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School Community Leadership: The perspective of primary school principal

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Abstract

This article focuses on the principal's role in school community leadership. In doing so it provides an account of a study that explores this issue in the context of Catholic primary schooling within one rural diocese in Australia. The impetus for this study was a realisation that while there is a policy expectation within the diocese that the principal nurture the school as community, meeting this expectation was proving to be challenging. Consequently, this study sought to document principals' perspectives on the Catholic primary school as community and their role as school community leaders. Here the intention was to develop a more informed and sophisticated understanding of this dimension of school leadership leading to recommendations for further policy and practice for primary schools within this diocese.

Introduction

"Community" is one of the keywords of education which educators continue to invoke. In the early 1900s, Dewey promoted the view that classrooms should be genuine communities. A century later, Sergiovanni (1994) proposed that the metaphor for school should change from "formal organization" to "community" (p.xx) with schools being organised "around relationships and the felt interdependencies that

nurture them" (p.4). Today, phrases such as *community decision-making*, *community standards*, *learning communities* and *communities of practice* are widely used in education. This emphasis suggests an underlying, unquestioned idea that schools should be communities of some sort as well as integrated with larger communities of which they are a part.

This idea of the school as community is reflected in the concern for school development within one rural diocese in Australia. Within this diocese there are thirty-four primary schools and, for over a decade, there have been policy expectations that these primary schools function as communities (Catholic Education Office, 2002, 2004). Most recently, the draft policy document *Foundational Beliefs and Practices of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Lismore: The Essential Framework* (Catholic Education Office, 2006) identified "community" as one of five foundational beliefs and practices in diocesan schools.

However, the implementation of this policy direction has proved problematic. In conversations with principals that followed the release of this policy document, it became obvious that both individually and collectively, the primary principals did not have a clear understanding of the Catholic school as community and the role of the principal in community leadership. Consequently, this study was designed to develop a more informed and sophisticated understanding of the primary principals' perspectives on the Catholic school as community and the role of the principal in community leadership.

Conceptual framework

From the outset this study was situated within a conceptual framework that acknowledged the binary relationship between leadership and community within the community leadership role of principal in the Catholic school.

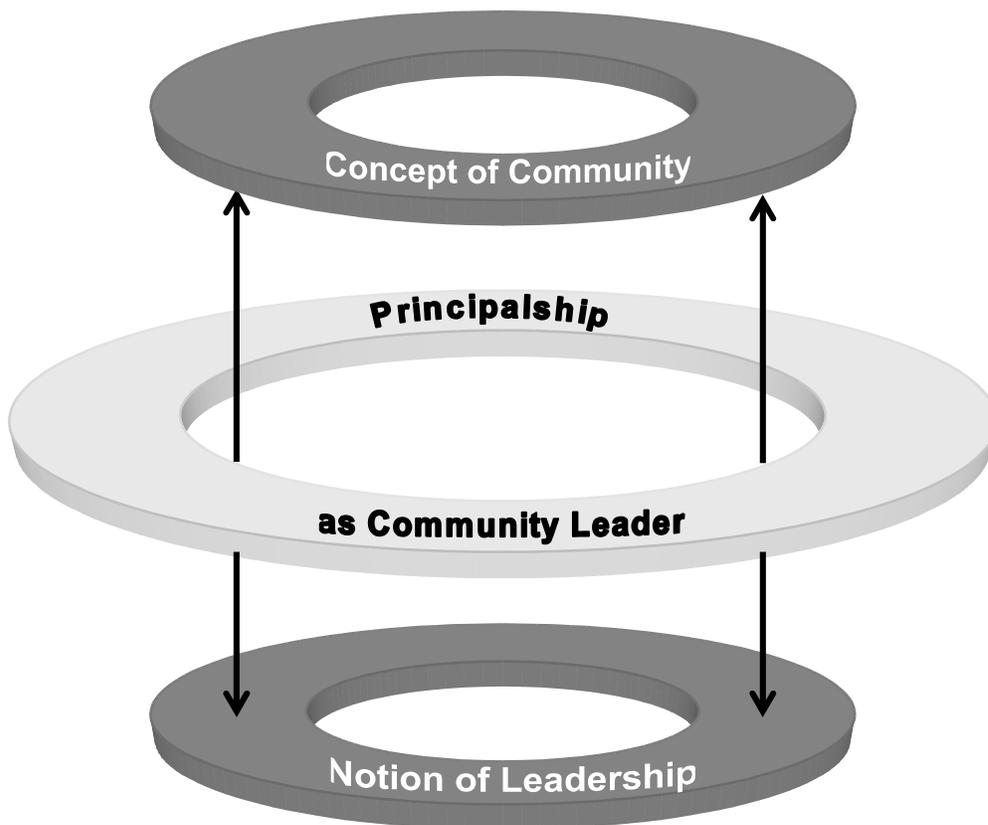


Figure 1: Conceptual framework outlining the boundaries of the literature review.

Within this study, this conceptual framework established the boundaries of the review of the literature. This review of the literature confirmed the problematic nature of community leadership by highlighting the contested nature of the concept of community as well as the elusive nature leadership in a postindustrial society.

The contested concept of community

The link between school and community has a long history in educational literature (Beck, 1999) and has been primarily influenced by theoretical developments in the discipline of sociology. Over time, three models of community have been advanced in sociology (Table 1).

Table 1: Models of community.

Models of community	Gemeninschaft	Gesellschaft	Personalist
Era	Pre-industrial	Industrial	Post-industrial
Metaphors	Family Village Tribe	Organisation City	Society
Assumptions	Dependence	Independence	Interdependence
Emphasis	Social obligation Unity	Contractual relationships	Self-in-relationship
Values	Co-operation	Competition	Participation Solidarity

The German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies (1957) is credited with the initial identification of the first two models of community. Put simply, Tönnies identifies a continuum between “gemeinschaft” (community) and “gesellschaft” (organisation) (p.17). Community as “gemeinschaft” is characterised as “a real social relationship of obligation or mutual dependence” (p.20). Often this “gemeinschaft” community is characterised by a “family spirit” (p.55) in which human beings “are related through their wills in an organic manner and affirm each other” (p.48). Alternatively, the theory of the “gesellschaft” community describes an artificial collective of human beings that while superficially resembling the “gemeinschaft” in so far as the individuals peacefully live and dwell together...in “gesellschaft” they are essentially separated in spite of all the unifying factors (p.74). In the “gesellschaft” community each person is competitively working towards a personal agenda, rather than cooperating with others for the common good. Moreover, interactions become more impersonal with connections becoming more contrived or contractual in nature.

Since Tönnies’ early work, the gemeinschaft and gesellschaft models of community have found both supporters and critics within sociological literature. Emile Durkheim (1984) who supports a gesellschaft model of community is highly critical of a gemeinschaft model of community that would strive to preserve homogeneity at all cost, even if this meant the imposition of repressive and coercive punitive laws to preserve “the bond of social solidarity” (p.31). On the other hand, Etzioni (1993) criticises the dysfunctional nature of the gesellschaft community and advocates a contemporary interpretation of the gemeinschaft community model that involves the exercise of rights and responsibilities in a spirit of solidarity and mutual concern, as members balance personal needs with the common good.

Recognising the limits of both the *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* models of community, contemporary scholars offer a third model of community that seeks to integrate the two previous models with the intention of minimising their excesses. This third model of community is said to be informed by the moral philosophy of personalism that places the person at the centre of a larger society (Macmurray, 1961). Beyond this centrality of the person, personalism also supports themes of subjectivity, autonomy, human dignity, community, participation and solidarity (Whetstone, 2002). While the centre of attention in personalism is the Other and not just the Self, the valuing of the Other is in response to a “self-realisation of the personal” (Macmurray, 1961, p.158).

Within a personalist model of community, the community is not a ‘taken for granted’, natural reality as in the *gemeinschaft* community. Rather community as a society has to be continually maintained by the intention of its members to make a unique communal life possible. However, intentionality here has little to do with private intention as in the *gesellschaft* community. Rather it is to do with the person acknowledging that they do not exist for him or herself, but for others.

It is only in relation to others that we exist as persons; we are invested with significance by others who have need of us; and borrow our reality from those who care for us...what rights or powers or freedom we possess are ours by the grace and favour of our fellows. (MacMurray, 1961, p.211)

Whilst there is support in the literature for a personalist model of community, the literature also notes the difficulty of applying personalism to today’s postindustrial world. As Whetstone (2002) asks “Is personalism realistic? Is the standard it sets too high for imperfect human beings who exist in a world that is far from perfect?” and “What leadership paradigm might help people to engage in productive work to approach [the personalist] perspective?” (pp. 386-387). Thus despite this theoretical development community remains a contested concept with three models of community being advanced. Consequently, it would be a mistake for educators to assume “that within our culture the notion of community is nonproblematic” (Starratt, 2003, p.67).

The elusive nature of leadership

Despite a growing knowledge and research base on leadership this activity remains an elusive concept (Leithwood & Riehl, 2004). For much of the 20th Century, leadership was associated with traditional forms of industrial leadership (Shriberg, Shriberg & Lloyd, 2002). In short, this paradigm “saw leadership as the property of the individual; considered primarily in the context of the formal group, and, equated concepts of management and leadership” (p.203). However, by the 1970s, this understanding of industrial leadership was challenged as theorists became aware that the reality of leadership in postindustrial society did not readily relate to this construction of industrial leadership. Consequently, contemporary writers have offered various theories of leadership that they argue meet the challenges of postindustrial society.

In the first instance, Greenleaf (1977) questioned the abuse of power and authority in the modern organisation and recommended Servant Leadership based on the hallmarks of cooperation and support. Reflecting on Greenleaf’s contribution to the field, Johnson (2001), has identified the strengths of the servant leadership model in terms of altruism, simplicity and self awareness. However, this same writer also notes

its weaknesses in terms of seeming unrealistic, encouraging passivity, not working in every context, sometimes serving the wrong cause and being associated with the negative connotation of servant. It is also argued that servant leadership can be subject to manipulation by followers (Bowie, 2000) and can be threatening to those wielding or seeking power in hierarchical structures (DiStefano, 1995).

Parallel to the theoretical development of servant leadership, Burns (1978) recommended transforming leadership as an approach to organisational change. Transformational leaders influence through charisma and inspirational motivation, challenging followers to be creative in problem-solving and providing a learning environment. Here vision is deemed all important and to be effective the transformational leader needs to be not only visionary but also capable of instilling this vision in others and inspiring them to achieve this vision.

Although, in theory, an altruistic form of transformational leadership is possible (Bass, 1995), critics argue that transformational leadership can be used for immoral ends; "If the vision is flawed or the leader neglects to stress principled behaviour towards the vision, then the results can be tragic" (Rasmussen, 1995, p.297). Here there is also possibility of transformational leaders ignoring or downplaying the contribution of others (Kelley, 1992). Moreover, followers may be open to manipulation and even become too dependent on the transformational leader as a charismatic leader (Johnson, 2001).

Twenty years on from the original work of Greenleaf and Burns, Rost (1991) advanced a postindustrial paradigm of leadership. This theory describes leadership as "an influencing relationship among leaders and their collaborators who intend changes that reflect mutual purposes" (p.7). Thus leadership is based on influence rather than positional authority, and is characterised by collaboration and service rather than individualism and self-interest. The emphasis here is on substantive attempts to transform people's beliefs, values, motivations and behaviours rather than maintaining a narrow focus on organisational goals. Such leadership is said to promote goals that represent the aspirations of both the leader and his or her collaborators and not just the wishes of the leader. However, postindustrial leadership has also been open to criticism. In particular, there is concern that postindustrial leadership by emphasising relationships denies the worth of the individual and by not situating decision-making within an ethical framework threatens the common good (Whetstone, 2002).

Following criticisms of transformational and postindustrial models of leadership, theorists have, most recently, called for the application of the moral philosophy of personalism to leadership in a postindustrial society. For example, Whetstone applies a personalism to leadership by recommending the integration of servant leadership, transformational leadership and postindustrial leadership. Here it is argued that servant leadership is consistent with personalist themes including the "centrality of the person", "subjectivity and autonomy", "human dignity", "the personal and community" and "participation and solidarity" (pp.386-387). To offset the association of servant leadership with weakness and the possibility of followers manipulating their leader, Whetstone recommends a synthesis of servant leadership and altruistic forms of transformational leadership and postindustrial leadership. Here personalist leadership is deemed to be:

A theoretically superior approach is a combination in which the morally tough servant leader adopts certain behaviours of the altruistic transformational leader. To inspire followers with strength and sensitivity of a transforming vision, the servant leader would use proven transforming techniques such as developing a vision, enlisting others, fostering collaboration, strengthening others, planning small wins, linking rewards to performance and celebrating accomplishments. The leader would focus on the vision jointly formulated and refined, avoiding manipulation by any party through a mutual commitment to participation, solidarity of community, and respect for each person grounded in the philosophy of personalism. (p.391)

However, despite this theoretical leadership, leadership remains an elusive concept as contemporary theories of leadership represent authoritative opinion that is not supported by scholarly research (Onsman, 2002). Moreover, despite the plethora of writing in the area, leaders in frontline human service organisations, including schools, continue to be challenged by internal and external forces and research indicates “the need for a reinterpretation of leadership thinking and practices” (Duignan, 2003).

The research questions

Two research questions were identified to guide the various moments of data collection, analysis and interpretation within this study of school community leadership.

Research Question 1: *How do principals conceptualize the Catholic primary school as community?*

This research question sought to discover how the principal participants understood the concept of community as applied to primary schools within the diocese. This question acknowledged that the principal's behaviour is influenced by their perspectives on what characterised the school as community. Moreover, any guidance or support offered to principals in their role as community leaders must be based on knowledge of how they made sense of being in or out of community.

Research question 2: *How do principals describe their leadership role in building the Catholic primary school as community?*

This research question assumes that the principals in this research study as experienced practitioners had valuable knowledge, skills and attitudes in respect to their leadership role in school community development. It also accepts Fullan's (1991) claim that successful innovation is based on what might be “most accurately labelled organised common sense” (p.xii).

Theoretical framework

Given these two research questions, this study was situated within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Emanating from within the sociological research tradition, symbolic interactionism offers a way of studying “how individuals engage in social transactions and how these transactions contribute to the creation and maintenance of social structures and the individual's self-identity (Gall, Gall &

Borg, 2006, p.500). Symbolic interactionism also advances a new understanding of role identity within social situations. In this theoretical perspective, roles or behavioural expectations are framed as “a set of rules” that are governed by negotiation (Charon, 2004, p.168). “The enactment or performance of the role is variable” given that “there is some choice in whether or not to perform this role and that there is the opportunity to reject expectations attached to a position occupied or to modify performance called for” (Stryker, 2002, p.79).

Extending this thought, symbolic interactionists highlight the role played by symbols in the process of social interaction and role negotiation. Symbols, in the form of language and other gestures, are “social objects used by the actor for representation and communication” for thinking and social interaction (Charon, 2004, p.48). The essence of symbolic communication requires that symbols are meaningful and make sense to both the user and the other person. This is particular true of words, because words are “the most important symbols, making human thinking possible” (Charon, 2004, p.59) and “make possible” all other symbols (Charon, 2001, p.51). Again symbolic communication, including the use of words, facilitates “joint action” by “collectives” (p.17) or the social organisation of different acts by diverse participants.

Thus a social situation is deemed problematic if individual living and working together have not developed a shared symbolic language that, in turn, serves to facilitate symbolic communication and joint action by the collective. A social situation will also be problematic if there are not shared expectations of roles. Without such clarity, individuals experience “role conflict” (Stryker, 2002, pp.73-76) as they face excessive or contradictory role expectations. In addition, role conflict for the individual across the organisation will result in “role strain” as reflected in the “continual problem of maintaining continuity of social roles that underlies the stability of social structure” (p.76).

To overcome such problematic social situations, symbolic interactionists advocate proactive cultural development and role-making processes. Here culture and roles are ‘made’ through on-going interaction between the “self and society” (Stryker, 2002, pp.78-84). Such interaction involves “self indication” with this activity including “self-communication”, “self-perception” and “self-control” contributing to “self-development” or the transformation of the self (Charon, 2004, pp.80-89). Moreover, this interaction between the self and society involves symbolic communication with ‘reference groups’ of significant others that include dialogue, co-operative problem-solving and the achievement of mutual goals. Over time, such interaction results in the identification of shared cultural perspectives as well as self-development, the internalisation of society’s rules and perspectives or the “generalised other” (p.76).

This appreciation of the importance of interaction within cultural development and a role-making process raises issues in respect to social structures that enable or inhibit the interaction of the self and society. Symbolic interactionists define social structures as “the patterns of regularities that characterise most human interaction” (Stryker, 2002, p.65). While it is possible to change these social structures, it does depend on whether social structures are ‘open’ or ‘closed’ to novel forms of interaction that support self development as well as allow for role experimentation through social action.

The design of the study

The decision to situate this study within a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism had implications for the design of this study. As an interpretive research method, symbolic interactionism is concerned with coming to understand the “common set of symbols and understandings that have emerged to give meaning to people’s interactions” (Best & Kahn, 2006, p.255). To this end, symbolic interactionism accepts two principles of investigation (Charon, 2004). Firstly, symbolic interactionism is primarily concerned with understanding what the actors themselves believe about their social world. Secondly, this research is conducted in the ‘real world’ and adopts careful, critical, systematic and objective approaches, in order to be accurate and consider the perspective of the actors.

In line with symbolic interactionism, the design of this study involved two stages: an “exploration” and “inspection” (Charon, 2001, p.208). The exploration stage was designed to gain an understanding about the principals’ perspectives on ‘what’s going on around here’, by describing in detail what was happening in the social situation and hence becoming more acquainted with the situation under review. The inspection stage was the second step and involved isolating important elements within the situation and describing the situation in relation to those elements.

Within this study, the exploration stage involved a questionnaire completed by 15 principals representing Catholic primary schools in the diocese. This questionnaire required text responses to three questions.

1. Describe your understandings of community in a Catholic Primary School?
2. How do principals exercise leadership in building the Catholic primary school as community?
3. What other comments would you like to make about community and Catholic Primary Schools?

The responses to this questionnaire were further explored in two semi-structured interviews with 6 principals from across the diocese as well as a ‘follow up’ focus group interview with all 6 principals together in the one group.

Following data collection within these two stages, the researcher adopted a three step approach to interpretation. The first step, a first-order interpretation, involved learning about the research problem from the meaning ascribed by the informants to the study. The second step, the second-order interpretation, involved looking for patterns or themes emerging from the data. The third step, the third order interpretation involved the researcher in considering the general theoretical significance of the research findings.

Table 1: Overview of the multiple data collection and analysis methods

RESEARCH STAGE	RESEARCH STEP	RESEARCH METHOD	DESCRIPTION
Exploration	Step 1	Open-ended Questionnaire	34 principals from each Catholic primary school in the diocese were invited to respond to this questionnaire.
	Step 2	Data analysis	Transcription of questionnaire data, identification of key areas for semi-structured interviews (First-order interpretation).
Inspection	Step 3	Semi-structured interviews	1 st interview with 6 principals from Catholic primary schools, seek their conceptualisation of community.
	Step 4	Data analysis	Transcribe, categorise and code data, develop themes (Second order interpretation).
	Step 5	Semi-structured interviews	2 nd interview with 6 principals from Catholic primary schools. Review previous interview transcripts and pursue descriptions of leadership for community building.
	Step 6	Data analysis	Transcribe, categorise and code data, develop themes (Second order interpretation).
	Step 7	Focus group	6 principals interact around key themes identified by the researcher.
	Step 8	Data analysis	Transcribe, categorise and code data, develop themes (Second-order interpretation).
Conclusions	Step 9	Data interpretation	Ascribe theoretical significance to the research findings (Third order interpretation).

Research findings

Following a first and second-order analysis of the data collected in stages 1 and 2 of this study, it was possible to identify a number of themes in response to the two research questions.

Research Question 1: *How do principals conceptualize the Catholic primary school as community?*

In the initial questionnaire responses, the principals offered a range of understandings in respect to the Catholic primary school as community. Here it was noted that a number of descriptors were used by the principals with notions of “worship/celebration”, “welcome”, “caring”, “compassion”, “inclusion”, “prayer and religious practice” and “common goals/vision” being named by more than one principal. Exploring these

initial thoughts, in the individual and focus group interviews, the principals identified four key characteristics of the Catholic primary school as community.

1. Unity and common ground

In individual interviews, five of the six principals asserted that the Catholic primary school as community should be characterised by unity and common ground. For Elise this was a community of “like minded people” and for Denise “staff and principal have to be of one mind”. However, in describing the Catholic school community in this way, these principals were quick to point out that both unity and common ground are not easily achieved:

There’s so many diverse ways of thinking and different spiritualities and different measures of where people are in their own story that it is hard to find unity in schools. (Elise)

School community is full of conflict and is full of discussion and negotiation, because we’re very heavily focused on children and they’re a precious commodity that we’re working with. (Albert)

Albert’s response reflected a deep care and compassion for the children, a value that was also apparent in the responses of the other principals.

2. Care and compassion

All six principals identified the Catholic school community with attitudes of care and compassion. Typical comments included:

We’re here, we’re together, we have direction, we have needs, we have compassion for each other, we know what we’re on about and we’ve got to go on that journey together. And to me that is what a community is all about. (Bruce)

At the same time, these principals also noted that this commitment to care and compassion is challenged in an individualistic society. For Hayley, the following story illustrated this challenge:

We had a Year Camp last week. I remember Camps in a Catholic school, where one of the things that you did when you went away was meet people and interact with people and put up with the people that you didn’t like in the cabin... I’ve had an influx of parents complaining about their child not getting the cabin they wanted, and I met with each one of the thirteen parents and in dialoguing with them, they’ve got one child or two children, and they’re so fixated on their child and their Y Generation needs.

For Hayley this camp experience reflected diminished care and compassion within the school community and caused her to express the opinion that “a wave of change was upon us”.

3. Parental partnership

Whilst the theme of parental partnership was found twice in the questionnaire responses, this theme received greater attention in the individual and group interviews. For Bruce:

Parent partnership is huge and all those things come together in community. The only thing that I feel I keep coming back to is that we have put a sense out there of belonging, and I think we have to have a sense of gathering, belonging and partnership.

Appreciating the importance of parental partnerships, Charles ensured that the voice of parents was heard from the moment of kindergarten: "Fresh people coming in and the kinder parents have a voice right from the beginning" (Charles). However, this group of principals were concerned about parents who "can overstep the mark and, at times, take on an overpowering role" (Bruce). Consequently, at least one principal was not averse to placing limits on parental participation:

I think that you provide the opportunities for parents to have their say and to express areas of need...Parent Forum has enhanced community...it's very open and flexible...it ensures that parents are vocal, interested and contributing...And that's where the conflict comes in. It's the old case, of the parent who comes in and is unhappy with this and that, when really, I mean okay, you're there for them, you listen, you try and help, but when it comes down to it, basically this is what we're on about, we're a Catholic school and if you can't work along those lines, well really, what are you doing here? (Frank)

For Frank parent participation had to be 'managed' and this thought also found support within this group of principals.

4. Embedded in the parish and Catholic practice

Finally, throughout the study, the principals provided strong claims that the relationship to the Catholic Church was integral to their conceptualisation of community in Catholic schools. This relationship was discussed at two levels. Firstly, religious practice as expressed in worship, ritual and prayer. The second level related to the connectedness between the school and its sponsoring parish. For Elise ritual and celebration played an important role in the building of community:

But probably what binds us more so than common beliefs at the moment is the idea that we have rituals. People don't necessarily understand them well I suppose, such as Anzac Day. But there's something about the ritual in how we do it, with our faith understanding of these things. In times of crisis, or the rituals created for significant public events such as Anzac Day, a deeper sense of common ground seems to emerge among parents and the school.

Frank placed emphasis on the religious life of the school by encouraging prayer at all staff meetings, and getting staff to reflect upon their spiritual development, so that they become more "inner directed persons". The principals also identified the importance of good relationships with the school's local parish church:

Here in this community, it's one, and we're lucky with the proximity to the Church and we've got a really active Parish Priest. So to me there's a oneness, and I think that's unique. (Bruce)

Moreover, there was a unanimous belief that the Catholic primary school as community should contribute to the mission of the Catholic Church by providing spiritual support to members of the school community:

People are not going to the Church they're coming to us for their conversations...people have found solace here or some sense of purpose that they can't find in a Church. (Charles)

However, there are challenges associated with embedding the Catholic school community in religious practice. For Denise "Church doesn't have relevance for a lot of the people now because they're so caught up in making a living, having some relaxation and family involvement".

Thus the principals identified a number of themes in respect to the characteristics of the Catholic school as community. Reflecting on this response there was a sense that this conceptualisation was the 'ideal' rather than the 'reality'. For these principals it seemed that the challenge of community leadership was to close the gap between the 'ideal' and the 'reality' of the Catholic primary school as community. This challenge was further explored as the principals responded to the second research question.

Research question 2: How do principals describe their leadership role in building the Catholic primary school as community?

Responding to questions about the community leadership role of the principal, the principals were optimistic that they could build the Catholic school as community:

I'm still positive with it because I still think there are lots of ways we can touch it [community] and we chip away at it, and that the little miracles that we see are evidence of that. You've just got to hold onto that. (Bruce)

In response to the initial questionnaire, the principals provided a range of practical ideas for community leadership. In particular, the principals identified 36 different strategies in support of community leadership. These strategies included facilitating "communication", developing "strong people focus and relationships", "open to family life", "linking parish/school together" and "supporting the needy". However, by the end of stage 2 of the study, there was consensus within this group of principals that conversation, communication and dialogue were the most important tools for community leadership. For Albert communication and conversation were essential to ensuring community prospered in a Catholic school:

I think one of the key principles in ensuring community prospers is the area of communication...We are interacting with people and developing directions and such, that involves people and, to me, that's what community is about, and I think that conversation is the essence of community. (Albert)

Elaborating on this claim, Albert, Denise and Bruce identified "reflective listening", "flexibility", "searching together for new ideas", "providing information" and "[appointing] class parents to support social networking" as important leadership strategies related to communication. For these principals, being intentional and

making time is a prerequisite for these community leadership strategies associated with conversation, communication and dialogue:

We actually become the community through providing time to digest and work that whole relationship...I provide a lot of opportunities to meet the people to develop that personal rapport, a sense of trust between the leader, the principal, and the rest of the community. (Albert)

However, being intentional and making time for community leadership was a challenge:

There are certain periods of time within the school community that are more frantic and more hectic than other times, and the community needs to balance how they deal with those things and what they operate and put things together. Unless we gather, there is no community. (Frank)

While some principals felt that communication “processes, strategies and procedures have been developed over a number of years and they seem to work well” (Denise), others thought they needed to improve their communication skills and make a commitment to “on-going dialogue” (Hayley).

Discussion

As noted previously, this study involved three levels of interpretation with the results of the first and second order interpretation displayed as research findings. In engaging with a third-order interpretation, the research reflected on the research study in the light of theoretical developments in respect to community and leadership as well as the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism.

In response to research question one, the principals in this study characterised the ‘ideal’ Catholic school community in terms of unity and common ground, care and compassion, parental participation, and being embedded in the parish and Catholic practice. Collectively these characteristics suggest that these principals conceptualise the ‘ideal’ Catholic school community as a *gemeinschaft* community, a real social relationship of obligation or mutual dependence. In other words, they accept “*Gemeinschaft* of mind which refers to the bonding together of people that results from their mutual binding to a common goal, shared values, and shared conception of being” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p.6).

However, the research data also points to the challenge facing principals as they seek to build a school community according to this ‘ideal’. Consequently, instead of a *gemeinschaft* community, there is evidence of an emerging *gesellschaft* model of community, a pseudo-community or an artificial collective of human beings found in industrial society. It was Charles who first raised the question as to whether “real” or “superficial” communities existed in Catholic schools:

Things like School Forums are great. They’re good and they get people in, but are they just superficial community or are they deep spiritual communities, I don’t know.

Developing this thought, Elise shared her belief that pseudo/pretend community existed in her school and her desire to ‘build a real community’ instead:

Funnily in my time here I have never had anybody disagree about something Catholic...I think in some cases, even with students, they have learned that if they don't agree with something it's really much easier to pretend they do...I think we are bordering on a pretend community...which borders on something almost like apathy...people used to think they wanted Catholic schools for religion, now discipline and we have helped them accept the pastoral side and trying to drift them back to religion. We need to build real community.

Given this emerging pseudo community, the principals reported on the challenge of maintaining an 'ideal' *gemeinschaft* community in contemporary society. Consequently, for these principals, the commitment to building the *gemeinschaft* community came at a cost: "Enormous burden on the principal" (Bruce); "Bloody hard again! The constant demand" (Charles); and "It's tiring building community...you've got to have a lot of energy" (Elise).

Given this cost it was interesting that in the latter stages of the study, two of the principals suggested what could be termed a personalist model of community. For example, Frank discussing the 'ideal' community for the future noted:

Certainly you need a loving, safe place, which is what you've said, a place where people can feel like they can come and present themselves and all the diversity in their lives. (Frank)

Yet again, for Hayley:

When I walk out into the playground and see kids really showing great interaction, I feel hope and optimism, and I also feel when I'm confronted with a parent who's going to challenge me that if I give enough time for the voice to be heard and spend a little bit more time really depthing [sic] the question and the issue, then we'll come to a commonality and it's usually their love for their child and it can build a relationship.

Such comments reflect the personalist model of community, in the sense that they support the centrality of the person, subjectivity, diversity, participation as well as solidarity. At the same time, it should be noted that the findings of this study do not suggest a strong commitment to personalism as the majority of the principals in this study seem caught up in the challenge of maintaining the 'ideal' of the *gemeinschaft* community in a *gesellschaft* 'reality'. For these principals the Catholic primary school as community remains a contested concept.

Consistent with this interpretation, the comments of these principals also suggest an ambivalent approach to leadership that 'swings' between traditional, 'heroic' forms of industrial leadership and more contemporary person-centred, collaborative approaches. This ambivalence is reflected in comments by Albert. In his initial interview, Albert described his leadership role in respect to a traditional industrial approach as:

At the end of the day you need to have a leader, a person designated to ensure that the focus of the Catholic school is at the forefront of all action, and I think that's the role of the principal. As long as you're very clear and very vocal about what we're on about, people respond. (Albert)

Later, he was to advocate a more personalist understanding:

By being an equal part in the community. By inviting people to be involved, by listening, by being available, by making people feel a sense of worth in the everyday functions of the school and by empowering all members of the school community. (Albert)

Thus 'reading' the research findings through the theoretical lens of community and leadership enables a deeper appreciation of the problematic issue of school community leadership found in the Catholic primary schools in this rural diocese.

In addition, taking a symbolic interactionist perspective suggests a way forward in respect to the problematic situation. Symbolic interactionism explains the contested nature of the Catholic school as community in terms of the absence of shared meaning and agreed symbols in respect to the school as community. Symbolic interactionism also alerts us to the challenge of achieving joint action without a commitment to symbolic communication. From this theoretical stance, the principals in this research study were right to identify the importance of "communication, conversation and dialogue" as appropriate leadership interventions in support of school community development. By facilitating symbolic communication these principals should contribute to cultural development and the developed of shared perspectives in respect to the Catholic primary school as community. In addition, symbolic interactionism offers a new understanding of the leadership role of the principal as a set of behavioural expectations open to negotiation through a role-making process involving the self, society and interaction. Within this research study, the data provide evidence of "role conflict" and "role strain" with the principals and suggests that the principals are open to a deliberate role-making process. This deeper interpretation of the research findings suggests three recommendations for strategic action within the diocese:

1. Development of policy at Diocesan and school levels in respect to the Catholic school as community. An exercise in policy development offers a process of interaction leading to the development of shared perspectives and shared symbolic language in respect to the school as community. This symbolic language should in turn enable symbolic communication and joint action in support of community development.
2. A role-making process to clarify the role of the principal as school community leader. The objective of this role-making process would be to reduce role conflict for individual principals and role strain across Catholic education within the Diocese of Lismore. Such role-making processes should respect the interrelationship of the self, society and interaction by providing opportunities for the principals and significant others to come to a shared understanding through interaction. This interaction would involve moments of self-reflection and social interaction with "significant others"

as well as provide an opportunity to internalise the society's rules and perspectives or the "generalised other" (Charon, 2004, p.76).

3. Professional development in respect to contemporary models of community and leadership. This recommendation recognises that policy development and role-making processes should be informed by recent theoretical developments in respect to community and leadership. This professional development will provide principals and others with concepts and categories to organise "commonsense" (Fullan, 1991, p. xii).

Conclusion

This article has provided an account of a study that focused on principals' perspectives on their leadership role in Catholic primary school community development within one rural diocese in Australia. In the first instance, the findings of this research study confirm the contested nature of the school as community and the elusive nature of leadership in contemporary society. In particular, this study found that while there was a strong commitment to the 'ideal' of the *gemeinschaft* community, principals actually lead within a *gesellschaft* reality. While a few principals voiced tentative thoughts in respect to a personalist model of the Catholic school as community, there did not seem to be a strong commitment to this version. At the same time, the findings of this study suggested an ambivalent leadership style as the principals 'swung' between traditional 'heroic' industrial leadership and contemporary collaborative forms. Reading these research findings through the lens of symbolic interactionism, this study recommends the ongoing commitment to the development of policy in respect to the Catholic primary school as community, a role-making process to clarify the role of the principal as community leader as well as a stronger commitment to professional development in respect to contemporary models of community and leadership.

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