Leadership Practice: Tools for Meaningful Change

How Leaders Use Language to Lead

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Abstract

To ensure the appropriate capacity development of educational leaders to meet the varying professional challenges they will encounter in the current landscape and into the future, school leaders need to be equipped to make evidence-based decisions about their practice. In this way, the careful examination of the language of leadership practice in the pursuit of improved outcomes for students stands to offer valuable insight for leaders and researchers alike.

The present research explores the practical language tools and relational skills that leaders leverage to build cultures and climates of growth and positive communities of practice within learning organisations during times of educational system change. In particular, this study examines how leaders lead in a Queensland secondary school setting as they transitioned to the new Queensland system of learning and assessment in 2019, with the first cohort having exited under the new system in 2020. This change reflects a significant leadership moment in time and the present study seeks to use this moment to examine leadership behaviour in managing systemic change.

A small exploratory qualitative study was conducted within the context of a senior leadership team meeting of a secondary independent school in Brisbane. A series of three vignettes were developed for use in the meeting to prompt discussion of a range of topics identified to be relevant to senior leaders in Queensland schools in the current context. This study seeks to add to the literature by exploring leadership practices that have a positive impact on staff, both attitudinally and performatively, with a potential impact on outcomes for students. Five key themes emerged from the research, including time, pressure and anxiety, trust, building organisational capacity through professional learning, and agency, all of which were dynamically evident within the talk of the group.

This study was designed to enable the garnering of insight with respect to what leaders say and do within the practice and praxis of leadership with a focus on leaders’ relational “toolkits”, with implications for future research into the language of agile leadership. The study found the methodological use of vignettes within a senior leadership team meeting to be valuable as a means of observing turn taking and other interactional dynamics within leadership teams’ discussion on a specified topic.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.
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<td>NAPLAN</td>
<td>National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QCAA</td>
<td>Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QCE</td>
<td>Queensland Certificate of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>Professional Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL</td>
<td>Transformational Leadership</td>
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<td>IL</td>
<td>Instructional Leadership</td>
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<td>SLT</td>
<td>Senior Leadership Team</td>
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Chapter 1 Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Leadership is a vitally important and increasingly sophisticated and scrutinised component of contemporary educational organisations (Gronn, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2008; Mulford & Silins, 2003). To ensure the appropriate capacity development of educational leaders to meet the varying professional challenges they will encounter in the current educational landscape and into the future, school leaders need to be positioned to make evidence-based decisions about their practice (Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2008; Limerick et al., 2002; Mulford & Silins, 2003). The careful examination of the language of leadership practice in the pursuit of improved outcomes for students stands to offer valuable insight for leaders and researchers alike (Day et al., 2016). This thesis will provide an overview of the research intent, including an outline of the research questions and a brief review of the literature that has informed the development of the study. Following this, the theoretical lens that underpins the study and the qualitative methodological approach that was used to analyse the data generated are outlined. Next, it will address the key ethical considerations relevant to the study and outline the identified challenges encountered in the research process, along with the strategies implemented to remedy these. The aim of the discussion chapter is to identify emergent themes from the findings and also to discuss the particular methodological approach to the present research. Implications and considerations for future research are presented in the final chapter.

Background

Educational leadership is complex, multifaceted work. It offers opportunities for reflective practice and research participation to ensure that those doing the leading in schools are positioned to make evidence-based decisions about their practice (Hallinger, 2010). Descriptions about the current educational landscape abound, acknowledging the discontinuity and complexity that school leaders face, including the increased impact of the political, media, and public gaze. There are a number of forces at work including technological advancement, the consumerisation of education, and various other trends impacting upon the work of leaders in schools (Gronn, 2006). It is widely accepted that the development of relevant skills and knowledge about contemporary leadership is essential for planning for and delivering the changes, improvement, and performance that society increasingly expects of all organisations, including schools (Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2008; Limerick et al., 2002; Mulford & Silins, 2003). It follows that educational
leadership is a more contentious, complex, situated, and dynamic phenomenon than previously thought, requiring sophisticated, nuanced, and integrated approaches (Day et al., 2016).

Building the capacity of leaders, mindful of the factors currently impacting schools and looking through the lens of futures thinking to the potentialities for the educational landscape of the future, is important work. In building leader capacity, it is clearly important to think carefully about the key competencies and attributes that benefit leaders in achieving positive outcomes for schools. In this way, it is helpful to explore the concept of leadership capital and the leveraging of this at the schools’ level, responsive to the politically shaped and reactionary paradigm of the post-contemporary, performance-driven educational landscape (Hardy, 2013; Limerick et al., 2002; Lingard, 2014). This present study seeks to add to our understanding of the literature by exploring leadership practices that have a positive impact on staff, both attitudinally and performatively, and potentially, on outcomes for students.

The literature abounds with the articulation and exploration of leadership theories and the impact of these, either independently or in an integrated approach (Hallinger, 2010). However, there is little focus on what this looks like in practice: the practice and praxis of leadership and the particular impact of leaders’ “sayings”, “doings”, and “relatings” (Grootenboer & Hardy, 2017). The present study seeks to address this.

Context

The context of the study is a senior leadership team (SLT) in an independent secondary school setting in Queensland, Australia. The data were collected during an SLT meeting in 2019. The context was selected on account of the system-level change occurring in Queensland at the time. This change involved the implementation of the new Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) system for Year 11 students from 2019. This system change involved modifications to all senior subject syllabuses, the nature of both learning and assessment in all subjects, and changes to systems for ensuring equity and accountability. For schools, this has meant revisioning teaching, learning, and assessment processes and practices and the preparation of senior secondary students for internal instruments and external examinations. This change reflects a significant leadership moment in time and the present study sought to use this moment to examine leadership behaviour in managing systemic change.
Significance of the Research

A wealth of educational research, particularly into transformational and instructional leadership for school improvement, has centred upon the creation of meaningful change (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2010; Robinson, 2007). This is important now and into the future as schools and their leaders wrestle with the various forces at work. For school leaders in Queensland, the change to the new system of learning and assessment has been ushered in, with the first cohort of Year 12 students set to graduate with the newly conceived QCE with an ATAR score at the end of the 2020 school year (QCAA, 2018). The present study is timely and has implications for schools and school leaders as they settle into the new system and refine their systems, processes, and ways of working. As an exploratory study, the present research offers an important snapshot into the most significant system change in the state of Queensland in recent years, one that stands to have practical implications for school leaders tasked with implementing change.

One very important phenomenon that has emerged in the past decade in Australian schools is the increasing interest in educational data and data analytics. In Australian schools, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has afforded a means of monitoring and measuring student performance in the areas of literacy and numeracy (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011; Hardy, 2013; Lingard, 2014). Hardy (2013) articulated concern about the inability of such instruments to truly reflect the realities of student ability and development but did acknowledge and was reflective of the measurement and reporting, along with increased visibility and accountability and real impact for teachers’ work. The data derived from external measures like NAPLAN, along with internal formative and summative measures of student performance, are often subject to data analytics work that at the schools’ level informs school leaders’ decisions about academic programs. The onus, then, is on school leaders to determine the leadership approach required to respond appropriately to identified trends emerging from such analysis to ensure improved or sustained outcomes for students. It is against this background – of strong public and media interest in school performance – that the new system of learning and assessment is ushered in, which amplifies the leadership challenge with school leaders under pressure to implement the change in a way that ensures positive outcomes for students. Thus, the present research offers a practical insight into how leaders work not only within their individual scope of responsibility, but also collaboratively in leadership teams to meet the challenges of this change.
The additional anticipated benefits of this study include clarity and raised meta-awareness for educational leaders and aspirational educational leaders about the importance of their language choices and ways of working relationally and discursively to improve potential outcomes for students. This study is an important topic in Queensland owing to the systems level change and the related challenges for Queensland schools (QCAA, 2018), but also has wider relevance as a contribution to the educational leadership literature.

The expected outcomes include insight into language usage in leadership practice along with insight into the relational and discursive way that senior and middle leaders work. The current study will add to the literature by offering an examination of the language of leadership, which has been largely unexplored at the articulated practical and theoretical levels. The use of a qualitative approach will allow for greater freedom in participants’ engagement and open responsiveness capacity and for a more natural capture of leaders’ language usage and dialogic interactions. The use of grounded theory methods to analyse participants’ responses and dialogic language behaviours will allow for themes to emerge that will give insight into leadership approaches, dispositions, attitudes, and behaviours at the practice level.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

In order to gain an understanding of contemporary educational leadership practices relevant to leading and implementing change in schools, a review of the literature was conducted. Whilst the literature abounds with research on a range of leadership theories, a comprehensive and methodical thematic sweep of recent and relevant research, using key search words and phrases in the Griffith Library database, indicated that in meeting the challenges of change in contemporary educational settings, transformation leadership and instructional leadership are two theories that have been strongly represented, both discreetly and together, from the year 2000 onward. Owing to the significant and sustained representation of these two theories in the literature, particularly with respect to leadership in times of change, it was determined that the present study – a study investigating a particular leadership moment at a time of significant educational change in Queensland – would explore the relevance of these two theories, transformational and instructional leadership, and their applicability. The literature was reviewed to gain an understanding of how these leadership theories were applied in contemporary educational settings, and how they might be applied. Many articles investigated instructional and transactional leadership practices in a complementary, integrated or “nested” way. As a result, the literature was reviewed again to investigate these integrated forms of leadership. Further to this, the literature was reviewed with a focus on the practice of leadership to develop and support a theoretical framework for the present study: practice architectures.

Initially, a quantitative approach was taken to identifying the literature that would be included, with a database search of listings that were peer reviewed and with publication recency of 2000 or later. The articles identified in this first step in the process were recorded in a spreadsheet. Listings found in this search of the databases were read in their entirety with relevant sections highlighted and annotated. A secondary sweep of the literature was conducted with respect to further relevant references gleaned from the search of databases. These sources were read, with relevant sections highlighted and annotated.

All bodies of the literature were reviewed to generate an understanding of the factors involved in educational change and the practical approaches educational leaders take in implementing change in secondary school settings and to determine whether there were any significant gaps in the literature that the present research might serve to explore. This
literature review will focus on an integrated consideration of both transformational and
instructional leadership and will establish a rationale for an investigation of leadership
practice through the particular use of language as a cultural force for shaping and responding
to schools’ cultures and climates through action, words, and the relational qualities reflected
by these.

**Educational Change**

The educational landscape is a complex and discontinuous one wherein schools and
school leaders are constantly tasked with implementing change (Clement, 2014; Limerick et
al., 2002). In and of itself, change is not necessarily a problem but the way in which change is
introduced can be (Dinham, 2000; Harris, 2009). In navigating change, effective leadership is
vital to ensure that there is understanding about what the change involves and what structures
and systems will be adapted or introduced to pivot practice in implementing this change. It is
important that school leaders understand the potential and emergent impacts of change
processes – those that are self-initiated and mandated, and change that is embedded and
imposed upon the nature of teachers’ work (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Change can be
positive, but it can also be negative, with implications of pressure and anxiety for those
actioning change across educational organisations (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Harris and
Jones (2019, p. 123) espouse the view that practices that invite educators in to become
“instigators, creators and implementors of educational change” are highly positive and “make
sense”. Leadership approaches that are contextually responsive and that allow space for
teacher leadership wherein educators can be “co-constructors” of change are presented by
Harris and Jones as highly positive. Thus, leadership practice – what leaders say and do and
how they relate to one another in accordance with the particularities of the site – is important,
especially in moments of significant system change. Language, then, forms the basis of social
happenings that enable or hinder the agreed educational work, prompt actors to act, and invite
educators to co-construct change.

Whilst the literature offers clear theoretical positions on positive approaches to
leading and managing educational change, considerations of how leaders exercise contextual
responsiveness and use language to lead in ways that create space for teacher leadership, and
what this looks like in practice, is a gap in the literature. In addition, given the recent
introduction of the new Queensland system – the QCE implemented by the Queensland
Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) – very little exists in the literature to address
this particular change, which is a significant moment of change for Queensland secondary
Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership has been widely explored in the research from its conceptual inception through the work of Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), and responsive to paradigm shifts in the work of organisations (Limerick et al., 2002). This early work was interested in motivating and inspiring individuals, or “followers”, to enhanced levels of commitment and performativity to the collective purpose (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Burns, 1978). Bass and Avolio (1993) presented four key components, the “four Is” that characterise transformational leadership practices: (a) idealised influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individual consideration.

In later work that extends their conceptualisation of transformational leadership, Avolio and Bass (1995, p. 201) asserted that the “leader who continuously focuses on developing follower potential will create group norms that encourage colleagues to focus on helping each other continuously learn and develop”, noting that this seeps into the broader organisational culture along with the “span of the leader’s influence”. In this way, the work of the transformational school leader is actively developmentalist with potential to positively influence organisational culture, attitudes, and behaviours across an organisation’s implementation of educational change.

Transformational leadership involves practices directly and indirectly through others to ensure alignment and consensus with articulated goals, engaging in cycles of learning and reflection and building agency, efficacy, and capacity in ways that positively transform (Mulford & Silins, 2003). Browning (2014) espoused the importance of presence and a consultative approach to decision-making as crucial to establishing and maintaining trust. He asserted that there are a range of leadership practices that transformative leaders implement to engender trust in school settings. Accordingly, trust is decoupled from individualised leader traits. Instead, Browning found that the plurality of practices that aided in the building of trust were “inextricably linked” to transformational leadership. Practices that engender trust require emotional intelligence and relational capacity and, perhaps, what Goleman and colleagues (2010) described as ecological intelligence – the capacity of leaders to build a “climate of trust”. In this way, trust might be described as a part of an integrated set of intelligences that leaders possess and demonstrate in their thoughts, language choices, and actions (Goleman et al., 2010). Grootenboer (2018, p. 126) posited that trust is a critical
aspect of school leadership that can either enable or constrain practice, outlining five key
dimensions of trust that are key to the “social-political conditions of middle leading” (see
Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Dimensions of Trust in Leadership*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of trust</th>
<th>Qualities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1. Interpersonal trust: Trustworthiness and responsiveness to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2. Interactional trust: Creation of open and safe communicative space enabling a community of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3. Intersubjective trust: Simultaneous capacity across leading and teaching practices: collegiality within the community of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4. Intellectual trust: Professional knowledge and practical wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5. Pragmatic trust: Reasonable and realistic implementation of directives in practice architectures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Grootenboer (2018, pp. 126-129).

It is argued that the dimensions listed in Table 1 can be applicable more broadly in school settings to all leadership practice. They reflect a range of important ways in which leaders can build trust and demonstrate their trustworthiness, but also the ways in which they may potentially break or diminish the trust others have in them (Grootenboer, 2018). Trust is seen to be complex and nuanced, taking work over time and across the afore-listed dimensions to establish, albeit with no certainties for success. Trustworthiness is established as a core element to leaders’ practice; one that is essential to achieving transformational leadership purposes and vital to positive organisational culture.

Some of the hallmarks of transformational leadership practice, though, are difficult to measure, owing to the shared and influential nature of transformational practice (Hallinger, 2010). Hallinger (2010) notes that studies of transformational leadership are more likely to include outcome variables that relate to teacher engagement and perception of leadership performativity and impact. In a study of the relationship between leaders’ social and emotional competence and their transformational leadership, Wang et al. (2016) explored the concept of self-other agreement. This study found that leaders who overestimated their leadership performativity also had an inflated self-concept of their social-emotional competence compared with subordinates’ ratings. The methodology here, which collected information about leaders’ self-rated perspectives about performativity and their social-emotional intelligence and subordinates’ ratings of leaders in these areas, offered an important point of comparison. The findings made clear the value in exploring transformational leadership performativity from different perspectives, highlighting the
highly relational, ecological aspect of transformative leadership practice. This makes salient the investigative focus of this research project with respect to how leaders reflect self-awareness and awareness of their impact, or potential impact, on others through their communicative competencies and the use of language to build culture and drive action. This is supported by the findings reported in a study of large-scale reform and the impact of transformational leadership practices on teachers’ practices and the effects on student outcomes, in which Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) found that while there were significant impacts on teacher motivation, capacity, and practices, there was not a significant impact on student achievement. This would suggest that transformational leadership alone is not enough; a pairing of transformational leadership approaches with other contextually responsive practices would be beneficial in executing educational change.

Further to the earlier conceptualising work on the topic of transformational leadership, Leithwood et al. (1999) suggested eight dimensions of transformational leadership to include the building of school vision, the establishment of school goals, the modelling of best practice(s), the setting of high expectations, and the creation of productive school culture. It must be noted that these dimensions are theoretically ambitious and pair neatly with some of the key intents of instructional leadership, which is explored below.

Instructional Leadership

An instructional approach is underpinned by strong educational knowledge and understanding, interested primarily in improving academic outcomes for students and building the culture, climate, and capacity of teachers to achieve the related goals (Hallinger, 2010). In a study on the differential effects of leadership types, Robinson and colleagues (2008, p. 635) identified a set of five key dimensions of leadership practice, including the establishment of goals and expectations; strategic resourcing; “planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum”; “promoting and participating in teacher learning and development”; and ensuring an environment conducive to teaching and learning. Notably, their findings showed that leadership presence and encouragement through the promotion of, and participation in, teacher learning and development had the strongest impact. The findings support the idea that very specific pedagogical leadership – instructional leadership where leaders participated as learners, expert facilitators and coaches, or a combination of these – is a key element of school leadership interested in improved student outcomes. There is resonance here with Browning’s (2014) work, with respect to the practices of coaching and active presence essential for building trust. These findings are also supported by the work of
Heck and Hallinger (2014) who, in an investigation of the mediating effects of instructional leadership, found that instructional leadership can moderate teaching and learning interactions, with consistency across teachers in instructionally focused settings. Both studies evidence the impact of teachers on student outcomes, but also, and most notably in the context of this research, the powerful impact of instructional leadership for teaching and learning.

Hallinger (2003, p. 330) acknowledged fluidity in the popularity of instructional leadership as a standalone model of leadership, identifying the problematic aspects concerned with the principal “as the centre of expertise, power and authority” and further, the limitations of this approach to leadership in larger school contexts. MacBeath (2006) articulated a similar criticism about the nature of “instruction” as a concept, raising concerns about the unhelpfully power-laden-ness of the word. Grootenboer (2018) acknowledged the “widespread support” in the literature for instructional or “curriculum” leadership as an approach that has been evidenced as generative of positive outcomes for students, but also notes that as a concept it is not discrete, but rather, connects to distributed and transformational practices also. Such critiques demand reflection and in this case have led to the exploration of an integrated or nested approach responsive to contemporary leadership, which has been identified as highly sophisticated, nuanced, and complex and layered work (Day et al., 2016). This view is relevant and important for the present study owing to the inherent flexibility of language to construct meaning with respect to the strategic leadership intents; for example, underpinned by a depth of social understanding and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). A close study of communication is closely linked and responsive to the particular ecological or ontological synergies and dynamisms of specific school sites, which this study acknowledges. Of particular interest is the study’s participant leaders’ decision-making and agility in moving between different leadership strategies, their capital and capacity to engage and assess to determine how best to move forward, and how this occurs dialogically.

**An Agile Approach to School Leadership**

Whilst transformational and instructional leadership have been explored as separate or discrete theories of leadership, this present study seeks to consider, in terms of architectures of practice, how the art of leading requires flexibility, and to examine leaders’ propensity to draw on both theories in what has previously been described as a nested, agile approach. Marks and Printy (2003) subscribed to this view and, in a study spanning 24 nationally
selected, restructured schools across the United States of America, investigated a blended model. They found a substantial impact on performance and outcomes where there was a balance of transformational and shared instructional leadership in practice, also finding that instructional leadership can be transformational (Marks &-printy, 2003). In a study conducted by Robinson et al. (2008), comparison between instructional leadership and transformational leadership showed that the impact of the former is three to four times that of the latter. One of the key reasons for this is the relational focus of transformational leadership, placing emphasis on the relationships between leaders and subordinates as opposed to the educational work of school leadership. Robinson and colleagues found that the quality of leader-subordinate relationships is not predictive of the quality of school outcomes; rather, pedagogically focused leadership has a substantial impact (Robinson et al., 2008). Mulford and Silins (2003) identified the importance not only of the collective efficacy of staff but also their capacity to engage in the work of the learning organisation, which would suggest both approaches are needed to enact change. Transformational and instructive leadership have been very influential in the field. However, one or the other is not enough: It is the leaders’ capability to move (agilely) between different forms of leadership strategies and practices that strengthens their potential to plan and enact change successfully.

The burden that both models place on the principal in educational settings of bearing the responsibility for modelling, inspiring, and being personally immersed in the instructional work is unrealistic and unsustainable (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris, 2010). Distributed leadership offers a practical way in which the work might be achieved and a way in which other senior leaders and middle leaders can be invited into the transformational and instructional work, working collaboratively and in an agential way to align with the organisational goals and vision (Harris, 2010). In this way, a key undertaking of those leading in schools, especially schools experiencing change, is the building of collective capacity for work that occurs jointly in a disciplined and focused way (Harris, 2010). Harris (2010) goes further, noting the positive and empowering potential for teacher “agency, collaboration and leadership” at the forefront of educational change but also making the point that such undertakings in the face of change are not easy, citing time and trust as significant factors. This view gives rise to the need to find a practical way to observe in practice the conduct of agency, collaboration, and leadership through a focus on the “language of leadership”, as the present study aims to do.

Hallinger (2007, p. 4) noted that “the substantive similarities between the models are more significant than the differences”, asserting that effective leadership involves
responsiveness to the particular needs of the context in which the leadership work takes place, thus reinforcing the potential value of an integrated model. An integrated model allows room for educational leaders to “change tack”, responsive to the particular needs of the context as the organisation navigates change (Fullan, 2002; Hallinger, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2020). In revisiting earlier work on successful school leadership, Leithwood et al. (2020) summarised key leadership actions for success as follows (see Table 2):

Table 2
What Successful Leaders Do

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of practice</th>
<th>Specific leadership practices</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Set directions                          | • Build a shared vision  
|                                         | • Identify specific, shared, short-term goals  
|                                         | • Create high-performance expectations  
|                                         | • Communicate the vision and goals  
| Build relationships and develop people  | • Stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff  
|                                         | • Provide support and demonstrate consideration for individual staff members  
|                                         | • Model the school’s values and practices  
|                                         | • Build trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents  
|                                         | • Establish productive working relationships with teacher federation representatives  
| Develop the organisation to support desired practices | • Build collaborative culture and distribute leadership  
|                                         | • Structure the organisation to facilitate collaboration  
|                                         | • Build productive relationships with families and communities  
|                                         | • Connect the school to its wider environment  
|                                         | • Maintain a safe and healthy school environment  
|                                         | • Allocate resources in support of the school’s vision and goals  
|                                         | • Staff the instructional program  
| Improve the instructional program       | • Provide instructional support  
|                                         | • Monitor student learning and school improvement progress  
|                                         | • Buffer staff from distractions to their instructional work  

Note. From Leithwood et al., 2020, p. 8.

The above summary of successful leader actions by Leithwood et al. (2020) does not fall neatly into discrete theoretical conceptualisations of leadership practice but rather represents a range of actions and inherent capabilities that require agility and considered contextual responsiveness. Thus, the findings in contemporary leadership literature point to the sophisticated nature of leadership and raise questions about what a blended approach might look like in practice. It is for this reason that the present study seeks to further investigate the language choices involved in an agile or nested and layered approach to leadership practice, as
reflected in Figure 1, encompassing both transformational and instructional elements among a range of possible leadership strategies that are agile and responsive to the challenges of contemporary educational leadership (Day et al., 2016).

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Model: Nested Leadership Practices*

A balanced, integrated approach sees educational leadership that prioritises the building of collegial and collaborative teams, working with and through such relationships to focus on specific pedagogical work. Leadership that places emphasis on teaching, learning, and people is critical to the current and future success of schools. Mulford and Silins (2003) identified the importance not only of the collective efficacy of staff but also their capacity to engage in the work of the learning organisation. Hallinger (2010) discussed the value of an integrated approach that embodies both transformational and instructional dimensions and developed the argument that instructional leadership may of itself be transformational. Day et al. (2016, p. 221) offered further support for an integrated approach, suggesting that effective school leaders who have a positive impact on student outcomes work to “progressively shape and layer the improvement culture”. Their research found that, in schools where outcomes were sustained or improved, both transformational and instructional leadership were exercised (Day et al., 2016). The “exercising” of leadership does not just happen: It is demonstrated and communicated within and beyond educational organisations, which the next section will explore in greater detail.
Language as a Cultural Force Within the “Ecologies” of Schools

Mitchell and Sackney (2016) explored schools as ontological constructs, finding that in what they determined as “high-capacity” schools, leadership emerged naturally, free of some of the constraints and contestations that come with mechanistic, structure-driven environments. Using an ontological perspective is helpful for a consideration of leadership that is responsive to culture and climate and the ways that leaders communicate and act in the praxis of leading (Grootenboer & Hardy, 2017).

Leader performativity, in terms of the practical ways that leaders approach their work through the way that they think, the words they choose, and how they act, matters (Sparks, 2005). Discourse analysis allows for a consideration of leaders’ practice with respect to the ideological positioning that is foregrounded, and also that which is marginalised or excluded, thus implicitly or explicitly creating, reinforcing, or dismantling power constructs within and beyond the cultural context of the educational site (Lumby & Foskett, 2011). Barton and Dereshiwsky (2009) and Anderson and Mungal (2015) argued that whilst language and the phenomenon of communication is a powerful aspect of leadership praxis, it is underrepresented in the mainstream literature. As such, the gap provides an opportunity for the present study to contribute to the field of educational leadership and change. The present research is underpinned by the notion that language operates as a cultural force, with expected outcomes to include practical insight into the relational and discursive ways that senior leaders work, adding to the literature by offering an investigation into the language of leadership, which has been largely unexplored in the research.

Theoretical Lens

This study will explore leadership as an agile practice that occurs in socially constructed environments. Thus, central to the theoretical frame for this project is the part that language and discourse plays in achieving “relatedness” in leadership environments. This study takes an ontological approach, looking at schools as “ecosystems” within which leadership practice and praxis requires leaders’ development of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This present study examines both practice and praxis, examining specifically the language of relating that builds motivation, alignment to purpose, and pedagogic agency (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The present study is exploratory, examining how leaders use language to lead. Practice architectures present a helpful theoretical platform to examine how leaders,
individually and collectively, participate and practise within a familiar site. Its semantic, physical, and social dimensions as represented in Figure 2, according to the norms and arrangements that exist there to do the work of leading (Kemmis et al., 2014). With particular attention to the sayings, without disregarding the doings and relatings, the present study will observe how leading practice happens – how the work of educational leadership is done. For the purposes of this study, practice is taken to mean the leaders’ words and actions, their sayings, doings, and relatings, while praxis is taken to mean action that is both “informed by traditions in the field” and that which takes a role in shaping the future (Grootenboer & Hardy, 2017; Kemmis et al., 2014).

**Figure 2**

*The Theory of Practice and Practice Architectures*

Kemmis et al. (2014) noted that practices are not predetermined; rather, they “unfold” in ways that are responsive to and shaped by the conditions particular to the context at the time, as well as “practice memories”. As represented in Figure 2, Kemmis et al. outlined practice architectures as being made up of enabling or constraining preconditions, including
cultural-discursive arrangements, material-economic arrangements, and social-political arrangements. This theoretical model is very helpful for observing and examining how leadership practice happens or unfolds in a particular site. With an ontological underpinning, it acknowledges the dynamic, nuanced, layered, and complex nature of behaviour and interactions in organisational sites and presents an architecture for attempting to understand the happenings – the sayings, doings, and relatings – as they unfold in a practice. This theoretical approach has been selected as a way in which to observe and describe the “project of practice” of leading in a significant moment of educational change (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Summary

This literature review takes into consideration key contemporary educational leadership theories and presents a theoretical lens through which the practice of leadership at a time of change might be observed, examined, and understood. Much of the literature reviewed explores transformational and instructional leadership as discrete leadership practices. While they were often considered as a pairing, more recent research has explored integrated or nested approaches. This integrated approach warrants further exploration owing to the fact that in many instances, the goals or focus on transformational efforts in schools are concerned with teaching and learning, requiring robust and specific educational leadership found within the instructional model. A blended model also addresses some of the concerns raised in critiques of the separate models. For example, instruction that is nested within transformative praxis becomes a shared and collaborative concept. The work of Robinson and colleagues (2008) supports approaches wherein leaders are actively present, engaging, and working with and through staff through coaching and mentoring practices or simply working alongside staff as participants in the learning. A blended approach may yield a stronger focus and goal set for transformative efforts, allowing for clearer opportunities for impact measurement.

Across the literature that considers transformational and instructional leadership practice, many of the research findings are reported descriptively, with discussion that sits at the theoretical level. There is little research that explores an integrated or blended approach to leadership at the praxis level and little research that explores leadership praxis using positioning theory (Grootenboer & Hardy, 2017). Additionally, the research approaches in the literature reviewed often focus on academic outcomes and focus only on the principal. The interactional dialogic and collective achievements of senior or executive leadership teams in secondary school settings and the specific ways in which the work of educational
leadership is conducted are not closely examined or represented in the literature. Kemmis et al. (2014) acknowledged the critical role that executive or senior leaders and leadership teams play in establishing the educational conditions for positive transformation; the present study seeks to bridge the gap in the literature by using the identified leadership models as a lens through which to explore and examine the leadership work of senior leaders, their input and interactivity, and the language choices they make in practising leadership. In this way, a close study of the language will yield new knowledge about leader identity and identities, power, value, attitudes, and beliefs.

There is scope for further research with respect to the impact on student outcomes of a blended transformational and instructional approach to leadership in schools, particularly in relation to the language moves that leaders make in leadership practices. What the collective achievements are and how the leading happens in leadership practices represent an important research opportunity for bridging the gap between theory and practice. The review of the literature has found that leadership theories are conceptualised at the high level and that even when seminal writers present summaries of specific leadership practices and domains of practice of what successful leadership entails, how leaders actualise these practices in what they say, what they do, and how they relate to others in practices is not captured. For leaders to be reflexive and work to pivot their practice in positive and helpful ways, and for aspirational leaders to achieve clarity about what leading looks like and sounds like, a consideration of leaders’ communicative and relational moves will extend the literature in the field in a practical way.

Within the contemporary world of educational leaders’ work, leaders in praxis communicate across a range of “text” types and modalities for varying audiences and purposes and so analysis of leaders’ language and communication would lend value to a study of leadership praxis (Anderson & Mungal, 2015). An opportunity in this research is to explore an integrated, transformational, and instructional approach to leadership as “storied work”, wherein leaders construct organisational narratives of change. As such, a consideration of how the work is conducted is enhanced by adopting practice architectures as a theoretical lens to explore how leaders do the work of leading through what they say (and think), what they do, and how they relate to others (Kemmis et al., 2014). The present study will bridge a gap in the literature by examining specific language choices to identify what stories are envisioned and what stories are “told” with respect to values communicated and the themes that emerge with respect to the ways that leaders relate to each other.
collaboratively and discursively in their leadership practice, within the context of a leadership team meeting.

Purposes

The review of the literature revealed that there is little work in the research on school leadership that examines the use of language by leaders as they do leadership – the language choices in practice that reflect the leadership theories explored in the literature. The present research aims to address this gap by exploring the practical tools and skills that leaders leverage to build cultures and climates of growth and positive communities of practice within learning organisations in order to achieve positive outcomes for Queensland secondary school students as Queensland secondary schools make the shift to a new system of learning and assessment. The present study is designed to enable the garnering of insight about what leaders say and do in their practice and will explore leaders’ relational toolkits. Ultimately, this research project aims to observe the dynamic repertoire of practical leadership practices that support, affirm, and grow professional capital for strategic and sustainable school improvement.

In the present study, the research focused on the “how” of leadership – how leaders leverage their language choices to build culture and efficacy and to optimise schools’ impacts on student outcomes. There is little work in the research on educational leadership, particularly with respect to schools, that examines the use of language used by leaders as they “do” leadership. This is a gap in the literature that this research aims to fill. The present study is interested in the practice of leadership, offering an examination of how leaders use language to lead, garnering insight into what leaders actually say and do as they lead, with a focus on leaders’ relational toolkits – how leaders contribute individually and work collaboratively and dialogically in senior leadership teams. A key objective of the research is to understand how leaders use language (Freebody, 2003; Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

Research Questions

In alignment with the purposes of the research project articulated above, the research questions were developed to explore the gaps identified in the review of the literature with respect to the actual practice of leadership – how leaders communicate with each other when leading organisations through change.

The primary research question that underpins this study is:
What is the function of the language of change used by senior leaders in senior leadership team meetings?

The following sub-questions have also emerged following a consideration of relevant literature:

1. What agility, in terms of approaches to leadership, is reflected in leaders’ language choices?
2. How do leaders engage with and relate to others within senior leadership teams?

The following chapter will outline the methodology design developed to explore these questions.
Chapter 3 Research Design

The theoretical frame for this study is the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014). As mentioned previously, a core aspect of this theoretical frame is the part that language and discourse play in achieving “relatedness” in leadership environments. In the sections that follow, the qualitative approach will be outlined, along with the processes and methods used in the collection and analysis of data and the representation of findings.

Methodology

To examine how leaders use language in their leading practices, the methods used focussed on an authentic in situ practice. To examine the sayings, doings, and relatings in a formalised, routinised, and authentic setting within which leaders practise according to the distinct and understood social arrangements of the site, it was determined that the research would explore the happenings in a regular scheduled meeting of senior leaders (Kemmis et al., 2014; Schatzki, 2002, 2010). A qualitative approach was taken to the research design and data collection and grounded theory methods were used to analyse the findings, which are presented descriptively. This approach was taken to afford a deep and nuanced examination and understanding of the happenings within the practice. The particular details of and rationale for aspects of the approach are outlined next.

A Qualitative Methodological Approach

In order to investigate the agility, in terms of approaches to leadership, reflected in leaders’ language choices and the ways in which leaders engage with and relate to others within senior leadership teams, it was determined that a qualitative methodological approach through the use of a focus group would enable a relevant snapshot into leaders’ practice, including their collaborative and relational engagement with one another. It was considered that a qualitative methodology would allow for a less restrictive, theoretically productive exploration of leaders’ practice (Freebody, 2003). This project has been designed to better understand leadership practice by examining the sophisticated nature of language and the relatedness of educational leaders. Thus, a qualitative methodology best allows for observation of communication through which “the social order of educational activities take place … and [are] thereby given structure and significance” (Freebody, 2003, p. 91). A qualitative approach also allowed for the observation of practice in a natural, culturally situated setting, with dialectic and discursive interplay analysed through a theoretical lens so
that the nuances of practice were able to be understood, and potentially, new practices generated (Freebody, 2003). It was further determined that the use of a set of hypothetical vignettes would assist to engage leaders discursively, allowing for nuance and fulsome responsiveness, acknowledging that the work of leaders is situated culturally within a “social order” (Freebody, 2003). The vignettes were developed in response to thematically identified pressures that emerged from the literature relating to leadership practice and change, including the experience of students and teachers and the resourcing of teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2010; Harris, 2010; Harris & Jones, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020). Topically relevant to the system change under discussion, the vignettes were developed as a focaliser. To mitigate the potential disadvantages of the focus group, including quality issues with respect to the interaction and the capacity of the chair to manage the discussion, the vignettes and prompts were carefully planned in advance (Kumar, 2014).

**Analytical Framework**

The analytical framework was underpinned by grounded theory methods, with the aim of collecting data that would enable inductive insight into the particular components of leadership as a cultural practice (Freebody, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was therefore determined that the use of a focus group interview and, in particular, the use of vignettes as a qualitative technique would allow for greater depth, detail, and nuance than other methods would allow (Gay et al., 2006). The analytic purpose of using a focus group interview as the qualitative technique to investigate the research questions is that it provides an evidence-based tool with which to explore leaders’ use of language in practice and to develop a conceptual model of this based upon the findings (Gay et al., 2006). The use of the focus group tool enabled the development of a conceptual model, as the analytical sweeps were able to identify patterns of language in use. These are explored in the findings and picked up, conceptually, in the discussion.

It is acknowledged that the limited data collected represent only a snapshot of leadership practice. The situation of a leadership team meeting and, more specifically, team discussion, has been chosen owing to the opportunity to observe collaborative and relational practices of leaders within a leading team setting. In this way, an ontological snapshot of the cultural practices of the team, through the language choices they make in response to the stimulus, is afforded.
Research Site and Data Collection

The research site is an independent secondary school setting in an Australian capital city, being also the researcher’s place of employment. It was proposed that participants negotiate a meeting time or meeting times of convenience to them, within the planned data collection window between August and September 2019. The selection of an already established leadership team enhanced the likely reliability of the data with respect to familiarity of participants with each other and the anticipated openness and honesty of their responsiveness. Further, the absence of the researcher from this team meant that the data were not impacted by observer effect (Gay et al., 2006). The use of a convenience sampling method and the use of scenarios, recorded with the researcher’s own equipment, offered an effective, convenient, and cost-effective means of collecting data.

Participants

The study group was an SLT, comprised of five senior leaders. The selected group represented a convenience sample of leaders in senior leadership roles at the level of Principal, Deputy Principal, and Dean. The inclusion of five participants was to allow for dialogical breadth and to enable analysis of interaction among three levels of positional authority within the leadership team. Participants represented a range of leadership experience with respect to the length of tenure in current roles. Owing to the nature of the selected sample, no screening mechanism was needed. The initial contact method was a face-to-face meeting with the Principal to secure in-principle agreement to participate, prior to face-to-face conversations to recruit participants and provide them with information brochures and informed consent documents, included in Appendices A and B.

Method

In order to investigate the language choices that leaders make, a series of free and open interactions among the participants (the SLT members) in response to a set of provided vignettes (see Appendix C) were recorded, meaning that the research method was a controlled observation (Kumar, 2014). The interactions were recorded to ensure an accurate aural record, preserving the integrity of the data (Gay et al., 2006; Poland, 1995).

The stimulus developed for use as part of the controlled observation, the three vignettes, differed in focus so that a range of inputs and interactivities could be observed and analysed. The vignettes were short in nature and so did not need to be distributed to all
participants prior to the meeting or meetings, enabling natural, immediate reactions and responses to the stimulus. The three vignettes were provided to the Principal in advance of the meeting in order to gain approval for their use. The Principal, who decided that they would chair the meeting, was provided with a series of questions to prompt discussion in response to each of the vignettes. It was intended that each vignette or scenario would stimulate between approximately 15 and 25 minutes of discussion. Owing to the necessity of convenience for participants, there was flexibility in the timeframe for data collection insofar as the Principal, at their discretion, was able to choose to dedicate one continuous meeting to the discussion of the vignettes or could elect to discuss one vignette per meeting across a series of scheduled meetings. The use of these prompts afforded a cost-effective means of exploring participants’ use of language and will enhance the ability for the study to be replicated in other settings for later research (Kumar, 2014, p. 133). It was anticipated that the vignettes would be effective as an instrument for prompting input and discussion and that by limiting the number of vignettes to three hypothetical and futuristically framed situations, consent for participation was more likely to be achieved, facilitating data collection within the planned time frame. The vignettes were designed to address issues of educational currency in Queensland secondary school settings during this time of change, including:

1. student well-being, responding to student anxiety in schools;
2. cultivating quality teacher practice and developing staff leadership capacity, including expert teachers; and
3. teacher well-being, including flexibility, support, and recognition.

These issues emerged in the Australian Government’s report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools and have been selected as the focus areas of the vignettes for that reason (Gonski et al., 2018). These vignettes have been designed in such a way that SLT participants were able to engage in a hypothetical way or could extrapolate to their own context of experience and influence. The prompts were designed to promote engagement, with respect to identification and analysis of the key elements or problems for each scenario; consideration, with respect to who is involved and who might be involved; and potential decision-making, with respect to what course of action might be taken and the implications of this. The vignettes were deliberately open ended, with the discursive direction free to be guided by the responsiveness of the group.

The researcher’s absence from the meeting’s interaction ensured that her bias was not introduced and discussion could be free-flowing and “normal”; variation in participants’ behaviours that might have happened with awareness of observation was thus minimised,
although participants were aware the meeting was recorded (Kumar, 2014). The absence of the researcher was also planned to ensure that participants engaged in a more natural way in that they were not be able to “check in” with the researcher. In addition, having the meeting run in the researcher’s absence afforded the usual chair of the meeting – the Principal – to facilitate the discussion, therefore enabling a more authentic snapshot of leadership practice within the context of a leadership team meeting. This decision was taken as a means of mitigating the challenges and complexities that can be encountered with respect to researcher positionality. In particular, the approach acknowledges four particular issues of complexity conceptualised by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019, p. 2) including:

(1) the fluidity of our ever-changing social identities; (2) the abstract, intangible nature of our social identities; (3) the difficulty of knowing which facets of our social identity are more influential over time and place; and (4) how our social identities impact the research process.

Mindful of the potential plurality of impacts that may be introduced with researcher presence, and the desire to capture an authentic snapshot of a leadership practice – the dynamic happenings and collective achievement in a leadership meeting – the method of data collection was designed in a way that would not be hindered by researcher absence.

Procedure

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the data were carefully collected and recorded and then analysed in a series of steps. The following section will outline the steps taken in collecting and transcribing the data, how the integrity of the data was preserved, and how the data were analysed, including a number of analytic passes using grounded theory methods.

Analysis

In the interests of preserving the accuracy of the transcribed interview and the integrity of the data, the conversation was recorded (Gay et al., 2006). Grounded theory methods were used to analyse the data, which had implications for the approach to transcription (Charmaz, 2000, 2001; Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Johnson, 2014). In advance of textual analysis of the data, a number of steps were taken to ensure that the recorded interview was transcribed in a way that captured an accurate “aural record” of the conversation to enable the analysis of valid and reliable data (Poland, 1995). Once the observation was complete, the recording was checked immediately and transcribed. The
researcher transcribed the observation, ensuring that the transcription represented a true, descriptive voice-to-text account of the meeting. In this way, the data were not “tidied up”. Participants’ contributions were deidentified and different indicators were assigned to participants where P1 = Participant 1, with all participants respectively numbered. Each number was followed with a number to indicate their leadership position; for example, the Principal was coded as P, the Deputy Principals were coded as DP1 and DP2, and Deans were coded as D1 and D2 respectively to afford analysis of any interactional nuances between levels of positional authority within the team. Coding in this way also enabled discreet analysis of individual participant contributions and patterns within these. Aural contributions were attributed to the contributing participant using their code and contributions were numbered in order of occurrence, with time stamps recorded at intervals throughout; finally, the transcript was annotated using transcribing conventions where appropriate to capture details like pause, inflection, and tonal variations (Freebody, 2003). While the transcript is not a linguistic account, notations were made about significant emphasis, emotivity, or significant pauses that may impact interpretation (Poland, 1995). The recording was reviewed by the researcher a final time to ensure the accuracy of the record (Poland, 1995).

Following the transcription process, the transcript was analysed and coded thematically using grounded theory methods and then analysed according to the patterns of language usage, with respect to how the communication was occurring – through statements, instructions, and questions, for example, and the impact of these communicative choices (Kumar, 2014). Although the nature of interactions was examined in this way, a close linguistic analysis was not conducted in the manner used by conversation analysts (Freebody, 2003). Rather, the transcript was analysed using positioning theory, conversational analysis, and discourse analysis with respect to the doings, sayings, and relatings evident in the meeting – the practice architecture (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Positioning theory is interested in the ways that individuals communicate to make claims and to place themselves and others (Davies & Harre, 1990; McVee et al., 2018). It is noted that the use of positioning theory as an analytical and theoretical framework extends beyond just the spoken word, and whilst the dialogic exchanges are the primary focus of this study, in addition to the topical content of interactions, the nature of participants’ interactivity was also examined. This included the way that participants in the meeting took turns and interacted, and the dialectic and discursive impact of this interaction (Freebody, 2003; Gay et al., 2006). The turns were closely analysed with respect to the words and phrases used, how
meaning was shaped and how positioning occurred, and how the language of leadership was used (Davies & Harre, 1990; Freebody, 2003; Lumby & Foskett, 2011).

**Ethical Considerations**

 Ethical clearance was required for this project as the methodology involves human research through the observation of adults who are leaders in an independent secondary school setting. Accordingly, an application for ethical clearance was submitted, in accordance with the Griffith Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (Griffith University, 2016). It was anticipated that the project represented negligible risk. The proposed participants were not characterised as vulnerable and, while data collected were deidentified, there was no likelihood that any identification would be considered problematic or cause concern for participants. The planned research did not deal with sensitive aspects of participants’ own behaviour. There were no benefits for participants although the research may be beneficial to participants in reflecting on their practice. Both the participants and the research site were deidentified and all data were and managed and will be destroyed in accordance with the guidelines (Griffith University, 2016). All names in transcripts have been de-identified, with responses coded prior to analysis. Electronic data were stored on password-protected computers. All data were and will only be accessible by members of the research team working on the project and all data, including recordings and transcriptions of recordings, are stored in secure locations with password protection access or in locked offices in locked filing cabinets. There was no foreseeable negative impact of the research and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point without comment or penalty.

 The project fell under the Negligible Risk pathway for the ethical review of human research, owing to the author’s aim to publish from the thesis, including the citing of results (Griffith University, 2015). Owing to the research site being the researcher’s place of employment, conflict of interest was given careful ethical consideration and was identified in accordance with the code of ethics (Griffith University, 2015). The non-participatory observation method ensured that there was no conflict with respect to unequal power relationships between participants and the researcher during the recorded interaction and the use of hypothetical dialectic prompts meant that participants were happy to consent to participate in the research project (Griffith University, n.d.; Kumar, 2014). Ethical clearance was granted, and this research was conducted in accordance with the approved protocol: GU Ref No: 2019/584.
It was anticipated that the experience would be useful developmentally for the SLT, who would participate during the course of one or more regular, scheduled meetings to minimise inconvenience. In the spirit of reciprocity, participants received a report on the findings and were offered the opportunity for debriefing at a later meeting.

**Anticipated Challenges**

One potential challenge that was identified in the proposed methodology related to the issue of time. As the project was a qualitative study, requiring the audio recording of a leadership team in a meeting situation and participants’ engagement with provided scenarios, the time commitment involved was identified as an important factor. Schools are complex and busy work sites, so to pull together a SLT for meetings from August through to September, as had been planned, there needed to be flexibility. It was anticipated that the vignettes would potentially need to be presented in separate sittings, negotiated in advance to be at a time most convenient and least intrusive for the participants involved. Accordingly, the vignettes used were kept to a minimum of three and these were carefully constructed to be short but capable of provoking input and interaction that would be useful for the purposes of this study. The Principal was provided with the vignettes in advance and determined that the data collection would take place in one meeting and that two vignettes would be used. This modification addressed the challenge of time and, whilst the data collected were limited, the meeting outcome was generative with respect to findings.
Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter will begin by outlining what happened with respect to the decisions made about the data collection, including the way that the leadership team meeting was conducted, and will document the particular variations to the planned research. Following this, the analytical process will be outlined, with detail of each of the three main analytical passes provided as follows:

- Analytical Pass 1 – descriptive overview;
- Analytical Pass 2 – thematic transcript analysis and development of a codebook; and
- Analytical Pass 3 – detailed analysis of themes.

Data Collection

The leadership conversation took place within the context of a single leadership meeting – a Future Assessment Modelling meeting – which was held at a regular meeting time within a regular working day. The Principal, who chaired the meeting, was provided with the vignettes in advance of the scheduled meeting, and had decided that the discussion would take between 30 and 45 minutes and that first two vignettes only would be used in the interest of time. As a result, the vignettes selected were:

- Vignette 1: Student Well-being; and
- Vignette 2: Teaching and Learning.

The Principal decided not to provide SLT members with a copy of the vignettes prior to the meeting to allow for more spontaneous, naturalistic engagement, exploration, and discussion. In addition, the Principal used the vignettes in an embedded and realistic way, exploring the real work of the organisation. This meant that discussion was less hypothetical in nature and SLT members put their thoughts to the issues in an authentic, grounded way, drawing on real practice and experience. Thus, the data collected offered insight into the real work of the team and enabled authentic and realistic conversation among interactants that was of currency and based on real understanding of the work of the team.

Analytic Pass 1

The first analytic pass was conducted upon the initial check of the recordings. The meeting was recorded using both an audio recording device and a video recording device as a backup. The first pass was conducted to ensure that the recordings captured the entirety of the
meeting, that the recording quality was clear, and to conduct a preliminary analytical sweep, which is outlined descriptively below.

Throughout the SLT meeting, the Principal, P, remained actively and powerfully engaged. P framed the discussion clearly with specific focal points and positioned meeting participants to explore these. Throughout the conversation, the talk showed that P listened deeply to interactants’ contributions and picked up thematic threads to emphasise key framed points and to reposition the group. In this way, P structured the talk in a productive way that opened opportunity for participation, engagement, and discursive exploration of thought in a focussed way. The SLT meeting participants remained focussed and engaged for the duration of the conversation and observed respectful turn-taking protocols. There was very little interactional trouble and repair in the meeting but rather, a solution-focussed dialogue that problematised the vignettes in ways that were contextually relevant (Freebody, 2003). Members of the group built and layered responses to progress the thinking of the group and consistently made connections to the thinking and articulations of others, building on colleagues’ utterances. In this way, the meeting was consistently respectful and positive, with alignment to common agreed purposes clearly evidenced. Strong alliances were demonstrated among all members of the group and agreement was signified explicitly through the talk, and implicitly through the tone of utterances, inflection, and sounds, including “mmm”, connoting agreement.

The talk of the group showed use of a range of language moves, including statements of belief along with open questioning strategies, by P as well as by other members of the group, to progress the thinking and to elicit the thoughts, beliefs, values, and attitudes of group members. The conversation was framed clearly by P as talk that would be focussed and potentially creative or generative when the meeting purpose was made clear to be “something of a brainstorm”. Dispositionally, the group demonstrated strong willingness to engage and productive responsiveness to the vignettes.

**Analytic Pass 2**

The meeting recordings were carefully transcribed before a second, careful, and comprehensive analytic pass was conducted. In this pass, a coding book was developed as part of the process of working towards themes. This code book is included in Appendix D. A close analysis of the transcript using grounded theory thematic analysis methods identified a number of significant themes and their generative sub-themes, which are captured in Table 3.
### Table 3

**Codebook Themes and Sub-Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Themes (categories)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Leaders referencing past action or experience</td>
<td>Leaders managing change over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Leaders expressing understanding of demands on time</td>
<td>Leaders managing pressure and anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Leaders understanding of time as a resource</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Leaders prioritising clear communication to manage pressure and anxiety</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Leaders understanding pressures and anxiety causes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Leaders identifying systems to support teachers and students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Listening and perspective taking</td>
<td>Leaders seeking to build trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Leaders taking time to interact with educators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Leaders engaging with and supporting educators</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Leaders demonstrating emotional intelligence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Planning aimed to facilitate educators’ growth</td>
<td>Leaders building organisational capacity through professional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Modelling and instruction for high quality practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Leaders identify opportunities for formal or informal professional learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Leaders allowing space for self-determination</td>
<td>Agency of leaders and educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Leader practice that motivates, engages, and builds confidence</td>
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As summarised in Table 3, the five most significant themes are: (a) leaders managing time, (b) leaders managing pressure and anxiety, (c) leaders seeking to build trust, (d) leaders building organisational capacity through professional learning, and (e) agency of leaders and educators. The scope of these themes includes consideration of leader practices and the ways that they engage with and relate to other leaders within leadership conversations and how leaders engage and bring staff with them as they navigate system change. There are strong connections among each of the five significant themes identified, which will be explored with respect to the ways in which the language used by leaders constructs each theme.

**Analytic Pass 3**

A third analytic pass was conducted wherein the transcript was closely analysed with respect to each of the major themes that were identified in the codebook. The findings from this pass were reported descriptively with respect to the doings, sayings, and relatings that occurred within the meeting.
Theme 1: Leaders Managing Change Over Time

The talk in response to Vignette 1 showed that leaders value time as a resource and had a deep understanding that a smooth transition from the existing system to the new system of learning and assessment in Queensland requires careful management of change over time. This was shown consistently through the group’s discussion in response to the first vignette and was also picked up in response to the second vignette.

Vignette 1 Discussion. Time is implicitly established as an important element in the positioning language of P who, in introducing the first vignette, prompts the group to “[think] about the systems we might put in place” along with the professional development that “might be required” to “cope with some of these challenges of the new system”. In this way, change is the challenge and the implicit focus is how best to use the time available to meet the demands of the challenge. The use of conditional language by P, along with specific prompts for the team to discuss, works to position the group with a particular focus whilst opening up opportunity for the group’s consideration of what this “might look like”. In this way, P establishes a powerful position in steering the high levels of transformative work, whilst inviting others in to explore the detail in what is a form of shared leadership happening through the discussion at the meeting. The discussion is in this way moving the leadership practices of the group forward.

Further, when initiating the discussion, P explicitly references D1 as being “deeply experienced from down south”, where a similar system involving external assessment and an ATAR score is in place, and invites D1 to respond by identifying the “big issues”. In this interaction, D1 articulates agreement with P about issues of resonance, reinforcing P’s framing of the need for systems and professional learning as ways to meet the challenges of the new system. In this exchange, P signifies respect for, and interest in, the experience of D1 and opens opportunity for D1 to have a voice in the discussion. D1’s contribution is positively acknowledged by P and D1 extends the response to raise the concept of a “campaign with staff … educating our teachers”, connoting a clear understanding of the need to work with staff over time, in response to the challenges of the systemic change. D1’s use of the word “campaign” is significant in signposting the need for the leadership group to approach the change systematically and strategically over time, with clear purpose and clear envisioned outcomes. In addition, D1’s use of the word “with” when articulating the idea of implementing “a campaign with our staff” is inclusive language that involves the SLT team, engaging them in the campaign. Whilst D1 does not elaborate with detail of what an involved
approach might look like, there is space here for instructional and transformative practices. D1 strengthens the point by identifying the core philosophical purpose of the work, the priority of learning, and the need for this to be preserved and protected by the language and communication and professional learning work done with educators. The quick succession of inputs from DP1, D2, and D1 that follow build upon this idea, particularly with respect to communication. In this way, the talk shows that the notion of a campaign is implicitly valued by the group and thus the SLT group demonstrate understanding of the need to manage the change over time.

Deeper into the conversation, DP1 identifies the goal of normalisation, comfort, and familiarity following the pivot in practice. At this point in the discussion, members of the group consider the context in the time after the change. There is interaction and agreement on this point, which is picked up by P who identifies and makes salient the high-level point of communication and “the opportunity of it”. Here, P appears to be positioning the group to be energised to think creatively about what that opportunity might represent, what might be helpful. P consolidates the issues raised by the group and positions the group to consider how the team might manage the change over time in a way that will achieve the agreed goals.

After listening to the exchanges, DP2 connects and extends ideas raised by the group and also raises potential problems. In this way, DP2 reinforces the notion that educators will be at the forefront of the change, implicitly reinforcing the importance of investing in teachers’ professional learning to support them in their work and identifying the problems of anxiety and mis- or mal-communication should this not occur. DP2 prompts the group to consider high-value practice from past experience along with what is new in educational contexts to ensure clarity and focussed practice.

On multiple occasions in the discussion of the first vignette, P and other participants’ talk shows thinking for phases of 2 years or longer: that is, over the longer term. The group talk shows thinking about students’ learning progressions over time – from school entry to the conclusion of students’ senior secondary studies. In addition, participants’ talk focuses on the 2-year senior learning and assessment experience.

P’s language choices are implicitly positive. P explicitly states at one point in the conversation “there will be difference but there are opportunities”, energising the group to think positively and creatively about what those opportunities might entail. P establishes the priority of education of staff, building teachers’ understanding along with creating certainty and maintaining high morale, but invites members of the leadership team to step into the
conversation and participate in determining how this change might be accomplished productively.

DP2’s input at this point picks up on key concepts from the literature. In this way, DP2’s talk offers suggestion for activating the organisation: leveraging and empowering middle leaders to work with staff to drive change down through the organisation to achieve “grass roots stuff”. DP2 advocates for a model that sees middle leaders working collaboratively with staff “around their tables”. The language is again inclusive and suggests middle leaders working with educators as a key element in managing the complexities of system change. The imagery of the words “around their tables” suggests unity and trust of teams within the organisation to carry out the work. Here there is understanding demonstrated about the potential discomfort that working through change can bring for teachers in planning and working through complex change in real and limited periods of time. In reflecting on the work of the leadership team, P’s commentary is educative in tone. In this way, P expresses value and advocates for the strategy of “frontloading” the architecture of change early and adapting or making small changes, creating time for “enculturation”. At this point in the discussion, P appears to be concentrating on time and the timing of organisational changes. This is followed with a back-to-the-future style inquiry prompt by P, wherein participants are invited to imagine: “what would success look like?” DP2 leads the response to this prompt and triggers horizental thinking through the use of past tense, which is picked up and continued by DP1.

The talk in response to the first vignette shows that the SLT members in this discussion believe that a strategic campaign that concentrates on communication and professional learning is central to ensuring a smooth transition to the new system of learning and assessment for students within their secondary school context. Change management is identified and framed as an important priority for the SLT, as something to be carefully attended to in the leadership work of the team and managed over time through whole-of-community learning, with professional learning agreed to be a key driver of change over time. The talk also shows that P appears to deeply understand that careful and consistent organisational behaviours over time are key to building community confidence and trust. The strong participation in the dialogue by P, DP1, and DP2 here lends power to the articulated thinking and emphasises the high value placed by the most senior leaders in the team on consistency, thought, and action that take into consideration the whole school and community, and leadership practice that attends to the building and protecting of trust.
Vignette 2 Discussion. The theme of time emerged in response to the second vignette also. Members of the SLT group discussed strategies for engaging staff in trialling new classroom furniture and pedagogy. Leaders’ talk shows that leaders take time to notice practice and the impact of practice and take time to seek input and listen to stakeholders. D2 referenced successful past projects as a way of conceptualising effective approaches. D2 cited the value in exposing the whole staff to professional learning and creating opportunity for an “opt-in” approach for further engagement where “champions” work within faculty groups to achieve broader enculturation over time. DP2 suggested “it always works that way” and later in the discussion described the work as “an evolutionary thing”. The positive reinforcement of the approach and the affirmations and agreements expressed by other interactants show the SLT group’s willingness to commit to a successful model of development wherein professional learning opportunities are designed to develop and enculturate staff over time in a positive “evolutionary” way.

Theme 2: Managing Pressure and Anxiety

Throughout the discussion and in response to both vignettes, members of the SLT demonstrated awareness and consideration of the need to manage in ways that minimise pressure and anxiety across the whole organisation, especially in times of change. Sensitivity in this regard was illustrative of leaders’ shared understandings that the disruption brought about by change can be destabilising and can impact negatively on outcomes for students, teachers, professional teams, and the school’s relationship with the wider community. A key identifiable priority in the talk is the smooth transition to the new system. This is demonstrated early in the conversation in exchanges involving DP1, D1, and D2:

D1 - So I think we’ve just got to be … I suppose we need it’s a bit of a campaign with our staff to talk about how their language and what they’re talking about in the classroom … how they’re emphasising it really needs to be about deep learning. Yes there is an external exam at the end of it but it really has to be about learning for the sake of learning and that sort of thing so I think starting with educating our teachers around language as well. We definitely need a lot of support systems for the students

DP1 - I think it’s the communication too. We’ve had a system where we have had so much assessment. Assessment has been pulled back to only one piece a term for the students

D1 - But worth more

DP1 - Worth more but you know they’re in … they’re not

D2 - Different pressure
DP1 - That sort of thing and I guess the pressure continues to culminate to that end of … that very final end of year with the external exam but I’d like to think that it’s different, yes, and in time after a few years the students might see “ok this is how it’s done” and with reduced assessment it won’t be a “thing”.

This exchange is built upon in later exchanges, which see a sustained emphasis and interest in achieving a smooth transition, with discussion working to elicit core strategies to ensure this:

P - Which goes back to communication … the opportunity of it …

DP2 - I think the classroom practice and the language of the staff is very, very important because they’re the ones that will set the expectation

D2 - Yeah

DP2 - and if they externalise you know if they externalise their stress, then everything gets ratcheted up so it’s quite a simple thing if we can get them to check what they say ah but with something that is new that they don’t know, the natural tendency is to probably externalise it

D1 - Yep

D2 - And [D1], you mentioned the media side of it and I think it’s how we actually um try to take that sting out it internally because the media love a ramp up of an issue of stress under these kind of exams which they can grab so again it’s how do we calm it within here and not allow the external to drive

DP2 - I suppose leading on from that as far as classroom practice is concerned, emphasising that rote learning isn’t a bad thing … memorisation isn’t a bad thing … all of the things that we used to do that they haven’t done and I think that also fuels into the use of mobile phones while they are studying … the discipline of what they are doing while they are studying and just the hard slog is just something they are going to have to learn … we’re going to have to teach. Teach remember rather than forget

DP1 - And that’s going to be really good because instant gratification and things so could turn around in their minds … in their lives. They’ve got this whole two years really to build towards that final exam and that brings in that study skills influence and how we’ll have to, in classes, really change the way they look at that

D1 - It needs to be more overtly taught. That’s a big thing I notice interstate and overseas with study skills. It’s more overtly taught there. They have had a need to remember it for longer that they have had to in Queensland. It’s not only the remembering, it’s mind maps, it’s talking things onto mobile phones and playing it back at night as you go to sleep. Whatever technique it is, it’s more overtly taught. I remember students in my classes having … for three months lead up. You know trying to strengthen their hand because of course, they
sat three-hour exams so it’s things like that we could now need to be more overt … you know … these are some options you could take to support you.

P - … as you say, it is stressing that they’re different but there are opportunities ... less assessment, rote learning is not a bad thing, but the main thing that is coming out to me is managing it, dare I say it, almost top down so that we are conveying confidence and that requires a certain amount of preservation from the people leading it which means that the teachers who are implementing it so we are really talking about making sure that teachers have a good understanding of it. So if we talk about what steps next given that we’ve got all of these recommendations and we are quite clear about what we need to do it’s a lot about managing more about managing morale at this point and this comes through education … the opportunities. People don’t like change … so what would you say are next steps in that regard?

In framing the conversation with the introduction of the first vignette, P foregrounds the disruptive potential of the system change and the inherent pressures and “challenges” that such change represents through the use of the word “cope”. After signposting a desire to concentrate the conversation on systems and professional learning, P poses the consideration to the group of how the school is “actually going to cope … with some of these challenges”. The connotations of the word choice “cope” suggest an understanding by P of the inherent pressures and anxieties and imply a dualistic priority of developing systems to effectively manage the required workflows resultant of the change alongside the organisational culture and members’ attitudinal response to the challenges the change brings. Additionally, in framing the discussion in this way, P establishes the challenge of managing the pressures and anxieties associated with the change as an important consideration for the team and a significant aspect of the ongoing work of the leadership group in leading through the period of change.

Members of the SLT identify a number of strategic considerations for attention in managing pressure and anxiety. Early in the exploration of the first vignette, P’s position is taken up and explored when D1 identifies the anxiety inherent in a system involving externalised assessment for both educators and students and, by extension, parents, along with the external pressures brought about by media interest and scrutiny. The key strategic solution of control over, and regulation through, the messaging relating to new system learning and assessment emerges repeatedly in the talk of the group. It is suggested that communication and the use of calm and consistent messaging be used to normalise the experience. Contributions by DP1, D1, and D2 position the group to consider a move away
from comparing systems (the old and the new) as being helpful, implying that a clean pivot to the new system that moves staff and students to an understanding of “this is how it’s done” will help to alleviate feelings of pressure and anxiety. This is positively picked up by P who, in stating, “that goes back to communication – the opportunity of it”, identifies and positions the group to see communication as an important opportunity to achieve this.

High value of support for staff is shown through discursive exchanges of interactants throughout the meeting, with support taking multiple forms. The form of support for staff referred to most frequently by meeting participants is professional learning. SLT members identify the importance of working with staff with respect to language and emphasis, along with language and classroom practice, to minimise pressure and anxiety for students and to help with building confidence and familiarity with the requirements of the new system. It is acknowledged that the externalisation of stress by teachers is a risk. This is evidenced explicitly in a contribution by DP2 who comments, “… I think the classroom practice and the language of the staff is very, very important because they’re the ones that will set the expectation … and if they externalise, you know, if they externalise their stress, then everything gets ratcheted up so it’s quite a simple thing if we can get them to check what they say … ah but with something that is new that they don’t know, the natural tendency is to probably externalise it”.

Later in the conversation, D2 picks up the thread of teacher anxiety by commenting, “with the Directors and their staff and the Heads of Department for them to acknowledge with the staff that it’s ok within ourselves to be uncertain”. Here, D2 positions the group to consider the need for SLT and for middle leaders within the organisation to acknowledge the legitimate and authentic feelings of teaching staff and their vulnerability in negotiating the complexities and uncertainties of change within supportive professional environments of organisational teams. The inputs that follow from all SLT members, both explicitly and implicitly, signify understanding and agreement and build upon this idea of including consideration of students and a “huge parent engagement piece” to support and build confidence across the organisation, thus allaying concerns and using clear and timely communication to build certainty and actively work to alleviate anxiety about the new system:

P - … and then because the students at this point aren’t part of the conversation yet. Because it hasn’t come to be yet. We’re still talking about a year or two out but getting those teachers so we’re not projecting it. Sorry D2, what were you going to say?
D2 - I was going to say I think it also with the Directors and their staff and the Heads of Department for them to acknowledge with the staff that it’s ok within ourselves to be uncertain.

P - Yes

D2 - but it’s the idea of not projecting that out beyond their own planning and working and have that anxiety if you like about how do I do this? This is new for me – within their department but it’s really important that they have an understanding that doesn’t get projected beyond that.

D1 - They do have an opportunity though as long as they’re not conveying any anxiety to the students; to say to the students “actually we’re all working together now for this new system” so it’s … so they can reframe their language in that sense so “actually it’s all of us against the system in a sense” so it’s there is that but not “I’m nervous because I don’t know what’s coming” …

D2 - Mmm

P - Yes

D1 – It’s more about “we’re in this together, we’re learning every step together and we’re going to get there together”

D2 - Because that’s one of the big strengths in the systems from down south is that idea “it’s us against them” – we’re playing together in this against the system as opposed to being “well hold on, I’m the examiner” which changes the relationship a bit.

D1 - Yeah

DP1 - And I think there’s … there will be a huge parent engagement piece with all of this because that message has to also be a message that’s at home – so that parents aren’t ramping it up too so the more comfortable parents feel about what’s going on at school, therefore the better the messages we give to them then the better it will be for the students – hearing similar messages at home and at school and doing their thing.

DP2 - And if we do it from as soon as they walk in the gate so if we try to decouple anxiety from assessment so assessment is actually a friend – not something to fear. It will be hard but if we can get that message across as they go through the school then hopefully, we’ll have more of a friendly approach towards assessment than possibly an anxiety-ridden one.

P - And I always find it quite remarkable how trusting parents are. So the anxiety really is a lot of teachers and how they’re feeling. I am always absolutely astonished by how trusting parents are and how easily they are … their needs are met just long as, as you say, there is good communication, information … timely information right before they come into the school, trust us – we know what we are doing. I think preserving that is going to be really
important but also getting onto your point there ah D1 about us versus the system in the same way that collegiality of being in it together is a great opportunity. So with next steps, it sound to be that a lot is to do with our staff, lots to do with communication how we move forward so ahh what are the opportunities in all of this that we can leverage? Professional development?

In this sequence of turns, the SLT members convey value in leader actions and school-wide approaches that support attitudinal and emotional regulation and minimise or avoid harmful or damaging projections of uncertainty or negativity. In this way, SLT members collectively support organisational cohesion and a strategic intent to manage and lead through the period of change, negotiating pivots in organisational practices smoothly. The talk shows that members of the SLT understand this work to be a shared endeavour.

Another key understanding demonstrated in the talk of the group, the theme of time, has been discussed as a discrete theme but has relevance to the theme of managing pressure and anxiety also. The talk shows that meeting participants understand that the group’s core educational aspirations, including the notion of decoupling anxiety from assessment, require consistent attention over time. This is explicitly contributed to in the comments made by DP2 who speaks to the effort required to “decouple anxiety from assessment so assessment is actually a friend – not something to fear” and that this is work that must be carried out over time, to “get that message across as they go through school” in order to accomplish the desired outcome or a “friendly approach towards assessment [rather than] an anxiety-ridden one”. P responds immediately after this contribution by DP2, emphasising the importance of the role of educators in mitigating anxiety and feelings of pressure with respect to the new system and the implications that this has for all, across and beyond the organisation.

Prompted by P to consider what opportunities exist for the leadership team to “leverage”, the talk of the group progresses with emphasis on the need for the leadership team to privilege consistency, to concentrate on implementing practical systems and strategies, and to take time to “enculturate” teachers and students to ensure that there are “no surprises”:

D1 - Yes professional development. The other thing we have to consider is preparing the students – making their experience as a normal part of the school, setting them up so when they sit in these external exams, they’re the same as how we sit our internal exams so they have the same people around, the same environment, the same structure … you know, we’re looking at consistent templates and things like that so that it’s nothing … I know still on the day when you’re sitting the external exam, it does still have that heightened anxiety but if everything else is the same as what they’ve experienced in each – you know, that we build up in their journey through school, that’s also helping the students prepare that “actually this is
the same as what you’ve been doing for the last so many years building up”. So it’s getting them used to that as well.

DP2 - So exam invigilators might be a good idea
ALL - (laughter)
D2 - It might be a great idea!
P - And then we get to use that word … at every opportunity!
ALL - (laughter)
D1 - But it’s that consistent thing, you know, it’s … it sort of does help when you can say to the students “yes, it’s a bigger exam now, but it’s exactly the same … you’ve sat in exactly the same spot for the last three years … and the same people were around you … and your conditions were you just bring the same clear pencil case or whatever it may be … a water bottle” and it’s…. It’s that routine for them that …

DP2 - Mmm there’s no surprises!

The discussion continued:

P – Yeah … so we can, you know, enculturate the students and the teachers around the new systems and they’re the pretty basic, pragmatic things but that can take away a lot of the decision making for later on.

So then the next question for me is, given it’s due for implementation over the next two years, what would success look like because this is all about change management at the end of the day, you know – this is all about implementing change and as we know, the most profound change our school has experienced in decades, so if we got to the other end and so I am talking two years out, what would effective change management or success have looked like?

So in two years’ time, when we’ve got our first ATAR students through, the teachers have finally seen this new system, the OP is long gone, what do you think it would look like?

DP2 - Everything appeared easy
DP1 - Yes
ALL - (laughter)

DP2 - So, there was no trauma everybody was doing what they had to do, it all just happened, and we ask ourselves what we were all worried about.

The humour and the explicit and implicit agreement at this point in the discussion shows this to be a point of resonance and one of high value for the collective.

The talk shows that the SLT members identify the need to engender confidence in the approaches taken by the school, the importance of ensuring certainty, and ensuring that practical measures are in place to support this. In addition, discursive inputs reflect a need for
leaders to be clear about next best pedagogical practices and to position the group as having an important role to play in the school’s implementation of these, demonstrated in active statements as articulated, for example, by DP2 who asserts “… we’re going to have to teach. Teach remember rather than forget”. The inclusive use of “we” involves leaders in the work of teachers and the pedagogic pivots and systems determined to be of value in achieving positive outcomes in the new system. In responding to this input and the two that follow, P synthesises the points made and draws the team’s attention to a collaborative leadership practice to transition to the new system. In this way, P positions the group to understand the need for both leadership and management of the change, stating: “[the system] is different but there are opportunities … the main thing coming out to me is managing … so that we are conveying confidence and that requires a certain amount of preservation from the people leading it … so we are really talking about making sure that the teachers have a good understanding of it”. P connect this thinking clearly to support for teachers and managing pressure and anxiety, continuing with: “we are quite clear about what we need to do. It’s a lot about managing more – about managing morale at this point and this comes through education … the opportunities. People don’t like change”, before prompting the group to contribute with respect to “next steps”. This sequence of inputs emphasises the leadership responsibility to develop a strategic and sustainable approach to leading, managing, and supporting teachers to make a smooth and positive transition from the old system to the new.

DP2 is the first to respond and identifies the need for the SLT to work closely with middle leaders to ensure consistent messaging, driving change down through the organisation to the “grass roots” in a way that is collegial and collaborative.

The theme of managing pressure and anxiety was evidenced to a lesser extent in the talk of the group in response to the second vignette; however, what was said in relation to this theme was significant. In discussing the school’s school-wide approach to teaching and learning and opportunities to progress the school’s efforts in this area, SLT members turned their attention to learning environments within the school and how practice might be re-visioned or revitalised to optimise teaching and learning practices in light of the system change. Members of the SLT group showed, through their talk, a hesitance or reluctance to explore educational “push[es]”, with a clear preference for evidence-based practices with ongoing relevance and impact: “what works” (D1).

There is notable use of language by interactants to position other group members with respect to practice. DP2 uses anecdote in response to Vignette 2 to illustrate points, differentiating between DP2’s own learning experiences of “very crusty old teachers and grey
classrooms” to illustrate points of value about practices that arrested student attention and made classrooms “exciting” (DP2). There was some contradiction expressed by some interactants with respect to sentiments expressed in response to the first vignette. D2 and DP2 and P, for example, challenge the notions of consistency, routine, and familiarity expressed in response to Vignette 1, in favour of disruption to spark curiosity and engagement and to stimulate robust classroom cultures of interest, inquiry, and wonder. P and DP2 express strong value statements that teaching and learning “should be creative” (P) and “should be exciting” (DP2).

Whilst the members appear to be energised by the talk and interested in investigating the possibilities for the school, respect is demonstrated for teachers here in relation to leaders’ demonstrated understanding that decisions by leaders to introduce a new focus on practice can be confronting for teachers. At a time when teachers are already saturated by change, there is evidence in the talk of a need to preserve and protect stability for teachers, to be clear about the purpose of exploring or experimenting with practice in this way, the need to be supportive, and the need for teachers to be able to “opt in”. P invites the group to consider whether it is something that is worthwhile pursuing, clearly expressing the need for an organic, natural opportunity for teachers to explore by asserting a desire not to operate as a “dictation from on high” and suggests the possibility of engaging a consultant for the group to consider. SLT members’ interest in not placing undue pressure on teachers is illustrated through talk of historically successful approaches to implementing pedagogical shifts being ones that were supported with professional learning experiences, the engagement of consultants, and the establishment of “champions” to build interest, familiarity, understanding, and the intrinsic desire for staff to be involved.

In summary, the SLT group is positioned by P to understand the leadership work of establishing systems and relevant professional learning as important for managing pressure and anxiety as the organisation undergoes change to the new system. SLT members discursively develop a position that management of the pressure and anxiety is an important part of the work of the team and that this would be achieved through:

1. Clarity and timely communication of information;
2. Establishing familiar routines and processes;
3. Modelled confidence and surety by senior staff; and
4. Ongoing professional support for staff.
Theme 3: Building Trust

The building of trust emerges from the data as a third significant theme and is evidenced in two important ways; firstly, the way that trust emerges in the talk within the SLT group as a means of accomplishing cohesion and goal alignment within and beyond the leadership group, and secondly, the way that the talk of the group addresses the topic of trust as a valued dimension of the work within the organisation. In other words, it refers to how the talk of the group demonstrates their understanding that trust is important and what leadership action can be taken to secure and sustain trust across the organisation. This focus on trust is evidenced explicitly and implicitly, and in a multidimensional way, through the discursive work of the group.

In the opening turn of the meeting, P positions the group to understand that the purpose of the meeting is for interactants to work as a focus group to participate in what is termed a “brainstorm”. P’s language move here, at the outset, reflects both intellectual and interactional trust. Intellectual trust is foregrounded by framing the meeting as one wherein participants’ professional knowledge, insights, and professional skills are valued. Whilst the construction of the group includes three levels of positional leadership authority, P, DP, and D’s shared use of the inclusive pronoun “we” in describing how the “working group” was brought together to participate in “something of a brainstorm” suggests a flattening of any traditional hierarchical structure and a positioning of the group as equal participants. Accordingly, intellectual respect and trust is established implicitly, along with a climate of trust for the leadership work that happens within the communicative space of the meeting.

As the opening sequence continues, D1 responds with an utterance that “… we have to be careful of the language in the classroom…” D1 includes the SLT along with teachers in this professional responsibility which flags the importance of careful language but does not elaborate in a way that would suggest a lack of professional trust. P overlaps with utterances of agreement, audibly encouraging engagement in the discussion and conveying agreement with the previous utterance. Here, P’s agreement serves a dual purpose of both reinforcing the climate of trust within the SLT and reinforcing the importance of holding professional trust in teachers and SLT members beyond the context of the meeting. In this way, P reminds the team of the need to “take care” of their language choices as professionals and thus remain aligned to the organisational goals and priorities in undertaking their professional work in the face of change.
D1 continues the turn, noting the need to run “a bit of a campaign with our staff”. This may be interpreted to reflect a limitation to intellectual trust of staff, which may be seen to be reinforced through the use of plural pronouns in the phrasing: “to talk about how their language and what they’re talking about in the classroom … how they’re emphasising it really needs to be about deep learning”. Here, D1 differentiates between the leadership group and the academic staff. The utterance is not framed in a negative way and so is positioning the SLT group to be interested in how they might be proactive in supporting staff through a form of “campaign” to support the work of educators in valuable, positive ways, thus demonstrating a position that is interested in developing pragmatic trust and interactional trust with staff. This claim is most strongly connoted through the use of the word “with” and the emphasised, articulated need to run the campaign “with our staff”.

The talk pertaining to the theme of trust shows leaders’ understanding of the pressure the change brings to the experience of teachers, students, and parents. Utterances show an interest in the student perspective and a commitment by participants to ensuring that the student perspective is included in the group’s consideration of the student experience. The attitudinal position of leaders is one that is respectful of interpersonal relationships. This respect is evidenced in utterances like those in the following sequence of turns:

DP1 - That sort of thing and I guess the pressure continues to culminate to that end of … that very final end of year with the external exam but I’d like to think that it’s different, yes, and in time after a few years the students might see “ok this is how it’s done” and with reduced assessment it won’t be a “thing”.

D2 - I suppose that those going through it won’t understand reduced assessment because they haven’t had … to them “oh gee I’ve got this assessment”

DP1 - Mmm

D2 - And others beforehand looking back might say “you’ve only got these pieces. I had …” They’ve not experienced that.

The use of inclusive pronouns is a common language move in the talk that includes leaders as active participants in the change. This is demonstrated again by DP2 who asserts: “we’re going to have to teach. Teach remember, not forget”. The positioning of the leadership group in the work is picked up and reinforced by DP1 also, who comments that “we’ll in classes, really look at the way we look at that”. Inclusive utterances of this nature are subtly reflective of intersubjective trust and establish the work of the meeting and the broader work of school leaders and teachers as a common and shared objective, a shared challenge.
Following a sequence of interactions, P takes a turn that acknowledges the preceding utterances and picks up, implicitly, the theme of trust. In this way, P articulates the importance of leader actions where leaders are “managing … so that we are conveying confidence and that requires a certain amount of preservation for the people leading it … a lot about managing morale at this point…”. P then observes:

P - So as you say, it is stressing that they’re different but there are opportunities. So less assessment, rote learning is not a bad thing, but the main thing that is coming out to me is managing it, dare I say it, almost top down so that we are conveying confidence and that requires a certain amount of preservation from the people leading it which means that the teachers who are implementing it so we are really talking about making sure that teachers have a good understanding of it. So if we talk about what steps next given that we’ve got all of these recommendations and we are quite clear about what we need to do it’s a lot about managing more about managing morale at this point and this comes through education … the opportunities. People don’t like change … so what would you say are next steps in that regard?

This utterance is dynamic and synergistic, with P using the utterance “so” to signpost a reformulation of prior remarks for emphasis. P positions the leadership group to appreciate the extent of active leader engagement required, alluding to the significant energy involved and the need to work with a high degree of emotional intelligence to manage “morale”. P’s turn is reflective of intellectual, interpersonal, and pragmatic trust – both of and within the leadership group, and in their work in the organisation more broadly. P’s explicit acknowledgement of the “preservation” required for “the people leading [change]” reflects understanding of the importance of leaders in ensuring their approach is one that is sustainable over time, is respectful of the effort of leaders within the group, and is caring for the team. Although the utterance is a passing one and one that is embedded within a wider synthesis of a trust-building approach, it is an articulated understanding and acknowledgement that reinforces the climate of trust within the SLT group.

DP2 connects and extends upon P’s thinking, catching the comment about morale and redirecting the attention of the leadership group to organisational structures and, in particular, to the consideration of middle leaders’ work. DP2 reflects high professional regard for curriculum middle leaders and makes the strong assertion that “we can’t be top down because it won’t work”. Here, trust in middle leaders to collaboratively problematise the challenges of the system change is shown, and it is identified that the SLT can be removed from this work; that middle leaders and professional teams can be trusted to enact positive change at what
DP2 terms the “grass roots” level in classrooms. This is evidence of interactional, intellectual, and pragmatic trust. DP2 continues by reflecting: “if it’s coming up from within, that’s something” suggesting that for leaders to build and hold trust in middle leaders and teams, enabling change to drive up through the organisation, is a positive and desirable outcome.

P responds affirmatively and positions the SLT group to consider a simultaneous approach wherein, concurrent to the work occurring through middle leaders and in classrooms, the SLT group engage in positive posturing, maintaining a strong position by: “modelling it … so that we’re confident and calm and our language is assured”. It can be observed that P is positioning the group to understand the need for the group to lead in a way that ensures depth and sustenance of trust at the leadership level and down through the organisation.

The attention of the group turns back to middle leaders with D2 articulating the importance of middle leaders allowing permission for educators to be free to experience and express natural responses to change in a safe collegial environment. In this way, D2 adds to the discussion and reinforces the valuable work of the leadership group and, by extension, of middle leaders, to build climates of trust within organisational teams throughout the organisation. The notion of climates of trust is extended to include teachers and students explicitly by D1, who comments on the relational opportunity afforded by the new system. D1 comments on the nature of the relationship between teachers and students in the new system as being one where they “are in this together. We’re learning every step together and we’re going to get there together”. This comment is met with agreement by D2 who also identifies the positive relational shift that the new system affords, suggesting it is one where teachers and students are “playing together in this against the system”. Both articulations make salient the priority of interpersonal trust with repetition of the word “together” connoting strength and unity in a shared educational undertaking. The language usage is framing change in a positive way and emphasising the significance of relational work in meeting the challenges of change and adapting to a new way of doing things.

DP1 continues the consideration of the impact of the system change on groups within the community by explicitly signposting the need for “a parent engagement piece”, articulating a leadership intent to ensure parental comfort, and consequently student comfort, through clear and common messaging and a positive partnership among the school, parents or caregivers, and students. This is demonstrative of a working combination of trust elements – pragmatic trust, intellectual trust, and interpersonal trust. DP2 uses an inclusive pronoun to
describe the “hoped for” outcomes of this work, commenting: “hopefully we’ll have more of a friendly approach towards assessment”. This utterance and the use of the inclusive “we” articulated in immediate succession to DP1’s comment addressing the three-way educational partnership extends the inclusive thinking and responsibilities and reflects an inclusive position. Implicitly, there is a combination of interpersonal, pragmatic, and intellectual trust at work. Immediately following this turn, trust is explicitly denoted in the talk of P who makes a positive utterance about parental trust, which is described as “quite remarkable” but P notes explicitly that this is conditional upon “good communication … timely information and [parental belief that] we know what we are doing”. Here, P makes a value statement about leader practices that engender trust, which are seen in the talk to include interactional trust, intellectual trust, and pragmatic trust. The turn is continued with P noting: “I think preserving that [trust] is going to be really important”, positioning the SLT to understand that attention to practices or actions that work to build trust is an important factor in leaders’ work to manage and lead through change. P’s use of heightened, superlative, and high-modality language in this utterance through the use of words like “remarkable” and “astonished” makes the point an emphatic one, drawing the attention of the SLT sharply to the significance of the trust and the value P has attributed to it. P synthesises the preceding points, naming contributions explicitly and drawing upon the point of collegiality; of “being in it together”, which is framed explicitly as an opportunity. The group is strongly positioned, by the length, substance, and modality of the turn, to understand trust as a core priority of the work of the group.

Following this, the talk of the group shows an implicit acceptance of interactants with respect to P’s positioning and a pivot in thinking to how this might be accomplished in practical ways to achieve consistency and stability and to engender confidence in students, teachers, and parents. The talk shows agreement in principle to a “no surprises” approach and reflects leader values that espouse pragmatic and intellectual trust. P notes the practice and value of early system implementation to allow time to “enculturate students and teachers”, connoting understanding that the establishment of trust is not automatic but, rather, is built over time.

In the introduction and framing of the second vignette, P uses inclusive language in drawing in the recent relevant endeavours of the organisation. The vignette is used in an organic way and applied as a practical and engaging focus group exercise. At the outset of the second part of the meeting, P uses inclusive language to engage and focus the group and to sustain the climate of trust as the context of the discussion is established. At the end of the
second introductory turn, P poses the question to the group: “What are the opportunities to embrace this – or not?” Here P opens the discussion and explicitly signifies the opportunity for debate wherein interactants are provided with an explicit cue permitting challenge, robust examination, and discursive investigation of the topic under discussion. P utilises humour through emphasis and commentary on common shared experience to lighten the mood and to shift the conversational tone, manoeuvring the tone of the talk to one that supports the denoted articulation of a desire for debate and reinforces the climate of trust:

P - So, of course, as we know, the school has invested a great deal of thought and planning … rigorous research in implementing a school-wide approach to teaching and learning. We have looked at school-wide pedagogy, we’ve looked at cultures of thinking so if we look at that approach. So essentially what happened is we got a collaborative team of teachers who were deeply interested years of trying to marry new research with our existing ethos and philosophy so trying to find an authentic, organic evolution but one that’s certainly not airy-fairy but deeply embedded in empirical research and evidence. As you know, a paper was put out that was prepared and delivered to staff. It articulated our philosophical position and there were a whole lot of people who were deeply interested. Some were cynical but as you know, we had a fantastic group of after the first professional development sessions that thought it was fantastic … thought it was exciting. We know who those people are, and they have committed to participating in action enquiry research so they have been meeting a couple of times a term; they’re working in cross-curriculum teams. As you know, we’ve had external coaches and facilitators. It’s been a really energising and exciting undertaking and certainly we’ve made a lot of good progress but it’s now we’ve got to a certain place and people are asking where to next; what happens next. Interestingly, as you all know, some of our Year 9 students visited a nearby school, had a look at different classrooms and came back all agog at the aesthetic of the classroom. They thought it was absolutely fantastic. They said they had amazing interactive spaces, they had this vibrant furniture, the walls were alive. There were posters – you can imagine the words of the students. There were posters, the student work was displayed everywhere. Whiteboards with coloured whiteboard markers etc. and the teachers obviously who took the students next door mentioned that that they like the fact that there were posters with subject-related content, the guiding inquiry questions surrounding them, things that were specifically looking at learning and study skills. So we’ve got this little group that have come back … they’re all excited. The teachers in particular were very interested. I guess our question here is given that some of us have been a bit cynical in the past, we’ve all been through De Bono’s hats and all of those things that sit there laminated on the wall and no one ever looks that them! … if we put our cynicism to one side, what are the opportunities here for us, if we look at it with fresh eyes to enhance or improve our existing
learning spaces for the benefit of the students but obviously for the benefit of teachers as well. I guess this goes back a little bit to ownership of classrooms, given that we’ve got a new building; new classrooms coming online, what are the opportunities for us to embrace some of this – or not.

The talk that follows is reflective of intersubjective trust. DP2 alludes to work done, including the visiting of classrooms with tools to support teachers’ practice. DP2’s talk reflects an interest in teachers’ work and in learning spaces and comments on the experience of noticing artefacts of learning and subsequently appreciating a culture of learning afforded by spending time in these spaces:

DP2 - It’s a really interesting thing because a few years ago, I went around to every classroom in the school during the holidays. I told you (P) this at the time

P - Yes, yes

DP2 - ... and I put the hundred questions to help with various types of thinking. But what I found interesting was; even though the classrooms were empty, you got an incredible feeling of what that classroom was like even what was there. I told you that at the time – it was really fascinating. So even when there wasn’t much there, you just might see something on the teacher’s desk that reminds you of something they have done or something that might be on the wall. I think there is a spirit of learning in classrooms, even though they might not be cluttered with stuff. That’s really interesting. I don’t really know what goes on there. The other thing that is really important too is that artefacts of learning can be online now. It would be interesting to see how those junctures marry … but having artefacts of learning somewhere as evidence of learning is a good thing – but not if they’re stale and getting tatty on the wall and just underused.

The positive tone of DP2’s commentary reflects professional respect and interest that stems from experience. The discursive approach to share insights from professional experience is continued by DP2 who uses an anecdote about classroom experience to substantiate a point in a way that honours the classroom experience of teachers in decision-making about the same. This is an example of intersubjective trust. Whilst the trust is not established between leaders and teachers explicitly, it is perhaps more powerful because it is present in a space where teachers are not: a meeting of the leadership team. An attitude of trust has been established as a means of managing the agency that teachers bring to the imminent changes.

The talk continues on the topic of the use of classroom spaces and D1 opens the consideration to be inclusive of the experience of teachers and also of students. D1 observes:
We still have tightness in that though. We do still have shared classrooms. We aren’t at a point and no school is where … there are not many rooms where one person owns it so what we find is we move in and out and we have to compromise with the other teachers in that room – especially with beginning teachers and other teachers who may have a class that is particularly difficult, they might find that a certain layout works to help them work with that class whereas you take on a senior class and you use little groups or pods or whatever would work more efficiently so it’s that time. Do you opt for every lesson or do you have one general setup that works for all classes. It’s hard to know. Do you have a setup for three months or a month and then change it around. But I’ve got to work with you and how do you like to your classroom whereas I like to interact with and that’s subject specific. You talk to the students and they talk about spaces in the library where there’s been as other spaces where they can break out and do that and that’s great for certain subjects Maths Oh no … no, no, no. They want to sit around. It’s how they perceive they learn in different subjects as well. So it’s a combination.

The talk of the group reflects an interest in leaders to be consultative and to set up a “trial”:

D1 - We could ask for a few teachers that were keen to trial it … you can get a loan of different things like that and do some sample areas and on a … set up a few different scenarios or situations in classrooms for the next five weeks and anyone can swap or walk in or try and explore.

D2 - And that’s model that has worked quite well here. With cultures of thinking, everyone had some exposure, a few people then took it on and worked in their departments and it spread and we’ve done it for the learning platform and the champions there and how that’s helped.

DP2 - It always works that way.

D1 - That’s the premise. Get a few people really excited and then yeah

DP1 - And see it.

I guess as teachers you are given a classroom. You’ve spent your time focusing on what you’re doing in your classroom rather than what the classroom looks like and the history has been “thou shalt not touch the classroom” so if that’s the case, it’s probably not necessarily a thing that teachers [have] as an option so you need to have an opportunity to experience it so I think that’s a great idea, D1.

And who was it who because did do that when we had this strategy day because we asked the students “where do you like to learn … which buildings, which classrooms and why” and
overwhelmingly, they loved the library. They loved the fish tanks. They loved organic and movable things and also they loved fish tanks …

They also love the safety of the teacher. They all say they do love that safety of that classroom space so it is interesting how a good teacher sets that up.

D2 conceptualises an approach that has proved successful, being one that is open to all with “exposure” or professional learning opportunities for all staff followed by the option for teachers to engage further, thus establishing “champions” who drive change through relationships. P invites the group to identify potential challenges. D1 notes the need to “not make everyone feel like they have to do it”. This can be interpreted as an understanding of the pressure that teachers can experience, as explored earlier, but also demonstrates awareness of the social contract and the need to act in ways that build trust and sustain trust in professional relationships. P picks up on this point, reflecting value in an approach that achieves action whilst maintaining trust by asking for people who are interested and opening safe and supported opportunities for teachers to refine practice.

The group shows a desire not to impose decisions, but rather to create opportunity for stakeholders to engage and participate in practical ways, evidencing planning that is respectful of relationships, the practical and professional expertise of teachers, and the valuable insight of students. The exchange progresses with the following utterances:

P - You know I always tell that story … it was my birthday dinner a few years ago and it was at a restaurant where they had red carpets. It was a complete blackout. Not red carpets – red curtains and soft carpet on the floor and what I found was it was so relaxing and you were not distracted by anyone beyond your immediate company and you know with modern architecture, you sit in a coffee shop and you’re always “oh who’s that … oh that’s interesting … who’s that coming in now”. You find that you’re constantly distracted by movement. And for the kids too … everything on their screens is fast moving and it’s all so hyped that I think those cosseted blocked out experiences are probably very rare in their lives. So we agree it’s something worth exploring. If we were to explore it, your suggestion, D1, was to get some early adopters. It is giving permission, really. An announcement that you can explore this and you can ask for resources because that’s another thing. Teachers are all so humble and you know, very reluctant to ask us to spend money upon them … so getting some early adopters … maybe getting a consultant who is fun … someone to actually to lead through … we could actually have a little trial room a classroom or something

D1 - That’s what I think … two or three classroom scenarios that are different

D2 - They could book into different rooms … “oh I would like to try that one now” … and that’s fine.
P - What are the challenges to think about in advance?
D1 - To not make everyone feel like they have to do it
DP2 - That difference is ok … and that it is an evolutionary thing … and see how it goes.

It is an approach that demonstrates the desire of the SLT group to maintain interpersonal, interactional, intellectual, and pragmatic trust. P uses anecdote as a tool to illustrate key points and to build a point that reflects back the reasoning for the changes the team is considering. The interactants, through their responses, show that a relational approach to leading through change is one that is highly valued.

**Theme 4: Building Organisational Capacity Through Professional Learning**

Professional learning (PL) is consistently raised as a means for achieving identified organisational priorities and as a solution for overcoming identified organisational challenges by interactants in the SLT meeting. PL is shown in the talk to take on many forms and is acknowledged in the talk of the group to occur both formally and informally.

P foregrounds PL as a valuable tool for change management, positioning the group to understand that consideration of professional learning will be a valuable and important component of the work of the meeting. P makes this clear at the end of the introductory turn by signposting an interest in the talk of the group, functioning as a brainstorming working group about what “systems [the leadership group] might put in place” and “what professional learning might be required” to “cope … with some of [the] challenges of the new system”. The inclusion of these identified considerations near the close of the turn serves as a structuring tool for the talk and makes clear P’s intended focus for leaders’ thinking and discussion in the meeting. In this way, P establishes PL as a strategic priority for the organisation to undertake as the school progresses through the process of system change.

In the sequence that follows, language and communication are identified and agreed to by interactants to be a key focus for PL. This concept is introduced by D1 who suggests that PL with respect to language (how change is talked into being) needs to be the first key focus. D1 suggests that the attention of the leadership group start with “educating our teachers around language”, a point which is picked up by P in a subsequent synthesising utterance, later in this sequence, identifying the opportunity for dedicated work on communication. DP2 picks up this thread in the next turn, with emphasis, commenting that “classroom practice and the language of the staff is very, very important because they’re the ones that will set the expectation.” This is a short turn but one in which the responsibility of
teachers is emphasised, along with the inherent value of prioritising both classroom practice and language for professional learning. This is made salient in a way that aligns with the synthesis of P and lends agreement to the preceding turns. DP2 continues and strengthens the positioning by suggesting that PL with respect to language usage by teachers in classroom practice could be a key lever to reducing anxiety to system change, reflecting conditionally that “if they externalise their stress then everything gets ratcheted up so it’s quite a simple thing if we can get them to check what they say.” This is a powerful dialogic sequence which shows PL to be a core part of the change agenda.

The discussion continues with emphasis on productive and supportive approaches to managing the change and to professional learning. There is agreement that the work of leaders moving through the change process involves strong messaging from the group to the staff about good practice. P identifies the leadership action required and frames this as needing to be instructional in nature, asserting that the leadership group need to “[make] sure that teachers have a good understanding of it”. In addition, P identifies the need for leaders to “[manage] morale”, suggesting that “this comes through education … the opportunities of it.” P continues this turn with a statement and a question: “People don’t like change. So what do you say are the next steps in that regard?”. Here, P is positioning the team to consider solutions for PL to increase and improve teachers’ level of professional comfort with the change. In the next turn, DP2 presents middle leadership as an important avenue for implementing or supporting PL of staff in smaller, professional working team environments. DP2 positions the group to consider the opportunity that PL through middle leaders affords: a collegial and collaborative approach “around their tables” in familiar working teams. There is a brief exchange between DP2 and P that shows that both agree that “top down” leadership is not effective, but an alternative approach that models confidence and assuredness is important. In raising the notion of modelling, P foregrounds the importance of leaders’ active engagement in PL work.

The discussion continues and PL is again raised as an important tool for managing the uncertainty of change. P synthesises the conversation and bring the focus back to the overarching consideration of professional learning with an explicit focalising question: “What are the opportunities in all this that we can leverage? Professional development?” P reinforces the notion that PL is a lever in managing change. D1 expresses agreement in the proceeding turn that PL is needed but does not elaborate or specify what PL opportunities may be helpful or relevant. While the specific possibilities are not explored at this time, the emphasis on PL throughout the discussion shows it to be a significant consideration for
action in the ongoing work of the group. P uses the word “enculturation” in talking about making decisions and setting up systems and the need to have time for staff to become familiarised and enculturated. The connotations of this word suggest that PL is not limited to formalised sessions: presentations or workshops offered internally or by external provision. Rather, the term “enculturation” signifies understanding of contextually rich learning over time and implies that such learning, to gain understanding of the culture or “the way things are, or the way things are done” in a particular setting, happens organically through experience and through both formal and informal learning. This is a gentle approach to change that enables a smooth transition.

In discussing hypothetically what successful change might look like, DP2 comments that “there was no trauma. Everybody was doing what they had to do. It all just happened, and we ask ourselves what we were all worried about”. The group responds with laughter, with agreement implicit in the good-humoured responses that follow in quick succession. This sequence suggests that the group believes that leaders’ “worry” and subsequent planning for PL that engages everybody is a productive means of achieving change in a way that allows for a successful transition to the new system that alleviates the problems of organisational anxiety that might otherwise have interfered with the process.

In discussing the first vignette, interactants’ dialogic exchanges about PL for change concentrated on PL targeting communication and, in particular, on teachers’ use of language in classroom practice. The talk of the group showed a high level of interest in ensuring that calm, measured, and consistent messaging occurs across the institution. The consistent use of the inclusive pronouns “we” and “our” in participants’ utterances showed leaders’ beliefs that the PL needs to involve leaders, although the nature of leaders’ involvement is not articulated or explored by the group. Additionally, no explicit suggestions or particular PL strategies were put forward by the group, with the exception of DP2’s mention of the strategy of engaging middle leaders to facilitate the development of teachers in existing professional teams.

The second vignette featured a stronger topical emphasis on teaching and learning. In introducing this second vignette into the discussion, P adapts it for more contextually authentic use. In this way, P narrows the focus by mentioning specific approaches, including the production of a paper to articulate the school’s philosophical position and the provision of whole-staff professional development sessions. The language from P in introducing the vignette and describing the strategic action taken is positive and P praises staff who have actively engaged, describing them as a “fantastic group” who found the initiatives “really
exciting” and were “committed to action enquiry projects”. P uses the scenario to position the group for a discussion about the improvement of learning spaces.

In discussing use of classroom spaces in response to the second vignette, DP2 describes noticing practice through cultural artefacts when visiting every room to install a poster of “100 questions for thinking” – an artefact of valued practice. The talk evidences this action as another strategy for PL, an approach that builds a culture of practice through the addition of visible professional artefacts to learning spaces that may be interpreted as a subtle form of instructional leadership. DP2 continues the turn, noting: “you just might see something on the teacher’s desk that reminds you of something that they might have done … I think there is a spirit of learning in classrooms”. Evidence of learning is explicitly described by DP2 to be “a good thing”. In preceding and subsequent utterances, interactants articulate what they believe to be low-impact practices, including learning spaces that are underused or learning artefacts as familiar “decoration” on the wall, connoting a desire for purposeful, high-impact practices that spark interest and curiosity. P asserts that “there is a chance to do things a bit differently” and questions the group: “what would be the next steps … would you get someone, a consultant, to come in … a person comes in and sits with you as opposed to going to a presentation…. Do you get someone in who is engaging and interesting and comes around to [Teacher name] in Maths and says “Hi, [Name], have you thought about …” P’s turn reflects the importance they place in engaging and generative professional learning. P’s repetition of the possibility of engaging a consultant and illustration of how they might engage with staff positions the group to consider what the learning might look like. D1 responds with a suggestion for a trial, implicitly accepting the group’s positioning by P wherein the interactants were encouraged to consider concrete examples, including strong positioning on the possibility of engaging a “fun and engaging” consultant. D1’s suggestion of a trial meets with explicit agreement from other members of the group, including D2 who reflects that the model “has worked quite well here”, citing two previous projects where “everyone had exposure” which was followed up with focused professional learning when “a few people then took it on”. D2 expresses the concept of “champions” and alludes to past success with PL offered in this way. Although a passing note, the mention of champions suggests that PL can occur in a natural, conversational way with “champions” sharing practice with others, both formally and in informal professional conversations with colleagues. This is picked up, affirmed, and reinforced by DP2 who, in the following turn, observes “it always works that way”. P synthesises the discussion and signposts the action
points to follow the positive discussion, including engaging a consultant and running a trial for interested “early adopters”.

The talk in response to the second scenario is positive and interested in supporting teachers’ work with interesting and engaging PL opportunities, offered via a variety of modes and formats. The work of the leadership team at this point of the discussion is quite fast and energised in pace and leads to clear and decisive action points. In summary, PL is a strongly represented theme and is shown in the talk to be a key element in managing the uncertainties of change and a practical, proactive approach. PL is evidenced in the talk as an important means to (a) ensure common language and consistency of approach, and (b) build confidence and professional capacity.

The talk reflected that there is a positive, respectful, and responsive organisational learning culture in place, which is shown to be something that is nurtured over time and must be carefully and thoughtfully sustained. A key means of achieving this is through the trust and resourcing of middle leaders to develop their teams. Finally, the talk shows that PL is an important focus for leaders, most especially when navigating system change, and that in a positive professional learning culture there is a need to strike the right balance between visible, instructional approaches and approaches that enable skill development and capacity building from the “grass roots”.

**Theme 5: Agency of Leaders and Educators**

Throughout the leadership discussion, a number of language choices and communicative behaviours are evidenced to enable agentic thinking and action of SLT meeting participants within and beyond the leadership discussion and also of members outside the discussion but within the organisation, including middle leaders and teachers. P establishes the meeting as a forum for agentic thinking very early, framing the leadership work of the meeting as a “working group” who will be participating in “something of a brainstorm”. At the end of the first turn, P states: “I thought we might start by coming up with what we think are the issues [concerning the QLD system change]”. The language moves P makes in the introductory turn are open and inclusive and distribute the leadership work intended to be carried out in the meeting across all participants. P makes a move to actively initiate discussion by explicitly calling on D1, traversing hierarchical layers of positional authority in this first turn change to signify the value of all participants in the floor of the meeting space. In this way, P clearly connotes permission for all to participate equally in the discursive work of the group in this SLT meeting. This claim is reinforced by the lack
of a formalised agenda with tabled items and contributors. P’s demeanour is encouraging, evidenced by audible affirmation of the first turn of D1 and of others throughout the meeting.

P sustains a position that is enabling of agentic thought consistently, positioning the leadership group to consider and respond to four separate questioning prompts about “next steps”. In this way, P focuses the work of the group on solutions and progress to move the organisation through the process of change. P anchors the thinking thematically to issues, concerns, or areas for consideration raised by the group, including the management of morale and professional learning in discussion of the first vignette, and the development of learning environments in discussion of the second vignette. Additionally, P flips the thinking and promotes agentic thought in a hypothetical move where P prompts the group to reflect and articulate “what success looks like” from a position 2 years in the future. In making this move, P indirectly prompts “next steps” thinking in a creative and democratic way. The use of open questioning strategies, posed to the group, shows P to be an enabler of agentic thought and agentic leading. In addition, it may be interpreted that the absence of itemised action points during or at the close of the meeting suggests that participants have freedom to think and reflect beyond the meeting and self-determine action that both reflects and respects agreed principles. This conveys high trust of P in the capacity of the leadership group. While there is no context given in the framing of the meeting with respect to preceding meetings, or articulated intentions for meetings that follow, it is implicit that the leadership work of the group discussed in the meeting is for ongoing thought and action. It is evident throughout the meeting that participants’ exercising of voice and agency is valued by P. The meeting is framed as a team discussion when P opens the meeting, making the purpose clear:

I thought today what we would do is just use this as a working group really, something of a brainstorm. It’s a very complicated area that we are about to discuss but I thought if we just capture where we have got to so far and then I think we might just have a conversation about some of the issues, challenges and opportunities that emerge out of this.

P’s valuing of the experience, agency, and voice of members of the team is foregrounded early and is quickly reinforced when P invites participants into the conversation in an affirming way and with open questioning:

… I thought we might start by coming up with what we think are the issues … um what sorts of systems we might put in place – what professional development might be required um and how we are actually going to cope I suppose with some of these challenges of the new system so … if we start with someone who is deeply experienced from down south, do these issues resonate for you and what are the big issues do you think D1?
Open questioning as modelled in this opening turn is consistently evident in P’s facilitative style, an approach that balances all voices and models and nurtures agentic thinking and voice.

Agency for middle leaders and professional working teams appears in the talk of the group as being of high value also. In discussing the challenges of system change, and in articulating strategic priorities for negotiating these, the role of middle leaders is agreed by the group to be of importance. DP2 prompts consideration of middle leaders explicitly in response to an utterance by P about the educative opportunities for supporting staff through change. DP2 comments: “It’s also in the Directors so they get a consistent message to their own staff and they can unpack that in their own areas.” DP2 continues the turn and explicitly asserts a strategic value that the leadership group “can’t be top down because it won’t work”. P is leaving room for or inviting agentive leadership. Here, DP2 communicates strong value in enabling agency in middle leaders and in professional working teams down through the organisation once the strategic vision and messaging are agreed. DP2’s positive and idiomatic description of this approach to change management as “grass roots stuff” that would be “coming up from within” holds connotations of professional agency of middle leaders as natural and organic, implicitly positioning the group to see such an approach as positive and of high value in the workplace.

Implicitly, educators have professional agency in the planning and delivery of curriculum but the talk shows that in managing the change to the new system of learning and assessment, the use of common language with respect to the change – language that is calming and reassuring as opposed to language that would “ratchet up” anxiety – is a key priority. Professional learning is articulated as a solution to this. In this way, the talk of the group shows that the group highly values consistency and alignment of messaging during times of change. Agency of educators emerges more in the group’s talk in response to the second vignette. P frames the discussion of this as an agentic opportunity to examine whether the team is interested in exploring improvement to teaching and learning spaces. In the introductory turn, P uses the second vignette to focus the group, providing context and framing the thinking by signposting preceding relevant action and the strategic approach of enabling educators the freedom to self-select development opportunities: an “opt in” approach to professional upskilling.

The talk shows that the SLT values ownership of rooms and agency of staff to engage in professional learning in relation to professional practice and the use of learning spaces. DP2 shares two anecdotes in response to the second vignette. In the first anecdote, DP2 reflects on the experience of placing professional materials, a set of “100 questions to help
with various types of thinking”, in each classroom, and therein noticing various artefacts of teachers’ practice that constructed a “spirit of learning” in classroom spaces. DP2’s language was positive and endorsing of teachers’ professional work and the agency that teachers have in learning spaces. In later utterances, P and DP2 respectively express the view that teaching and learning should be “creative” and “exciting”, reflecting high value in the creative agency of educators and in teachers’ leadership for learning. The discussion moves to consideration of possible action to support this, with leaders using conditional language to raise possibilities to the group. P positions the group to think conditionally by asking: “if we were going to explore it and if we agreed that the next step in teaching and learning for us might be to really look at the learning spaces, what would be the next steps?” D1 suggests the possibility of a trial, setting up “a few different scenarios or situations in classrooms … and anyone can swap or walk in or try and explore”. This utterance demonstrates understanding that choice and flexibility are important. This turn is followed by a sequence of utterances that signify agreement with the suggested approach. D2 draws on praxis by commenting: “that model has worked quite well here. With Cultures of Thinking, everyone had some exposure, a few people then took it on and worked in their departments and it spread and we’ve done it for the learning platform and the champions there”. DP immediately follows with an affirming utterance, commenting that “it always works that way”. The sequence is concluded with circularity, with D1 noting the premise: “get a few people excited and then …”. The exchange demonstrates consideration of staff and agreement among the leadership group that the provision of time and space for staff to self-determine is not only valued but also a successful model.

The conversation that takes place in the meeting shows variance in opportunity for agency across the organisation. It is important also to note that no agentic barriers or interactional trouble were evidenced in the talk. It appeared that all the participants exercised agency, showing that leaders within the group have a high level of agency to contribute to leadership discussion. It was also evident that leaders in this setting believed that agency for middle leaders was important. The greatest variance with respect to agency was shown with regard to educators and professional practice. The talk of the group shows that in managing system change, control is desired by leaders to ensure consistency and common language, with professional learning articulated to be a key lever in achieving this. With respect to professional teaching and learning practice and educators’ use of learning spaces, the talk showed that leaders’ intent was to enable agency. In this way, the talk showed reasoned discernment and flexibility in approaches to different forms of organisational leadership.
Summary

The three analytic passes through the data generated during the meeting revealed a range of findings with respect to the way in which the work of leadership was accomplished in this site, at the particular time at which the leadership meeting was conducted. The first analytic pass revealed that the meeting was, on balance, conversationally fluid, suggesting the team’s familiarity with the arrangements of the scheduled meeting and also perhaps either familiarity with the use of hypothetical scenarios or vignettes or adaptability, openness, and willingness to engage with different or new stimuli. On balance, the use of the two vignettes, in each of the analytic passes, showed the team to be cohesive and respectful in observing turn-taking; it also showed the presence of intersubjective and intellectual trust and a culture of respect and care. In the second analytic pass, the development of a code of themes demonstrated the broad scope of the conversation, with 15 sub-themes (see Table 2) reflecting practice domains that connect to transformational and instructional practices explored in the literature review. The third analytic pass revealed semantically the way in which ideas were shared and built upon, how the team achieved agreement and navigated challenge and repair, and how the collective work of the group was done.

Throughout the conversation, statements of belief or the establishment of position are supported with logical reasoning and ethos and are reinforced with examples where leaders draw on individual or shared experience, reflecting understanding of praxis. Anecdote and story are also used to illustrate thinking and ideas. Conditional language is evident as a language move both in P’s facilitation of the discussion and in participant input. This use of conditional language is revealed to be a powerful tool – one that opens the discussion to possibility, the exploration of curiosity and inviting others to wonder. In a similar way, conversational cues in words like “opportunity”, “challenge”, and “risk” prompt similar creative future-focused thinking or problematisation, showing a willingness to manage change collaboratively. These cues and the use of conditional language are present across the five major themes identified in the third analytical pass. Inclusive pronouns “we”, “us”, and “our” and words like “together” are frequently used to include leaders and staff alike in the work of change.

P plays an important role in facilitating the discussion, clearly establishing the purpose, foregrounding, framing, and reframing the discussion at intervals throughout, signposting key ideas and synthesising the discussion, eliciting the high-level strategic points, and driving the thinking forward in what might be described as horizontal thinking for
leading. Importantly, P creates space for each member participating in the meeting, inviting individuals into the discussion and offering positive verbal or audible support and encouragement. Participants were responsive and the discussion was balanced. The tone of the meeting was cordial and positive, with leaders showing commitment to sustaining the conversation and exploring the issues raised.

Moments of humour arise at various points in the meeting and relate to shared understanding with historical relevance or common goals. These moments are interactionally rich, with faster sequences of utterances that draw in most if not all participants. These moments are powerful, with the nature of inputs showing them to generally relate to leadership thought or action that is highly valued or highly important to the group, showing solidarity and alignment.

The leaders in this group show understanding of the value of the organisation’s human resources and of a collaborative approach to building a culture of care with strong organisational trust. As well, professional capacity over time is agreed at a high level to be a positive and productive strategy by the group for managing change. The group does not press on this idea, however, or offer any suggestion about what this might look like or how it might be achieved, suggesting that leaders have autonomy to self-determine the particular approaches they might take with the areas of the organisation for which they are responsible.

In each of the analytic passes, SLT members demonstrated strong relational skills through close listening and verbal participation that built and shaped ideas collaboratively and strongly demonstrated members’ ability to draw upon a broad range of skills and understandings that support a layered and nested view of leadership, theoretically, in practice (Day et al., 2016). The analytic passes revealed that relational trust among members of the team and across the organisation more broadly is highly valued, actively nurtured, and protected (Grooternboer, 2018), through considered group-think and thoughtful action. The analytic passes revealed leadership thought and action demonstrated or described in the meeting covered the domains of practice outlined by Leithwood and colleagues (2020) in an organic, synergistic way.
Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter offers a discussion of the emergent themes and the implications of these, discussion of the methodology utilised, including the implications for the practice of educational leadership in leading change, and the implications for future research. Lastly, this section will include discussion about the limitations identified.

Discussion of Emergent Themes

The findings show that in managing organisational change, the leadership toolkit (Grootenboer, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020) requires strong relational capabilities to establish and sustain trust and to create positive energy by opening up opportunity for agentic thought and action, across organisations, within the scope of the organisational goals. Communication is a critical tool for successful educational leadership and a core element of the leadership toolkit. This is not a new finding but is one that is resoundingly clear in the findings in the present study. Communicative capability is central to leaders’ individual doings, sayings, and relatings, to ensure that meaning is shaped as intended within leadership teams and in the educational leadership they undertake collectively and individually in schools (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Communication is acknowledged in the meeting to be essential to achieving consistency in the messaging across school communities, most especially in times of change, and is the foundational competency for leaders to set directions, build relationships and develop people, develop organisations to support desired practices, and improve the instructional program of each of the 19 specific leadership practices Leithwood et al. (2020) articulated as being hallmarks of these four key domains of practice of successful leadership action (which were presented in Table 2). Strong communicative ability ensures that organisational vision is clearly articulated and that key aligning messaging is consistent and not confusing. Strong communicative skills also see leaders equipped to tell a story, fold in logos, ethos, and pathos with ease, substantiate thought with examples, include others, and modulate mood. The present study found conditional mood to be a simple yet powerful tool that can be used to prompt creative, innovative, and critical problem solving in ways that overcome the “power-laden-ness” of instruction and pave the way for positive, generative work (Grootenboer, 2018; MacBeath, 2006). The dynamic dialogic work of the leadership team lifts off the principal the burden that transformational and instructional approaches can bring to bear, by distributing the thinking across the team (Harris & Jones, 2019). Strong
communication skills and careful, considered language moves are central to leaders’ relational toolkits.

PL is acknowledged in the literature and both implicitly and explicitly identified in the findings as an important transformational tool. This presents the important challenge for leaders to select PL opportunities that are meaningful and high impact – the right learning at the right time, delivered in the right way for maximum benefit to the organisation. The findings showed understanding of the valuable role middle leaders perform in leading change at the grass roots level and, while the attitudes reflected by senior leaders in the data are highly positive, it must be noted that there is scope for variance in cohesion of working teams across organisational settings; therefore, it is important that organisational approaches to PL that involve implementation through middle leaders are introduced and conducted with appropriate support so as to be successful and beneficial. Consequently, it is important that leaders do not adopt a “set and forget” approach but rather, involve themselves actively in the design and implementation phases, engage with staff, and seek feedback about the PL to better understand the impact of those initiatives.

An interest in this regard may serve the additional purpose of making clear patterns of success for PL wherein leaders gain a praxis-based understanding of what works best in their particular context and why. This was seen in the data relating to the second vignette wherein leaders identified a selection of historically successful implementation strategies for PL. Greater visibility of PL and clarity about what works is valuable for leaders to actuate change earlier, and with greater coverage, which is an important consideration where leaders’ strategic intent for the organisation is transformation. Blended transformational and instructional approaches by senior leaders that visibly include senior leaders in the PL of the organisation, distribute the leadership of PL projects, and open opportunities for teachers to engage agentively are potentially valuable considerations for building trust and efficacy and for mobilising organisations positively in the PL agenda (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2010; Harris & Jones, 2019; Robinson et al., 2008). Language moves that communicate trust in middle leaders and make space for teacher leadership, for example, invitational approaches for professionals to opt in to take the role of “champions” in PL initiatives, is efficacy building, agency enabling, and highly conducive to the building of trust owing to the professional respect that is inherently part of an optional approach. It is also an approach that conveys confidence in the motivation of educational professionals in the site to engage. This is reinforced by a consultative approach to decision-making which similarly builds trust and
relationships, engages staff, and develops the organisation to support desired practice (Browning, 2014; Grootenboer, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020).

There is clear understanding demonstrated in the data collected, and in the literature, about the importance of building and sustaining trust along with thinking and communication that is responsive, open, authentic and collegial, reasonable and realistic, and underpinned by deep professional knowledge and understanding (Grootenboer, 2018). Trust is identified in the findings as something that is highly valued by leaders, is actively developed and nurtured, and carefully protected across and beyond the organisation. A simple representation of the lines of trust is reflected in the conceptual model of Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Lines of Trust in Schools*

As Figure 3 indicates, leaders must consistently take care in their sayings, doings, and relatings in all forums to build and sustain trust – interpersonal, interactional, intersubjective, intellectual, and pragmatic – as an important foundational condition for the domains of practice to be realised (Grootenboer, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020). Without this trust, transformation or any kind of leading would be a challenge. One of the ways that the findings evidence how leaders nurture trust through conversation is in the inclusive language utilised and the ecological intelligence demonstrated in advocating work through teachers and middle leaders with language that emphasises collective efficacy, agency, and culture building, all of which find positive resonance in the literature (Hallinger, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2016). This would suggest a balance of instructional and transformational leadership approaches; a nested, agile approach to leadership to establish a thriving culture in the face of change that strikes the right balance of inspiration, modelling, and professional instruction and guidance and distributed practices that work for the organisation (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2010; Mulford & Silins, 2003). The present study shows that an agile approach and a high-performing leadership team, operating in a climate of trust both within the team
and the broader school culture, is conducive to achieving organisational goals and managing change in a positive way.

The findings reveal a leadership approach that is actively developmentalist, one that seeks to develop “follower potential” positively through organisational systems of influence. PL is strongly represented in the talk as a means of achieving positive, transformational change. The talk shows that leaders value highly the work of middle leaders in developing their teams and that they see middle leadership as a key element in ensuring the success of PL initiatives. Trust in middle leaders to do “grass roots” work with staff “around their tables” is high. This emphasises the importance of careful and considered development of potential of aspiring middle leaders or careful recruitment and development of external applicants to ensure fit within the organisational culture and professional knowledge and capability, such that middle leaders are aligned with the vision and trusted to work with individuals and teams within the scope of their roles and in ways that positively actualise the domains of successful leadership practice (Avolio & Bass, 1995, Bass & Avolio, 1993; Leithwood et al., 2020).

The importance of understanding and responding to the pressures and anxieties that can result from the experience of change in and of itself, paired with the significant and numerous implications of change to the work of educational organisations, finds resonance in the findings and the literature alike. This topic is extensively represented directly and indirectly in the data collected. The particular pressures of change are reflected in contributions by most voices in the group, with thinking synthesised by the principal, foregrounding the understanding of the complexity of change and the earnest endeavour to lead with sensitivity to this. Such an approach is important for leading practices outlined by Leithwood et al. (2020) to be able to be successfully actioned in a way that transitions the whole organisation smoothly into the new (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Within senior leadership teams, language that is used as a cultural force to engender trust and cohesion, that also creates space for respectful challenge, disagreement, trouble, and repair in the interest of rigorous and robust problematisation of challenges, is important. Conversation and dialogic exploration of challenges that allow for diversity of thought and perspective taking are highly valuable for organisational leadership teams in leading change. Further, it is clear that in navigating significant change, such as system change, the work of educational leaders is layered, sophisticated, and nuanced. There is a need for leaders to be agile in their approach – to have a deep cultural understanding of the organisational ecology and to make decisions and determine approaches that will serve to positively mobilise and
align stakeholders across all aspects of the organisation to the goals and vision determined by the leadership team. To do this, leaders must build and sustain trust, be mindful of the pressures, enable agency, make wise decisions about the use of time, and have foresight about what PL is needed. The value of language, then, as a cultural force cannot be underestimated. The language moves that leaders make within leadership teams to achieve clarity and to move the work of the team and the organisation forward are crucial. The messaging, implicit and explicit, in the machinations of change is something that is deserving of leaders’ close and careful attention and usage.

The findings reinforce the complexities of contemporary educational leadership and the sophisticated, nuanced, and integrated approaches required to meet the challenges of educational change (Day et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2008). Understanding that the introduction and implementation of significant systemic change can be a problematic task, the findings show the careful attention paid and the complexities involved in ushering in change with a smooth transition (Dinham, 2000; Harris, 2009). The present research finds relational intelligence and communicative capital to be central to the work of educational leaders, particularly in the face of change, as represented conceptually in Figure 4

*Conceptual Model for Managing Educational Change Over Time*
Discussion of Methodology

While the nature of the present study was a small project with findings generated from only one SLT meeting, a number of benefits and challenges associated with the use of vignettes within the context of a meeting were apparent. On balance, the use of vignettes as a means of observing the work of educational leaders was found to be highly valuable. Whether applied hypothetically or in a more realistic or authentic and grounded way, the application of vignettes within SLT meetings can be useful for elucidating the nuanced constructedness of values and beliefs, for observing the building and layering of articulated thought, and for eliciting and illuminating the culture that exists within a working team in an organic, situationally authentic way. Where other research methods might allow for more individualistic responses, the application of vignettes within the context of a team meeting enables natural and immediate responsiveness, insight into the power dynamics within the group, and a natural representation of the way that leadership work is undertaken within the SLT meeting space.

The use of vignettes can also present challenges. These include the use and application of the vignettes. With the researcher absent within the conversation, the application of the vignettes is determined by the interpretation of each vignette by both the chair of the meeting and the participants as, in turn, is their responsiveness. Where there is not strong relevance or participant interest in the content, responsiveness may be problematic. To this end, it may be helpful for the researcher to provide conversational prompts or to be present and facilitating the conversation. The level of responsiveness and depth of conversation may also be influenced by participant familiarity with the nature of the exercise – the use of vignettes to prompt leadership thought and discussion and to explore ideas that may or may not directly relate to participants’ work as educational leaders.

Challenges notwithstanding, the use of vignettes as an exploratory exercise or as a means of observing collaborative dialogic behaviours in a team is valuable. In future studies, it would potentially be useful to extend the number of meetings in which vignettes are utilised to observe leadership team dynamics and to pair this methodological approach with additional research methods such as interview or survey to triangulate the findings.

Limitations

A number of significant themes were identified through the transcript analysis but, owing to the sample being one of convenience and conducted in one meeting sitting, it is
recommended that the sample be extended beyond the present pilot study, to sample a
dialogic representation of like contexts to triangulate the findings. It must also be noted that
within the context of leadership team meetings, the inherent possibility for individual agendas
means that the research sample could be open to the problem of response accuracy or honesty
and, owing to the fact that it was one recorded conversation that transpired within the work
flow of a regular working week, leader fatigue, or the existence of a “response set”, is
possible in this instance (Gay et al., 2006).

The qualitative nature of the study meant that responses were open, although the
potential existed for participants to contribute conversationally in ways that may not have
truly or fulsomely reflected their position or attitude (Gay et al., 2006). This potential exists
with respect to self-determination and also within the praxis of the working group, in regards
to preexisting, accepted ways of working or codes of conduct within leadership team
meetings in this setting, thus potentially presenting a limitation through the nature of the turn
taking in conversation. It is important to note here that the conversation offers a limited
capture of the work of educational leaders. In this way, the work, values, attitudes, and
beliefs of leader participants is limited to that which is expressed verbally within the talk of
the meeting. It must be noted that whilst leaders “sayings” and examples of past or planned
“doings” and “relatings” are evidenced in the talk, the conversation does not offer levers to
test the doings and/or relatings, whether or not leaders are living or acting on such articulated
values, and how they might be doing so in practice (Grootenboer & Hardy, 2017). Therefore,
it is recommended that further exploration of this topic include additional qualitative and
quantitative elements in order to further investigate the articulated aims of this study and to
triangulate the findings.
Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The qualitative methodological approach adopted in this study offered insight into leadership team dynamics and the synergistic and dynamic nature of leadership team interactivity within the context of a meeting to discuss system change. The use of vignettes as prompts was valuable as a means of anchoring the discussion. In the present study, the researcher did not provide instruction on the use of the vignettes. Meeting participants were free to use these in a literal way to talk about what is happening within the vignette, as a prompt for discussion of the issues identified, or even hypothetically, extrapolating to test their thinking about the issues within their own context. For future use of vignettes, it may be helpful to discuss the ways in which vignettes could be used. The use of a SLT meeting, within a regular meeting setting, to examine leadership behaviours was worthwhile.

The data gathered here showed leadership behaviours within the context of a leadership meeting. To better understand the thinking and positioning moves that leaders make within such situations, it would be beneficial to extend future research to include follow-up interviews and perhaps a research component that gathered data about staff perception of leadership behaviours and impact to further examine leader action.

Conclusion

It is clear from the research findings that a relational approach to leadership is fundamental to navigating the challenges of change across learning organisations. Such an approach is one wherein leaders build a culture of trust and are obviously interested and invested in the development and success of staff and students alike.

The research indicates that openness in leader dispositions, the capacity to self-regulate, and willingness to actively engage in senior leadership team conversation are key elements that contribute to positive leader performance within the team. The research also reinforces the importance of the role of the principal to set the organisational agenda, mobilise the leadership team to lead the organisation through change, and to have oversight and exert influence in ways that welcome and encourage diversity of thought, ensure cohesion and alignment to a common purpose, and build the capacity of those working at the senior leadership level.

Overall, in response to the primary research question which aimed to investigate the language of change used by senior leaders in a senior leadership team meeting, it was found that leaders do, and must, in practice, draw upon knowledge and experience that reflects a
nested leadership approach, theoretically. What’s more, they must be able to do so with agility, carefully listening to others and attuned to the particular emergent opportunities, along with risks and challenges, that confront educational organisations in times of change. Further, the research found that transformational practices and instructional practices form part of an integrated suite of skills: leadership knowledge and action that leaders draw upon when working together to discuss, reflect, and plan for change. The ability for senior leaders to work collaboratively to build ideas and engage in robust problematisation within a climate of trust to work through to agreement and clarity about ways forward in times of change is invaluable, and perhaps a key determinant of success.

What the present study ultimately shows is that a significant differentiating factor in leader performance is the quality of professional relationships within senior leadership teams. Leaders respond positively to those within the team who listen, turn take to progress the thinking of the team, and demonstrate genuine interest in, and respect for, what leaders and educators know and can do. These research findings suggest that further research into perspectives of leader behaviour and impact and subordinate interactions would be worthwhile, along with a close study of the leadership in practice to determine the specific approaches that are most transformative.

**Recommendations**

There are a number of interesting concepts identified in the results for this project that suggest that the finer aspects relating to how leaders lead, and the impact of their approaches to leading, would be worth further investigation. In addition, given the relationship shown between leaders’ abilities to coach, build agency, and build trusting cultures, it would be worthwhile to explore the nexus between leaders’ visioning and the agility of leaders in leading through change and how leaders’ transformation and instructional practices impact the work and outcomes of educational organisations. Further research in this area is important for considering school leadership in the discontinuously changing, data-centric educational landscape of today and for the educational futures of tomorrow.

On balance, this research project presents a valuable opportunity to examine the practice of leaders with respect to the language choices that they make, what they say, and how they relate to others to convey meaning, achieve influence, and pivot practice within educational organisations moving through phases of change. Where many researchers focus on theoretical conceptualisations of leadership and the impact of various approaches, there is relatively little research that explores leadership practice and praxis with respect to how it
happens at the language level. It is therefore envisaged that this project will offer a unique and important insight into the language of leadership at a time of significant system change in Queensland, when careful and considered leadership is crucial. The continued conduct of research in this field is important to ensure that leaders are positioned to make informed and evidence-based decisions about their practice as they seek to enhance the professional capacities of educators and build the leadership capacity of staff in leadership positions, and aspirants, in meeting the challenges of what is a complex educational landscape.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet

Leadership practice: Tools for meaningful change

INFORMATION SHEET

Researchers

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Why is the research being conducted?

This research project aims to explore the agile nature of leadership in practice in contemporary secondary school settings in Queensland. The study is interested in investigating the language usage of leaders in their leadership practices. The study is an exploratory work and will use grounded theory methods to identify emergent themes that may inform future research.

What you will be asked to do

Senior Leaders at your school will be asked to participate in a discussion within the context of a Senior Leadership team meeting or meetings. This discussion will be responsive to a set of three vignettes or scenarios that will be presented as conversational prompts. The discussion will take between 15 and 20 minutes per vignette.

The basis by which participants will be selected or screened

The research setting has been selected as a convenience sample. The project participants will comprise of Senior Leadership team members at the Principal, Deputy Principal and Dean – or equivalent – level.

The expected benefits of the research

The expected benefits of the research include benefit to participants and the leadership
team who will benefit professionally from reflection and discussion about significant issues of relevance to contemporary educational organisations. It is envisaged that educational leaders or aspirants will benefit from this research, which seeks to offer practical insight into the ‘how’ of leadership practice.

Risks to you

Risks to participants and the School are negligible. Participants will be able to self-select their level of involvement in the discussion, and the discussion will explore issues of educational currency and relevance, framed in vignettes that are hypothetical and futuristic in nature. The identity of participants will be known by other participants in the discussion only and the research team. All data collected will be de-identified. Participants’ responses will be coded in transcripts.

Your confidentiality

Your confidentiality and that of your school is highly valued. All data collected will be de-identified upon completion of the project. In the SLT meetings, participants will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes. The audio-visual file/s will be deleted once the transcript of dialogue has been created and checked. Data retention for this project is five years.

Meeting recordings and transcripts will only be accessible by the research team. All data will be stored in secure locations with password protection access or in locked offices in locked filing cabinets. While some ancillary identifiable data may be collected participants will not be identifiable in any reporting. After data collection has been completed, all data will be de-identified.

Data collected from or about you will be presented in research publications in a way that will not identify you or allow you to be identified by third parties.

Your participation is voluntary

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from participating at any time without penalty or comment.

Questions / further information

If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact Professor Peter Grootenboer via telephone (07) 5552 8916 or email p.grootenboer@griffith.edu.au.

The ethical conduct of this research

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If potential participants have any concerns or
complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 07 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

Feedback to you

If you would like to review the results of this study once completed, please do not hesitate to contact the Griffith University Research Team (contact details above).

Privacy Statement – Non disclosure

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. This identified information will be de-identified following the completion of data collection (post-interviews). The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. Your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded except where you have consented otherwise. For further information telephone (07) 3735 4375 or consult Griffith University’s Privacy Plan at http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university. 
Appendix B: Informed Consent

Leadership practice: Tools for meaningful change

CONSENT FORM

Research Team
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Ms Sarah Ballantyne
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By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular:

- I understand that my involvement in this research will include (participation in one or more Senior Leadership Team meetings, including participation in discussions responsive to a set of 3 hypothetical vignettes);
- I understand that the research may include recording/audio-visual recording of my participation;
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;
- I understand the risks involved;
- I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research;
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary;
- I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without explanation or penalty;
- I understand that my name and other personal information that could identify me will be removed or de-identified in publications or presentations resulting from this research;
- I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3735 4375 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and
- I agree to participate in the project.
☐ I consent to the inclusion of my personal information in publications or presentations resulting from this research

☐ I consent to the inclusion of my written and/or verbal comments/opinions in publications or presentations resulting from this research

☐ I consent to being contacted about future research

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Appendix C: Vignettes

Vignette 1: Student wellbeing

July 2020
The first Year 12 cohort to experience the new system of assessment in Queensland is moving into Unit 4 of their selected subject areas. In a local independent secondary school, subject area leaders are raising concerns about levels of student anxiety and the impact this is having on student learning and engagement - and also on student assessment performativity, especially in the Year 11 and Year 12 cohorts.

Heightened student anxiety levels are being observed through increases in:

- students accessing staff in pastoral care roles
- students accessing the School Health Centre
- students approaching academic staff for assistance (email; 1:1 before/after school; during morning tea and lunch breaks)
- non-completion/non-submission of work and school/class avoidance
- students leaving responses blank in exam situations
- breaches of academic integrity (plagiarism; excessive assistance from tutors/siblings/parents/others; cheating)
- applications for Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments (AARA) for short term conditions - anxiety disorder
- students struggling with the balance of curriculum and co-curriculum commitments

What are the emergent issues?
What might success/change look like?
What are the opportunities?
What problems might arise?
Next steps?

Vignette 2: Teaching and Learning

July 2020
In the face of substantive system change in Queensland, with the ushering in of a new system of assessment, an independent secondary school has spent considerable time investigating potential learning frameworks that might be adopted to ensure a common language across the curriculum.

Following the research phase, the School has invested significant time and money implementing a school-wide approach to teaching and learning; (e.g. a learning framework or cultural approach - Harvard Project Zero; Cultures of Thinking; Marzano etc). The approach was decided upon by a collaborative team of teachers because of sound empirical research and evidence. A position paper was developed and delivered to staff outlining the School’s philosophical position and rationale for adopting and implementing the framework/culture/approach.
Teachers demonstrated high levels of engagement during dedicated whole-staff professional learning sessions. Following the Professional Development sessions, some teachers and some subject area leaders embraced the approach and have served as champions.

Volunteers agreed to participate in action inquiry projects and committed to meeting 2-3 times a term, working in cross curriculum teams to undertake action inquiry projects and share practice. An external coach/facilitator was engaged to work with teachers on action inquiry foci- 1:1 coaching and/or classroom observation and feedback - to assist with professional learning and growth.

July 2021
Some teachers have opted out of collaborative action inquiry teams and some team facilitators have opted out of action inquiry projects. On days when the coach/facilitator comes to the School to run further training, the commitment to attendance is varied, with some teachers leaving the training to teach classes or attend other meetings. Other teachers are fully committed and energized.

Senior leaders decide to gain insight into teachers’ thoughts and attitudes with respect to the approach, and find that while teachers talk about it and give the impression that they are engaged, the reality is that teachers believe they lack the time they feel is required, feel pressed to cover content and syllabus objectives in preparation for external assessment.

What are the emergent issues?
What might success/change look like?
What are the opportunities?
What problems might arise?
Next steps?

Vignette 3: Teacher wellbeing

June 2020

Context: an independent secondary school.

After a subject department meeting, a teacher stayed behind for an informal conversation with the Head of Department. During the meeting, the teacher mentioned two recent email communications from parents requesting daily summaries of work covered in class and for the teacher to spend additional time with their child to address gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

The teacher also shared that at the Parent Teacher Interviews, held in the same week, a student’s parents confronted them, angrily accusing the teacher of not providing the same resources as other teachers, and not adequately preparing their child for assessment. The teacher explained the situation to the Head of Department and said they took time to diffuse the situation, explaining to the parents the resources available, their approach in the classroom and showing the parents the
evidence collected with respect to the child’s progress. The teacher expressed their professional discomfort not only in having to defend their practice, but in managing the anger and aggression of parents.

The teacher continued and expressed that they felt their time was very stretched; that students were regularly seeking 1:1 assistance during lunch breaks and that learning how to use the new ISMGs meant that marking of student work was taking considerably more time. Further, the teacher expressed that there was considerably more time spent in professional conversations about evidence shown in student work and judgements on ISMGs – particularly with younger/less experienced members of staff who required support. The teacher stated that they felt there was not enough time to be able to do what was required.

The teacher finally shared their concern about the demands of the new syllabus for the subject and the drop observed in student performance.

The teacher expressed to the Head of Department that they feel they need a break and would reflect over the upcoming holidays before deciding whether to take some long service leave.

The Head of Department listens carefully to the teacher, discusses practical strategies and a way forward in addressing each of the separate issues raised. The Head of Department brings the issues to the attention of Senior Leadership.

What are the emergent issues?
What might success/change look like?
What are the opportunities?
What problems might arise?
Next steps?
## Appendix D: Codes of Themes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Grouping codes</th>
<th>Themes (categories)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Leaders referencing past action or experience</td>
<td>Leader understanding of praxis</td>
<td>Time – leaders managing change over time</td>
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<td>2. Leaders expressing understanding of demands on time</td>
<td>Leader understanding of time constraints</td>
<td>Leaders managing pressure and anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Leader understanding of time as a resource</td>
<td>Time as a resource</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Leaders prioritising clear communication to manage pressure and anxiety</td>
<td>Clarity of communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Leaders understanding pressures and anxiety causes</td>
<td>Understanding pressure and anxiety</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Leaders identifying systems to support teachers and students</td>
<td>Identifying support systems</td>
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<td>7. Listening and perspective taking</td>
<td>Listening and perspective taking</td>
<td>Leaders seeking to build trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Leaders taking time to interact with educators</td>
<td>Taking time to interact</td>
<td>Leaders building organisational capacity through professional learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Leaders engaging with and supporting educators</td>
<td>Engagement and support</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Leaders demonstrating emotional intelligence</td>
<td>Emotional intelligence</td>
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<td>11. Planning aimed to facilitate educators’ growth</td>
<td>Planning aimed to facilitate growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Modelling and instruction for high quality practice</td>
<td>Instructional practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Leaders identify opportunities for formal or informal professional learning</td>
<td>Identifying professional learning opportunity</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Leaders allowing space for self-determination</td>
<td>Agency of teaching teams and individual teachers</td>
<td>Agency of leaders and educators</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Leader practice that motivates, engages and builds confidence</td>
<td>Motivation, engagement and confidence</td>
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