The social dimensions of teacher collegiality

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Abstract

As aspect of teachers’ work lives rarely given consideration within the larger scheme of educational research is that of social interaction with colleagues. While research focuses strongly on linking teacher collaboration to student learning outcomes, what is often neglected are the social benefits of teacher collegiality for teachers themselves. This presentation provides empirical data drawn from a completed PhD case study on teachers’ social interaction in a primary school and reveals teachers’ perceptions of the importance of such interaction. It provides an argument for incorporating a social dimension into existing concepts of teacher collegiality and posits that social interaction among colleagues may have two-fold benefits. First, it is suggested that social interaction may promote better working relationships, which in the longer term may improve the quality of teaching and learning. Second, positive social interaction may improve the emotional health of the staff community, thus reducing emotional stress and burnout. What may appear on the surface to be an immaterial part of a teacher’s workplace experience in terms of educational outcomes should now be acknowledged as promoting significant individual and organisational benefits.

Introduction

Ask teachers what they like about their jobs and invariably their responses revolve around their satisfaction, or lack of satisfaction, with human relationships; relationships with their students and/or with their colleagues. Interpersonal relationships in the workplace are extremely important to teachers, as they are for many other employees, but rarely do we read studies of the social dimensions of work in an educational setting. This article seeks to address this issue through an investigation of workplace relationships in an urban primary school, and the meanings that teachers attach to these relationships.

Teaching is no longer the isolated profession it was once seen to be. With school-based management already an accepted reality in schools today, teachers’ work has expanded to include a significant component of non-teaching tasks related to curriculum and policy development (see Jarzabkowski, 2000; Cranston, 2000). These kinds of tasks, by and large, are collaborative, to the extent that the individualism that once characterised primary teachers’ work in Lortie’s (1975) time is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. However, it is interesting to note that even over twenty-five years ago Lortie warned "against a too casual view of the significance of peer relationships" (p. 192). If peer relationships were important in 1975, they can only be more so now that collaborative work is an accepted component of the position of a teacher.

This article reports on research into the social dimensions of the school as a workplace for adults. The topic is approached from a cultural perspective and explores the notion of collegiality as a form of teacher culture. The first section outlines some of the theory of collaborative cultures, noting by and large the absence of a social dimension. However, attention is drawn in the second section to the fact that social and emotional support are important aspects in the lived experience of teachers in schools, as some researchers readily acknowledge. The research underpinning this article is also briefly explained. Data to describe the social dimensions of life for teachers in one primary school are then outlined, and this is followed up with an account of the teachers’ perspectives on why social interaction is important to them. Such views are then analysed to provide a strong argument for the need to incorporate social dimensions into existing concepts of collegiality in schools.
Social relationships and collegial culture

Without entering into the debate of defining and describing culture, a debate with a long and involved history, the research upon which this article is founded is based on the understanding that teachers, in collaboration with their colleagues, negotiate and contest workplace culture throughout their working lives in the school. As Cooper (1988, p. 46) suggests, "[c]ultures are not made; they are born and grow", a statement which argues against the notion that culture can be artificially manufactured. In the same way, school leaders do not have the sole ability or responsibility to affect changes in organisational culture. Angus (1995, p. 73) maintains that "leaders have no monopoly on the development of organisational meaning", rather, everyone, "whether they like it or not", is a part of the process of developing meaning within the workplace. Collegial practices in schools are therefore activities in which culture is being developed. Culture evolves in a particular way when teachers spend time working together.

Hargreaves (1994) suggests that school culture can be viewed from two aspects, content and form. He posits that the content of teacher culture can be seen in what teachers say, do and think, being based on shared values, beliefs and assumptions of the teaching group. This sits well with the more traditional definitions of culture. It is Hargreaves' form of culture that is more important to this research.

The form of teacher cultures consists of the characteristic patterns of relationships and forms of association between members of those cultures. The form of teacher cultures is to be found in how relations between teachers and their colleagues are articulated (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 166 [emphasis in original]).

It is important to note that teacher cultures may not necessarily be stable. The form of the culture, the relationships among teachers, may change over time. Hargreaves posits that changes in the content of culture may be contingent on prior or parallel changes in the form of culture. That is to say, changes in staff relationships affect the beliefs, values and attitudes of the teachers in a school. This suggests that the form of culture is a very powerful and significant element in the life and work of teachers in schools.

Unfortunately, traditional notions of collegial school culture do not pay much heed to the social relationships that develop in schools. While several authors acknowledge the advantage of positive personal relationship, they do not believe that such relationships contribute significantly to the core work of teachers, that is, teaching and learning. For example, Ihara (1988) acknowledges that affection among colleagues would promote cooperation and support, but he maintains that it is not a necessary component of collegiality. Sergiovanni (1990) makes a similar point, stating that congeniality and collegiality are very different.

When congeniality is combined with collegiality, work-enhancing values and norms are actually reinforced; but this ideal combination in not necessary for excellence (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 118).

Nias (1998), on the other hand, appreciates that the social and emotional dimensions of collaborative cultures are important. Her research provides strong grounds for justifying an expanded view of teacher collegiality, much as my research does, in arguing that

the welfare of the children [is] intimately bound up with the well-being of the adults who worked with them. If the latter did not feel accepted as people in the staffroom, they would not be fully at ease in the classroom. Besides, it [is]
philosophically inconsistent to treat children as 'whole' and 'individual' but to ignore the personhood of their teachers (Nias, 1998, p. 1262).

While it is not the intention of this article to make a close connection between the development of social relationships and positive student outcomes, it is expected to link such relationships to an emotionally healthy workplace, which may foster closer collaboration among teachers to the ultimate benefit of students. This article explains what social relationships mean to individual teachers and explores how they contribute to collegiality among teachers. As will be demonstrated, from a teacher's perspective, personal relationships are a lot more important in developing collaborative work practices than many researchers realise.

**Social and emotional support in schools**

Teachers can gain much satisfaction from collegiality. Most obviously they seek support from their colleagues. Current writings on teacher burnout make the point that this condition largely results from emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and a feeling of lack of personal accomplishment (for example see Byrne, 1999; Maslach, 1999). However, there is now strong backing for the notion that social support from colleagues can reduce teacher stress and burnout (for example see Maslach & Leiter, 1999; Nias, 1999; Schwarzer & Greenglass, 1999). Nias suggests that collegial relations appear to strengthen the moral perspectives and values of teachers and thus have the ability to reduce burnout. One reason for this is the development of a collegial culture characterised by mutual support and care in which individuals feel able to express their emotions, negative and positive, to admit to failure and weakness, to voice resentment and frustration, to demonstrate affection. By contrast, a culture of individualism tends to increase emotional stress for its members by fostering an illusion that others are coping and that one's own fears are born of a unique incompetence; by requiring individuals to pretend to feelings they do not own; by failing to promote the habit of day-to-day communication so that small interpersonal or professional differences build up into major problems (Nias, 1999, p. 235).

Fenlason and Beehr (1994) refer to two kinds of social support offered in the workplace: instrumental support and emotional support. The former is characterised by rendering tangible assistance such as physical aid, advice or knowledge to complete tasks. The latter is characterised by caring behaviour and sympathetic listening. These two kinds of support often appear to be linked in schools. Nias (1998) notes that teachers gain a lot from talking and listening to colleagues whom they respect for their skills in teaching. However, it is also important that these people be non-judgmental and easily accessible.

We found that teachers wanted their colleagues to be sensitive to their emotional needs, to respond with empathy, sympathy, and, occasionally, wise counselling. They were deeply appreciative of opportunities to talk, to share their sense of worthlessness and failure, to relax and above all to laugh (Nias, 1998, p. 1260).

Talking and listening are activities greatly valued by teachers and their colleagues as a means of sharing emotional experiences (Nias, 1998). Particularly in times of frustration or despair, teachers need someone to listen and understand. As well as in their low times, teachers also want the opportunity to share their excitement and successes. However, Nias (p. 1260) notes that teachers in English primary schools find it even more difficult to share their successes than their failures, "encountering in their schools an expectation that neither
joy nor anguish would be publicly shared". This may, of course, be more particular to English society than Australian.

Nias, Southworth and Yeomans (1989) noted that in schools displaying cultures of collaboration, teachers spent a great deal of time talking to one another. Their talk revolved around both themselves and their teaching. Nias et al see this talk as a medium through which shared meaning could be established and then continue to be reinforced. They see three benefits from this kind of teacher talk. First, it is a process that reveals individuals' attitudes, values and beliefs. Teachers thus get to know one another much better, both personally and professionally. Second, this kind of talk is also based on trust and can therefore lead to mutual openness. The sharing of lives involves the sharing of emotions and people come to understand others more deeply and develop reciprocal, trusting relationships. Third, the development of a shared language enables exchanges to convey complex ideas. A cultural language develops amongst group members.


It is interesting to note that humor appears to play a role in creating links between the lounge [staffroom] and school events. … The lightness and sometimes lack of seriousness in the lounge seems to give [the] teacher the strength to continue with her classroom teaching.

Jansen’s (1994) study of humour in educational leadership reveals that principals also see humour as offering a counterbalance to the seriousness of education. She described humour as a "buoy" which lifts the spirits of school leaders. However, humour does even more than this. Jansen (p. 16) notes that "at the crucial social level, humour was seen as a marvellous adhesive, a bonding agent which strengthened relationships and held teams firmly together". Principals in her study suggested that a self-deprecating sense of humour was also essential, such that one could laugh at oneself, and also allow this privilege to others.

Humour and laughter are components of play. Consistent with the emotional/rational dichotomy, work and play are usually seen as opposites (Dandridge, 1988; Fine, 1988). The Protestant work ethic of western society stereotypes work as serious, structured activity designed to achieve instrumental goals, and play as fun, lighthearted activity for personal enjoyment. Play is seen as "affective" — related to emotions, but work is seen as "effective" — related to production and outcomes (Dandridge). In reality many work activities are intertwined with elements of play and humour. Nias, Southworth and Campbell (1992) also comment on how humour often accompanies teachers' collaborative activities. Dandridge (1988) sees that activities such as ceremonies, customs and rituals can bring work and play together into one experience. The ritual patterns of celebrations within an organisation are important in this regard.

"The world of work is also a world of play and expressive behavior" (Fine, 1988, p. 119). Fine sees the integration of work and play as expressing the same value system and assisting workers to adjust to the work environment. He sees work and play as mutually reinforcing. Play at work "contributes to increased satisfaction and productivity by changing the definition of the work environment from an institution of coercive control to an arena in which the workers have some measure of control over the conditions of their employment"
(Fine, p. 120). Woods (1984, p. 190) maintains that "it is through laughter that teachers neutralize the alienating effects of institutionalization; that they synchronize the public and the private spheres". Through laughter the private and the public self of the teacher can be reintegrated.

Provided that joking does not subjugate or belittle colleagues, a variety of benefits can be obtained from its incorporation into the workplace. First, a sense of community and social identity is created.

Mutual production of an intrinsically enjoyable activity fosters a shared memory of a rewarding experience, creates and affirms a sense of "groupness," and facilitates a richer appreciation of one’s peers as whole persons rather than as stereotypical role occupants (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995, p. 115 [emphasis in original]).

Colleagues are seen as real people in the sharing of ‘play’ activities. In viewing colleagues from this perspective, added benefits such as improved cooperation, communication and emotional commitment are derived (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Fine, 1988). Fine’s workers found their work environment to be pleasant primarily because of the interpersonal relationships they formed and the freedom of expressive behaviour that that permitted them. Task effectiveness is also seen as an unexpected advantage of the integration of work and play. This is thought to stem from improved motivation and personal engagement, an increase in creativity and a reduction in tension (Ashforth & Humphrey). This may be significant in considering the collaborative activities in which teachers partake on a regular basis. Elements of humour and play that arise naturally out of collaborative tasks may result in added creativity and better generation of ideas from the group, as well as contributing to the emotional health of the staff group. Nias et al (1992, p. 210) note

When tension was high or tempers had been raised, shared laughter frequently seemed to reduce the emotional temperature and to reaffirm symbolically the staff’s readiness and ability to think and work together. Further, in the positive affective climate which resulted, individuals revealed their strengths and weaknesses to one another and, as they gained in interpersonal knowledge, were able appropriately to offer help or show appreciation to their colleagues.

It is the staffroom where such social and emotional activities usually take place. Therefore to conduct research that investigates the social dimensions of collegiality requires a researcher to get "up close and personal" with the staff group. The next section outlines how the research for this article was undertaken.

The research

A study focusing on teacher culture and social relationships called for an in-depth, long-term association with members of the organisation. Therefore, an ethnographic approach was chosen. A single case was chosen for the purpose of intensive study. Through participant observation, data were gathered in the form of fieldnotes, taken largely from observed interaction in the staffroom before and after school and in recess and lunch breaks. I also attended a variety of professional and social events with the staff, both in and outside school hours. Over 80% of the professional staff also agreed to formal interviews, material which when cleared by participants, provided further data for triangulation. In total I spent over one quarter of the school year on site, these days being spaced throughout the period of one academic year. During this time I tutored individual students, did relief teaching, covered library books, staffed the front office and took on other sundry tasks. It could be said without
too much hesitation that I came to know the participants and the context of the setting quite well during this time.

St Cecilia’s School, a primary school in the suburban region of a large Australia city, operated under the auspices of the Catholic Education Office. Enrolment at the school during the period of the research was fairly stable at around 370 pupils. St Cecilia’s drew its enrolments from the surrounding middle to lower-middle class suburbs. Approximately 12% of students were identifiably of non-Australian background, representing a variety of nationalities. Less than 2% acknowledged Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage.

The school had a full time, non-teaching, female principal and a male assistant principal with 60% release time, mainly devoted to coordinating religious education. Fourteen other full time teachers and six part-time teachers were employed, bringing the total professional staff composition to the equivalent of 19.6 full time persons. Female staff members outnumbered their male counterparts at a ratio of just over four to one. Staff ranged in age from 23 to 58 with the average age being 44 years. Staff turnover was fairly low, with a few very long serving staff members, although the average length of service at this school was six years. These statistics are possibly quite relevant to the development of the collegial culture at St Cecilia’s and the desire of most members to build and maintain community among staff.

The social dimensions of collegiality at St Cecilia’s School

Little has been written about the social aspect of the school as a workplace for adults. This section contributes to an understanding of the value of social interaction for community building in schools. The staff at St Cecilia’s School was observed to have several social rituals such as the celebration of members’ birthdays, Friday afternoon drinks, social outings and special lunches and dinners. A social committee was responsible for the organisation of such activities. The fieldnote below, taken from an observation of a staff meeting held early in the year, records the committee’s annual formation.

A very humorous discussion was held about the celebration of birthdays, traditionally a responsibility of the social committee. Other matters that related to staff social activities were also discussed. An agreement was made about contributions to the social fund. "Who’s volunteering to be on the social committee?" asked the principal. Quite a number offered their services. "All the alcoholics," quipped someone, which resulted in much laughter.  
(Fieldnotes, 25th January)

Although there were officially recognised social activities for staff, the most common form of socialising was that which occurred during the school day in between teaching periods. The first informal gathering of the day commenced in the early mornings. The staffroom door was usually opened around 8:00 am, and any time after that, teachers would drift over to the staffroom. Except for tuckshop day, which was Monday, teachers brought their own lunch to school, and therefore would go to the staffroom to deposit it in the refrigerator. Some teachers would then stay on to have a cup of tea or coffee, and during this time would chat to their colleagues.

Recess and lunch times were also important occasions for social interaction. The teachers, the principal and the assistant principal always came to the staffroom during the two official breaks unless they were on duty or had pressing matters to which they needed to attend. This was not the kind of staff where teachers stayed in their rooms, eating their lunches in private while doing preparation or marking.
During the break times, topics of conversation were wide ranging. Current affairs were popular, but talk also extended to both the professional and the personal arenas. Talk also centred on students and their families. Teachers’ own families were often topics of discussion too. The two excerpts from fieldnotes, taken a day apart, show the variety of topics covered during break times.

A wide range of non-education related topics continued around the tables. These included diets, recipes, movies, cable TV, teachers’ families and children, contraceptives, scuba diving and tales of claustrophobia. Various TV programs were discussed. There were numerous occasions where laughter rang out. (Fieldnotes, 10th February)

Teachers again sat around the three tables. Groups do not appear to be identical at each sitting. Topics during this break included the school's Behaviour Management Policy, as well as the behaviour of individual students. Several teachers discussed the issue of parent-teacher meetings, the pros and cons of their usefulness and the alternatives available. (Fieldnotes, 11th February)

One of the most common social events in many organisations is the celebration of members’ birthdays. At St Cecilia’s birthdays were celebrated on the day they occurred, or as close as possible to the event if it fell on a weekend or holiday. One staff member from the social committee took responsibility for writing down in chronological order the birth date of each teacher and ancillary staff member. People were then asked to nominate a couple of these dates throughout the year upon which they would contribute some food for a shared morning tea. Below is an observation of a typical birthday celebration.

At the beginning of the break I observed that a variety of food had been laid on the tables. It was a celebration of a male teacher’s birthday. Among other things there was a carrot cake with icing. One of the female teachers proceeded to put six candles on it and light them. She then led the singing of "Happy Birthday" which was followed by "three cheers". Someone asked the birthday person how old he was. To his response the assistant principal called out that he was relieved to find that the teacher was older than he was. The teacher replied, "I may be older but I look younger." The assistant principal responded that that was debatable. Much laughter resulted. (Fieldnotes, 16th September)

A very popular social activity for many organisations, particularly schools, is "Friday afternoon drinks". To celebrate the end of the working week, teachers at St Cecilia’s School gathered in the staffroom anywhere from about 3:30 pm onwards for drinks and snacks. There was a standing invitation to all staff to join but members of the ancillary staff did not usually participate. Numbers of attendees varied each week depending on commitments, but seemed to average around eleven or twelve. There appeared to be a core group who regularly participated in this social activity. Both the principal and the assistant principal usually attended, suggesting that they both saw joining in such social activities as important, although the principal was not always able to stay for long periods. The staff saw Friday afternoon drinks as a ritual, as the following teacher commented.

Friday drinks is a classic example. … Now it’s like a ritual, and it’s great because some people might just stay for five minutes. Some stay for an hour and a half. Sometimes they throw us out at half past five. But it’s a real relaxation and people just unwind. And everybody at some stage has come
for a drink, everyone on the staff. So it's a relaxation and a real wind down at the end of the week. People really look forward to it. (Fran)

Most formal social activities in which the staff of St Cecilia's School participated involved food and eating, as noted by Valentine and McIntosh (1991) in their research in female-dominated workplaces. One such event was the sharing of lunch on pupil-free days. The custom at St Cecilia's School was that on these days once a term the staff would join together for lunch. This was sometimes held at school with a barbeque or it might be celebrated off the premises at a restaurant. The principal encouraged teachers to make the choice about the organisation of lunch. During the year I observed and participated in two such lunches at school and one at a local restaurant on pupil-free days.

Another important ritual at St Cecilia's was the end-of-year lunch, which was held on the last day of school after students were dismissed around midday. All teachers and ancillary staff attend this lunch, which is always held at a local restaurant. The principal suggested that this was one of the most important functions of the year for staff.

The one [function] that we have here that is the best of all is our end-of-year luncheon, where we are all together, just the staff without our partners, and we have this lovely luncheon that draws together the events of the year. (Principal)

My observation of this event concurs with the principal's statement. The end-of-year lunch was a laughter filled occasion.

After the presentation of the Kris Kringle gifts, the assistant principal gets up to present 'awards' which he has written on official school award certificates. I understand that this is a tradition of his predecessor that he is now continuing. Each member of staff is given an award appropriate to something special either in the work or private capacity of his/her life. Each award is given under the guise of some interesting character as head of a fictitious organisation. Most of these are quite humorous. Lots of laughter is generated as a particular aspect of each person's life is highlighted. I am also presented with an award, a one-year subscription to "Interviewers Anonymous" from Sigmund Freud! (Fieldnotes, 10th December)

Staff also gathered for dinners on other occasions. One such dinner was held to mark the end of an externally provided professional development course, in which many staff had participated over a series of weeks after school. Social activities such as this, held after school hours and off school premises, are less likely to attract a large complement of the staff, owing to family commitments. Other social outings were also organised during the year the research was conducted. Of particular interest was a race day organised by the social committee for one Saturday afternoon. This family day was well attended by staff. It is on occasions like this that people also get the opportunity to meet the partners of their colleagues. There were also celebrations for one-off special occasions. One such event in which I participated was the retirement dinner for a long serving staff member. This was held at the school at the teacher's request and was a particularly collegial activity, generating some intense emotions for the teacher herself, and many others.

Most of the staff also participated in a football tab, a minor form of gambling where each participant must try to select the winners of weekend football games. One of the male teachers organised this annual event during the football season. The "footy tab" generated a lot of interest and discussion during the season, staff debating the likelihood of winners on
Fridays and checking each Monday to see how competitors had fared and who had won the weekly cash prize.

There is friendly rivalry this week as the footy tab is reviewed. Some surprising match results over the weekend have left many experienced tipsters with low scores. One of the male teachers is delighted to hear that a colleague has scored only three points. "You beauty!" he responds, since she had been a leader on the scoreboard. (Fieldnotes, 19th April)

Many of the teachers admitted to having no knowledge of the game or the form of the teams and just participated for social reasons. The zero score of one of the female teachers generated a lot of laughter one week. It was also a standing joke that one of the other female teachers used patterning on the score sheet to select her weekly winners. When this particular teacher on several occasions won the weekly prize, no one was more surprised than she was.

As is evident from the discussion above, the St Cecilia’s School workplace had an active social dimension to it. Teachers organised and participated in a variety of events with their colleagues. Although not all staff members joined in all activities, there was a strong core group of very social beings who seemed really to enjoy the company of their workmates and encouraged participation in social events. The principal and assistant principal were also regular attendees at almost all social functions, although they did not take responsibility for organising the events. A social committee made up of teachers took on this responsibility.

Why people chose to participate in an obviously voluntary part of workplace life is discussed below.

**Teachers' beliefs about the importance of social interaction**

It is evident that many staff at St Cecilia’s enjoyed one another’s company. Social activities were a way of connecting with the personal side of their colleagues, not just the professional, as suggested by Ashforth and Humphrey (1995). That point was made clearly in the statement below.

And they [the staff] are fun. That’s the aspect of drinks, and whenever we go out, if we go to the races or if we do something, they’re fun and it’s good to have a social day with them. And I think that’s important that there’s that side of them as well as the professional side. (Pat)

Most staff spoke very positively about the social aspect of the school. Perhaps one of the most interesting comments about socialising with colleagues was the idea that it promoted better working relationships. A couple of teachers specifically made this point, while others merely indicated it in their statements of support for the social activities of the community.

I suppose what I see is a very positive attitude for people to get on with each other socially as well as in a work situation. I think that that is because they get together socially. That encourages the friendship which then make the working relationships fit in. (Beth)

There was a feeling that an atmosphere of friendship could contribute to a workplace where staff felt comfortable, and that would have a positive influence on work in general.

Together hopefully we can create some sort of atmosphere where not only do teachers feel happy and secure, but also an atmosphere where learning can take place and a bit of socialising can happen as well. So that we're not
always talking school, but we can talk as friends as well. And I think that if you’re coming to a place of work where not only do you feel comfortable working, but you feel comfortable with the people you work with, you can only look for positive things. And I mean, that’s only going to be better for the school over all. (Assistant Principal)

Many teachers explained that through participation in social activities they came to know their colleagues more personally, and they believed this to be a good thing. They felt that social activities gave them the opportunity to relate better to other staff members as people, not just as teachers. This strongly supports the research of Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) who maintain that such activities both foster ‘groupness’ and reduces stereotyping colleagues as role occupants.

I think it lets staff members actually relate to other staff members on a much more personal level, not just talking about kids in classrooms and resources and all of that sort of thing. They actually get to let go of that a bit and talk about their lives and what’s happening, and what they enjoy doing. And I think that’s really important between the staff, so that there is some other basis for their interactions, not just that they all happen to be teachers, that they’ve made some other little connections. (Mandy)

You need to see the person as more than just a teacher. And I think that if you’re on a personal level with that person you feel more comfortable with them and therefore you can talk more about general things as well as work things. I think it also makes a more positive environment because they’re your friends, not just your colleagues. I think it’s really important. (Pat)

One staff member made the point that it was not so much the social outings that were important but that every opportunity to come together socially was valuable. She strongly favoured the social opportunities that were afforded by staff joining together at break times, particularly the ability to express emotions and laugh together.

I just think that there are personalities on the staff now who enable people to laugh. And I think that’s more important than having drinks. … I think it’s the amount of time we can spend in the staffroom having a whinge or having a giggle, that sort of thing. And it’s the people who have the ability to come in and drop a clanger or do something that will make everybody laugh. That’s what’s really important. (Georgie)

A positive outlook or a happy disposition could be emotionally contagious, according to some teachers.

Well, generally people [here] are fairly happy. I suppose you don’t see that much frustration or anxiety from people generally. I think people generally show a very positive emotion, or outlook. … I think they’re just happy themselves, or positive themselves and that happens to [rub off], like if you hang around with somebody who is happy and positive you tend to feel the same way even though you may first walk into a room feeling a bit down. (Chris)

Like a note that a child brings over, and on that note, it might be a request for something, but on the bottom it says, "Have a great day," and a smiley face. Just something as small as that reminds you to cheer up or all is not lost. (Linda)
They [some staff members] do make people laugh. When things are getting bogged down they have the knack of throwing something in to make everybody relax and that sort of thing. (Georgie)

Staff at St Cecilia's really appreciated the social dimensions of their work lives. One teacher made the observation that those who joined social activities regularly were also the more collaborative members of staff. This perhaps reflects the personalities of these teachers. Those who enjoyed socialising together also enjoyed working together, and *vice versa*. By and large my observations would support this notion.

Regardless, it is fairly obvious that these teachers themselves saw value in fostering social relationships for various reasons. The section below discusses the need to incorporate social dimensions more overtly into the concept of collegial cultures.

**Rethinking teacher collegiality from a social perspective**

From the data above it is easy to see that social activities add another important dimension to staff relationships in schools. For St Cecilia's staff, they afforded several unique benefits. First, it allowed them to get to know one another on a more personal basis, and this then gave them a better understanding of each other. Most teachers saw this as very important, which suggests that the building of personal relationships at work was something desirable and beneficial. Leading on from this is the belief that in knowing one another better, there is more chance that stronger collaborative relationships can be developed. This supports comments by Fine (1988) and Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) that social sharing can lead to improved cooperation, communication and emotional commitment. It is also obvious that participating in social activities like staffroom banter and Friday afternoon drinks can reduce tension.

This has implications for improving emotional health in schools. When teachers are able to share their concerns about teaching with their colleagues in an open and non-threatening environment, emotional stress may be reduced. When colleagues make an effort to create a positive and supportive workplace, the emotional pressures associated with teaching may decrease. Social interaction among staff increases the likelihood that emotional support will be available when needed by individuals. In this way, individual staff members may benefit directly, but the organisation also receives the benefit of an emotionally healthy staff.

What could clearly be seen from the data was that many teachers at St Cecilia's School valued highly the social aspects of their relationships with other staff members. They felt that it was important to know them on a level deeper than ‘teachers’, to know them as ‘individuals’. In this way they could be more understanding of one another, and could provide the personal and professional supports necessary for good working relationships to be maintained. Working relationships were perceived to improve through the development of social and emotional relationships. This research supports the work of Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) in suggesting that such social experiences create shared memory for a group, develop a sense of community and build relationships based on appreciation of peers as individuals rather than stereotyped role occupants.

For teachers in schools, collegiality is more than the work they do together. It extends beyond the strict boundaries of work and into the social realm. Teachers value their social interactions because it is through the social that supportive relationships are developed, that community is created. The sense of community is important if a culture of collaboration is to be successful. While Ihara (1988), Hargreaves (1994) and Sergiovanni (1990) may disregard the influence of congeniality, this research challenges the assumption that it is irrelevant to the pursuit of a collegial culture. In support of Campbell and Southworth (1992),
this research brings to prominence the importance of personal relationships in fostering collaborative practices in schools.

It is posited that, at least from the perspective of the teachers in this study, successful and comfortable personal relationships are in fact necessary for genuine collaboration to take place. Hargreaves (1994, p. 192) maintains that collaborative cultures "emerge primarily from the teachers themselves as a social group". This suggests that such a culture arises out of the social group. Collaboration must necessarily be seen as both enjoyable and rewarding for teachers, otherwise the practice would not continue. Therefore, the state of staff relationships becomes very important as a foundation for genuine collaboration in primary schools.

Of course, school-wide collegiality is not something that can develop overnight. It requires that school leaders and a body of teachers support it. While a principal can mandate that certain activities be conducted collaboratively, for collegiality in its fullest understanding to develop requires that a core group of teachers builds a community to support it. Principals have little control over social practices of their staff. It is the teachers who value community who will cultivate social relationships with their colleagues, with the ultimate benefit being that collaborative practices may become more successful. Collaboration in primary schools is intimately linked with personal and social relationships and cannot in practice be readily separated.

Conclusion

Teachers' work in the 21st century has incorporated new dimensions of collaborative activities, brought about largely by the introduction of school-based management practices. Teachers increasingly find themselves being required to work in groups and on project teams and committees to further the educational goals of their schools. Concepts of collegiality and collaboration need to acknowledge new dimensions so as to keep up to date with the lived practices of school life for teachers, part of which involves their interest in the development of healthy social relationships with colleagues.

The research upon which this article is based identifies the significant contribution that social interaction plays in fostering collegial cultures in the primary school. It has been shown that when staff members have a variety of opportunities to come together in an informal manner and this occurs on a regular basis, community building can take place, the benefits of which can flow on to create a more productive working environment. Both individuals and the school community can benefit from the creation and maintenance of an emotionally healthy workplace.
References


