

## **CAN PHOTO-STORIES CREATE POSITIVE STAFF AND WHOLE-SCHOOL MORALE?: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

### **ABSTRACT**

Whilst the focus on promoting wellbeing in schools is often on students, it is also important to consider the morale and wellbeing of staff, who in their own right, have a significant impact on student wellbeing. The school in this study had identified the importance of enhancing staff and student morale following a large increase in staff and student numbers due to recent expansion. This action research project was designed to focus on increasing staff and whole-school morale through the use of photo-stories. Students across the school were involved in creating photo-stories about positive experiences of school life. A focus group of Year 7 students used the data to create a whole-school mini slideshow of photo-stories representing a genuine student perspective of the school. The process engaged all staff and students and created a sense of pride amongst those involved. It demonstrated the value of using simple techniques to acknowledge and share positive school experiences as part of broader school efforts to provide a supportive environment.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview and Rationale**

Teaching in a school means much more than providing academic skills and achievement. Research suggests we need to do more to promote social-emotional competence alongside academic competence (Bernard, 2006). Student wellbeing has become recognised as an integral part of the school community and not just a single component of curriculum (McLaughlin, 2008). It is also important to recognise that wellbeing is an ongoing issue within the whole-school environment for staff, students, parents and the wider community (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). In addition several studies acknowledge that student wellbeing has a direct link to staff wellbeing and that whole-school morale affects all those who are directly involved with educational institutions (Leithwood, 2007; Esselman & Moore, 1992; Zigarelli, 1996; Pearl & Knight, 1999). The idea behind this action research project was to focus on improving staff morale, which would in turn benefit the students. There is a simple logic of association: interactions between students and their teachers consume the bulk of students' time while at school, and most, if not all, classroom variables (e.g. class size) are actually some form of teacher practice. Teachers' practices are influenced by what they think and feel (Goddard, 2001). Teachers' emotions, therefore, have a major influence on teaching and learning (Leithwood, 2007).

### **School Context**

The school where this study was undertaken is a Catholic co-educational college set in a rural environment with approximately 540 students in Prep to Year 12 and 64 staff. Data obtained from the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) database states the school's attendance rate is 92 per cent. The school has seen an increase in student enrolments and a decrease in truancy, in part explained by the introduction of VCE and VCAL in the past few years. The socio-economic status rating of the student clientele is 91 with 23 per cent of families receiving health care card benefits, and many parents working as labourers. The majority of families come from farming backgrounds, in particular dairy, fruit and vegetable production. Many families have been affected by the drought, which continues to have an impact on their ability to pay for fees and other resources. The religious

affiliations of the current cohort are mostly Catholic, while 35 per cent are from other faith backgrounds or have no religious affiliation.

Since the introduction of Years 11 and 12 the school has grown significantly, causing a changed workload for teachers, and, in some cases, an increased workload with the demands of senior classes. The school has employed many new staff members, resulting in changes to the school climate and to the atmosphere amongst staff as the school has moved from a small closely linked group of approximately twelve secondary and eight primary staff members, to a total of sixty-four staff members (thirty-three secondary, seventeen primary and fourteen support staff).

The college has in place several staff wellbeing initiatives such as social events, a staff wellbeing team, a graduate and new teacher mentor and induction policy and program implemented at the beginning of each year, and the recent inclusion of a staff healthy lifestyles program as part of a WorkSafe Victoria's WorkHealth initiative. Each of these initiatives has assisted the school by providing opportunities for staff to build relationships and to maintain and develop fit and healthy lifestyles. However, there remained scope to include specific strategies for staff to improve morale while at work, and to consider including strategies to cater for a range of staff needs (Howard & Johnson, 2004).

### **Background – Linking Research to Context**

Staff morale is important to any organisation, in particular schools, where it impacts on the wellbeing of students who are at the centre of educational institutions (Miller, 1981). It is important to focus on enhancing protective factors rather than only on reducing risk factors when addressing staff and whole-school morale. A focus on what sustains or supports it is much more effective when trying to build morale (Smyth, 2001).

Hicks (2003) states there is a general crisis in teacher morale in Australia, with teachers feeling undervalued, frustrated, unappreciated and demoralised. Rather than focusing on these negative feelings and allowing staff to focus on negative aspects of their profession (Mackenzie, 2007; Willis & Varner, 2010), this research project focuses on using positive approaches to improving staff and whole-school morale.

Ramsey (2000) points out that people with low morale tend to see obstacles as potential opportunities for failure, while people with high morale see obstacles as challenges that need to be solved. Young (1998) claims morale is often influenced by outside factors rather than internal, whereas Lumsden (1998) identifies both internal and external factors as influencing morale. Lumsden (1998) also argues that individuals can take steps to maintain their professional satisfaction and morale; however, they must also be nurtured, supported and valued by the broader school community. Howard and Johnson (2004) point out that rather than providing people with an opportunity to focus on the negative aspects, it is best to focus on what is *working*, or what the school is already doing well. In addition McCallum and Price (2010) suggest that aspects of the school environment contribute to staff morale and that school characteristics have a bigger impact on morale and motivation than individual characteristics.

Cotton and Hart (2003) argue that staff dissatisfaction and stress are driven mainly by individual perceptions and experiences, whereas staff motivation and morale are driven mainly by school characteristics. Zengaro (2005) points out that staff morale in each educational institution needs to be considered in the context of ensuring a positive school image is portrayed. Schools also need to examine the ways that attitudes of staff members affect the impression parents and others have of the school.

Mackenzie (2007) suggests that teacher morale is more complex than previously understood and functions on three distinct yet intertwining levels: personal, school and professional. Personal

morale results from an individual's personal circumstances, which often remain private; school morale involves day-to-day experiences of teachers in schools and the local community; while the status of teaching as a profession results in professional morale. All three overlap and create teacher morale. Morale is influenced at a system and school level and is something that needs to be recognised as valid for schools to remain positive (Lumsden, 1998; Wenger, 2000).

Lumsden (1998) states that it may be impossible to separate issues of school culture, leadership and teacher morale. However, Miller (1981) maintains that student learning and teacher morale are related to positive school culture and are also characterised by factors such as respect and communication, which is something that needs to be promoted. Andrews (1985) found that students who have good relationships with their teachers feel a closer connection with teachers with high morale because they show a deeper interest in their development, which may also increase their level of achievement. Andrews (1985) also emphasised that schools with high morale were characterised by formal and informal systems of teacher recognition.

Informed by this research, which emphasises the importance of taking a positive approach to promoting staff morale, two participatory techniques were chosen as the key methods of data collection. They included the Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique (Davies & Dart, 2005) and the Photovoice technique (Wang & Burris, 1997). The MSC process is a narrative technique involving the collection of stories of *significant change* from participants, and the systematic selection of the most important of these by participants (Davies & Dart, 2005). McNiff et al. (1996) comment on the use of significant change stories in research, suggesting that this approach encourages diverse and original interpretation by both authors and their audiences. This method involves the search for theory behind the story. The construction of explanatory theory is more important than the issue of how real the story is itself. Photovoice is a participatory action research (PAR) method by which people create and discuss photographs as a means of catalysing personal and community change (Wang & Burris, 1997). As part of the process, participants use cameras to document realities in their

lives. By sharing and talking about their photos they use the power of visual image to communicate their life experiences, expertise and knowledge. In this project the two methods were merged, with participants asked to make significant change stories using the Photovoice technique. The term *photo-stories* is henceforth used to describe this approach.

### **Goals and Initial Aims**

The project aim was to enhance staff and whole-school morale. The short-term goal was to find out from students what supports/sustains school morale, and use this information in a positive way to validate efforts and thus increase staff and whole-school morale. The photo-story technique provided a flexible tool suitable for use by students from Prep to Year 12. The students were asked to make photo-stories about positive school experiences.

### **Change Agent Role**

As the Year 11 and 12 Wellbeing support person, my role is to support students and staff in senior year levels. I work closely with the Wellbeing Coordinator and we meet regularly to ensure we are providing support to all students across the school with my main area of focus being senior secondary. This role within the school assisted me to involve others in the action research and to establish a collaborative group.

Initially, as part of the collaborative process, I met with the Wellbeing Coordinator and occasionally we met together with the Principal providing information about the progress of the action research. While meeting with the Wellbeing Coordinator proved effective in the early stages, once the stories had been collected and feedback had been provided by the School Principal, we decided to include a small team of students who would contribute as co-researchers and be involved in organising the data collected and providing feedback on the process. Eventually the whole school was involved in producing the photo-stories.

## **TAKING ACTION**

### **Towards Improvement**

There are several views on the importance of action research and the key principles involved in the process (Cohen et al., 2007; Johnson, 2008; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Zuber-Skeritt, 1996). Each view specifies the value of undertaking research and the benefits for educational institutions (McNiff et al., 1996; Mertler, 2006). This project corresponded with Johnson's (2008) description of what action research involves, as the aim focused on an area of improvement for the school, rather than starting with an answer. Cohen et al. (2007) also point out that action research is designed to bridge the gap between research and practice and is seen as a significant vehicle for empowering teachers.

The project consisted of one main cycle. The initial focus of this cycle was to assess the staff's view of wellbeing, its importance, positive aspects of existing initiatives, and areas for improvement. However, after reviewing responses from the staff wellbeing survey conducted before the action research, I recognised that even though there were a few positive comments, staff were more likely to use the survey as an opportunity to comment on negative aspects of the school and pressure from leadership. After discussions with my collaborative group and tutor it was decided that it would not be effective to adopt a survey data collection method in order to avoid the possibility of staff contributing sensitive data about their personal lives, the school and leadership. Therefore, the aim of this cycle was to focus on the contribution of more positive aspects of the school that may contribute to sustaining staff and school morale. After some research about the MSC technique (Davies & Dart, 2005) and the Photovoice technique I decided that using these would be a more appropriate and positive way to gather data about how students genuinely view positive aspects of the school and use this to assist with improving staff morale (Schell et al., 2009). Combining the Photovoice and narrative story techniques (Dart, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997) provided a way to concentrate more on existing approaches to sustaining school morale.

I planned to conduct the initial cycle of the action research from August 1 – September 12.

## **Steps in the Action Research**

The specific steps planned for the action research were:

- discuss the importance of increasing staff morale with collaborative group (Wellbeing Coordinator and Principal)
- discuss with collaborative group the use of Photovoice and Most Significant Change stories as data collection methods
- collect data based on existing strategies to sustain staff morale and whole-school morale
- inform teachers about the process of using photo-stories to gather data
- reflect on data with collaborative group
- create a focus group of students to organise, summarise and decide on how to present the data
- reflect on the process and future possibilities with focus groups
- make a presentation to staff and school.

Indicators used to evaluate the success of the plan were:

- teacher and student responses to the idea of using the photo-story process
- the focus group discussion and reactions to the slideshow
- the amount of data collected and how it represented the whole-school population
- informal discussions and feedback from staff involved.

In this cycle, I intended using the photo-story technique to focus on the short-term goal of finding out from students what supports/sustains school morale and to discuss positive ways to use this information to increase staff and school morale.

## **Developing a collaborative approach**

A collaborative leadership approach was central to the project. Participating with staff and students is inevitably aimed at benefiting those involved and the wider school community (Goleman, 2004).

Zuber-Skeritt (1996) mentions that involving a whole-school approach to practical improvement,

innovation and change of social practice enables practitioners to gain a better understanding of their practices. To that end the action initially involved sharing my ideas and research with my collaborative group, the Principal and Wellbeing Coordinator, about finding ways to increase or sustain staff and whole-school morale. It was the Principal and Wellbeing Coordinator, who, excited at the possibilities of using photo-stories, suggested involving the whole school. The proposed strategy was to ask Primary classroom teachers and Secondary Religious Education teachers to involve their students in making their own stories. This way we would have the whole student body represented, rather than working only with a small group of secondary students, which was my initial idea. In deciding to proceed with this action I developed some focus questions to guide teachers and students with the process of explaining the photo-voice approach. These were then discussed with the Principal and Wellbeing Coordinator.

The students were provided with four key questions around which to build their photo-story. The focus questions were:

1. What helps you try your best at school?
2. What helps you feel welcome at school?
3. What helps you join in with others?
4. What helps you feel happy at school?

It was decided to develop a template with instructions to assist classroom teachers with collecting the data to make the process as user-friendly as possible and to avoid placing any additional stress on teachers. This is something I was conscious of throughout the project as I did not want something that was ideally intended to improve staff morale to have the opposite effect (Howard & Johnson, 2004). The template with clear instructions was sent to all staff involved in the process and teachers were given a three-week timeframe to collect and pass on the data to me. I made myself available to assist classroom teachers and regularly communicated with them via email and informal discussions to monitor their progress and to check whether they would like any assistance.

The collaborative nature of the project allowed those teachers involved to provide feedback throughout the process and to modify their data collection. Feedback from primary teachers assisted with making the process easier for their students to complete. Instead of answering all four questions, the process was revised to allow for each student to either draw a picture or take a photo as a response to one of the focus questions. They were then asked to write a short response explaining their photo/picture. The Prep and Grade 1/2 teachers asked if it was possible to have four students take one photo to represent the four focus questions and represent the whole class, as this was easier to manage. Again as a result of the collaborative nature of the research one of the Grade 6 teachers offered to send buddies to the Prep classroom to assist them with taking photos and recording their explanations. This worked effectively. As they completed their photo-stories, class teachers collected and passed on their data (photos, drawings and explanations) to the collaborative group to be organised.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Instructions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students need to take <b>one</b> photo or draw <b>one</b> picture in response to <b>one</b> of the questions on the next slide.</li><li>• This can be of people, objects or places.</li><li>• The student needs to provide a brief written explanation of their photo/picture.</li><li>• Please use this PowerPoint slide to insert your students' photos.</li></ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Questions: Choose <b>one</b> to respond to with a photo/picture and explanation.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Q1: What helps you try your best at school?</li><li>• Q2: What helps you feel welcome at school?</li><li>• Q3: What helps you join in with others?</li><li>• Q4: What helps you feel happy at school?</li></ul>
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Figure 1: Template showing instructions for teachers to use with primary students.



Figure 2: Template providing sample primary student responses to the four focus questions.

Originally I had planned to create a focus group of students representing each year level; however, this proved difficult to organise with students already spending quite a bit of time out of class for production, and senior students completing VCE requirements. Therefore, I decided to include four volunteers from my Year 7 Religious Education (RE) class (two boys and two girls) who helped with organising the data into themes and deciding on the best photos and drawings to include in the whole-school presentation. Once the presentation was created, they were also involved in an evaluation session where they responded to focus questions about the slideshow that included: their impressions; feelings about the process; its importance; how the presentation could be used; where it could be displayed; why it is important to do this for the community; and how it benefits staff, students and the school.

## **Collecting data**

The main method of data collection was the photo-story technique. Additionally a student team of co-researchers assisted with engaging student participants and analysing the data. The student team sorted the photo-stories into themes and created a presentation of selected photos representing those themes. This gave the students a real role on the research team. Those involved realised that research can be enjoyable for researchers and participants without becoming serious or boring (Collucci, 2007).

## **Reflecting on the process**

Most staff were very supportive of the process and were excited by the possibilities. Those who were unsure of how to undertake the data collection were involved in discussions of how to modify and simplify the process, which was very helpful for all involved and demonstrated the importance of a collaborative approach to action research (Duignan & Bezzina, 2006).

The process took longer than expected and the initial suggestion from the Principal and Wellbeing Coordinator for each class to create their own slideshow collection of photo-stories needed to be reviewed and postponed. The teachers were supportive and indicated they would be happy to create the class presentations at a later stage with a longer timeframe to collect their data. In response to time pressures, it was decided that a whole-school presentation would be created within this shorter timeframe and class presentations could be a future possibility. While it took some time to modify the process for each year level, the way the staff engaged in the process and offered to assist junior classes was something unexpected and proved very helpful.

Most staff and students became positively engaged in the process, with the amount of data passed forward to the student team confirming that the teachers and their students were in action and were enjoying using the photo-story technique. Students were approaching staff to take their photos and explaining to them why they had chosen them to acknowledge. The uplifting benefits of this

acknowledgement were apparent even before the final slideshow was created. Staff also commented on the sense of wellbeing they experienced as a result of being approached by students and hearing their affirmative responses about the school. It was pleasing to hear that some students who tended to be harder to engage became interested in taking photos and sharing their positive responses about the school.

The responses of the student team were the most surprising. They were very engaged in the process and said they were 'proud of their school' after seeing all the students' different responses. They also requested that their quote about being proud be placed on the last slide of the presentation. It was interesting to see that such a simple task designed to increase morale, also resulted in students displaying pride in their school and engaging in the important skill of affirmation.

## **Outcomes**

The qualitative data of photos and drawings from each of the primary and secondary classes was collated and organised by the student team into common themes emerging from the four focus questions. The themes identified by the team of students were: *teachers, welcome signs, other students and friends, programs and challenging school work, activities and facilities, camps and excursions, and friendly environment*. Each theme is explained in more detail below:

- *Teachers*

Teachers were identified as a common factor or theme in students' responses to each of the questions. Many students across primary and secondary identified their teachers greeting them and their friendly approach as an important factor that makes them and their families feel welcome in their classrooms and within the school environment on a daily basis. They also mentioned the way teachers greet and make conversation with them inside and outside of class as an important factor in helping them to feel welcome. Teachers taking the time to assist students with their work was identified as the most common factor contributing to students

trying their best at school, and teachers were also identified as a positive factor influencing what helps students to join in with others at school. Within the theme of *teachers* a few students pointed out the importance of the Wellbeing Coordinator providing support and being there to talk to, as something that helps them to feel happy and welcome.

- *Welcome signs*

School signs were identified as one of the most common factors contributing to students feeling welcome at school. Primary and secondary students commented that welcome signs and pictures on their classroom doors and walls made them feel welcome at the beginning of the year and also every time they enter their rooms. Students mentioned that the large welcome sign at the front entrance to the school and office was something they considered important to making themselves, visitors and new people to the school feel welcome and accepted.

- *Other students and friends*

Students identified other students and their friends being friendly towards them as something that makes them feel welcome at school. They also pointed out that the friendliness of most students helped them to join in and make friends with people across all year levels. Students regarded friends and fellow classmates as an important factor in helping them to feel welcome and happy, and to join in at school. They recognised that the way people (friends, teachers and classmates) treated them was important in determining how they felt about school.

- *Programs and challenging school work*

Students considered school programs such as sport, Students Thrilled About Reading (STAR) and Teacher Advisor (TA) important in helping them to try their best. Challenging school work was also something they identified as influencing them to try their best in class and to reach their full potential. Sports programs and fun subjects were things they considered important in helping them feel happy and wanting to join in at school.

- *Activities and facilities*

The activities teachers organise in class and the facilities available to students were considered important factors in helping students to try their best, to join in and to feel happy about school.

The gym, playground, new hall and Church were the specific facilities identified as helping students feel happy. Although it is not specifically a facility, the availability and use of laptops to 'do cool things', was also recognised as a key factor contributing to happiness at school for many students.

- *Camps and excursions*

The opportunity to be involved in a wide range of camps and excursions from primary to secondary was something students pointed out as helping them to feel happy and to join in with others. Responses from secondary students showed that the Year 9 cultural experience camp was something that helped many of them to join in with people outside their usual circle of friends.

- *Friendly environment*

Finally, the friendly environment and atmosphere of the school was identified as one of the main factors influencing students to join in with others. This was also recognised as something that creates a welcoming feel to the school and also helps them to try their best.



Figure 3: Student responses to the focus question, 'What makes us feel happy at school?'

### Reflection and Interpretation

Reflecting on the data, it is evident that the students value many positive aspects of the school, most of which are provided by the staff. This has allowed staff to realise that they play a significant role in how the school is viewed by students and the wider community, which is something Willis & Varner (2010) point out as an important factor in increasing school morale. The students' photo-story responses also demonstrated the importance of focusing on enhancing protective factors, which previous research has indicated assists organisations to identify appropriate coping strategies for stress and increases morale (Borg & Falzon, 1990; Cockburn, 1996; Kyriacou, 2001).

The students' photo-story responses demonstrated that although they may not show it very often, they actually appreciate many of the things their teachers and the wider school community offer them. The student team also acknowledged that the process of reflecting on the school was not only beneficial to them, but that it would 'help the teachers know what they're doing well so they can keep doing it' and 'it helps everyone know they are doing a good job looking after us'. As Howard and Johnson (2004) mention, teachers can be the most critical of their actions, and the opportunity for students to reflect on their learning experience allows teachers to recognise the impact they have on their classrooms.

The strong positive response from staff during the study demonstrated the importance and advantage of providing a supportive environment where teachers have the opportunity to engage in whole-school issues whilst also experiencing a sense of achievement (Marks & Louis, 1997). The process has created a sense of pride within the school.

I have recognised the importance of action research to empower teachers and their colleagues (Johnson, 2008). This was a basic process that had positive outcomes resulting from staff finding out about some of the positives that were not usually acknowledged. The project also demonstrated the importance of distributed leadership, as each staff member became involved and was responsible for part of the data collection (Leithwood, 2007). The ability to include the whole school made the process more valuable and worthwhile to all those involved. Harris (2002) states if there is opportunity for shared responsibilities and leadership it will promote better staff involvement that will lead to them feeling more valued and more likely to feel they can make a difference to school morale.

My role as a change agent was challenging to begin with, as I was mindful of not adopting a coercive (people resent and resist) or pacesetting (people become overwhelmed and burn out) style of leadership, which Goleman (2004) points out often produce a negative effect on climate and performance. Therefore, I adopted a more collaborative style of leadership by assuming the role of facilitator, and made use of group skills such as seeking information, seeking opinion, giving information and initiating activity (Nylen et al., 1986) when collaborating with teachers as they collected the photo-stories from students in their classes. This allowed me to provide support and explanation and allowed others to contribute their ideas throughout the process. I recognised the importance of providing staff with the opportunity to work together with colleagues in teams to achieve a group goal, something not uncommon in schools, but is still not commonplace (Silins et al., 2002).

I have also recognised the change process undertakes a natural progression and it is important to accept that it will involve spirals that assist with refocusing and ensuring the action is relevant to those it is designed to benefit (Zuber-Skeritt, 1996). It is important to be flexible, yet to remain focused and ensure clear goals are set during the initial stages to assist with this. I have understood that positive change can happen even in a short timeframe and it is important to maintain enthusiasm with clear objectives for the future to avoid losing the momentum and relevance of the project.

Whilst it was challenging to do so much in such a short timeframe, the process was very rewarding, and it is now more evident how this can be further developed and continued to use as a tool, rather than a program, to enhance school morale (Schell et al., 2009).

## **CONCLUSION**

This action research project has had a positive impact on the students and their teachers. The photo-stories method, one in which people were enthusiastic to participate, has provided the school with important data about the school experiences that students value and provided a participatory tool to improve communications. The teachers, who fostered their students' involvement in this activity, were empowered as a group, and became an important part of the change process that has contributed to whole-school improvement (Leithwood, 2007).

The photo-stories will be shared more widely at information nights, open days, assemblies, and whole-school masses. The aim is to have every class group develop their own slideshow. The theory is that showing these presentations will further enhance staff and student morale and foster a sense of school pride. There is also the future possibility of inviting staff to create their own photo-stories to assist them to reflect on and share with the whole-school the aspects of the school that they value.

The positive stories and the student involvement in the photo-story technique has enhanced staff and student morale and promoted a sense of belonging and connectedness amongst the staff and students. The process has been worthwhile for the whole school, and allowed us to see the potential of adopting a participatory action research approach to change.

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