

## School leaders and a culture of support: Fostering student social emotional development

Lee Beatty and Glenda Campbell-Evans

*Edith Cowan University, Australia*

The *Melbourne Declaration* (2008) set the national priorities for education with a focus on the vital role schools play in social emotional development, thus preparing students for life and citizenship. More than a decade on, there is little evidence to demonstrate how Australian schools are fostering the social emotional development of students. The purpose of this study was to interpret leaders' understandings of student social emotional development and to explore the roles and responsibilities leaders and school staff take. A small scale pilot study was designed and three in-depth interviews of leaders across a K – 12 non-government metropolitan school were conducted. It was found that the leaders prioritised student social emotional development due to a strong belief in the foundational nature of this development to engagement and learning. Leaders and staff across the school work to create a culture of support to foster student social emotional development in order to optimise the conditions for learning. This key finding highlights the need to foster this aspect of student development in a school setting where learning is the primary goal.

### Introduction

The past decade has seen a renewed focus on the central purpose of education: preparing students for success in life and citizenship. Australia's national priorities for education have been shaped by the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (the Melbourne Declaration) (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). The Melbourne Declaration, and recent *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (the Mparntwe Declaration), acknowledge the vital role schools play in not only intellectual and physical development, but also the "social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development ... of young Australians" (Education Council, 2019, p. 2; MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4). Following the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008), Australia's first national curriculum was developed (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2012). This Australian Curriculum defined seven general capabilities that "play a significant role in realising the goals set out in the *Melbourne Declaration*" (ACARA, 2013, p. 2). ACARA (2013) developed three general capabilities within the social and emotional domains: personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015). Within the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008), the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012), and the Mparntwe Declaration (Education Council, 2019), there is a clear national priority focus on fostering student social emotional development and the fundamental value of schooling in preparing young people for success in life and citizenship.

The current educational climate of performance driven accountability means that there is also a clear focus on academic achievement (Ehrich, Harris, Klenowski, Smeed & Spina,

2015; Yates, 2013). International benchmarking and global competition have resulted in a focus on testing as a means to raise standards in many countries, including Australia (Dinham, Collarbone, Evans & Mackay, 2013; Yates, 2013). National high stakes testing was introduced in Australia in 2008 with the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (Ehrich et al., 2015). While they do allow for international comparisons, this focus on test scores may be problematic if exaggerated prominence is placed on a few results, overemphasising academic literacy and numeracy learning (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin & Roberts, 2015; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015; Yates, 2013). In this case, student social emotional development may be lost to testing priorities.

Despite the national priority focus on social emotional development in Australian education, and the fundamental value of schooling in preparing young people for success in life and global citizenship evident in the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008), there is little evidence to demonstrate how this is happening in our schooling systems. An OECD (2015) report found that all OECD countries, and many others, have national policy statements that highlight the importance of equipping students with social and emotional skills; however, it was found that there is a lack of guidance within education systems about how to foster student social and emotional development. The report acknowledged “there is often insufficient awareness of ‘what works’ to enhance these skills and efforts made to measure and foster them” (OECD, 2015, p. 3).

The OECD defines social and emotional skills as those “involved in achieving goals, working with others, and managing emotions” (2015, p. 34). Within the Australian Curriculum, the three social emotional general capabilities are defined as follows: personal and social capability helps students to understand and manage themselves, their relationships and learning; ethical understanding “involves students in building a strong personal and socially oriented ethical outlook” (ACARA, 2013, p. 122); and intercultural understanding develops students’ understanding of their own personal identity and other cultures, and their interactions, empathy and respect for others (ACARA, 2013). The latter two general capabilities are important in ensuring students develop social and emotional skills to work effectively and respectfully with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2015) defines intrapersonal (individual/emotional) competencies as self-awareness and self-management; interpersonal (social) competencies as social awareness and relationship skills; and the fifth competency, responsible decision-making, as both an intrapersonal and interpersonal process. For the purposes of this research, the conceptual meaning we attach to social emotional development is the way students manage themselves, their relationships and their learning through responsible decision making. Managing themselves encompasses self-awareness and self-control of their emotions and includes coping skills, resilience, and a sense of self-worth. Managing relationships encompasses an awareness of others and includes respect, caring, empathy, ethical and intercultural understanding, conflict resolution, effective teamwork and communication skills. Managing learning encompasses a belief in their ability to reach their full potential and is demonstrated through confidence, motivation, perseverance and organisation.

In this study, we sought to explore and understand leaders' perceptions and practices related to fostering student social emotional development in one K (Kindergarten, age 4) to 12 (Year 12, age 17 to 18) non-government (non-public) school in Perth, Western Australia. The school was selected due to its focus on the whole needs of students, including social and emotional development. Given the lack of evidence about how Australian schools are fostering this development, it was important to gain an insight into how the leaders conceptualise this aspect of student development and to explore any practices relating to this. This paper presents the findings of this small scale pilot study that explored these perceptions and practices through interviews with three leaders in one school.

## **The nature of social emotional development**

Social emotional development is essential for the holistic development of children and young people, preparing them for success in school, life and participation in our modern society (MCEEYTA, 2008; OECD, 2015). Studies show that social emotional development affects how, and what, students learn (Durlak et al., 2011). It has been found that social emotional learning plays a role in the success of students at school, and therefore, is "of equal importance" to academic learning (Rutledge et al., 2015, p. 1061). Other research points to the interrelated nature of social, emotional, and academic development and the need for teachers to address all three aspects of development to ensure student success (Aviles, Anderson & Davila, 2006; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016).

Whilst studies indicate the interrelated nature of social, emotional, and academic development, the current context of academic accountability and high stakes testing may overemphasise academic learning in schools (Rutledge et al., 2015; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016; UNESCO, 2015; Yates, 2013). This trend, combined with research demonstrating that schools rarely support social emotional development systematically or effectively, even when aware of its importance (Bower, van Kraayenoord & Carroll, 2015; OECD, 2015), suggests that social emotional development may not be supported appropriately in all schools. Rutledge et al. (2015) and Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison and Cohen-Vogel (2016) found that high schools can become overly focused on subject disciplines and the academic purpose of schooling. Tichnor-Wagner et al. also found that the current academic accountability context has led to competition and a lack of collaboration within some schools. However, in contrast, Rutledge et al. (2015) found that higher achieving schools in this current context prioritised connecting student social emotional and academic development.

## **School culture**

A caring school culture focused on social emotional development prepares students for a successful life and participation in democracy (Cohen, 2006), meets the needs of younger children (Leyden & Shale, 2012), and adolescents (Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000), and fosters moral development (Cooper & Cefai, 2009; Noddings, 2012). Studies indicate the significance of positive, caring relationships among teachers and students (Branson, Baig

& Begum, 2015; Wrench, Hammond, McCallum & Price, 2013) for providing social emotional support in childhood (Leyden & Shale, 2012) and early adolescence (Bower et al., 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Studies also show that quality, meaningful, and positive relationships with teachers influence students' sense of belonging to the school (Rutledge et al., 2015; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016).

School organisational structures can enhance positive relationships between students and teachers, fostering student social emotional development and a positive school culture (Bower et al., 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Leyden & Shale, 2012). Roeser et al. (2000) found organisational structures that foster relationships over extended periods are fundamental to fostering authentic interactions and meaningful relationships between teachers and students. Similarly, Noddings (2005) and Tichnor-Wagner and Allen (2016) discussed structures such as cohorts within schools and looping (a cohort of students placed with a teacher for several years) that foster caring relationships and personalise schooling for students, especially in large schools. Additionally, a study by Tichnor-Wagner et al. (2016) reported that a large high school placed teachers and students into learning houses in an effort to foster relationships and overcome departmental divides.

### **Role of leadership**

In the current academic accountability context, leaders face the dilemma of meeting performance expectations on high stakes tests, whilst also fostering student social emotional development for success in life and citizenship (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012). There is a body of research conducted within the "International Successful School Leadership Project" (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011, p. 355), including Australian case studies, that is concerned with what successful school leaders do and their influence on student outcomes that include both academic ("traditional") and social emotional ("authentic") outcomes. This research in Australia found a dual focus on individual student welfare and achievement by successful school principals (Dinham, 2010; Gurr, 2015). Tichnor-Wagner and Allen (2016) reported that principals focussed on the holistic and personal development of students foster caring relationships and a sense of connectedness through school-wide organisational structures.

Successful leaders have been found to build collaborative cultures, a shared sense of purpose, and a cohesive school vision across the school through distributed or shared leadership (Jacobson, 2011; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016). Successful leaders have also been found to foster positive relationships, create a positive school climate (Branson et al., 2015), and personalise student learning experiences (Rutledge et al., 2015). However, there is more work to be done to understand how leaders can link school culture and positive relationships to effectively foster student social emotional development within their schools (Leithwood et al., 2010; Rutledge et al., 2015).

### **Method**

This pilot study was conducted within the qualitative paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) as it explored school leaders' understandings within a natural setting (the school) in order

to create a picture of how student social emotional development can be fostered in schools. The ontological belief held by the researchers is that reality is socially constructed and therefore multiple realities exist (Patton, 2015). An interpretive framework was employed as the intent was to interpret the meanings participants held about the central phenomenon of how school leadership fosters student social emotional development (Creswell, 2013).

Whilst the literature review provided an accepted view of social emotional development, with minor differences in definitions, the intent of this study was to uncover the perceptions and practices of three leaders in one Australian school related to fostering this aspect of student development. We therefore posed three research questions to guide our understanding of the central phenomenon within the school context:

1. How do school leaders describe their understandings of social emotional development?
2. How do school leaders describe their role and responsibility, and those of staff, in fostering student social emotional development?
3. How do school leaders describe any other ways in which the school fosters the social emotional development of students?

### **Sample and participants**

This pilot qualitative study was designed to inform a proposed larger exploration of the topic; therefore, we sought to explore the understandings of leaders in one K – 12 non-government metropolitan school. Utilising purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011), we selected a school that was known to focus on the whole child and social emotional development. We conducted a review of websites of metropolitan schools within one non-government sector, known by reputation for a holistic focus on student development. Our selection criteria required that we chose a school with a stated focus on student social emotional development. The selected school was invited to participate by way of an information letter emailed to the school principal, followed up by a telephone conversation with a member of the leadership team who had been informed of the study by the principal. We selected three members of the leadership team for interview, the leaders of the primary (Kindergarten – Year 6), middle (Years 7 – 9) and senior (Years 10 – 12) schools. This allowed for an exploration of leadership beliefs and practices across the K – 12 school as these were designated leadership positions with responsibility for students, staff and curriculum in each section of the school.

### **Data collection**

Participants were interviewed at the school over a two week period, at a time that suited them, in the second half of 2016. The interviews were individual, in-depth and semi-structured in order to gain a rich understanding of the perceptions and practices of the participants (Barbour, 2014; Creswell, 2013). Interviews lasted between an hour, and an hour and a half, were recorded on a digital voice recorder as .mp3 files, and then transcribed. The interview schedule questions were crafted to answer the research

questions. Due to the semi-structured nature of the schedule, additional prompts were used as needed to explore participant responses. As part of the purpose of this study was to discover how leaders define social emotional development in practice, our working definition was not shared with participants before, or during, the interviews.

### **Data analysis**

Data were analysed utilising qualitative coding strategies. Initially, we purposefully assigned in-vivo codes during first cycle coding as a way of “remaining grounded in the data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 171). This strategy, using the words or phrases of participants as the label for each code, is particularly effective for studies that focus on the participants’ voice (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Once the iterative process of coding the three interviews using first and second cycle codes was complete, we began to look for patterns emerging in the data (Barbour, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). These categories were reorganised through a constant comparative method of checking back and forth between the data and the codes (Barbour, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). We then analysed the data thematically, constructing conceptual themes that provided a deeper understanding of participant meanings (Barbour, 2014; Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2013). This focus on the commonalities in experience then led to the final description of how leaders in the pilot study school conceptualise, and foster, student social emotional development (Creswell, 2013). The first theme reported below responds to research question one and the second theme to research questions two and three.

Despite this being a small scale pilot study, the data allowed for a rich description that showed significant commonalities between each leader’s perceptions, with some differences arising when the leaders tailored practices to meet student developmental needs across each section of the school (primary, middle and senior).

### **Findings**

This section presents the findings from the interview data. We have referenced the data to indicate the relevant leaders across the school: primary (P), middle (M), and senior (S). This allows for the clear identification of commonalities and points of difference across the school.

The most significant finding to emerge from the data analysis was the foundational nature of social emotional development to engagement and learning. Analysis of the findings revealed that, due to this belief in the foundational nature, the leaders focus on creating a culture of support within the school to foster student social emotional development.

#### **The foundational nature of social emotional development**

The data revealed the shared participant view that fostering social emotional development enables students to cope, and therefore, engage in their studies and learn more effectively. When asked to discuss their understandings, there was a common view amongst the school leaders that social emotional development is foundational to students’ ability “to

navigate their way through life” and “to be able to cope” (P), to “cope within society” (M), and “cope with setbacks, problems and outside influences” (S). When asked if social emotional development was part of their responsibility, the primary school leader explained: “it has to be, because of the place it fits; if kids aren’t social and emotional, if they’re not happy, if they’re not able to cope - then they’re going to struggle academically” (P). The senior school leader noted: “we have to do that [foster social emotional development], because we want our kids in our class to do well and to focus on their studies”. In reference to the benefits of fostering student social emotional development, the primary leader stated: “the main benefit would be high engagement” (P); the middle school leader noted: “it *certainly* enables them to learn more effectively, and in a school setting, that, to me is a real focus, it has to be”; and the senior school leader noted the development of “resilience” that helps students to succeed in school and beyond.

According to the participants, the foundational nature of social emotional development to engagement and learning remains relevant through all stages of schooling:

That’s our starting point in the early years. So ... we invest all, rather than academics, it’s all social and emotional because if you don’t get that right first, then the academics is not necessarily going to flow on naturally or smoothly. (P)

This investment in fostering social emotional development continues “up into the primary years” (P) and enhances the “learning capacity” of students (P). “We’re under enormous pressure to get them reading and writing, but we’re saying no, the social stuff is what we need to get right first, so we invest in that” (P). “In the middle school we bring the curriculum and pastoral care together” (M), with social emotional development as much a daily focus as curriculum; “it’s about developing the whole person, that’s what we set out to do as a school” (M). Fostering the social emotional development of senior students ensures that students “can cope with all of the things that bombard them, [then] they can succeed better at school and get where they want to go” (S).

The leaders reported that they regularly collect and use data to inform and improve practice related to fostering student social emotional development, due to its significance across all stages of schooling. Information is sought about how well the school is fostering student social emotional development through surveys (P, M, and S), feedback (M and S), and pastoral care audits (P). The senior school gets “feedback from kids” and uses “mental health surveys that are done across year groups” (S) to gather information about how well supported, socially and emotionally, the senior students feel. The middle school leader seeks feedback from students about their “sense of belonging and connection with this school” through discussions with individuals and groups of students, and has sought feedback from Year 7 through surveys; “I want to start using surveys more explicitly to try and gain some understanding” (M). “You get a lot of feedback [from parents and students] about how things are working, or not” (M). The primary school conducted an external survey across all year levels to gain an insight into student perceptions about engagement and aspects of social emotional development. These results were then used to conduct “an audit of our pastoral care” (P). The primary school leader explained that the audit “looked from behaviour management through to, we’ve got this team of people,

what are the roles that each one plays?” (P). Programs run by staff were also explored in terms of “how much is being teased out consciously and whether we’re being too generic” (P).

This key finding, the foundational nature of social emotional development, highlights the need to foster this aspect of student development in a school setting where learning is the primary goal. The data revealed that the focus of the leaders in this school was on creating the optimal conditions for learning to take place.

### **Culture of support**

The leaders in this study reported that the foundational nature of social emotional development required that they focus on creating a culture of support in the school to foster this aspect of student development. The primary school leadership role is about ensuring that “we’re getting that culture of support developed” because “kids need to know that they’ve got backup” (P). The middle school leadership role is “about creating an environment which suits that early adolescent phase, when their world is in turmoil both personally, at an emotional level, and also socially”. The middle school leader explained that:

... a *lot* of what we do in terms of Year 7, Term One, is about making the students feel safe, that they’re known, building close relationships and developing the environment where their social emotional welfare and wellbeing is in place before we start trying to teach them curriculum because they won’t learn if they don’t feel comfortable, safe and cared for. And so that’s in simple terms, for me, the rationale of middle schooling. (M)

The Middle school makes “a fairly strong investment in terms of creating an environment where social and emotional wellbeing is catered for” (M). The senior school “is built on that pastoral tenet” (S), where providing continuity of pastoral care continues to be a focus whilst also preparing “our senior kids to become independent ... [and] self-directed”.

Analysis of the findings revealed that creating a culture of support involves the following two key sub-themes: *developing a sense of belonging* and *meeting new and increasing challenges*. This paper reports the findings related to *developing a sense of belonging* that is achieved through a *shared vision* and *supportive relationships*.

### **Developing a sense of belonging**

The importance of developing a “sense of belonging” (S) within the framework of a culture of support for student social emotional development was evident in the data:

If you’ve got a happy child who feels like they want to come to school and they’re valued, they’ll learn. If the child doesn’t feel like they belong, if they don’t feel safe, if they don’t think they’re valued, they’re not going to learn as well. (M)

The primary school runs specific programs that develop “opportunities for kids to connect better with each other” and all staff focus on developing relationships and ensuring that students “feel safe”(P).

The data revealed the leaders foster a sense of belonging amongst students through focusing on creating a *shared vision* and *supportive relationships* across the school.

#### *Shared vision*

Having a strong, shared vision emerged from the data as a significant focus of the leaders in developing a sense of belonging amongst students, providing them with a cohesive sense of purpose. “The school’s vision is about creating excellence and we’re about creating well-rounded kids that are able to function and be successful in society . . . everything that we do supports that” (P). This vision is reinforced through “a set of explicit school values” (M) and “explicit goals we set the students” (M) that promote positive social emotional behaviour, attitudes and beliefs. Awards are given based on the school values and this is “a big honour for students” (S). Across the whole school, some external social emotional programs are run that are developmentally appropriate; however, the school mainly relies on school based programs and initiatives that foster student social emotional development that are run by teachers, tutors, the school counsellor and pastoral care leaders. “I don’t think you can just rely on one specific program, you need to have a whole lot of different things” (P). “I’m always mindful that you don’t have this constant introduction then falling away of a particular program” (M). Additionally, the senior school highlights “positive behaviours for mental health . . . once a term and we choose a different type of theme for each” (S). Senior students “also work in groups, teamwork, to do charity days” four times a year (S). Students across the school are encouraged to go beyond thinking about themselves to what they can “contribute to society as well ... [and] a *big* part of the school ethos is serving the community and serving one another” (P). This is further developed in the senior school with “a leadership program that helps them [students] with their role in year 12” (S). The interview data revealed a holistic approach towards the development of students across the whole school.

#### *Supportive relationships*

It was evident in the data that developing strong, supportive relationships between students and teachers was believed to be the key to developing a sense of belonging amongst students. Distributed leadership across the primary school, with a focus on pastoral care, developing supportive relationships and collaborative practices, was a key finding within the interview data:

We’ve got this team of people ... we’ve got a counsellor, we’ve got our learning support program people, coordinator, we’ve got our upper and lower coordinator, they’re pseudo Deputies, and then we’ve got our Deputy, and then we’ve got my role. (P)

Two teachers take “key leadership” roles as “coordinators” (P) across the primary school and “they’re given a day a week” (P) to focus on ensuring student social emotional development is fostered effectively through pastoral care; “they’ve got quite a demanding

role” (P). The key relationship for primary students is their classroom teacher, however, “everyone takes on a pastoral care role” (P). There are broader support structures in place to provide other relationships for students who need additional support, with the classroom teachers communicating “with all the people that can help support them” (P). For example, a key part of the learning support teacher’s role is to provide “a lot of social and emotional support” and “the teachers work very hard to have that relationship” (P) with students requiring additional academic support. This pastoral care focused, distributed leadership in the primary school is continued in the middle school, within an organisational structure not typically the norm in high schools.

The organisational structure of the middle school emerged from the interview data as the most significant means of developing supportive relationships. Staff and “students are placed into learning teams” (M) with tutors and “a team leader, like a pastoral care leader” (M). This organisational structure requires that some teachers in the middle school are “cross curriculum teachers” and “the key is, they will teach every child in their group that they have pastoral care responsibility for” (M). “The relationship between the tutor and the student is really the key part. We try to keep those same people together from year seven to year nine” (M). The tutors and team leader primarily teach all of the students in their learning team. Belonging to this team provides the students with the opportunity to seek out relationships and support from any of the tutors or leader in their team. Each pastoral care team has a balance of new, experienced, male, and female teachers, in order to maximise the chances that students will find a teacher that they connect with; “it’s whatever relationship works, that person will be happy to give support to the student” (M). The middle school leader explained:

Every tutor’s engaged with something in the middle school, every tutor’s doing something ... this is part of the model, there is an investment in those people [students] because you’re there as a pastoral care teacher but you’re also their curriculum teacher. (M)

School staff are placed in learning team offices, based upon the students in their team, rather than curriculum-based offices and this makes a “huge difference” (M) to the pastoral support that the middle school can offer:

So they’ve all taught the same classes that day, and at the end of the day they’re all going ‘oh yeah, so and so was really off today’, phone call to the parents, turns out the grandmother had died the day before ... so that’s the depth of understanding you get. You don’t get that when you’ve got Maths teachers, Science teachers, the conversation never happens ... and so then we can engage with that student about grief ... [and ask them] do you want to go and have a chat with the school counsellor, [or] would you rather go and talk to the school chaplain? (M)

Belonging to these teams provides an opportunity for teachers to develop relationships and provide a level of support for students not necessarily found in discipline-based high school structures.

The senior school in this research provides continuity of relationships for senior students through House and tutorial groups, with the tutor being the main support person for students; “someone they can go and see, and talk to” (S). The students stay in their tutorial group, with the same tutor, for their final three years of schooling. Students are placed into tutorial groups with students from years “10, 11 and 12 in each one” (S) and “each House has four tute groups” (S). The Heads of House continue the pastoral care distributed leadership model evident in the primary and middle schools. The senior school leader explained: “social and emotional awareness, that’s really directed by the Heads of House. So, I have to empower them to do that, and programs that they come up with, provide support for that” (S). The House program fosters “interconnections” and a “sense of belonging” (S) amongst students with a particular focus in Term One on “ice breaker activities because we’ve got Year 10s coming into house groups” (S). The multiple year levels, whilst still providing a pastoral care team structure for the students, is designed “to help our senior kids become independent ... [and] self-directed” (S) in an effort to help prepare them socially and emotionally for life after school. Throughout the year, house groups work together on whole school activities and compete with other houses in debating and sporting competitions. There is a focus on developing the senior students’ ability to lead other students and provide supportive relationships to year seven students through the peer support program and leadership training.

## Discussion

### The foundational nature of social emotional development

The participants shared a clearly articulated belief in the foundational nature of student social emotional development to engagement and learning. The leaders reported that focusing on social emotional development results in well-adjusted students who are able to engage in learning. As this study did not go beyond leaders perceptions, more data are needed to explore whether this is the case. However, the leaders’ perceptions are consistent with a body of literature pointing to the interrelated nature of social, emotional and academic development and the need for teachers to address all three in order for students to be successful in school (Aviles et al., 2006; Durlak et al., 2011; Rutledge et al., 2015; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016). This suggests the significance of social emotional development in a school setting where learning is the primary goal and warrants further study.

The data revealed that distributed leadership through organisational structures were in place across the school to foster student social emotional development. This is a welcome counterpoint to research showing that despite acknowledging the importance of supporting social emotional development, schools rarely address this systematically and effectively (Bower et al., 2015; OECD, 2015). Whilst this study did not explore how effectively social emotional development was addressed in the school through other data sources, the leaders’ views revealed a focus on social emotional development across the whole school through distributed leadership and organisational structures that reinforce the social emotional purposes of schooling.

The pastoral care focused learning teams and cross-curriculum teachers in the middle school meant that conventional disciplinary boundaries did not exist in this section of the school. In contrast, Rutledge et al. have suggested that the high school structure and focus on subject disciplines “may further reinforce the academic purpose of schooling over the social” (2015, p. 1085). Similarly, Tichnor-Wagner et al.’s (2016) findings reinforce this challenge facing high schools, where subject-specific departments can create entrenched cultures of learning that do not cross disciplinary boundaries. Both Rutledge et al. and Tichnor-Wagner et al.’s findings suggest that school organisational structure is important and that high schools can end up with departmental silos that do not focus on social emotional development. This study demonstrates how thinking differently about organisational structure, resulting from a holistic focus on student development, allows high schools to operate flexibly, providing the opportunity for staff to balance student social emotional and academic development.

### **Supportive culture**

This study found that developing a sense of belonging amongst students, through a shared vision and supportive relationships, was viewed by the leaders as a key factor in creating a culture of support. Consistent with previous research findings (Noddings, 2005; Roeser et al., 2000; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016), the leaders reported that organisational structures across the primary, middle and senior schools were in place to foster supportive relationships over extended periods; and were key to fostering student social emotional development (Bower et al., 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Leyden & Shale, 2012). Rutledge et al. (2015) and Tichnor-Wagner and Allen (2016) have reported the influence of meaningful and positive relationships with teachers on students’ sense of belonging, and whilst there are no data in this pilot to report on student perceptions, the leaders believed in the importance of developing supportive relationships over time, with a shared vision, as central to student sense of belonging. This focus on positive interpersonal relationships is a key feature in schools with positive cultures (Branson et al., 2015), and the focus of the leaders in this study was on creating a supportive culture for students in order to meet their social emotional needs at all stages of schooling (Cooper & Cefai, 2009; Leyden & Shale, 2012; Noddings, 2012; Roeser et al., 2000). Therefore, this evidence suggests organisational structures that foster relationships over extended periods could be an important way to foster student social emotional development through creating a culture of support and this may provide a model for future use in schools.

The participants articulated the strong belief that when students feel safe, cared for, and have a sense of belonging to the school, they are more likely to engage and learn. This finding is in accord with studies indicating the importance of positive, caring relationships among teachers and students in supporting engagement and learning (Bower et al., 2015; Cohen, 2006; Durlak et al., 2011; Leyden & Shale, 2012; Wrench et al., 2013). Other studies have shown that students demonstrate improvement in learning when they feel happy and respected (Noddings, 2005; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Tichnor-Wagner and Allen (2016) found that leaders could play a role in the current academic accountability context by taking a relational approach, fostering caring school

communities as well as meaningful academic development. Therefore, further studies are needed to explore whether a supportive and caring environment, such as the culture of support presented, is significant for student social emotional development and their engagement in learning.

### **Role of leadership**

The findings clearly indicated the significant role played by leadership beliefs in shaping practices aimed at fostering student social emotional development in this school. The leaders took a holistic approach to the development of students, with a focus on preparing students for success in school, life, and becoming contributing members of society. This is consistent with a body of literature recognising that schools need to foster positive social, emotional and academic development of students in order to prepare them for life and citizenship (Cohen, 2006; Durlak et al., 2011; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012; MCEETYA, 2008; OECD, 2015).

Collaborative practices and communities, evidenced by organisational structures and distributed leadership throughout the school, are the result of leaders focused on holistic development who have prioritised student social emotional development. Jacobson (2011), Leithwood et al. (2010) and Tichnor-Wagner et al. (2016) all found that successful leadership builds collaborative practices. However, Tichnor-Wagner et al. also found that the current context of academic accountability and high-stakes testing can lead to a lack of collaborative practices and communities; this was not the case in this research. This study also provides evidence that the current accountability context has not led to an exclusive focus on academic improvement in this school, as otherwise suggested by Rutledge et al. (2015) and Tichnor-Wagner and Allen (2016). The leaders monitored and informed practice relating to fostering student social emotional development by regularly conducting surveys, seeking feedback, and in the primary school leader's case, conducting a pastoral care audit. Therefore, this current study provides an example of how leaders of a K - 12 school, in the current academic accountability context, can remain focused on the holistic development of students.

### **Conclusion**

The shared position of the leaders in this pilot study was that social emotional development is foundational to engagement and learning. Analysis of the data revealed that the leaders all believed in the role and responsibility of the school in fostering the holistic development of students. This overarching idea is consistent with the educational literature and whilst the detail may differ with the varying foci on successful schools and successful principals, the importance of the school setting in providing and catering for the holistic development of students remains the same. More research is needed to explore the interrelated nature of leadership, school culture, and student social emotional development.

This study demonstrates how the leaders in one K – 12 Perth school, in the current academic accountability context, can remain focused on the fundamental purpose of

education. The culture of support in this school is the result of leaders who are committed to the holistic development of their students and providing the best environment for students to engage in their learning.

### A final note

Further research conducted into how other Australian schools foster student social emotional development would contribute to the gap in this knowledge. A further extension of this study would be to observe the practices described by the leaders in this study, and to include other data collection methods. It would also be useful to explore student perceptions of school culture and leadership, whether students feel that their social emotional development is fostered at school, and if this helps them to engage in their learning. Additional research including more schools, participants and data collection methods is needed. It would be ideal to have a picture of what schools in each sector of Australian education are doing to foster student social emotional development. This knowledge may be useful to leaders in the current academic accountability context, as students engaged in their learning is the first step towards students achieving their best academically. More research may provide insight into both the importance and role of a supportive culture for student social emotional development.

### Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the leaders who participated in this pilot study for their time and candid responses.

### References

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012). *Curriculum Development Process: Version 6*.  
[https://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/ACARA\\_Curriculum\\_Development\\_Process\\_Version\\_6.0\\_-\\_04\\_April\\_2012\\_-\\_FINAL\\_COPY.pdf](https://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/ACARA_Curriculum_Development_Process_Version_6.0_-_04_April_2012_-_FINAL_COPY.pdf)
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2013). *General capabilities in the Australian curriculum*. <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/>
- Aviles, A. M., Anderson, T. R. & Davila, E. R. (2006). Child and adolescent social-emotional development within the context of school. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 11(1), 32-39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-3588.2005.00365.x>
- Barbour, R. (2014). *Introducing qualitative research: A student's guide* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526485045>
- Bower, J. M., van Kraayenoord, C. & Carroll, A. (2015). Building social connectedness in schools: Australian teachers' perspectives. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 70, 101-109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.02.004>
- Branson, C. M., Baig, S. & Begum, A. (2015). Personal values of principals and their manifestation in student behaviour: A district-level study in Pakistan. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 43(1), 107-128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213510505>

- Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical, and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy, and well-being. *Harvard Educational Review*, 76(2), 201-237. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.76.2.j44854x1524644vn>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). New York: Routledge. <https://routledge.com/textbooks/9781138209886/>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2015). *2015 CASEL guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs: Middle and high school edition*. <http://secondaryguide.casel.org/>
- Cooper, P., & Cefai, C. (2009). Contemporary values and social context: Implications for the emotional wellbeing of children. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 14(2), 91-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632750902921856>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dinham, S. (2010, August). Self esteem: Caution – do not over-inflate. *Teacher: The National Education Magazine*, August, 6-8, 10-11. <https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/self-esteem-caution-do-not-over-inflate>
- Dinham, S., Collarbone, P., Evans, M. & Mackay, A. (2013). The development, endorsement and adoption of a national standard for principals in Australia. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(4), 467-483. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213485462>
- Drysdale, L. & Gurr, D. (2011). Theory and practice of successful school leadership in Australia. *School Leadership & Management*, 31(4), 355-368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2011.606273>
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D. & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- Education Council (2019). *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education declaration*. <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>
- Ehrich, L., Harris, J., Klenowski, V., Smeed, J. & Spina, N. (2015). The centrality of ethical leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(2), 197-214. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-10-2013-0110>
- Gurr, D. (2015). A model of successful school leadership from the International Successful School Principalship Project. *Societies*, 5(1), 136-150. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc5010136>
- Gurr, D. & Drysdale, L. (2012). Tensions and dilemmas in leading Australia's schools. *School Leadership & Management*, 32(5), 403-420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2012.723619>
- Jacobson, S. (2011). Leadership effects on student achievement and sustained school success. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 25(1), 33-44. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513541111100107>
- Jennings, P. A. & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 491-525. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>

- Leithwood, K., Patten, S. & Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a conception of how school leadership influences student learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(5), 671-706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X10377347>
- Leyden, R. & Shale, E. (2012). *What teachers need to know about social and emotional development*. Victoria, Australia: ACER Press. <https://shop.acer.edu.au/what-teachers-need-to-know-about-social-and-emotional-development>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M. & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. <https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/oce/qualitative-data-analysis/book246128>
- MCEETYA (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs) (2008). *Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians*. [http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/National\\_Declaration\\_on\\_the\\_Educational\\_Goals\\_for\\_Young\\_Australians.pdf](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf)
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College.
- Noddings, N. (2012). The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(6), 771-781. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745047>
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2015). *Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264226159-en>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Roeser, R. W., Eccles, J. S. & Sameroff, A. J. (2000). School as a context of early adolescents' academic and social-emotional development: A summary of research findings. *The Elementary School Journal*, 100(5), 443-471. <https://doi.org/10.1086/499650>
- Rutledge, S. A., Cohen-Vogel, L., Osborne-Lampkin, L. & Roberts, R. L. (2015). Understanding effective high schools: Evidence for personalization for academic and social emotional learning. *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(6), 1060-1092. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831215602328>
- Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE. <https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/oce/the-coding-manual-for-qualitative-researchers/book243616>
- Tichnor-Wagner, A. & Allen, D. (2016). Accountable for care: Cultivating caring school communities in urban high schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 15(4), 406-447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1181185>
- Tichnor-Wagner, A., Harrison, C. & Cohen-Vogel, L. (2016). Cultures of learning in effective high schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52(4), 602-642. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X16644957>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2015). *Rethinking education: Towards a global common good?* Paris: UNESCO Publishing <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232555>
- Wrench, A., Hammond, C., McCallum, F. & Price, D. (2013). Inspire to aspire: Raising aspirational outcomes through a student well-being curricular focus. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(9), 932-947. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.718804>

Yates, L. (2013). Revisiting curriculum, the numbers game and the inequality problem. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(1), 39-51.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2012.754949>

**Lee Beatty** is a lecturer and PhD candidate in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. Lee is currently undertaking her PhD research furthering this pilot study. Her research interests include leadership, school culture, and student social emotional development.

Email: [l.beatty@ecu.edu.au](mailto:l.beatty@ecu.edu.au)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7119-8021>

**Dr Glenda Campbell-Evans** is Associate Professor and Director International in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. Her research interests include school governance, leadership, and the not-for-profit sector.

Email: [g.campbell\\_evans@ecu.edu.au](mailto:g.campbell_evans@ecu.edu.au)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1775-5720>

**Please cite as:** Beatty, L. & Campbell-Evans, G. (2020). School leaders and a culture of support: Fostering student social emotional development. *Issues in Educational Research*, 30(2), 435-451. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier30/beatty.pdf>