Factors contributing to small school sustainability and success
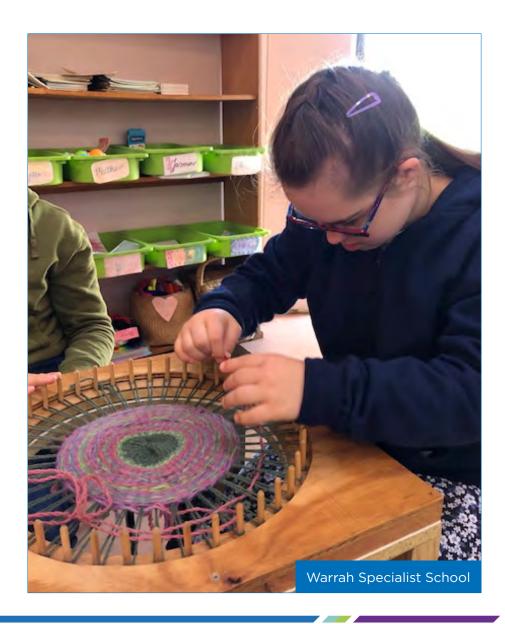
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to shed light on factors critical to the sustainability of small schools, including possible enabling strategies. These factors can impact a school's success and be either financial such as social entrepreneurship, or non-financial including school culture and the role of leadership (Mansor, 2020). This paper provides suggestions on how to increase the financial health of a small school either directly, or indirectly. The literature offers a range of ways this can be done such as leveraging external partnerships (Anderson & White, 2011; Preston & Barnes, 2017), enabling effective support for school leadership, and enhancing the culture characteristics that ensure collaboration and longevity of school improvement (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew, 2018).

It should be noted that there is a limited research base to draw from that explicitly examines factors that contribute to small schools' sustainability and success, and the circumstances that challenge the sustainability of schools. The key focus of existing research is on the differential learning and teaching outcomes in small (versus larger) schools, while a consideration of the factors that impact on the viability of a small school have centred on rural and remote settings (e.g., Anderson & White, 2011; Preston & Barnes, 2017). This latter focus often has a number of contextual features not relevant to small schools that are not located in rural or remote areas.

Warrah Specialist School

Financial health

Financial health is a critical factor determining a small schools' sustainability and success (Leaman, 2016). Strong financial health allows schools to allocate more money towards areas that enhance reputation, skill and expertise, including school academic resources, quality facilities, and professional learning and development opportunities for staff.

The factors that contribute to financial health, and in turn sustainability of independent schools, can be both financial and non-financial, and these often impact the other (Independent Schools Queensland, 2018). For example, many of the factors that attract more students (e.g., quality facilities, skilled staff), are also those that are positively impacted by greater financial resourcing.

Accurately capturing financial capacity, sustainability, risk and vulnerability involves exploration of the array of impacting financial and non-financial factors (e.g., culture, leadership, expertise), cause and effect factors (i.e., pandemic relocations), internal and external factors, including consideration of context and trends (e.g., increasing trends towards home-schooling). This balance is important as it is recognised that a heavy reliance solely on financial factors is believed to be ineffective in accurately identifying risk and vulnerability (Financial Health Assessment Framework, 2010; Leaman, 2016).

School culture, as a non-financial factor, provides conditions that can enable a school to be forward thinking and innovative (Independent Schools Queensland, 2018). These conditions may be critical for anticipating future challenges or opportunities for growth. A positive and supportive school culture can also attract and retain students and staff (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018) which in turn connects with other non-financial factors recognised as impacting financial success including leadership, resourcefulness, and staff expertise and experience (Nduka, 2020; Nir & Hameiri, 2013).

Redfern Jarjum College

Social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship involves being a facilitator of change to resolve a local social need, with discipline and innovation. Principals in small schools can become a type of 'social entrepreneur' by developing school–community partnerships and creating a form of social capital in the community (Anderson & White, 2011; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Approaching leadership of small schools through this lens can positively influence both financial and non-financial factors previously discussed as impacting sustainability.

A case study of a small rural school in Australia demonstrated the improvement of a small school's financial state by the explicit development and emergence of education-driven social entrepreneurship (Anderson & White, 2011). The school principal and teachers worked co-operatively to develop a clear whole school approach of care, connection, innovation, and social entrepreneurship within and across the school and its community as a way to increase the school's revenue (Anderson & White, 2011). The school was active in developing new relationships with other individuals and organisations (e.g., not for profit organisations), tapped into philanthropic resources, encouraged volunteering, secured funds to support key educational projects, and encouraged teachers to do the same. Improving the school's financial state also required the Principal to reconsider existing resources and to harness new opportunities for the school and the school community. The researchers defined resourcing to include "grants, in-kind and volunteer support, sponsorship, awards, prizes or donations, and, more broadly, relationship building within the school and externally" (Anderson & White, 2011).

Through social entrepreneurship, schools may build trust, loyalty and feelings of reciprocity within the community, and encourage coordinated action to solve problems (Allison, Gorringe & Lacey, 2006). Close ties between a school and the community can create financial opportunities by allowing access to school buildings for social or business activities (e.g., weddings, meetings), as well as opportunities for community volunteerism (Barley & Beesley, 2007). As an example, a small school in Malaysia was able to address non-financial factors impacting their sustainability through a social entrepreneurship approach. They found success attracting and retaining staff by focusing on developing school community partnerships and finding creative ways to use existing resources to turn into social capital (Mansor et al., 2020).

The 'How to Guide' for Schools Business Partnerships produced by The Council for Corporate and School Partnerships provides a helpful roadmap for implementing and sustaining partnerships between schools and businesses. It outlines suggested steps to developing business partnerships within the community such as, first assessing unmet needs and areas of opportunity, identifying potential contributions from partnerships, and creating community connections.

Drawn from the experiences of several community school initiatives, the following strategies have been suggested as key to forming and maintaining key relationships in external partnerships with schools (Blank, Jacobson, & Melaville, 2012):

- Ensure that all stakeholders share a common vision

- Ensure goals, expectations, and roles are clear from the outset

- Establish a formal agreement between those involved

- Encourage active involvement from the community

- Foster shared ownership by allowing those involved to have input

- Encourage an open and honest dialogue about potential obstacles and setbacks, and consider pro-active solutions to mitigate them

- Consider how to support accountability towards project progress

- Consider how program activities could be further supported by utilising, existing resources, leveraging community resources, and capitalising on the financial assets of community partners.

Leadership

Leadership focused on creating a vision for longevity and growth is critical for small school sustainability (Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew, 2018), and considered second only to classroom instruction as a positive factor influencing student learning outcomes (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Reardon, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Leaders in small schools are often seen as more integral to the day-to-day running of their schools, having greater indirect influence through organisational and leadership features, when compared to those from larger schools (Nettles & Herrington, 2007; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Southworth, 2004). They tend to have greater direct influence on teaching quality and the management of change and improvement within the classroom, through supervision and management of instruction of teachers (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2006; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Qualities and characteristics

The leadership style of a principal in a small school is considered vital to its success and sustainability (Nir & Hameiri, 2013). From a non-financial perspective, there are particular qualities of school leaders and leadership characteristics that are linked to successful schools, irrespective of size. Preston and Barnes (2017) conducted a literature review on 40 studies published between 2005 to 2015 to investigate the personal qualities commonly associated with successful leadership in rural schools. Regardless of the different characteristics amongst schools included in the study, qualities commonly associated with successful leadership included those that were "accommodating, supportive, community-focused, team-building focused, cooperative, visionary, and decisive" (Preston and Barnes, 2017). Fostering collaborative relationships with the entire school community was an important quality differentiating successful schools.

Collaborative leadership

Collaborative leadership is another non-financial factor considered beneficial to school sustainability and involves activities such as developing school goals and priorities using a co-operative process amongst school staff over a number of staff meetings. Amongst teachers, perceptions of leadership that focused on teamwork, was linked to greater trust, job performance, motivation, commitment, and morale (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Clarke and Wildly (2011) in their literature review observed that having a shared sense of purpose and demonstrating a strong belief in the capacity of school staff to achieve high standards of teaching, leadership and student learning was a critical feature for effective small school leadership. The collaborative leadership approach adopted in a number of rural schools (Preston and Barnes, 2017) meant that schools were able to draw from the knowledge, skills, and experience of the entire school community (e.g., teachers, students, parents) to effectively problem-solve. Feeling trust, respect, and freedom to put forth ideas may allow for more effective problem-solving and collective inquiry, improving collaborative efforts (Carpenter, 2015).

Sustainable leadership

Sustainable leadership that is impactful and enduring is critical to school improvement (Clarke and Stevens, 2009; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). Hargreaves and Fink (2003) identified seven principles of sustainability in educational leadership drawn heavily on a large-scale study of high schools in North America, being that sustainable leadership "matters, lasts, spreads, is socially just, is resourceful, promotes diversity, and is activist" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). These findings have also been found to be applicable in other contexts, such as in small rural primary schools in Australia (Clarke and Stevens, 2009; Heffernan & Longmuir, 2019).

Sustainable leadership is focused on collaboration and capacity building and emphasises a distributed approach. Collectively, these characteristics can help schools achieve their goals associated with sustainability (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Distributing leadership allows others in the school community to help support and maintain school improvement. It encourages the use of expertise and skill wherever it exists within the school, rather than through formal positions. Sustainable leadership is especially important as school leaders are under increasing pressure to meet school improvement goals. Through shared leadership, the principal can disseminate the workload enabling the school to be better prepared and resourced when there are changes to leadership positions. A collaborative approach to leadership enables schools to draw from the knowledge, skills, and experience from the entire school community to manage change and problem-solve.

Leaders play an important role in enabling small schools to make the change to sustainable practices through supporting professional learning, higher education, and human resource management (Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew, 2018). An investment in staff capacity building and professional learning opportunities with a focus on innovation and adaption to change is essential. Professional development and learning opportunities, and upskilling teachers is increasingly important in small schools when a lack of experienced teachers means that early career teachers are required to fill leadership roles earlier than they might otherwise in larger schools (Clarke & Wildly, 2011; Graham, Miller & Patterson, 2009; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

A focus on staff development as a tool for enhancing sustainability is relevant to schools of all sizes. Schools should identify strategic priority areas through the collection of evidence and knowledge of their communities. Although schools state having a focus on improving teaching instruction, they sometimes do not use student achievement data to drive change or to measure improvement (Heffernan & Longmuir, 2019). Improving the use of evidence and data is recognised as enhancing learning outcomes for all schools, irrespective of size.

One small rural school in Australia worked actively to build teacher leadership capacity amongst teachers, despite having no formal leadership team apart from the principal (Heffernan & Longmuir, 2019). Their long-term goal was to have leadership capacity increased across the whole school. Using a collaborative and collectivist approach, the Principal enabled staff to develop and improve upon professional skills important for its school leadership such as strategic planning, effective communication, resource use and management, and a focus on teacher expertise (Heffernan & Longmuir, 2019). The Principal acknowledged that developing teacher leadership requires an ongoing commitment from the school to see effective sustainable changes.

Lutheran School Wagga Wagga

The following prompts, based on Hargreaves and Fink's (2003) seven principles of sustainability in educational leadership, can provide further insight when considering sustainable leadership.

- What is my long-term vision for the school community? What do I want the school's leadership to achieve?

- Is there a shared vision across school staff?

- How will I embed the changes within the fabric of the school, so that the changes will sustain even after I am no longer in my position at the school?

- How will I ensure that leadership tasks and responsibilities are shared and distributed to other members in the school community?

- What knowledge, skills and abilities should be invested in to enable effective leadership within the school?

- Are the school resources used to its best capability? How can we create new partnerships to increase the schools resource pool?

- Will everyone benefit from this type of leadership? Are there any groups of people that will benefit less, and if so, how can we resolve, or at least minimise, this or any potential negative impacts?

- How can the school's leadership benefit the larger community?

Northside Montessori School

School culture

"Culture provides the context in which the whole education process occurs" (Gruenert, 2000, p.14). School culture is considered to be another non-financial factor influencing small school sustainability. Culture is determined by the shared values, beliefs, practices, leadership style, and social norms within the school (Brendefur et al., 2014; Groseschl and Doherty, 2000). Areas that influence culture include schools' policies, procedures and student and teacher expectations (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; Kohm and Nance, 2009). Many factors addressed in this paper collectively play an important role in creating and sustaining an effective school culture, including distributed leadership, collaboration, capacity building (Lee & Louis, 2019). Other factors linked to a strong school culture include the degree of student support, and the trust, respect, and optimism amongst school staff (Lee & Louis, 2019).

Continuous improvement

Continuous improvement is linked to higher levels of academic performance and is acknowledged as a feature of an effective school culture (DuFour, 2008; Lee & Louis, 2019; Szőköl, 2018). Engaging in a culture of evidence use and continuous improvement involves school staff systematically taking part in an ongoing cycle to improve quality of teaching and learning and other practices important to a school setting such as wellbeing. This process enables early identification of potential issues and increases opportunities for improvement. It is most effective when professional learning and improvement is a shared responsibility and involves engagement in reflective dialogue (Lee & Louis, 2019). A continuous improvement cycle allows schools to understand "what works, for whom, and under what conditions", and includes:

- gathering data to measure student achievement and learning

- reflecting on teaching and learning

- designing and implementing strategies and innovative practices to improve student outcomes

- measuring the impact of strategies and practices

- adjusting and applying knowledge gained for the next cycle of improvement. (DuFour et al., 2008).

Articulating the benefits of continuous improvement, setting expectations, and modelling evidence use by leaders within their own practice is critical (Tichnor-Wagner, Wachen, Cannata, Cohen-Vogel, 2017). Educator collaboration can enhance motivation and enthusiasm for change when fostering a culture of continuous improvement, including co-designing new strategies or practices. Validating prior experiences of change can be helpful in reducing frustrations that might occur (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017). Partnering with researcher-practitioners can benefit the school by engaging with external expertise which can increase school staff knowledge and skills and allow for more effective and proactive solutions to address challenges (Cohen-Vogel, Cannata, Rutledge, & Socol, 2016).

Family and community engagement

Effective family and community engagement is shown to support student achievement and influence school improvement (Rudo & Dimock, 2017). In their report, Rudo and Dimock (2017) collated several studies examining family and community engagement programs and practices which have been linked to positive student outcomes. These were academic (Alameda-Lawson, 2014; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009) and social learning outcomes (McDonald et al., 2006). Families engaged with the school by participating in programs and working collectively to identify student needs (Alameda-Lawson, 2014). School cultures with a focus on continuous improvement and family and community engagement, can enhance school sustainability by improving teaching and learning outcomes and supporting changes within the school (Lee & Louis, 2019; Rudo & Dimock, 2017).

Conclusion

There are a range of financial and non-financial factors that contribute to the sustainability of small schools. These factors do not work in isolation, making it beneficial for small schools to consider a holistic approach when exploring how leadership, culture and financial health function together for each unique school and community. Exploring social entrepreneurship can function as a means to build financial security, while also fostering impactful community partnerships. Engaging with the qualities of impactful leaders, and viewing leadership as collaborative and sustainable, can enable effective change. When brought together with a focus on continuous improvement and engagement with family and community, collectively these factors can work to enhance a school culture and support long-term sustainability.

Mumbulla School

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