

Steering the boat or turning the Titanic: researching the role of the principal and middle level leaders in enabling collaborative professional learning in a rural context using a value creation framework.

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Few would doubt the importance of the principal in developing a culture of growth within a school community – ideally, a person of ‘ferocious warmth’ who has the passion and skill to lead a diverse group of professionals and achieve measurable goals. This presentation will examine the role of the principal and their professional development leaders within the context of a regional secondary school in Victoria, Australia. This school excelled in the ways in which it engaged its teaching staff in various Communities of Practice over a three year period. The research builds on the doctoral research of one of the presenters with the early career teachers in this school. Interviews with the two leaders was conducted in 2019 who were purposively selected for their involvement in the school over preceding years.

A qualitative research methodology was used involving semi-structured interviews, as part of a larger research project for the recently published book, *Sustaining Communities of Practice with Early Career Teachers* (Mercieca and McDonald, 2021). The interview questions were framed using the Value Creation Framework of Wenger-Trayner, Wenger-Trayner & De Laat (2011). The overarching elements of *strategic value* and *enabling value* were our focus as they related more closely to leadership. A constructivist, grounded theory approach was used to code the interviews.

Our findings revealed that the principal had an expansive vision and was able to move his staff to engage with each other, collaboratively support the professional learning of all teachers, but especially early career teachers. This is significant at time when early career teachers are at risk of leaving the profession if they are not adequately supported. The principal’s challenge was to work with his staff who, although appearing reluctant to change their practices, voiced that they were concerned about having too many staff meetings. Findings revealed that he was able to steer a path that would engage his staff and provide a fertile ground for developing leadership and self-efficacy in the early career teachers who were fortunate to begin their careers at this school. This form of enabling and strategic leadership will be explored in this presentation with specific ideas about how such leadership could be implemented in other schools.

The presentation will be of interest to principals and other leaders as well as those who form and develop them in educational institutions. Being based in a rural context, it has implications for regional and remote schools.