enthusiasm and energy rather than resentment. Since positive education is not a program, but an 'umbrella' term and draws on the work of psychologists and others working in the field from around the world, it lends itself to being implemented differently in different settings, thus each school can contextualise how it will look in their community, creating a relevant way of being for the school that teachers own and have an investment in. This makes it an ideal way to implement wellbeing focused activities into a school as it allows the staff in the school, supported by thorough professional learning, to develop how it will look in their setting, for their community.

When I arrived at IRHS twenty-two years ago I found a school that staff were seeking to leave. When I went on leave at the end of last year it was a school where staff members "want to grow old and grey" (Mandy). This change in attitudes was the result of a significant culture change that empowered and valued the input of staff and made their wellbeing a priority. In hindsight what came out of the school's involvement with the Adelaide Thinkers in Residence, Seligman project has been beneficial for the school. The lived experience of teachers and leaders as the

school implemented positive education was an approach taken to change that was different from that usually taken in schools. It engaged staff and got them involved with each other.

> And yeah, that was probably one of the best decisions – having that opportunity, if you look in hindsight, is probably just this moment in time that changed the whole DNA of the organisation, or of the school, but also staff, students, and there were so many flow on effects. So, it was just like that pivotal moment (Gavin).

See also Appendix H.

Appendix A: Ethics Approval

Human Research Ethics <human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au>
Wed 26/06/2019 11:09

To:

- Cook, Jenni ~~[redacted]~~

+3 others

Dear Jennifer,

Your conditional approval response for project 8336 was reviewed by the interim Chairperson of the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) and was **approved.** The ethics approval notice can be found below.

APPROVAL NOTICE

Project No.:	**8336**

Project Title:	Leaders' and teachers' ways of being in change: re-culturing a school through the introduction of positive education

Principal Researcher:	Mrs Jennifer Cook

Email:	~~[redacted]~~

Approval Date:	26 June 2019	Ethics Approval Expiry Date:	**31 December 2024**

The above proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application, its attachments and the information subsequently provided.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS

1. **Participant Documentation**

   Please note that it is the responsibility of researchers and supervisors, in the case of student projects, to ensure that:

- all participant documents are checked for spelling, grammatical, numbering and formatting errors. The Committee does not accept any responsibility for the above mentioned errors.
- the Flinders University logo is included on all participant documentation (e.g., letters of Introduction, information Sheets, consent forms, debriefing information and questionnaires – with the exception of purchased research tools) and the current Flinders University letterhead is included in the header of all letters of introduction. The Flinders University international logo/letterhead should be used and documentation should contain international dialling codes for all telephone and fax numbers listed for all research to be conducted overseas.
- the SBREC contact details, listed below, are included in the footer of all letters of introduction and information sheets.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number 'INSERT PROJECT No. here following approval'). For more information regarding ethics approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au*.*

2. Annual Progress / Final Reports

In order to comply with the monitoring requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018)* an annual progress report must be submitted each year on the **26 June** (approval anniversary date) for the duration of the ethics approval using the report template available from the Managing Your Ethics Approval web page.

Please note that no data collection can be undertaken after the ethics approval expiry date listed at the top of this notice. If data is collected after expiry, it will not be covered in terms of ethics. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that annual progress reports are submitted on time; and that no data is collected after ethics has expired.

If the project is completed *before* ethics approval has expired please ensure a final report is submitted immediately. If ethics approval for your project expires please either submit (1) a final report; or (2) an extension of time request (using the modification request form).

First Report due date:	**26 June 2020**
Final Report due date:	**31 December 2024**

> Student Projects
> For student projects, the SBREC recommends that current ethics approval is maintained until a student's thesis has been submitted, assessed and finalised. This is to protect the student in the event that reviewers recommend that additional data be collected from participants.

3. Modifications to Project

Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval has been obtained from the Ethics Committee. Such proposed changes / modifications include:
- change of project title;
- change to research team (e.g., additions, removals, researchers and supervisors)
- changes to research objectives;
- changes to research protocol;
- changes to participant recruitment methods;
- changes / additions to source(s) of participants;
- changes of procedures used to seek informed consent;

- changes to reimbursements provided to participants;
- changes to information / documents to be given to potential participants;
- changes to research tools (e.g., survey, interview questions, focus group questions etc);
- extensions of time (i.e. to extend the period of ethics approval past current expiry date).

To notify the Committee of any proposed modifications to the project please submit a Modification Request Form available from the Managing Your Ethics Approval SBREC web page. Download the form from the website every time a new modification request is submitted to ensure that the most recent form is used. Please note that extension of time requests should be submitted prior to the Ethics Approval Expiry Date listed on this notice.

Change of Contact Details
If the contact details of researchers, listed in the approved application, change please notify the Committee so that the details can be updated in our system. A modification request is not required to change your contact details; but would be if a new researcher needs to be added on to the research / supervisory team.

4. **Adverse Events and/or Complaints**
Researchers should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 08 8201-3116 or human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au immediately if:
- any complaints regarding the research are received;
- a serious or unexpected adverse event occurs that effects participants;
- an unforeseen event occurs that may affect the ethical acceptability of the project.

Kind regards
Rae

_____

Andrea Mather and Rae Tyler
Executive Officers, Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee
Research Development and Support

Flinders University
Sturt Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042
GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia, 5001

http://www.flinders.edu.au/research/researcher-support/ebi/human-ethics/human-ethics_home.cfm

Appendix B: Letter of Introduction to Participants

School of Education, Psychology and Social Work

GPO Box 2100
Adelaide SA 5001

Tel: 08 82017800
cook0344@uni.flinders.edu.au
https://www.flinders.edu.au/college-education-psychology-social-work
CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear Colleague,

This letter is to introduce researcher Jenni Cook.

Jenni is conducting insider research at ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛ School to explore how leaders and teachers experience cultural change through the introduction of positive education. The title of her project is *Leaders' and teachers' ways of being in change: re-culturing a school through the introduction of positive education.*

The aim of this auto-ethnographic and hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry is to seek to understand the experiences of teachers and educational leaders in a school as the school culture is impacted on by the implementation of positive education.

Current research into positive education acknowledges the essential role played by teachers and leaders in schools but has given very little attention to their experiences. The focus of research has primarily been quantitative studies on the impact of positive education programs on students. Jenni seeks to provide voice to, and insight into the impact on, those expected to implement positive education in schools.

To enable Jenni to develop an understanding of the experiences of the leaders and teachers of ⬛⬛⬛ school as they have implemented positive education, and the cultural changes that have gone along with it, she plans to conduct semi-structured interviews with school leaders and staff.

Jenni is seeking volunteers from three distinct groups of teaching staff to be involved in this research. Those who have had a leadership role during the implementation of positive education in the school, those who have been in the school since before positive education, and those who have arrived since positive education was embedded.

As a participant you would be interviewed individually at a local café, the ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛ District Library, or another suitable location of your choice. Interviews will be approximately one hour long. Be assured that information relayed through such an interview will have no bearing on your professional relationship. It is essential to this study that the information is honest and factual. As Jenni intends to make recordings of the interviews, your consent would be sought prior to the interview. This would also include permission to use the information from the recording in her thesis and other publications, on the understanding that your name and identity would not be revealed. It may also be necessary to use secretarial services to transcribe the recordings. You can be assured that if this is the case such a person would be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and to destroy any copies of the transcripts once they have been returned to the researcher.

Where relevant you may choose to share artefacts or journal entries that help convey your thoughts. This is completely at your discretion.

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Be assured that any information provided will be treated with the utmost confidence and neither the school nor participants will be identified in any publications. That said anonymity cannot be completely guaranteed given the school's unique position in the state and positive education community with regards to its implementation of positive education. Please consider this in your decision.

If you are interested in participating in this study one of the administration SSO's will provide you with an information sheet containing further details, and consent form to sign should you agree to be involved. Jenni will only be notified of those who have indicated their willingness to participate.

Thank you for your attention and possible participation.

Dr Andrew Bills and Dr Bev Rogers
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University

INFORMATION SHEET
(for *interviewees*)

Title: *Leaders' and teachers' ways of being in change: re-culturing a school through the introduction of positive education.*

Researcher:
Jenni Cook
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University
Tel:▨▨▨▨▨▨
cook0344@flinders.edu.au

Supervisors:

Dr Andrew Bills	Dr Bev Rogers	Professor David Giles
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work Flinders University	College of Education, Psychology and Social Work Flinders University	College of Education, Psychology and Social Work Flinders University

Dear Colleagues,

I am embarking on a doctoral research project that endeavours to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of cultural change in schools, as experienced by school leaders and teachers. I am looking for participants (▨▨▨ ▨▨▨▨▨ School (▨▨▨) leaders and teaching staff) to share their stories of how they have experienced change as Positive Education has been implemented in the school, or as they have come into the school since Positive Education was initially implemented. You are invited to participate in this study. Please read this sheet in full before deciding whether or not you are willing to participate in this research. If you would like further information about any aspect of this project, you are invited to speak to either Andrew or Bev listed above.

Description of the research project
This study forms part of the data collection phase of the research project titled above. Being a phenomenological inquiry, I am keen to understand leaders and teachers experiences of change in ▨▨▨ through the medium of positive education.

Purpose of the study
The purpose of the inquiry is to document descriptive narratives of the experiences of school leaders and teachers. Your experiences of cultural change will be sought for analysis to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying meaning of what it was like for each individual. It is essential for my research that participants honestly share their stories and experiences, not coloured versions they believe I might want to hear.

What will you be asked to do?
If you agree to participate, you will be invited to attend an interview at a mutually determined location (examples are a café or the ▨▨▨▨▨▨ District Library). At this interview I will ask you to talk about your experiences of

leading/teaching at ▨▨▨▨▨▨▨▨ School through or since the implementation of Positive Education. As you share your stories they will be digitally recorded. I will also be taking notes and asking questions designed to help the conversation flow. Following the interview, the recording will be transcribed before being returned to you for review and to seek approval to use it for further analysis. You retain the right to amend, add or subtract information so that it more accurately reflects what was intended.

Where relevant you may choose to share artefacts or journal entries that help convey your thoughts. This is completely at your discretion.

How much time will your participation require?
Depending on the depth and flow of conversation, it is anticipated that the interview will take approximately one hour. In addition, reading through your interview transcript and reviewing it may take another 15 – 30 minutes.

Consenting to participate in the project and withdrawing from the research
The consent process involves:
- Reading this information sheet
- Clarifying any questions you may have
- Returning a signed Consent for Participation in Research form to the designated SSO.

An administration SSO chosen by the ▨▨▨▨ business manager will invite a selection of teachers and leaders to participate from a larger number of possible participants I will provide to them. I will not know who has been invited and who said no to participating in the research. I will only be made aware of who has agreed to participate. You retain the right to withdraw from participation at any stage.

What are the benefits of participation?
Hermeneutic phenomenological research endeavours to uncover hidden meaning within texts to gain deeper understandings. In attempting to uncover the experiences of leaders and teachers involved in cultural change through the implementation of positive education, it will give voice to the leaders and teachers implementing positive education in schools, which has been largely overlooked in the research to date. Given the critical role played by leaders and teachers in schools in the implementation of positive education these narrative descriptions may help us to understand what this has meant for them and the impact it has had.

Positive Education is a relatively new field of research, only appearing in journals in the past fourteen years and only named eleven years ago. Whilst it is clear from the research that teachers are crucial to the successful implementation of positive education in a school, (Adler, 2016) there has been very little research into teachers' experiences of implementing positive education. It is hoped that this research will help add to this emerging field. As leaders and teachers at Mount Barker High School you have been actively involved in implementing positive education in the school over the past seven years. Your experiences will have value to the field of Positive Education research, but may also have value to other schools wishing to explore the advantages and disadvantages of implementing positive education.

Confidentiality
As much as possible, all identifying information will be removed, including the name of the school. No personal details of those involved will be revealed, nor will it be revealed who did and did not participate. However due to the unique position of MtBHS in the state and the positive education world, anonymity cannot be completely guaranteed.

Storage of data
The transcription of your interview may be completed by a third party. If so they will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. Data will be securely transmitted to them and they will delete all copies once it has been returned to me. The transcriptions and edited narratives will be stored in a secure file and back-up file. My supervisors will view the transcripts in their capacity of overseeing the analysis of the data, however theses transcripts will have been de-identified using codes in place of names. On completion of the research the data will be securely stored for seven years, as required for any research involving State Government bodies, after which it will be destroyed.

Risk or discomfort

I do not anticipate any risks through involvement in this research. Understandably there may be times in the interview when the conversation uncovers some emotional or confidential information, that may cause discomfort. I wish to assure you that your narrative descriptions will be treated with the utmost confidence and respect.

Services available if adversely affected
Following the data collection process there will be the possibility of debriefing either individually or in small groups, should participants desire it. All participants will be given the number for the Employee Assist Program ▨▨▨▨▨

Compensation for participation
No financial payment will be made for involvement in this study. Participation is not part of your professional responsibilities and is not a school activity. The research is separate from my school role.

Results
The results will be published as part of the thesis for my Flinders University Doctorate of Education. They may also be used for other academic publications. Participants will be provided a short summary of the results upon request.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information. I hope that you will accept this invitation to be involved.

Yours sincerely,

Jenni Cook
Researcher

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in South Australia (Project number 8336). For queries regarding the ethics approval of this project, or to discuss any concerns or complaints, please contact the Executive Officer of the committee via telephone on +61 8 8201 3116 or email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Jenni Cook

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CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

Consent Form for Participation in Research
By Interview

Leaders' and teachers' ways of being in change: re-culturing a school through the introduction of positive education

I _____ being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate as requested in the Information Sheet for the research project on leaders and teachers experiences of cultural change in a school.

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.

I agree to the audio recording of my interview. Where relevant I may choose to share artefacts or journal entries that help convey my thoughts. I understand that this is completely at my discretion.

3. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.
4. I understand that:
   a. I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
   b. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions, or ask that the audio recording be stopped at any time.
   c. The information obtained in this study will be published as outlined in the Information Sheet. Whilst I will not be identified, and all individual information will remain confidential I understand that the unique position of ▨▨▨▨▨▨ School in relation to positive education means that anonymity cannot be guaranteed.
   d. Whether I participate or not, withdraw during or after participation, it will have no impact on my professional relationship with the researcher.
   e. That the audio recording of my interview may be transcribed by a third person.
5. I have had the opportunity to discuss taking part in this research with a family member or friend.

Researcher's Name: Jenni Cook

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

I, the participant whose signature appears below, have read the transcript of my interview and agree to its use by the researcher as explained.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

I, the participant whose signature appears below, have read researcher's report and agree to the publication of my information as reported.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E: Interview Guide Questions

Tell me a little bit about your teaching career?
What has been your best moment as a leader/teacher?
What is your history of employment at this school?
What have been your experiences of the school?
How has this been different from other schools?
Did you apply for this school, and if so why did you choose it?
How did the school go about implementing positive education?
How are new staff provided with induction into positive education?
How would you explain positive education to a new teacher starting at the school?
What would you say about how it feels for you?
Can you tell me a little bit about what your experiences have been at the school throughout the implementation?
Talk about how you personally engaged with the philosophy and practice of positive education.
When did you feel that you got what it was about? How did that feel? What was it about?
Is there anything that has particularly resonated with you personally?
Paint a picture of what was happening around you when you were struck by some new learning – paint the scene. How would you describe the way you felt at the time?
Paint a picture of an experience of learning that had a real impact on you.
How has it felt for you being a teacher engaged in this type of immersive program?
Is it different from how you felt as a teacher previously and if so how?
Do you think that your sense of professional identity has changed over the last few years?
Has there been a flow on into your personal identity?
Has there been any change in where you want to go with your career?
Have you ever had thoughts about whether teaching is right/where you want to stay? Has positive education had an impact?
How has positive education changed your teaching/how you teach/your classroom practice?
How has positive education changed how you work in your role as a leader in the school?
How have you used the principles/research behind positive education?
How has positive education enhanced relationships/collaboration in the school?
What sort of level of professional trust do you feel there is? Permission to take risks?
In relation to leadership you have mentioned how important it is to have someone you can go to and trust and who trusts you so do you feel that this exists?
So over the last few years, with the change that the school has been through, what have been your personal experiences of being in that change process?
Is the sense of being valued there?
To what extent do you think positive education has fostered collaboration and interschool relationships?
Is there anything else that you would like to add about what positive education has brought to the school or to you as a teacher that you feel we haven't discussed?

> As we interview others about their experience of a certain phenomenon, it is imperative to stay close to experience as lived. As we ask what an experience is like, it may help to be very concrete. Ask the person to think of a specific instance, situation, person, or event. Then explore the whole experience to the fullest. Van Manen P.67

Appendix F : Crafted Stories Overview

Participant	Story Titles	Description	Interpretation	Emotional responses
Interview One	Validation	Positive education validated much of what Barb already did.	Barb felt empowered by the implementation of positive education in the school as it gave a name and research backing to much of what she already did and believed intuitively.	Validation Affirmation
	Culture of care (Saying hello!)	Barb believes that the culture of the school has changed for the better since the implementation of positive education.	Barb hated the school when she arrived due to the negativity and lack of connection. When teachers come back from positive education professional learning, they are excited and enthused and eager to share with others, focusing on wellbeing and building resilience. She now finds that people are friendly, say hello and want to collaborate and learn from each other. It is very different from the 'old days'. She thinks this is 'really nice'.	Frustrated Excitement Open and sharing Empathy
	Care at home	Barb found that she was able to use strategies from positive education to improve things for her elderly parents.	Barb has found that positive education not only has relevance at school, she has also adapted strategies from it to use at home with her husband and elderly parents. She has found that doing this has helped to validate her husband and bring joy and laughter into her parents' otherwise sad lives.	Appreciation Good place
	Things to be grateful for	Barb has used gratitude extensively with her students, helping them to find things to be grateful for in their challenging lives.	Teaching gratitude to her highly vulnerable cohort of students has been both challenging and rewarding for Barb. At first not believing that there was anything in their lives to be grateful about she now has students appreciating even the little things like a beautiful flower seen on their walk to school and sharing this with her in a photo. This has brought her joy.	Really nice Happy Excited
Interview Two	Recovery from the 'lowest of lows'	Alice describes the school reaching a point that was the "lowest of lows" when staff morale was at absolute rock bottom. Positive Education was seen as something that could bring about change in the school.	IRHS went through a period of conflict between executive team members that left staff morale floundering. Although no longer at rock bottom morale was still low when Gavin asked staff if he should accept the Department's offer to implement positive education. Alice recognised that something needed to change and was enthusiastic. The implementation of positive education shifted the narrative around the school, and it became a place parents were interested in and wanted to send their children to.	Low Not in a good place Negative Positive Enjoyment Pride

Interview	Theme	Summary	Narrative	Codes
			Personally, Alice found that positive education changed how she related to students. She believes that it gave the school a 'point of difference' in the district.	Dark place Self-pity Fulfilling Gratifying Happy
	Strategies for life	Alice uses strategies from positive education in her personal life.	Alice has embraced strategies from positive education, finding that they help her manage her emotions and cope with stressful situations. She also shares what she has learnt to support others who may be struggling with difficult situations. She told a story of a student who was in a dark place and not participating in the class. She was able to provide the student with some strategies from positive education that saw the student join in with the lesson and thank Alice at the end of it. This was very rewarding.	
	Teaching it!	Alice was enthusiastic about embedding elements and concepts from positive education into her teaching and enjoyed the intellectual work associated with embedding it into the subjects she taught.	Alice enjoyed the intellectual challenge of embedding positive education into her teaching. She believes that it needs to be taught both explicitly and implicitly, so that it is built into practice in the school. As a curriculum leader she found some teams collaborated enthusiastically and creatively to develop the curriculum whilst others had to be encouraged, believing that it was what they did anyway!	Enthusiasm Frustrating Enjoyment
Interview Three	Building of strengths	Barry was uncertain about positive education at first, standing back to 'see what happened'. When he realised how positive education strategies could add to his work with students that he began to utilise aspects enthusiastically.	Having been hesitant about positive education initially Barry realised that it offered a lot to his work with students at risk. He began to use the aspects of positive education that resonated with him, in particular using a strengths-based approach both with students and in his personal life. Barry has always valued and fostered positive relationships and when he began to use a strengths based approach both at work and at home he found that these were even better.	Hesitant Positive Connection Doubt
	Hope for a new direction	Barry found the school a negative place when he first arrived. Positive education became the catalyst for positive school change.	Staff and student morale were low when Barry arrived at the school. When the chance to implement positive education was offered, he believes that staff 'reached for it' as they wanted something to change, and this offered a positive way forward.	Disengaged Negative Glass half-full Positive Pride

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Interview	Theme	Description	Narrative	Codes
			According to Barry the 'feel' of the school changed after the implementation of positive education, becoming positive, collaborative and appreciative. The community began to look at the school favourably and take an interest in the work being done there.	
	A culture of sharing	Barry saw a culture of sharing and collaboration develop in the school that he has rarely seen elsewhere.	Teachers at IRHS began working together, sharing resources and ideas. Collaboration and trust grew in the school as teachers worked to develop what positive education should look like.	Trust Connection
	Challenges ahead	Barry believes that keeping the focus on positive education is important for the school, but sees that it may be challenging to do so as key staff leave and the school grows in size.	Barry believes that positive education is an important part of the school culture and keeping it alive is vital. Now that positive education isn't new it has lost some of its allure. He sees challenges in the appropriate induction of new staff and in longer-term staff become complacent, believing that they 'know this stuff'. He recognises that he has been complacent and challenges himself to keep on learning.	Challenging Complacency
Interview Four	Growing old and grey	Mandy had a poor opinion of the school as a community member. Joining staff as a graduate teacher changed this and she now wants it to be her forever school.	Mandy grew up in the district and was aware of IRHS poor reputation. Coming into the school as a pre-service and then graduate teacher after the implementation of positive education, she was impressed by the importance placed on care, relationships, resilience and wellbeing in the school and now wants to 'grow old and grey' there. She appreciates the deliberate practices in the school that are designed to make teachers feel seen and appreciated and encourage them to affirm others.	Bad perception Interested Grateful Committed Appreciated Affirmation
	Starting out	Mandy found that positive education in the school gave her the knowledge and strategies to successfully navigate a very difficult time in her life.	Mandy found that the skills she learnt through her positive education induction helped her cope with the stress of being a beginning teacher, at a time when her personal life was also challenging.	Bit lost Challenging Stressful Overwhelm Really good Grateful
	Resonance	Mandy found that many of the concepts and strategies from positive education resonated with her.	Mandy took positive education to heart, finding resonance with many of the ideas and strategies.	Enjoy Interesting Positives Celebrating

	Living it! Becoming part of who you are and how you do things.	As a teacher Mandy has only ever known a positive education school. She values this and feels that it has become part of how she does things.	Having come to IRHS as a graduate teacher Mandy has never known anything but positive education in a school. It is embedded into her practice and her way of being as a teacher. It is not something she can explain – it is not something you do, although there are elements of positive education she has put into her practice - it is how you do things, who you are as a teacher and a person.	Loved Positive Interesting Nice Grateful
Interview Five	The culture of care	Coming into the school when positive education was fully embedded Trish immediately embraced it, seeing how important care and relationships were at the site.	Trish values care and relationships. Coming into IRHS when positive education was fully embedded, she was struck by how both these were prioritised in the school. This made her feel 'at home'.	Lovely Hits the Heart Loved it
	Living it 2! The importance of role modelling.	Role modelling the concepts and strategies from positive education is important to Trish.	Trish is very conscious of how the way teachers present has an impact on students. She believes that it is crucial to role model using positive education in your own life. This might be using strategies to help you present your 'best self for students, even when you are dealing with challenges in your personal life, or modelling practices such as gratitude for students.	Bad day Energy Good place
	It is what we do	Trish sees that positive education is part of how things are done at IRHS, and every teacher embeds it a little differently.	Trish believes that positive education has had a strong impact on how teachers relate to students and manage difficult students. She feels that they are more creative and thoughtful in coming up with strategies that work for individual students and show their care and concern. She says that it is 'how we do things' at IRHS.	Challenging Caring Creative
Interview Six	Not good enough	Gavin came into a school that was struggling. Teachers and students felt they were not as good as those at other schools and were disengaged.	Gavin felt gutted when he saw how staff and students at IRHS had lost all self-belief, self-worth and self-respect. They felt that the school was a second-rate school, and you only went there if you could not get in anywhere else. He was conscious of an atmosphere of distrust and felt that he had to tread carefully.	Disconnection Devastated Emotional Upset Anger Horrible Struggling No love No nurturing
	Stepping into the unknown	Gavin went looking for a catalyst for change in the	After a lot of soul-searching Gavin went in search of something that would be able to drive change at IRHS. He	Soul searching Lose

	school. When he was offered the opportunity to take on positive education he agreed, even though he knew nothing about it and there was very little information.	was not afraid to ask for things as he believed that the worst that could happen is that he would be told 'no', so he went to the Department to present a case for money to improve the physical condition of the school. Whilst there he was offered the opportunity to work with Martin Seligman and the Thinkers in Residence program. He was keen to give it a go, being someone who is inclined to 'jump in', but he wanted staff to make the final decision. Despite there being very limited information, the staff were almost unanimous in agreeing to take it on as they all knew things needed to change.	Wanted something Best decision Valued Fortunate Willingness
Including the community	Gavin was very conscious of the poor reputation the school had in the community and determined to involve community organisations and other schools in positive education. As a result, the community perception of the school improved.	Gavin was distressed by stories of students being treated as 'lessser' because they wore the IRHS uniform and wanted to change the low opinion of the school held by the broader community. Gavin invited community organisations and other schools to be involved in the work to implement positive education. This brought them into the school and the narrative about the school began to change. After only two years a positive attitude to the school began to develop and parents began wanting to send their children there.	Devastated Disconnect Challenged Proud Good Calm
Looking back	Looking back Gavin sees the opportunity to work with the Thinkers program as a once in a lifetime opportunity that IRHS did not waste.	Gavin talks about the implementation of positive education as a collaborative effort rather than taking credit for himself. He believes that it was successful because there were no parameters and no model to follow so that the staff at IRHS developed how it looked and worked in the school themselves. They were trusted to do this work. This led to the development of a culture of sharing, risk taking and collaboration across all areas of the school. Looking back Gavin believes that taking on positive education became the catalyst for lasting, positive, significant change in the school. It changed the culture to one of caring and trust, and the school became somewhere people wanted to be.	Willingness Freedom Trust Connection Really great Best thing Good Positive
Personal growth	Learning about positive education had both a personal and professional impact on Gavin. He feels	Gavin took many aspects of positive education into his own life, both professionally and personally. Much of what he learnt resonated strongly with him and he values the	Good Proud

Interview Seven			that it led to real growth for him as a leader.	growth that came from taking these concepts and skills into his practice.	
	Validation	Positive education resonated with Ruth and validated much that she did already	Relationships and care are central to how Ruth works. Positive education gave a name, a framework and research to underpin much that she already did. She makes it a priority to be available and to listen, to be present when staff, students or parents seek her out. When difficult relationships 'gel' it feels affirming and 'good'. It has given her confidence to be her genuine self.	Felt right Appreciative Confidence Really good Really great
	Appreciative Inquiry	Using appreciative questions rather than a deficit approach to change makes all the difference to the culture and energy of a school.	The whole 'feel' of the school changed when staff were first introduced to appreciative inquiry through two simple questions: 'What do we do well at IRHS?' and 'What are you proud of at IRHS?' Suddenly staff realised that they did have things to celebrate and be proud of and that these could be built on to improve. The move away from looking for problems and trying to fix them energised the staff and motivated them to get involved in changing the trajectory of the school.	Positive Appreciative Celebrate Proud
	Embedding it! (It is not a program).	Wellbeing programs do not make lasting change. For lasting change it needs to be embedded into the school's DNA.	Ruth is proud of how IRHS made a point of embedding wellbeing science through-out the school – in a stand-alone curriculum, in the general curriculum and in policies and practices. Only by fully embedding the practices into the DNA of the school can lasting change be achieved. Any 'program' will only have a short-term impact, unless it is embedded into practice. It is not just about how things are done in the school – it is very personal – it impacts how we do things as individuals as well.	Proud Amazing Good feeling Confidence Affirming Nurturing Connection Love
	They don't get it!	Despite IRHS being recognised both nationally and internationally in the positive education world for the work being done there the SA Department has shown little interest in what	Ruth is frustrated that DfE have shown no interest in the work that has been done at the school to introduce positive education and positive change. It is clear from conversations that they do not understand what positive education is about and are happy to dismiss the school's achievements as unimportant and insignificant, and not something to learn from.	Frustrated

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Overview	has been achieved at the school.	
	For some interviewees positive education was affirming, for others it provided new perspectives and ways of enacting their role as a teacher/leader in the school. One, who came to the school as a graduate teacher, has never known anything different in a school and values the care and importance placed on wellbeing. All interviewees spoke of using concepts and strategies from positive education in both their professional and personal lives. All those with 'before and after' experience of the school spoke about the deficit school story and how this changed to one of affirmation and strength after the introduction of positive education. They discussed the school's positive engagement with the community and mentioned the change in community perception of the school. All talked about the culture of collaboration, sharing, trust and appreciation in the school, how the staff built the practices into the school from the ground up and the importance placed on relationships.	When the opportunity of working with Martin Seligman and positive psychology was put to the staff there was almost unanimous agreement to go ahead, despite there being very little information to go on. Everyone knew the school was in a bad place and things needed to change. As a result of this decision the culture of the school changed from a deficit, negative focus to a positive appreciative focus, where relationships, care and wellbeing were valued and prioritised. This contrast was put into stark view by one interviewee who talked about the school hitting the 'lowest of lows' when staff morale could not get any lower, another who discussed how staff and students had lost belief in themselves and did not feel that they were good enough and another who described how students referred to the school as the 'povo' school, where you only went if you couldn't get in anywhere else. Yet another described how she 'hated' the school, and that it was all about discussing how bad the students were. Their descriptions of the culture of the school after the implementation of positive education included words like care, valued, trust, affirmed, appreciative, sharing, collaborating, positive relationships. They said the school was positive and valued wellbeing of staff and students. Interviewees talked about feeling validated and affirmed, about valuing the trust given to them and about feeling 'good' about the changes in the school. All who had 'before and after' experience mentioned the change in community perception of the school and how that impacted both them and the students. Every interviewee spoke about their growth from learning about positive psychology and how they had taken elements from it into both their professional and personal lives. They spoke of using strategies to bring joy and affirmation to family members, to address issues with their own wellbeing and to strengthen their teaching practices and relationships in and out of school. One spoke of his regret at not knowing about some of these strategies earlier in his life, when he believes they would have helped deal better with some difficult times. Three spoke about using the elements of PERMA when down to discern what was missing in their lives. Four interviewees spoke about taking a strengths-based perspective and three about using the character strengths. Five described using gratitude strategies. Gavin, the principal, talked about being gutted by what he heard and saw when he first arrived at the school. When he was offered the opportunity to work with Seligman, he felt that he just had to give it a go. In his interview he spoke about 'we' – how we made a difference, how we made it work, how we changed the school. He was really clear that it was a collaborative effort and would not have been successful had staff not been involved and had a say, right from the start. He believes that the lack of parameters, allowing staff to design how positive education would look in the school, was critical to its success. He sees that it was a once in the lifetime opportunity that was not wasted.

Appendix G : Example Story

Interview Six – Crafted Story Four

Story One – *Looking Back*

Gavin now believes that being the DfE focus school for positive education was one of the best decisions he ever made, one of those pivotal moments in time. In hindsight he says this opportunity "is probably just this moment in time that changed the whole DNA of…the school, but also staff, students and so many flow on effects".

Something was lacking in the school and the introduction of positive education provided a pathway for long term, significant change.

When he left the school two years ago it was a completely different place from the school he arrived at. It had become a place where staff and students wanted to be. Professional learning, self-development and growth were valued for staff and students. Relational trust had been developed, leading to psychological safety in the site and removing the feeling of 'them and us' that had existed between staff and students and staff and executive. Practices in the school encouraged strong relationships, openness and conversation.

"Looking back at the combinations of staff and that and you can see how staff interact and the changes, it has actually been a wonderful journey."

It had taken an immersive experience of change built collaboratively. Staff had ownership and leadership of the process leading to staff empowerment and as a by-product, student agency.

The result was deep cultural change that was maintained through ongoing nurturing and maintenance.

Gavin believes that having no parameters made a huge difference. Had the school been restricted, or directed he does not believe it would have got anywhere, but because they could do their own thing it made the change possible.

"You don't get these opportunities very often. We were given a chance, and we didn't waste it. We built it into the DNA. We made it stick."

Description

Gavin has left IRHS and moved to a new school. He looks back with pride and affection on what was achieved in IRHS. Due to a lack of parameters the school staff were able to develop a way of working that involved openness, trust, collaboration and sharing, which led to staff empowerment and deep cultural change in the school.

For Gavin it was a once in a lifetime opportunity that was not wasted.

Interpretation

Throughout his interview Gavin used 'we', indicating that he saw what had happened at IRHS as a collaborative, communal effort, rather than taking the credit himself. He believed that there developed a consistent attitude across the school that we were in this together for the betterment of our students.

This was possible because of the trust shown in the school by the Department. It was known that the school was in trouble, yet nothing was being done – quite possibly because no one knew what was going to make the difference. Certainly, no standard intervention was going to work.

Gavin was offered the opportunity to work with the Thinkers in Residence program and the school was trusted to develop how positive education would look contextually. For many years

immediately following the Seligman residency this trust was replaced by a top-down improvement agenda where context was considered irrelevant and schools were told what they needed to do, based on a narrow quantitative data base. This approach would not have worked for the situation at IRHS.

The trust and lack of parameters or direction about how positive education should be implemented showed a belief in the school that empowered teachers and allowed the school community to work collaboratively to develop what positive education looked like at IRHS, providing the environment for genuine participatory action research, which grew organically from within the staff. The cultural change in the school was a result of collaboration, learning and sharing, and led to a collegiate way of working and being in the school that is now embedded in its DNA.

Looking back Gavin believes that taking on positive education became the catalyst for deep, lasting, significant, positive change in the school. It changed the culture to one of caring and trust, and the school became somewhere people wanted to be.

Appendix H : Final Note

I was just finishing my conclusion when I received an email from a colleague at IRHS which I include below as it illustrates the far-reaching impact that positive education has had on the staff.

> I have never fully conveyed the impact that positive psychology has had on me and how far-reaching its benefits are. I wanted to share a story with you. This morning, my neighbour experienced a psychotic episode. She was out in the street with her bags packed, (milk, cucumber, passports etc etc) trying to get back to her home country. In her mind, Adelaide no longer had any humans, and the airport didn't exist, so she needed to get to Sydney to fly home. What I want to highlight is that until help arrived, I had the tools to keep her safe and prevent her from spiralling further.
>
> I reassured her that I wanted to keep her safe, and we did some grounding mindfulness activities. Once I saw she was more present and calmer, I asked her about her three favourite things about being in Australia this year. While we waited, she started talking at length about her trip to Uluru. Her mood and demeanour softened completely as she relived the experience.
>
> This practice has proven so valuable, and I feel these tools will only become more and more useful. I also think of other times I've relied on strategies from the PERMA model to support someone, often a student, in crisis and how some practices have most probably stopped someone from reaching a crisis situation. Thank you! (Private email, reproduced with permission).

Appendix I : SA Department for Education Ethics Approval

RE: Research ethics application [DLM=For-Official-Use-Only]

Education:Research Unit <DECD.ResearchUnit@sa.gov.au>
Thu 30/05/2019 17:11
To: Cook, Jenni ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬

For Official Use Only

Hi Jenni

Thank you for your research query.

If you are doing research at the Department for Education site where you are employed you do not need to go through the research application process, however, you do need approval from the school principal/site leader.

Please refer to the document at the following link:

on page 5 it states;

"This procedure does not apply to:
·   Research that involves surveys, observations or the evaluation of educational programs or practices by a current Department for Education site leader, staff member or university students undertaking a teaching placement within their own or neighbouring sites. Research matching this description must be approved by the relevant Principal, Director or site manager. "

Feel free to contact me if you have any further queries.

Regards
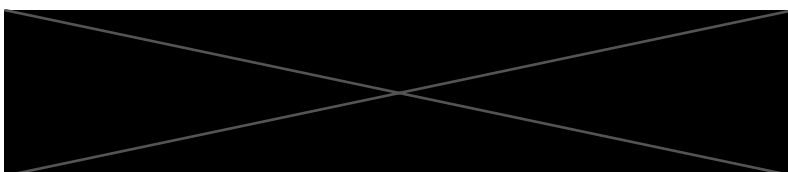
RE: Research request for my doctorate

▓▓▓

Mon 25/03/2019 11:12

To: Cook, Jenni ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓

Hi Jenni,

As you know I'm happy to support you with this request, however we need to meet to discuss the full implications of this proposal.

I hope we can meet over the next few days.

Regards,

▓▓▓▓▓▓

Appendix J : School Bulletin Notice

EXAMPLE OF BULLETIN NOTICE NOTIFYING ALL STAFF OF MY RESEARCH:

Hi All,

As many of you are aware I am working towards a Doctorate of Education at Flinders University.

The title of my research is *Leaders' and teachers' ways of being in change: re-culturing a school through the introduction of positive education.*

The purpose of the inquiry is to document descriptive narratives of school leaders' and teachers' experiences of cultural change to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying meaning of what it was like for each individual.

Over the next semester I hope to be interviewing a small number of teaching staff to gain an understanding of their experiences of this change.

I will also be documenting the story of █████ implementation of positive education and some of the significant moments that have occurred.

Please feel free to ask me about my research if you would like further information.

Jenni

Appendix K : Letter of Introduction

Letter of introduction emailed to staff by school administration office with a request for volunteers:

Dear Colleague,

This letter is to introduce researcher Jenni Cook.

Jenni is conducting insider research at ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ School to explore how leaders and teachers experience cultural change through the introduction of positive education. The title of her project is *Leaders' and teachers' ways of being in change: re-culturing a school through the introduction of positive education.*

The aim of this auto-ethnographic and hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry is to seek to understand the experiences of teachers and educational leaders in a school as the school culture is impacted on by the implementation of positive education.

Current research into positive education acknowledges the essential role played by teachers and leaders in schools but has given very little attention to their experiences. The focus of research has primarily been quantitative studies on the impact of positive education programs on students. Jenni seeks to provide voice to, and insight into the impact on, those expected to implement positive education in schools.

To enable Jenni to develop an understanding of the experiences of the leaders and teachers of ▓▓▓ school as they have implemented positive education, and the cultural changes that have gone along with it, she plans to conduct semi-structured interviews with school leaders and staff.

Jenni is seeking volunteers from three distinct groups of teaching staff to be involved in this research. Those who have had a leadership role during the implementation of positive education in the school, those who have been in the school since before positive education, and those who have arrived since positive education was embedded.

As a participant you would be interviewed individually at a local café, the ▓▓▓▓▓▓ District Library, or another suitable location of your choice. Interviews will be approximately one hour long. Be assured that information relayed through such an interview will have no bearing on your professional relationship. It is essential to this study that the information is honest and factual. As Jenni intends to make recordings of the interviews, your consent would be sought prior to the interview. This would also include permission to use the information from the recording in her thesis and other publications, on the understanding that your name and identity would not be revealed. It may also be necessary to use secretarial services to transcribe the recordings. You can be assured that if this is the case such a person would be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and to destroy any copies of the transcripts once they have been returned to the researcher.

Where relevant you may choose to share artefacts or journal entries that help convey your thoughts. This is completely at your discretion.

Be assured that any information provided will be treated with the utmost confidence and neither the school nor participants will be identified in any publications. That said anonymity cannot be completely guaranteed given the school's unique position in the state and positive education community with regards to its implementation of positive education. Please consider this in your decision.

If you are interested in participating in this study one of the administration SSO's will provide you with an information sheet containing further details, and consent form to sign should you agree to be involved. Jenni will only be notified of those who have indicated their willingness to participate.

Thank you for your attention and possible participation.

Dr Andrew Bills and Dr Bev Rogers
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University

Appendix L : Example of Explicit Positive Education Curriculum

Positive Education Curriculum – Year Eight

Term 1

Week 1
Positive Emotions:
Character Strengths: What are your signature strengths?

Week 2
Positive Relationships:
How do we build positive relationships?

Week 3
Positive Relationships:
Friendship: The best way to have a friend is to be a friend.

Week 4
Positive Relationships and Engagement:
Camp!

Week 5
Positive Relationships:
How can we help bullies?

Week 6
Positive Relationships:
Bullying: Ways of dealing with it

Week 7
Engagement:
Time flies when we're absorbed and challenged

Week 8
Positive Emotions:
Random Acts of Kindness

Week 9
Engagement:
Random Acts of Kindness ~ Putting them into practice

Week 10
PERMA:
Catch-up and review

Week 11
Accomplishment:
Showcase

Term 2

Week 1
Positive Accomplishment:
Term 2 Learning Plan

Week 2
Positive Accomplishment and Emotions:
Introduction to Growth Mindsets vs Fixed Mindsets

Week 3
Positive Accomplishment and Emotions:
Effective study strategies

Week 4
Positive Accomplishment and Emotions:
Effective study strategies: Presentations

Week 5
Positive Accomplishment and Emotions:
Creating a Study Guide

Week 6
Positive Accomplishment and Emotions:
Exploring Gratitude

Week 7
Positive Accomplishment and Emotions:
Gratitude Wall

Week 8
Positive Accomplishment and Emotions:
How to recognise and cultivate positive feelings

Week 9
Positive Accomplishment and Emotions:
Sharing a personal artefact

Week 10
PERMA:
Catch-up and review / Showcase

Term 3

Week 1
Accomplishment:
Term 3 Learning Plan

Week 2
Engagement:
Introduction to the Term 3 brochure

Week 3
Accomplishment:
Identifying your Top 5 Character Strengths

Week 4
Meaning:
Discovering your preferred Learning Styles

Week 5
Relationships:
Exploring your Personal Qualities and Skills

Week 6
Meaning:
Researching your Career Pathway

Week 7
Accomplishment:
Compiling your brochure

Week 8
Accomplishment:
Compiling your brochure

Week 9
Accomplishment:
Compiling your brochure

Week 10
Engagement:
Three Good Deeds

Term 4

Week 1
Accomplishment:
Term 4 Learning Plan + Resillience

Week 2
Positive Emotion:
Introduction to Optimism

Week 3
Positive Emotion:
Overcoming Adversities

Week 4
Positive Emotion:
Wall of words + Invictus game

Week 5
Meaning:
How to use technology appropriately part 1

Week 6
Meaning:
How to use technology appropriately part 2

Week 7
Meaning:
Mindfulness

Week 8
Engagement, Relationships, Accomplishment:
End-of-year review: *A letter to myself*

Appendix M : Example of Positive Education Embedded in the Curriculum

Positive Education in the Curriculum – HASS 2022

Subject	Year level & Teacher	Pos Ed Aspect
Geography	8, ▮▮▮ (▮▮▮ - same for y8 Geog)	Focus on the ingenuity and innovations of individuals to help impoverished peoples in Megacities of underdeveloped nations.
History	10, ▮▮▮	Focus on the perseverance of key individuals (Rosa Parks, MLK, Malcolm X, The Little Rock 9) during the Civil Rights period 1930-1970s.
Research Project	11, ▮▮▮	Building resilience, determination and instilling diligent work ethic into Year 11s working on RP.
Problem Based Learning	7, ▮▮▮	Whole unit - Looking After Yourself: Topic 1 Personal strengths and achievements, goals setting, topic 2 Understanding emotions, topic 3 Local community. Also, elements of the Sustainability unit: global community, interdependence, social impacts…
History	Year 10 ▮▮▮	Developing a respect and appreciation for positive human traits of perseverance and resilience by examining WWII experiences of foreign and Australian troops
History	Year 10 ▮▮▮	Understanding human rights and freedoms and how everyday behaviour and decision making can have both a positive and negative effect
Geography	Year 8 ▮▮▮	Developing an understanding and respect of our local community and landmarks within our township to develop our students into respectful and active citizens.
History	Year 9 ▮▮▮	Exploring the sacrifice of Australian citizens during the WW1 campaign and how the determination and resilience of those involved help developed Australia's National identity
Society and Culture	Year 10 ▮▮▮	Recognising the impact of modern culture, belief systems and ideologies and their effect on the population. Understanding these elements has allowed students to discover the underlying traits of humility, acceptance and respect.
Geography	Year 8 ▮▮▮	Developing an understanding and respect for the local community, environment, and ecosystems, to become more active members of the community. Students form an appreciation for the need to maintain connection to community.

Appendix N : Site Improvement Plan Wellbeing Goal

SIP Wellbeing Goal 2023 :

<table>
<tr>
<td rowspan="2">Goal 3: Increase the percentage of students reporting high levels of resilience</td>
<td colspan="2">ESR Directions:
Develop clear structures and processes that support regular teacher reflection of their impact on student learning to inform the next steps in planning.

Work with leaders to develop their ability to lead and coach others effectively and conduct systems and forums focused on their teaching and learning priorities.</td>
</tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr>
<td>Achievement towards Goal in 2022:
New goal</td>
<td>Target 2023:
2022 year 10 students show 5% growth in the number reporting high levels of resilience in year 11 (16/161 year 10 2022 increase to 24/161 year 11 2023)</td>
<td>2024:
2023 year 11 students show 2% growth in the number of students reporting high levels of resilience in year 12</td>
</tr>
</table>

Appendix O : Letter of Invitation to Students AI Summit

Letter Inviting Students from Other Schools to Student AI Summit:

29th March 2018

Dear Student Leaders,

We would like to invite you to an **Appreciative Inquiry Summit on Friday, May 25th 2018** from **9:00am – 2:00pm**. It is set to be a fantastic day run by student representatives, for students, focusing on the value of a strengths based approach to leadership and school development using the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) cycle. The day will be fully catered and this means a cost of $25.00 a head for attending students.

This AI Summit will be held for secondary school student leaders, aspiring leaders and students who show leadership qualities. It will build upon student's leadership skills by empowering student voice and providing them with the skills and confidence to instigate change within their schools. By examining the four stages of appreciative inquiry; discovery, dream, design and destiny, the day will help form student pride and reflect upon the changes that students can make within the learning environment. At the end of the day, students will leave with a plan of action for student leadership within their school.

The RSVP date for your student leaders to attend is Friday the 18th of May. To register and for further information, please do not hesitate to contact ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ by telephone ▓▓▓▓▓▓ email…. The payment of $25.00 per head will be invoiced upon registration. We hope to see you there.
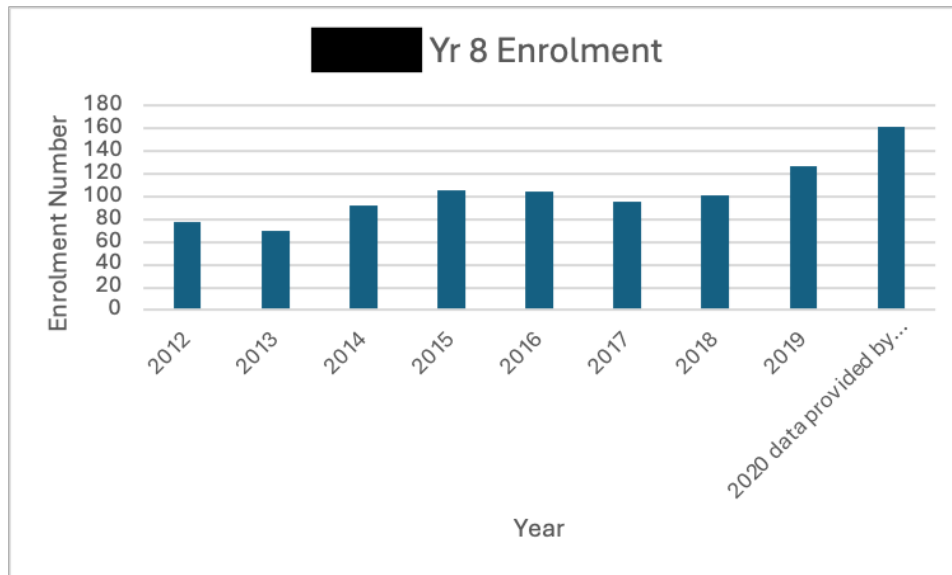
Yours sincerely,

▓▓▓▓▓▓   ▓▓▓▓▓▓

SRC President   SRC President

Appendix P : Student Achievement Data

Stage 2 Comparision of Grades 2013, 2020 & 2021

Sesmester One Whole School Grade Difference 2015 & 2019
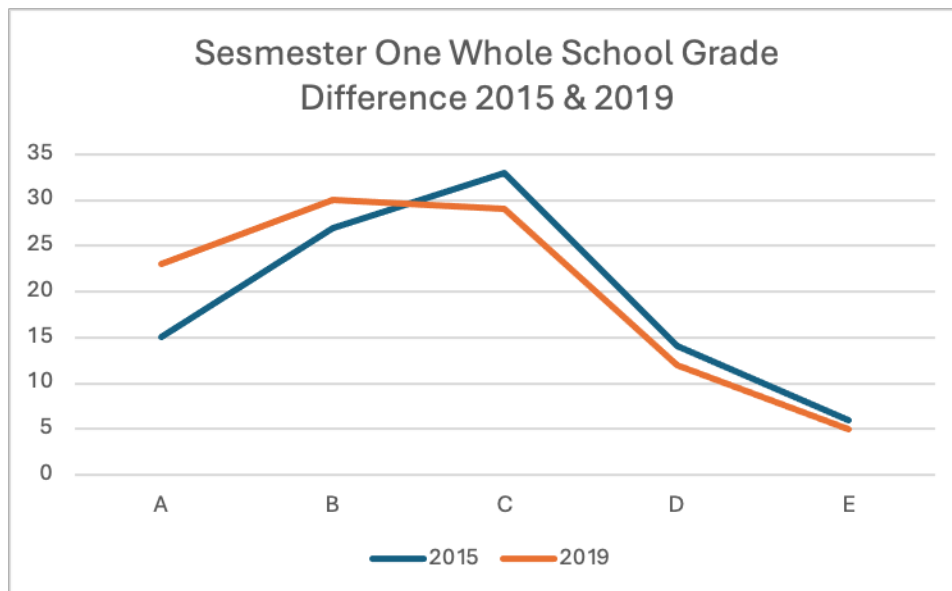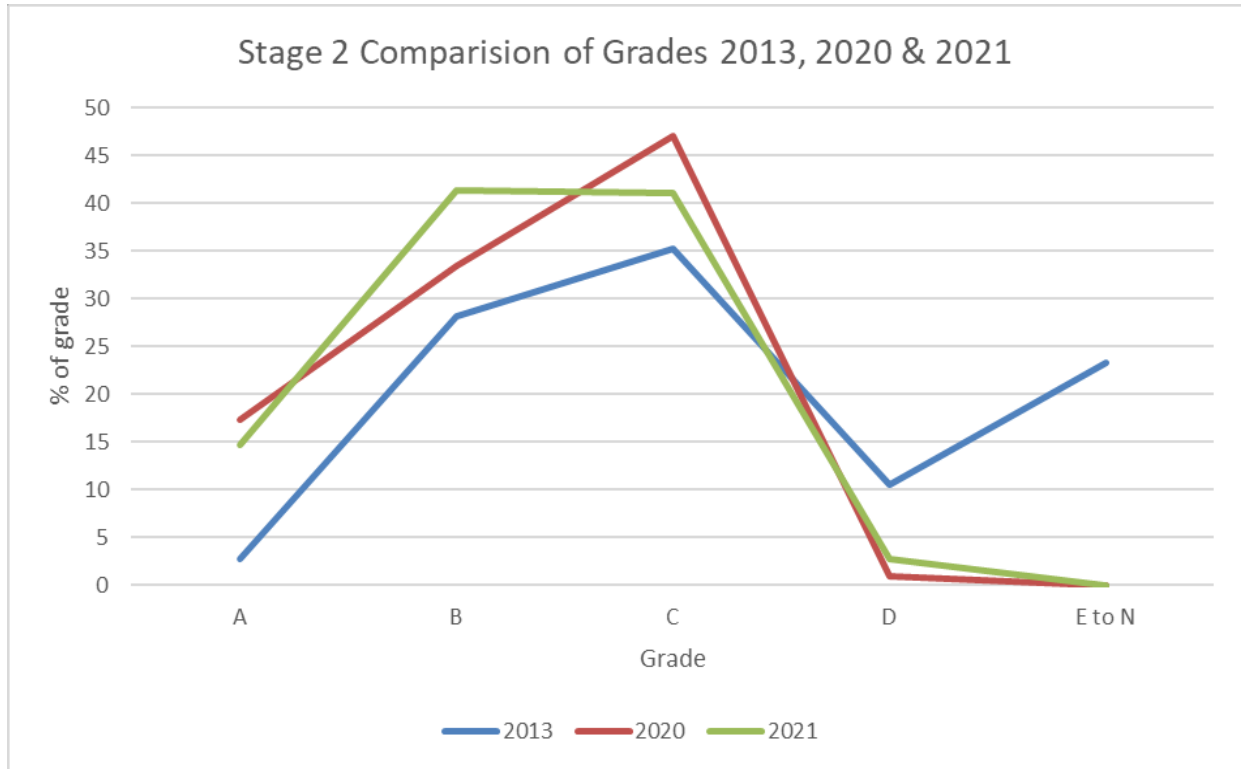
Appendix Q : Enrolment Data

Appendix R : Example Unconference Schedule

███████ ⟨XX⟩ School Unconference 2024 Semester 1 (3/7/24)

2.30 START	Nibbles, Connecting, Getting Our Bearings (please don't be late, being early = more nibbles!)		
	W11	W15	W16
2.45 - 2.55	*Canva for lesson notes* ███	*Introduction to timetabling* ███	*Voc On Creative Class* ███
3.00 - 3.10	*Learning hub - Where are we now* ██████	*Helpful Hints in EdSmart* ███	Google sites for teaching ███
3.15 - 3.25	Primary in Secondary - How to deal with (inner) 10-year-olds ███	*Virtual Tutor using ChatGPT* ███	*Google Sheets/Excel (Beginners)* ███
3.30- 3.50	*Understanding and managing challenging behaviour* ███	*Year 7 Robotics course* ███	*Google Sheets/Excel (Intermediates)* ███
	10 minutes - Digest, discuss and network		
4.00 - 4.20	***Mystery Event #1***	***Mystery Event #2***	***Networking*** *Sharing of successes from Semester 1* *Enjoying drinks & nibbles*
	Nibbles, Drinks and Close		

Appendix S : Wellbeing Data

Staff Wellbeing Data

	2012	2013
Flourishing	54%	70%
Languishing	8%	12%
Struggling	38%	18%
Floundering	0	0

Venning & Muscat 2012; Venning, 2013 – presentations prepared for ▨▨ staff

Student Wellbeing Data

School Climate

	Low	Medium	High
2013	41.2	41.2	17.6
2018	23	56	21
2019 Yr8/9	17	58	25
2019 Yr8-12	18	55	28

Connectedness

	Low	Medium	High
■ 2013	20	50.8	29.2
■ 2018	14	37	49
■ 2019 Yr8/9	10	36	54
■ 2019 Yr8-12	12	38	51

Happiness

	Low	Medium	High
■ 2013	35.6	37.3	27.1
■ 2018	16	39	45
■ 2019 Yr8-12	21	40	39
■ 2019 Yr8/9	17	36	47

Perserverance

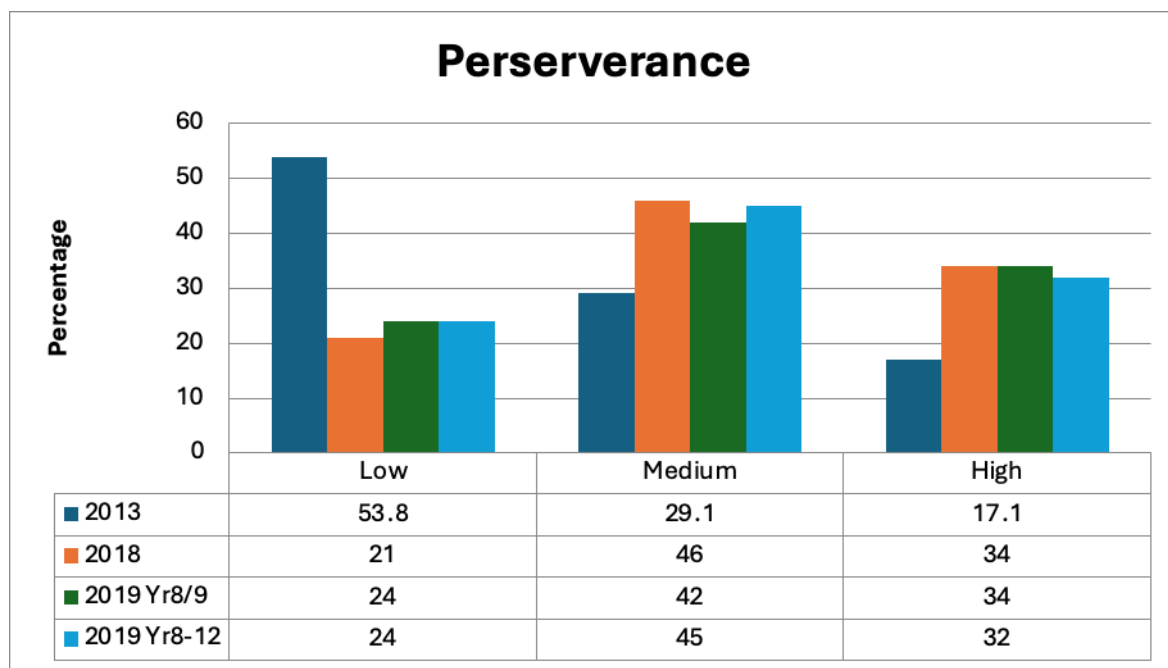|	Low	Medium	High
2013	53.8	29.1	17.1
2018	21	46	34
2019 Yr8/9	24	42	34
2019 Yr8-12	24	45	32
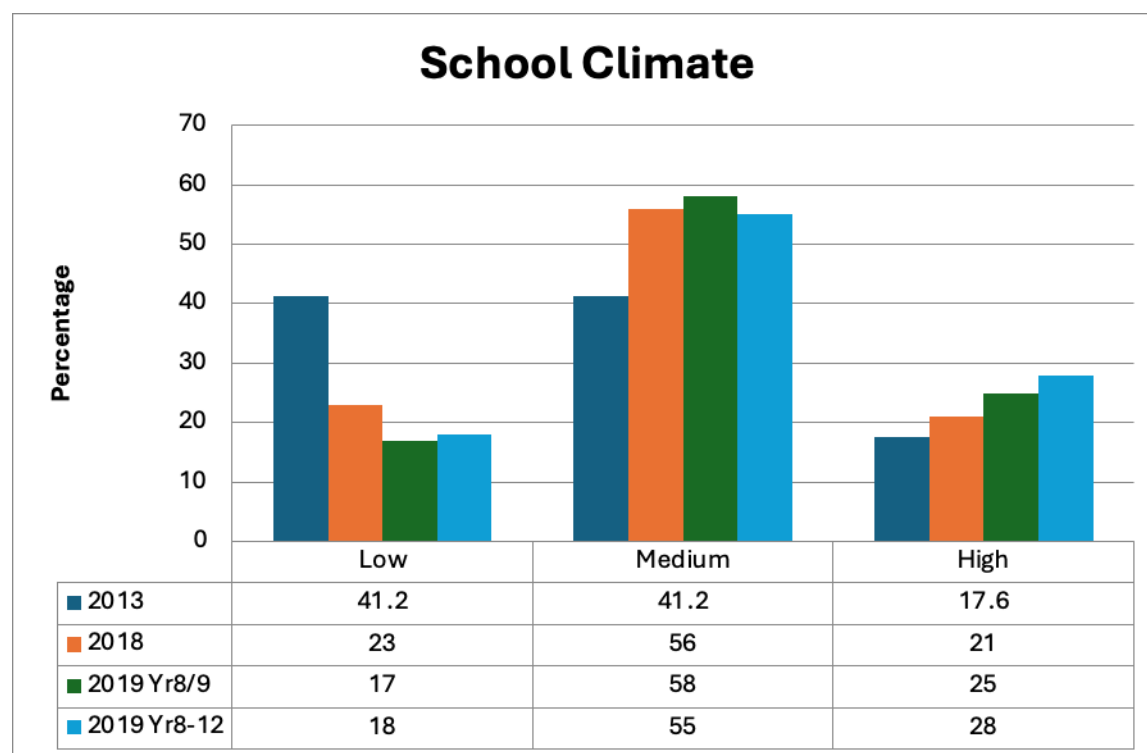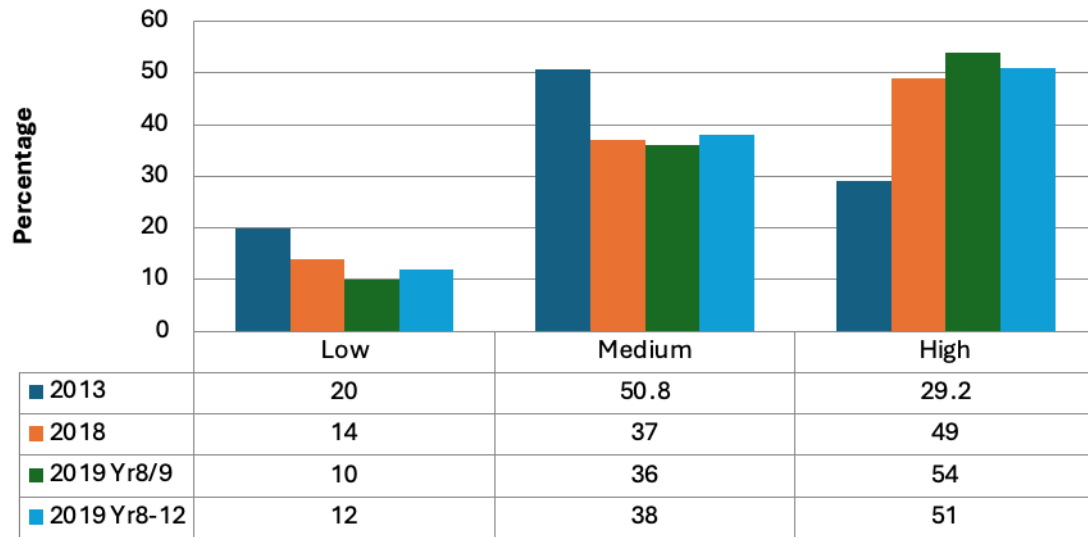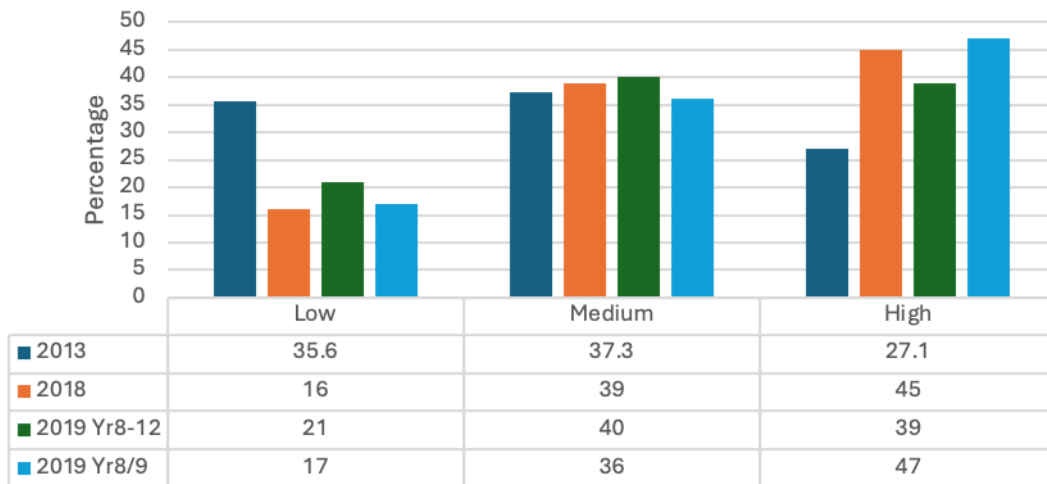
Data taken from DfE Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC)

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