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## **The social dimensions of teacher collegiality**

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### **Abstract**

One aspect of teachers' work lives rarely given consideration within educational research is that of social interaction with colleagues. While research focuses strongly on linking the collegial practices of teachers with student learning outcomes, the social benefits of teacher collegiality for teachers themselves is often neglected. In this article, I provide empirical data on the social interaction of teachers in a primary school and reveal their perceptions of the importance of such interaction. I provide an argument for incorporating a social dimension into existing concepts of teacher collegiality and posit that social interaction among colleagues maybe beneficial in two ways. First, social interaction may promote better working relationships, which in the longer term may improve the quality of teaching and learning. Second, positive social interaction may improve the emotional health of the staff community, thus reducing emotional stress and burnout. What may appear on the surface to be an immaterial part of a teacher's workplace experience in terms of educational outcomes should be acknowledged as promoting significant individual and organisational benefits.

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

Teaching is no longer the isolated profession it was once seen to be. With school-based management already an accepted reality in schools today, teachers' work has expanded to include a significant component of non-teaching tasks

related to curriculum and policy development (see Cranston 2000; Jarzabkowski 2000). By and large, these kinds of tasks are collaborative, to the extent that the individualism that once characterised the work of primary teachers in Lortie's (1975) time is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. However, it is interesting to note that even over 25 years ago, Lortie warned against 'a too casual view of the significance of peer relationships' (p 192). If peer relationships were important in 1975, they can only be more so today, now that collaborative work is an accepted component of the position of a teacher.

Drawing from a larger, completed PhD case study investigating connections between emotionality and teacher collegiality, in this article I report on research into the social dimensions of the school as a workplace for adults. I approach the topic from a cultural perspective and explore the notion of collegiality as a form of teacher culture. In the first section I outline some of the theory of collaborative cultures, noting the absence of a social dimension.

In the second section, I draw attention to the fact that social and emotional support are important aspects of the lived experience of teachers in schools, as some researchers readily acknowledge. The research methods underpinning this article are also briefly explained. Data to describe the social dimensions of life for teachers in one primary school are outlined, and followed up with an account of the teachers' perspectives on why social interaction is important to them. I then analyse such views, to provide a strong argument for the need to incorporate social dimensions into existing concepts of collegiality in schools.

### **Social relationships and collegial culture**

Before examining the theory of collegial culture, it is pertinent to discuss briefly the meanings of the terms 'collaboration' and 'collegiality'. As Fielding (1999) so pointedly noted in his critique of the works of Hargreaves and Little, collegiality and collaboration are terms frequently used interchangeably in reference to educational practices in schools. However, in accordance with Jarzabkowski (2000), in this study I use 'collegiality' to describe teachers' involvement with their peers on any level, be it intellectual, moral, political, social and/or emotional. Picking up on part of Fielding's (1999) definition, collegiality has a communal aspect. It is a group property; a characteristic of a group of professional educators.

'Collaboration' in this study takes its meaning from common English usage to denote teachers working in combination. It relates to the professional activities - the intellectual work - conducted with peers, and in this regard is largely instrumental in function. In this study, collaboration is seen as a subset of collegiality, since the former relates only to the professional sphere of relationships while the latter encompasses both professional and social/emotional interaction in the workplace. In her latest work, Little (1999) agrees that collaboration is one expression of collegial relations, but notes that it is not the

only one. It must also be pointed out that it is not always easy to clearly separate the professional from the social, given the myriad of interactions teachers share with one another within the workplace.

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

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

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

It is important to note that teacher cultures may not necessarily be stable. The form of the culture - the relationships among teachers - may change over time. Hargreaves (1994) posits that changes in the *content* of culture may be contingent on prior or parallel changes in the *form* of culture; changes in staff relationships affect the beliefs, values and attitudes of the teachers in a school. This suggests that the *form* of culture is a very powerful and significant element in the life and work of teachers in schools.

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

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

On a more positive front, Fullan (1999) explains that effective collaborative cultures do not need to be based on like-minded consensus, but he acknowledges that the quality of relationships is central to school success. He sees the importance for organisational members to develop trust and compassion for each other. Nias (1998), taking a strong position on positive staff relationships, stresses that the social and emotional dimensions of collaborative cultures are very important. Her research provides strong grounds for justifying an expanded view of teacher collegiality, in arguing that

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

Donaldson (2001) firmly emphasises the need for leaders to expend energy on relationship-building. He highlights the fact that we 'learn the affirmative qualities of colleagues by being with them – in business and social contexts both – and experiencing their optimism, humour, and buoyancy' (p 58). If the culture of a school is such that the only opportunities for the whole staff group to come together are formal occasions, this can be an inhibiting factor in the development of strong working relationships. Donaldson appreciates that teachers need plenty of opportunities to get to know one another informally if there is to be any hope for the development of a trusting, open and affirmative environment, which he sees as necessary for mobilising schools to be their best.

While it is not the intention of this article to make a close connection between the development of social relationships and positive student outcomes, it *is* expected to link such relationships to an emotionally healthy workplace, which may foster closer collaboration among teachers - to the ultimate benefit of students. In this article I explain what social relationships mean to individual teachers, and explore how these contribute to collegiality among teachers. As will be demonstrated, from a teacher's perspective, personal relationships with colleagues are important in developing collaborative work practices. It should be noted that the qualitative nature of this study makes it difficult to make a strong claim that social relationships in schools directly increase collaborative practices among teachers, but the data clearly show that teachers themselves believe this to be the case.

### **Social and emotional support in schools**

Before engaging with the research data, it is important to develop a picture of the experience of being a colleague in the school setting. It is necessary to identify

what teachers recognise as part of the reality of being collegial. As I discuss below, teachers can gain much satisfaction from collegiality.

Of particular interest is the support that teachers frequently desire from their colleagues. Current writings on teacher burnout make the point that this condition largely results from emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and a feeling of lack of personal accomplishment (eg see Byrne 1999; Maslach 1999). However, there is now strong backing for the notion that social support from colleagues can reduce teacher stress and burnout (eg see Maslach & Leiter 1999; Nias 1999; Schwarzer & Greenglass 1999). Nias suggests that collegial relations appear to strengthen the moral perspectives and values of teachers, and thus have the ability to reduce burnout. One reason for this is the development of a collegial culture characterised by mutual support and care, in which

... individuals feel able to express their emotions, negative and positive, to admit to failure and weakness, to voice resentment and frustration, to demonstrate affection. By contrast, a culture of individualism tends to increase emotional stress for its members by fostering an illusion that others are coping and that one's own fears are born of a unique incompetence; by requiring individuals to pretend to feelings they do not own; by failing to promote the habit of day-to-day communication so that small interpersonal or professional differences build up into major problems. (Nias 1999, p 235)

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

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

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

Nias, Southworth and Yeomans (1989) noted that, in schools displaying cultures of collaboration, teachers spent a great deal of time talking to one

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

Considering conditions that unify staff relationships, Donaldson (2001, p 62) maintains that school leaders need to appreciate the needs of people to 'form deep and lasting relationships at work', a need that may stem from the isolation and demands of classroom teaching. Donaldson notes that such relationships are usually based on commonalities that teachers see in themselves and others. Such commonalities can only be discovered when teachers spend time together informally, in a supportive and trusting environment. He also notes that '[a]t the root of many relationships is the need to share and enjoy time with others, the need to connect and befriend, and the need to seek professional assistance and camaraderie' (2001, p 62).

Both Nias (1998) and Pollard (1987) acknowledge the value of humour and laughter among teachers. Humour reduces tension, induces relaxation, promotes and maintains a sense of social cohesion and staff morale, and promotes individual confidence. Acker (1995) and Nias et al (1989) observed humour in the teacher cultures they studied. Ben-Peretz, Schonmann and Kupermintz (1999, pp 155-156) comment that, in elementary schools,

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

Jansen's (1994) study of humour in educational leadership reveals that principals also see humour as offering a counterbalance to the seriousness of education. She described humour as a 'buoy' that lifts the spirits of school leaders. However, humour does even more than this. Jansen (p 16) noted that '[a]t the crucial social level, humour was seen as a marvellous adhesive, a bonding agent which strengthened relationships and held teams firmly together'. Principals in her study suggested that a self-deprecating sense of humour was also essential, such that one could laugh at oneself, and also allow this privilege to others.

Humour and laughter are components of play. Consistent with the emotional/rational dichotomy, work and play are usually seen as opposites (Dandridge 1988; Fine 1988). The Protestant work ethic of Western society

tends to stereotype work as serious, structured activity designed to achieve instrumental goals; and play as fun, lighthearted activity for personal enjoyment. Play is seen as 'affective' – related to emotions, but work is seen as 'effective' – related to production and outcomes (Dandridge 1988). In reality, many work activities are intertwined with elements of play and humour. Nias, Southworth and Campbell (1992) also comment on how humour often accompanies teachers' collaborative activities. Dandridge (1988) sees that activities such as ceremonies, customs and rituals can bring work and play together into one experience. The ritual patterns of celebrations within an organisation are important in this regard.

'The world of work is also a world of play and expressive behavior' (Fine 1988, p 119). Fine sees the integration of work and play as expressing the same value system and assisting workers to adjust to the work environment. He sees work and play as mutually reinforcing. At work, play 'contributes to increased satisfaction and productivity by changing the definition of the work environment from an institution of coercive control to an arena in which the workers have some measure of control over the conditions of their employment' (1998, p 120). Woods (1984, p 190) maintains: 'it is through laughter that teachers neutralize the alienating effects of institutionalization; that they synchronize the public and the private spheres'. Through laughter, the private and the public self of the teacher can be reintegrated.

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

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

In the sharing of 'play' activities, colleagues are seen as real people. In viewing colleagues from this perspective, added benefits such as improved cooperation, communication and emotional commitment are derived (Ashforth & Humphrey 1995; Fine 1988). The subjects in Fine's study found their work environment to be pleasant primarily because of the interpersonal relationships they formed and the freedom of expressive behaviour this permitted them.

Task effectiveness is also seen as an unexpected advantage of the integration of work and play. This is thought to stem from improved motivation and personal engagement, an increase in creativity and a reduction in tension (Ashforth & Humphrey 1995). This may be significant in considering the collaborative activities in which teachers partake on a regular basis. Elements of humour and play that arise naturally out of collaborative tasks may result in added creativity and better generation of ideas from the staff group, as well as contributing to the emotional health of its members. Nias et al (1992, p 210) note:

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

Such social and emotional activities usually take place in the staffroom. Therefore, to conduct research that investigates the social dimensions of collegiality, a researcher is required to get 'up close and personal' with the staff group. The next section is an outline of how I undertook the research for this article.

### **The research**

A study focusing on teacher culture and social relationships called for an in-depth, long-term association with members of the organisation. Therefore, an ethnographic approach was used. A single case was chosen for the purpose of intensive study, ultimately on the basis of staff size and the interest in teacher collegiality shown by the principal. The researcher (myself) had no previous contact with the school or its staff before making the approach to undertake research with school personnel.

The selected site, which shall be known by its pseudonym St Cecilia's School, is a primary school in the suburban region of a large Australian city. It operates under the auspices of the Catholic Education Office. Enrolment at the school during the period of the research was fairly stable at around 370 pupils. The school draws enrolments from the surrounding middle- to lower-middle-class suburbs. Approximately 12% of students were identifiably of non-Australian background, representing a variety of nationalities. Less than 2% acknowledged Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage.

The school had a full-time, non-teaching female principal and a male assistant principal with 60% release time, mainly devoted to coordinating religious education. Fourteen other full-time teachers and six part-time teachers were employed, bringing the total professional staff composition to the equivalent of 19.6 full-time workers. Female staff members outnumbered their male counterparts at a ratio of just over 4:1. Staff ranged in age from 23 to 58, with an average age of 44 years. Staff turnover was fairly low, with a few long-serving staff members, although the average length of service at this school was six years. These statistics are possibly quite relevant to the development of the collegial culture at St Cecilia's and the desire of most members to build and maintain community among staff.

Through participant observation, data were gathered in the form of fieldnotes, taken largely from observed interaction in the staffroom before and after school and in recess and lunch breaks. As researcher, I also attended a variety of professional and social events with the staff, both in and outside



school hours. Over 80% of the professional staff also agreed to formal interviews, material which, when cleared by participants, provided further data for triangulation. In total, I spent over one quarter of the school year on the site, the days spaced throughout the period of one academic year. During this time, I tutored individual students, provided relief teaching, covered library books, staffed the front office and took on other sundry tasks. Without much hesitation, it could be said that I came to know the participants and the context of the setting quite well during this time.

### **The social dimensions of collegiality at St Cecilia's School**

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

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

Although there were officially recognised social activities for staff, the most common form of socialising occurred during the school day, in between teaching periods. The first informal gathering of the day commenced early in the morning. The staffroom door was usually opened around 8:00 am. After coming into the staffroom to deposit their lunch in the refrigerator, some teachers would stay on to have a cup of tea or coffee, and during this time would chat to their colleagues.

Recess and lunch times were also important occasions for social interaction. The teachers, the principal and the assistant principal always came to the staffroom during the two official breaks, unless they were on duty or had pressing matters to which they needed to attend. This was not the kind of staff where teachers stayed in their rooms, eating their lunches in private while doing preparation or marking.

During the break times, topics of conversation were wide ranging. Current affairs were popular, but talk also extended to the professional and personal arenas. Talk centred on students and their families, and teachers' families were often topics of discussion too. These two excerpts from fieldnotes, taken a day apart, show the variety of topics covered during break times:

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

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

One of the most common social events in many organisations is the celebration of staff members' birthdays. At St Cecilia's, birthdays were celebrated on or as close as possible to the day they occurred. Individuals were asked to nominate a couple of birthday dates throughout the year upon which they would contribute some food for a shared morning tea. Below is an observation of a typical birthday celebration.

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

A very popular social activity for many organisations, particularly schools, is 'Friday afternoon drinks'. To celebrate the end of the working week, teachers at St Cecilia's School gathered in the staffroom anywhere from about 3:30 pm onwards for drinks and snacks. There was a standing invitation to all staff to join, but members of the ancillary staff did not usually participate. Numbers of attendees varied each week depending on commitments, but seemed to average around 11 or 12. There appeared to be a core group who regularly participated in this social activity. Both the principal and the assistant principal usually attended, suggesting that they both saw joining in such social activities as important, although the principal was not always able to stay for long periods. One teacher commented:

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

Most formal social activities in which the staff of St Cecilia's School participated involved food, as noted by Valentine and McIntosh (1991) in their research in female-dominated workplaces. One such event was the sharing of lunch on pupil-free days, once a term. This was sometimes held at school with a barbeque, or it might be celebrated off the premises at a restaurant. The principal

encouraged teachers to make the choice about the organisation of lunch. During the year, I observed and participated in two such lunches at school and one at a local restaurant on pupil-free days.

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

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

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

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

Staff also gathered for dinners on other occasions. One such dinner was held to mark the end of an externally provided professional development course, in which many staff had participated over a series of weeks after school. Social activities such as this, held after school hours and off the school premises, were less likely to attract a large complement of the staff, owing to family commitments.

Other social outings were also organised during the year I conducted the research. Of particular interest was a race day organised by the social committee for one Saturday afternoon. This family day was well attended by staff. On occasions like this, staff also get the opportunity to meet the partners of their colleagues. There were also celebrations for one-off special occasions, such as a retirement dinner for a long-serving staff member. This was held at the school at the teacher's request and was a particularly collegial activity, generating some intense emotions for the teacher herself, and many others.

Most also participated in a football tab organised by one staff member, a minor form of gambling where each participant must try to select the winners of weekend football games during the season. The 'footy tab' generated a lot of interest and discussion, with staff debating the likelihood of winners on Fridays, and checking each Monday to see how competitors had fared and who had won

the weekly cash prize. Many of the teachers admitted to having no knowledge of the game or the form of the teams, and just participated for social reasons.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many teachers explained that social activities were opportunities to relate to other staff members as people, not just as teachers, and they believed this to be a good thing. This strongly supports the research of Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), who maintain that such activities both foster 'groupness' and reduce a tendency to stereotype colleagues as role occupants.

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

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

One staff member made the point that it was not so much the social outings that were important but that *every* opportunity to come together socially was valuable. She strongly favoured the social opportunities that were afforded by staff joining together at break times, particularly the ability to express emotions and laugh together. Social interaction in staffrooms is as important as less regular social gatherings of staff, if not more so.

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

This supports the research of Pollard (1987), Nias (1998) and Woods (1984) with regard to humour in staffrooms, and the use of laughter as an emotional support for teachers (Ben-Peretz et al 1999). A positive outlook or a happy disposition could be emotionally contagious, according to some teachers.

Well, generally people [here] are fairly happy. ... I think they're just happy themselves, or positive themselves and that happens to [rub off], like if you hang around with somebody who is happy and positive you tend to feel the same way even though you may first walk into a room feeling a bit down. (Chris)

They [some staff members] do make people laugh. When things are getting bogged down they have the knack of throwing something in to make everybody relax and that sort of thing. (Georgie)

The work of Nias et al (1992) is certainly confirmed here. Teachers at St Cecilia's School maintained that emotional tension was reduced through the provision of collegial support. Offerings of such support arose when others were

made aware of an individual's needs. However, it was largely through social interaction that expressions of need and offers of support could be made. Only in a safe, trusting environment could teachers ask for support.

There are people [on staff] that I can trust, and talk about things that are problems either in your work or even personal things at times. Knowing that they will help you, and offer you ideas to work with to solve problems. Just people to help you release the tension and the stress, you know, if you're having a bit of a difficult day. (Evelyn)

Teaching is a fairly high stress job, I think, and if you don't have support around you, you'll crumble, and I think that other teachers are aware of that, and they look out for each other, which is good. (Claire)

A specialist teacher made a comment that it was important not to isolate oneself from the rest of the staff. It was important to have the opportunity to talk to others, to express emotions, and to communicate regularly with colleagues, just for sanity's sake. The principal also supported this idea in her assessment of the importance of staffroom chat, in line with the research of Ben-Peretz et al (1999).

I learnt really quickly that for me it was really important to spend that time just having a chat to the staff. And it was also really important for the staff to see me a bit, and not to be this hermit. ... Part of it was that I was spending all the time between breaks teaching, and I was spending my breaks doing things and preparing, and I thought, "Oh, I need to go and vent if I need to, and discuss with other teachers what they're doing". (Mandy)

When the teachers get together, and the staffroom is a bit of an example of this, I think they're more or less inclined to let it go. ... They're unloading all of this stuff that's happened in the classroom. And having a bit of a laugh, because it's the laughing that diffuses it. Then they can go out again feeling a little bit more refreshed from having had a colleague sit beside them to listen to all these stupid things that have happened in the classroom or whatever. (The principal)

Staff at St Cecilia's really appreciated the social dimensions of their work lives. One teacher made the observation that those who joined social activities regularly were also the more collaborative members of staff. This may perhaps reflect the personalities of these teachers in that those who enjoyed socialising together also enjoyed working together, and *vice versa*. In fact, with some very active social beings, it can sometimes be difficult to delineate firmly between social and professional encounters. The following observation, of two year-level teachers developing a program overview, reveals the extent to which social relationships extend into professional work.

The pair seemed to reach agreement quite informally. "How about this for our rationale?" ... "Okay, let's run with it". Occasionally they left their task to discuss other matters (the movies, a death in the family of a staff member, the bottling of homebrew) but came back to task fairly quickly. Together they laughed about what one of them had written in last year's program. Neither of the pair seemed afraid to disagree with the other over what should be written but managed to reach consensus without difficulty. (Fieldnotes, 20 January)

At the same time, one particular staff member provides an excellent example of how lack of sociability may be linked to a decreased desire to collaborate with others. In this case, one female teacher very rarely joined activities like Friday afternoon drinks and other social gatherings, and it was known by many staff that she had caused her year-level partner some real distress in the early stages of the year with her lack of desire to collaborate in term planning. The teacher making the statement below demonstrates the importance of knowing a person on a personal level, and makes the connection between sociability and collaboration.

And I offered her lots [of resources]. And she'd just say, "Oh no, I'm right". She has a bit of a problem accepting help. I felt a bit strange because I'd never come across someone like that. ... And she's not very social either. That's just the way she is, I suppose. ... But we certainly talk. And she's opened up more to me this year than ever. Before, I would never even know anything about her life beyond school, whereas this year she's starting to open up a little bit more about her family. (Pat)

Importantly, the relationship between these teachers improved over the course of the year, although it is difficult to state conclusively that this was the result of the development of a better social relationship between them. However, sensing the importance of sociability to the teacher above, it is highly likely. A few similar examples, although less prominent, were observed in relation to another, less social member of staff during the course of the research, adding weight to the notion that healthy social relationships provided the basis for improved collaborative work practices at St Cecilia's.

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

### **Rethinking teacher collegiality from a social perspective**

From the data above, it is easy to see that social activities add an important dimension to staff relationships at St Cecilia's School. While it is acknowledged that the data upon which this article is based were generated from a single case study, and that generalisations are therefore not possible, the data do provide some interesting thoughts upon which to examine teacher collegiality. In line with the thinking of Stake and Turnbull on 'naturalistic generalisations' (Stake 1994, p 240), readers can be left to make their own interpretations based upon their personal experiences and understandings of social collaboration in schools. With an attempt only to generate 'fuzzy generalizations' (Bassegy 1999, p 46), I have provided my interpretations of the data for a wider audience below.

There is no doubt that social activities afforded several unique benefits for teachers at St Cecilia's School. First, it allowed them to get to know one another on a personal basis, and this gave them a better understanding of each

other. Most teachers saw this as very important, which suggests that the building of personal relationships at work is something desirable and beneficial. These teachers felt that it was important to know their colleagues on a level deeper than 'teachers': to know them as 'individuals'. In this way they could be more understanding of one another, and could provide the personal *and* professional support necessary for good working relationships to be maintained. This research supports the work of Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) in suggesting that such social experiences create shared memory for a group, develop a sense of community and build relationships based on appreciation of peers as individuals rather than stereotyped role occupants.

Leading on from this is the belief that in knowing one another better, there is more chance that stronger collaborative working relationships between individuals can be developed. For teachers in schools, collegiality is obviously more than the work they do together; it extends beyond the strict boundaries of work and into the social realm. Teachers value their social interactions because it is through the social that supportive relationships are developed - that community is created.

While Ihara (1988), Hargreaves (1994) and Sergiovanni (1990) may disregard the influence of congeniality, this research challenges the assumption that it is irrelevant to the pursuit of a collegial culture. This research, more than any other, brings to prominence the importance of personal relationships in fostering collaborative practices in schools. It also supports comments by Fine (1988) and Ashforth and Humphrey (1995): that social sharing can lead to improved cooperation, communication and emotional commitment. Working relationships were perceived to improve through the development of social and emotional relationships.

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

What this research posits is that positive staff relationships commence at the social level, and develop from there into more collaborative work practices. Teachers certainly believe this to be true, and a longitudinal study of the collaborative work of new teaching partners would undoubtedly develop this notion further.



Participating in social activities, like staffroom banter, special morning teas and Friday afternoon drinks, is believed by teachers in this study to reduce tension and stress. This has implications for improving emotional health in schools. When colleagues make an effort to create a positive and supportive workplace, the emotional pressures associated with teaching may decrease. When teachers are able to share their concerns about teaching and their personal lives with their colleagues in an open and non-threatening environment, emotional stress may be reduced.

Social interaction among staff increases the likelihood that emotional support will be available when needed by individuals. In this way, individual staff members may benefit directly, but the organisation also receives the benefit of an emotionally healthy staff. The notion that healthy working relationships can be a buffer to school-wide stresses (Donaldson 2001) is supported by this research.

Of course, school-wide collegiality is not something that can develop overnight. It requires that school leaders and a body of teachers support it. While a principal can mandate that certain activities be conducted collaboratively, for collegiality in its fullest understanding to develop, a core group of teachers must build a community to support it. As Donaldson (2001, p 113) notes, '[g]ood working relationships require conscious care', but principals do not necessarily hold all the responsibility for their development. Indeed, they may have little control over some of the social activities of their staff. It is the teachers who value community who will cultivate social relationships with their colleagues, with the ultimate benefit that collaborative practices may become more successful.

Principals can, however, model and encourage such practices and provide time and resources to facilitate them. Donaldson (2001, p 109) sees good leaders in schools as those who put relationships first, and in a very practical way he encourages leaders to foster connections among teachers at every opportunity by, for example, 'set[ting] aside time and space for staff to gather for social as well as business purposes'. Naturally, these occasions need not be mutually exclusive. As this research shows, collaboration in the case study school was closely linked with personal and social relationships and could not, in practice, be readily separated.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers' work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has incorporated new dimensions of collaborative activities, brought about largely by the introduction of school-based management practices. Teachers increasingly find themselves being required to work in groups and on project teams and committees to further the educational goals of their schools. In considering concepts of collegiality and collaboration, we need to acknowledge new dimensions, so as to keep up to date

with the lived practices of school life for teachers, part of which involves their interest in the development of healthy social relationships with colleagues.

The research upon which this article is based identifies the significant contribution that social interaction plays in fostering collegial cultures in the primary school. When staff members have a variety of opportunities to come together in an informal manner, as they did at St Cecilia's School on a fairly regular basis, community building can take place - the benefits of which, it is suggested, can flow on to create a more productive working environment. Both individuals and the school community can benefit from the creation and maintenance of an emotionally healthy workplace.

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