

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Collegiate Principal Structures in Implementing a School Behaviour Support Program: The Role of the Local Management Group Model<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

Student problem behaviour in schools is an issue for teachers, schools, and education jurisdictions. Problem behaviour also has an effect on families, the individual student, and the community. It is one of the principal issues of discussion for teachers, preservice teachers, principals, and policymakers. The purpose of this study was to examine a model that supports schools in managing available resources to promote positive behaviour and address problem behaviour. Interviews were conducted with 12 primary and high school principals to investigate their experiences of working together in 6 local management groups (LMGs) for the management of student behaviour. The findings revealed that the LMG model supported effective collaborative leadership practices between the high school and primary school principals and encouraged collegial networks among primary and high school teachers through joint professional learning opportunities. The benefits of the LMG model highlighted some positive outcomes for principals, teachers, and students with problem behaviour within their local schools.

**Keywords:** principals; collaboration; partnerships in education; professional learning communities; student behaviour; collaborative decision-making

Student problem behaviour in schools is an issue for principals, teachers, schools, and education jurisdictions (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009). In Australia, England, the United States, and Canada, research investigating students across kindergarten to Year 12 typically reveals that problem behaviour is associated with learning and social difficulties and negatively affects students' access to education and school completion rates (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Conway, 2014; Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007). A student's engagement with the school system and their development of learning, academic, and social skills can predict a student's risk of dropping out of school at a young age (Dockery, 2012). Dropping out of school can result in reduced employment prospects (Bowlby, 2005), increased likelihood of incarceration in prison systems (Nagle & Hiller, 2003), more mental and physical health problems, and less protective factors that can impact a student's resilience to future adversity (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Healey, 2003; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2009). There is an increase in risk factors such as crime, depression, young parenting, drug and alcohol issues, and poverty for those who are not engaged with school and who drop out of school early (Healey, 2003). The impacts of student behaviour are felt not only at school. Student behaviour also has an adverse effect on the individual student(s), their family(ies), the community, and society in general. Schools can be a good place for change, where systems

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of support led by an effective leader can address communication deficits between staff and local communities to improve learning and reduce problematic behaviour. Attention to both learning and behaviour can improve the outcomes for school students and their relationship with their families and their community (Gurr, 2017).

Research reveals that the role of a principal is crucial to developing staff capacity to engage students in learning and promote positive behaviour and learning both within classrooms and across the school environment (Daniëls, Hondeghem, & Dochy, 2019; Harris, Jones, Adams, & Cheah, 2019). An effective leader creates systems approaches within the school that focus on increased engagement within schools to improve both behavioural and learning outcomes (Hyde, 2013; McCormick, 2001; National College for School Leadership, 2011; Ringuet, 2012; Sugai, 2012). More specifically, an effective principal, in consultation with staff and the broader school community, sets clear goals and develops the strengths and qualities of teachers. The principal also organises and provides funds and resources to implement agreed behaviour and learning programs, measures and monitors specific outcomes and agreed expectations, and makes ongoing agreed adjustments to processes and approaches (Sugai, 2012).

A principal needs to maintain harmony among staff members to ensure that the school policies and departmental procedures are in place, and be the interface for community connections including providing emotional support to staff, students, and families (Ridden, 2018; Ringuet, 2012). In the Australian context, a principal is also expected to be an expert in learning and teaching and curriculum, and must maintain all aspects of school administrative procedures (e.g., Government of South Australia, 2020; NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2016; Victorian State Government, 2016).

Research into personal self-efficacy of leadership in organisations such as schools has found that leaders with a high sense of self-efficacy and confidence have a positive effect on the work environment and their colleagues (Gurr, 2017; Luthans & Peterson, 2002; McCormick, 2001). Further, the researchers of a longitudinal study of 3,675 principals across Australia investigated whether changes in social support from colleagues affected principals (Beusaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riley, 2016). We concluded that there was an increased likelihood of burnout and stress if a leader lacked social support from peers in their high demanding environments. McCormick (2001) also discovered that strong leadership encouraged higher levels of performance by others and a willingness to accept and engage with organisational change. These findings suggest that principals' confidence level and self-belief can have a positive effect on the staff in their schools through creating positive organisational change, supporting staff in changing their professional direction, creating opportunities for staff in connecting with current research, and implementing consistent approaches for behaviour (García Torres, 2019; Gurr, 2017).

How principals support themselves both emotionally and professionally to cope with their considerable responsibilities and workload has also been a focus in recent literature. School principals confront many situations in which they seem to have no choice but to negotiate compromises and to constrain their emotions to maintain a stable and positive school climate (Poirel & Yvon, 2014). Research into the impact of stress and coping strategies employed by 50 principals in Malaysia found that the most common strategy was talking about their problems with colleague principals (Abdul Muthalib, 2003).

Furthermore, Gurr (2017) synthesised the results of research about successful leadership as part of the International Successful School Principalship Project. One of the important mechanisms that was considered an effective practice for principals was their ability to enhance their schools through developing networks, collegiality, collaborations, and mutually successful partnerships (Gurr, 2017). Effective partnerships between schools are based on trusting relationships between school leaders and staff (Solvason & Kington, 2020) and provide a forum through which expertise and resources can be shared, thus resulting in enhanced levels of thinking and facilitating change (Kempen & Steyn, 2017). One of the benefits of creating communities of practice is that staff from different schools who are facing similar problems have an opportunity to share their learnings and try out recommended, or collaboratively developed, strategies in their own context. The importance of collaboration to school improvement programs has been emphasised by Hermansen and Nerland (2014), who

contend that instructional reform and changes in classroom practices ‘depend on local collaborative work among teachers’ (p. 188).

In England, for example, schools trialled a collaborative partnership called the Excellence Clusters (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, 2003a). A cluster comprised several deprived high schools working together with their feeder primary schools. The partnership of principals (called headteachers in England) made collaborative decisions on the funding and allocation of resources designed to close the performance gap of students through joint professional learning of teachers. It was reported that the collaboration of principals, resources, and funding showed signs of improvement in both attendance and behaviour, exclusion from school, and general positive attitudes to school by students. A highlighted outcome in the Excellence Cluster was the improved relationship between schools, their leaders, and the teachers (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, 2003b).

Similarly, a New Zealand government initiative in 2014 was the Investing in Educational Success (IES; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015). IES provided funding to New Zealand schools to establish a community of schools designed to ‘... build teachers’ individual and collective capacity to attend to the needs of every student’ (p. 3). Resources were assigned to a number of schools within a local area to share good teaching practices, hold professional development opportunities using their own expertise, and encourage school collaboration in innovative and supportive systems to address and improve the learning needs of students. The IES initiative reinforced that when teachers engage in professional problem-solving, it impacts on effective learning for students. The community of schools was expected to develop lifelong learners who are ‘... literate and numerate, critical and creative thinkers, active seekers and users, creators of knowledge and informed decision makers’ (p. 8).

Both the Excellence Clusters and the IES systems relied on good leaders who drove the initiatives and guided staff through processes and procedures to ensure consistency of professional learning opportunities and programs of support for students based on local requirements. The report of the IES summarised that effective leaders can create a community aimed at student success and improved teaching and learning, as well as providing professional learning and support for teachers (Rawlins, Ashton, Carusi, & Lewis, 2014).

This article reports the results of a study examining the effective elements of a school-wide systems approach for the management of student behaviour and the role of the principal in implementing and coordinating such programs through a collegiate approach. The collegiate structure employed for the behaviour management program was the state government mandated formation of local management groups (LMGs). An LMG comprises a cluster of schools, usually a high school (Year 7 to Year 12) and their local feeder primary schools (kindergarten to Year 6) situated in a local community.

## Methods and Participants

The results reported in this paper were part of a larger study that employed a convergent parallel design (Creswell, 2014) to examine six LMGs in a government schools regional area of the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education, Australia. In this research we sought to understand current views concerning behaviour management from those participants experiencing the social process under investigation (Gillis & Jackson, 2002) and within a target population (Ryan, 1999). Charmaz (2006, p. 127) suggested that rather than a participant’s perceptions explaining reality, there are in fact multiple realities. Therefore we need to ask what do people assume is real and how do they construct and act upon this reality? The social constructivist approach in interviewing staff within the context of an LMG complemented this theory. The principals were key informants in the study, as they made decisions for the management of student behaviour based on how they believed their school and the LMG should be organised. Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggested that it is important to obtain perceptions from those directly involved with making decisions about support and delivery of behaviour programs and resources in schools. Therefore, we asked how the principal participants used the given resources,

what they thought about the LMG model, and how it assisted with the organisation of their schools. The collection of case study data from six LMGs further expanded the breadth and depth of the current investigation (Onwuengbuzie & Leech, 2006).

Formal ethics approval was granted by Flinders University in June 2015 (approval number 5998). A purposive sampling technique was employed, as the LMG approach was considered a 'special' or 'unique' case as a major focus of the investigation (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Twelve principals (six high school, six primary school) from six LMGs were digitally recorded during a semistructured interview about their perceptions of involvement in their LMG for managing student behaviour. The larger study also included a survey of school staff that focused on specific features of the school-wide behaviour support systems in the school, including school-wide, non-classroom, classroom, and individual systems. The results and discussion for this paper report only on the analysis of the interviews with principals.

Kincheloe (2003) described interview research as being 'as naturalistic as possible, meaning that contexts must not be constructed or modified. Research must take place in the normal, everyday context of the researched' (p. 119). Ensuring that participants can be heard in their own context through open-ended questions supports the discovery of new information (Hoepfl, 1997). In line with this approach, in this study, the interviews were conducted within the school setting, in the principals' offices.

Each principal selected for interview was approached via email and personal phone call. Each email was accompanied by an ethics-approved information letter outlining the research focus and a list of the themes to be covered by interview and a principal consent form.

Each of the 12 principal interviews involved a face-to-face conversation with the lead author about the structure of the LMG and the ensuing partnerships with other schools within their LMG. The opening question for the principal was 'tell me about your LMG'. Further questions were directed at the use of the LMG for managing student behaviour and the professional learning of staff across the LMG and within individual schools. Principals were also asked about their role in the implementation of the behaviour management program and their perceptions of the challenges and benefits of working together as an LMG, both on a personal and professional level. Drew, Hardman, and Hosp (2008) suggested that a '... respondent must be immediately convinced that the interviewer is legitimate and the study is of sufficient value to become involved ... An extremely important factor in the success of the interview is the clear establishment of rapport' (p. 173). The relaxed atmosphere created during interviews reinforced that both the interviewer and the participant were comfortable during discussion, allowing the interview to be recorded and little or no adjustment of transcription post interview. The participant was confident in the researcher's professionalism.

Each LMG and principal was given a code from 1 to 6. For example, a primary school principal from LMG6 was PS6 and the high school principal was HS6. The software program NVivo 10, released by QSR International in 2012, was utilised as the tool for searching patterns of coding and patterns of text (Richards, 1999, p. 423) and as a tool in the detailed analysis of the interview transcripts.

### **Data Analysis**

Eight of the interview recordings were transcribed word for word by a paid transcriber and four were transcribed by the researcher. The researcher first edited the completed transcript, ensuring that the transcription used all the principal's words, and identifying material (such as school names or staff names) was replaced with a \*\*. Following that process, the transcription was emailed to each principal who edited, deleted, or added to the content and returned the transcript to the researcher. Only one principal made a minor change to the transcript and deleted an overlooked identifying name. Once the transcription was received by the researcher, the digital recording was deleted.

NVivo 10 was selected to facilitate organisation through consistency checks of text within the definition of the categories chosen, record keeping, comparison of categories, examination of relationships, and the ability to organise interview transcripts data and its analysis efficiently (Weitzman, 2000, as

cited in Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2004, p. 250). NVivo 10 was utilised as a tool in searching for patterns of coding and patterns of text (Richards, 1999) and because it is a useful tool in the detailed analysis of large data extracts. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) believe that in-depth interviews allow researchers to capture language and behaviour. As a transcript may not translate many other factors, a detailed journal of the interviews was kept. This was further utilised in the analysis so that the intention of the participant was fully recorded.

Initially, basic content analysis was used to deduce word-for-word transcripts of each principal. Words and sentences were first analysed for specific content to determine the number of nodes (themes), followed by categorising further concepts into tree nodes. Initially, 17 categories were identified from this analysis. Because content analysis rarely focuses solely on the use of specific words but on ideas and meanings (Ezzy, 2013, p. 113), the three researchers reviewed the content of the 17 categories and reduced them to seven distinct themes.

## Results

The seven themes that emerged from the final analysis of the interviews were related to the effective elements of LMGs and included collaboration and collegiality, sense of community, transition, funding/finance, professional learning, principal's role, and future directions.

### *Collaboration and Collegiality*

This theme was defined as the ways in which the high school and primary school principals and staff communicated and collaborated with each other within their LMGs. Principals felt that the LMG structure of having regular meetings and discussions between high schools and primary schools was beneficial and welcomed by staff. Principals communicated about issues such as how to 'distribute LMG funds ...' (HS2) and discuss common business such as '... our transition programs from primary school to high school ...' (PS3). Both high school and primary principals identified that they had a new respect for, and appreciation of, each other's role. Principals further understood the particular roles of high school and primary school principals.

Principals from both primary and high schools observed that regular interaction through an LMG approach was a productive way to feel supported as a leader in a school. Principals commented on the value of having peers who understood the challenges and positive aspects of their particular community. Also commented upon was the collegiate aspect of the LMG when the principals worked together and school staff worked in the high school from the primary schools and vice versa. The following two examples highlight the importance of a primary/high school community:

*In my opinion the relationship between the high schools and the primary schools is really the key thing to it [LMG]. (PS6)*

*... we share our communities with each other, and we have really good talks, sometimes they are lively discussions, and we meet off site and ring each other all the time ... (PS1)*

The collegiality of principals from five out of the six LMGs was important for personal and professional growth and support. One high school principal noted that '... being able to have that informal dialogue, communication and sharing opportunities ...' (HS5) provided him with personal support that helped reduce stress and increase confidence in his leadership role. Principals believed that collegiality and support led to better LMG priorities and ultimately stronger documentation and accountability. Commonly, this was achieved through regular meetings, email and phone contact, equal partnership at LMG meetings, collegiate support throughout challenging times, and equitable distribution of resources.

### **Sense of Community**

This theme refers to schools within an LMG feeling connected because of their local common needs and issues. Primary and high school principals were interested in creating ‘in principle’, or actually developing, a common language across the LMG schools for discussing with students the jointly identified behavioural expectations through the communication channels established via the LMG structure. This theme recognised the ‘local-community-specific’ issues being addressed by adopting consistent practices across high schools and their feeder primary schools through a whole-school approach in individual schools to an LMG approach across all schools. The following is one example of how a school provided a focus on local needs across an LMG:

*We put these [banners] out on days like kindergarten orientation so that the parents know they aren't just coming into a school but a community of schools with all of the primary schools and the high school. We discuss this at LMG all the time. (PS4)*

In general, both the primary and high school principals noted that having a whole-school approach that involved each school within an LMG having similar rules, values, and behavioural expectations in primary and high schools facilitated the transition of students into high school. The use of a common language around behaviour was a factor mentioned by a number of the principals interviewed. Some were actively using common behaviour language, such as similar five rules; others were using a common framework, such as positive behaviour for learning (PBL; see NSW Department of Education, 2019, for a description of NSW PBL), with similar approaches (Mooney et al., 2008). The following two comments (examples) describe the use of common language about behaviour being reinforced during LMG meetings:

*You are talking to people about education — about teaching kids these strategies [behaviour] — and it is so simple — having this common language and the links I have with the high school principal. Everyone in the LMG talking the same common language especially about behaviour. (PS1)*  
*... both principals [high school and primary school] have really recognised the K to 12 model which is essential in our LMG model. (PS3)*

There were also a number of comments that referred to using the LMG as a vehicle to the schools' engagement with the local community:

*In the LMG what we have been working on is community engagement. At other schools I have been at there was an emphasis on community involvement and we have been trying to open a pathway for the community to become involved in school governance and I have seen a positive outcome from this. We discuss this at the LMG supporting each other with this topic. We all believe in this LMG. (HS5)*

### **Transition**

Principals discussed orientation and transition programs during LMG meetings and were aware of the facts, but mainly left detailed organisation to specific staff. Principals discussed transition from primary school to high school programs of behavioural intervention in LMG meetings. Most of the principals suggested that the discussion of transition principles and activities had better outcomes if discussed in LMG meetings and a common approach was adopted. The following example highlights the importance of transition to have full involvement from the primary school to the high school and the need to establish the common transition procedures within the LMG:

*Irrespective of which school, which primary school and which high school the student attended they would have a seamless transition. So each school would have three or four key expectations, universal expectations and they would be taught, and the expectations would be those with consequences and so forth. The LMG was a good place to get this going. (PS1)*



### Funding/Finance

Five out of the six LMGs used targeted funding, or their own individual school funding, to benefit joint programs developed during LMG discussions. Those schools within the LMG that received more funding than other schools believed that it should be shared with all schools, as the LMG was considered a team, and supporting those schools was an LMG priority. The following comment highlights the commitment by principals to have an LMG focus for funds and personnel:

*I was very vocal about that [pooling money received for other programs]. I wanted to pool into the common good so we pooled some of our National Partnership money into the LMG. (PS1)*

*We had an \$8,000 grant through the Premier Sporting Challenge but we used some of it for everyone in the LMG as you can't not — we're a team! (PS5)*

One of the LMGs equally divided all targeted LMG funds but agreed in principle that a team approach may have more positive benefits and be worthy of future discussion rather than dividing funds and operating as a single school:

*My understanding [is that], we get funds and the LMG distribute that based on the number of students enrolled in this school and we are allocated those funds each year and then we [the primary school] determine how that is spent. I can see how a team approach would have further benefits so perhaps a future discussion is needed. (PS2)*

### Professional Learning

Five out of the six LMGs regularly took the opportunity to discuss and organise various programs that had high school teachers teaching specific subjects to primary school colleagues and primary school teachers working with high school colleagues in programs such as literacy. There were many examples given by principals that also included joint professional learning days between all schools within the LMGs focusing on learning and behaviour outcomes, using staff from their own schools to provide professional learning sessions to other staff. Principals gave many examples of joint professional learning projects between primary and high school teachers and how this improved outcomes for students and particularly provided unique professional learning targeted at their own local context. Following are comments from a high school and a primary school principal that reinforce the notion of effective professional learning within an LMG:

*... as the high school has become more involved in what goes on in the primary schools, with high school teachers meeting with our teachers, they have come to see the higher levels of learning, especially in year 6 that is going on. ... We are trying to get away from the idea that it's the year 6 teachers being lazy and not teaching the kids properly. (HS4)*

*We had a writing project and that worked really well because it involved people from the high school, it involved reps from each of the primary schools and there were teachers who were classroom teachers, who were meeting and making that project work. It's great for staff to see each other as professional and committed to the local community. (PS6)*

The LMGs were either implementing, or in discussion about, combining learning and behaviour as a priority within the LMG, using the term *student engagement*. Principals commented that the focus on engaging students with the learning process and adjusting for the different ability levels in classrooms would ultimately improve classrooms. Some LMGs were using staff expertise in specific subjects to provide professional learning for other staff, and there was movement of staff between high schools and primary schools as an LMG-targeted priority. Professional learning was discussed in LMG meetings, and details were included on each individual school's professional learning calendar. Many of the learning opportunities were in stage (grade-level) collaboration or transition from Year 6 to high

school. Many of the LMGs cooperated in whole-staff professional learning days where all schools participated in the same professional learning activities. All principals believed that the combined and collaborative professional learning opportunities between primary and high schools, either in practice or in discussion, was a better way to improve behaviour and learning for students in their schools and across the LMG.

Principals' comments indicated that active professional learning opportunities were considered more effective across schools if there was an LMG focus. The LMG focus was mainly on learning and academic engagement of students, but principals agreed this approach had behavioural benefits as teachers received more targeted strategies and resources that highlighted kindergarten to Year 12 as a continuum of learning and behaviour with a focus on what was happening in their local school community. Following is an example of the focus on LMG-structured activities and the importance of the kindergarten-to-Year-12 focus:

*... We've had a lot more structured activities focusing on learning with a goal of having it as embedded practice within the LMG. We want to go further so it is really a K to 12 thing ... (HS5)*

The LMG priority, as reported by principals, was on improving academic engagement in classrooms by upskilling teachers using their own personnel and having common objectives through joint effective programs that gave knowledge of all schools within the LMG and thus increased appropriate programs and resources aimed at both the primary school and the high school. The following is an example of a program developed by the primary school that involves the high school:

*For example with our science program, the high school science teacher gave us a year 7/8 science program and we gave them a year 5/6 science program and lessons/experiments were given to us that would best match units within the high school program, creating that consistency in the curriculums. But just having them in a room talking curriculum, pedagogy, and that helps to form and build relationships with the faculties. (PS5)*

### **Principal's Role**

Principals interviewed for this study reinforced that flexible and dynamic leadership qualities were important for successful implementation of any programs and supports, including managing the behaviour of students and increasing the skills of teachers. Principals in this study reported that they believed themselves to be effective leaders. Some of the ways principals said they supported their school included involving all staff in decision-making for behaviour and learning, presenting current research on behaviour, providing release from class for teachers to work together on projects, giving teachers opportunities to extend their professional learning, enabling teachers to develop specific skills (e.g., become PBL coaches), and providing links between the school and the community.

Principals within this study also reported on the leadership qualities of colleagues from the other schools within their LMG as supportive professionals and on a personal level as experts in leadership as well as for stress, anxiety, and collegial support. All principals in the study commented that they needed to be good leaders willing to work with each other. This is evident in the following two comments that indicate these principals felt they were part of a collective that was trustworthy and effective:

*It's just that whole thing of knowing you aren't alone ... support ... it's just easier. We are on the phone and email each other all the time just asking questions and working together. (PS4)*

*I have some great colleagues in the primary schools who I know would be there for me professionally as well as personally. (HS5)*

Communicating with staff and gaining their participation was an ongoing concern for principals. Principals explored whole-school approaches and particular behaviour management frameworks such as PBL to increase the capacity of staff and students to manage problem behaviour. Principals saw the



academic and social benefits of students with disruptive behaviours remaining in their local schools. Principals suggested that this could be achieved by effectively and consistently communicating with staff that there was a need to increase and improve teacher skills for managing student behaviour in their classrooms. Also, the focus included improving skills in increasing the engagement of all students with school. This needed to take into account the unique needs of their local community by using the resources and an LMG commitment to the continuum of learning and behaviour across the whole of the LMG (all primary and high schools). Schools were at various stages of implementing PBL, but principals seemed enthused about its potential. Again, within the LMG it was a focus for developing resources and upskilling teachers to be involved in PBL. The following are two examples of principals' enthusiasm for the LMG and/or PBL as an LMG project:

*I had a meeting with the primary principals yesterday and discussed how we can address academic problems across the LMG. We recognise the benefits of the LMG approach. (HS4)*

*PBL is a focus for our LMG where we make some decisions of joint professional learning opportunities for staff. We reinforce the behavioural aspects such as common rules and similar ways to behave. We are trialling a new recording of the behaviour data across the schools to see if it works. You know how data driven it is! I love it! (PS3)*

### **Future Directions**

The theme of future directions including behaviour support emerged from interviews with LMG principals. Plans for the future often focused on the inclusion of PBL as a major framework for behaviour support. One LMG had been involved in PBL for 3 years; the others had begun with initial 2-day regional training with the assistance of the regional PBL coordinator. Only one LMG (LMG4) had no intentions of being involved in establishing PBL in their schools, but they did refer to their community of schools as similar. The following examples highlight the enthusiasm for the LMG approach to PBL in the future and the wish that the LMG approach will continue to operate:

*We haven't launched PBL yet. We've been working on it this year. I can't wait for it to launch; I just know we've got to get it right to launch. Consistency in everybody is what it comes down to, I just want to make sure that when we do it, we do it right. We will launch at the beginning of next year and hopefully everything will be in place. All of us in the LMG will be on PBL. On the same page so to speak. (PS5)*

*When I go to the big regional meeting I won't go and sit next to a personal friend, I will always want to go and sit with one of my LMG colleagues because there is always something to talk about. [It's] usually how is the term going and just the feedback. [It's] the very small things like, yeah, I have had a few suspensions lately, there's a few behaviour issues and, yeah, me too, and those sorts of dialogues, and what's the issues then, and I guess it's the conversations and the ability to never hesitate to pick up the phone and to talk to one of the collegiate LMG principals, so I can't speak highly enough of the LMG. It needs to continue but it is mainly us principals that have to keep it going not the money. (PS4)*

In summary, the principals' perceptions of future directions for LMGs were largely focused on commitment by principals for the LMG process to continue. The commitment focused on being colleagues, with closer dialogue between schools. A common and consistent approach across the LMG in behaviour and learning was a major discussion point. Many of the LMGs had chosen PBL as an LMG-committed approach to student engagement and were actively involved in ensuring it was across the LMG. All the LMG principals would like to be autonomous and make local decisions about behaviour and learning according to school and community needs and priorities.

## Discussion

We examined what principals perceived were the effective elements of an LMG to promote increased professional learning for staff for the management of problem behaviour. Interviews with 12 principals involved in six LMGs present some promising results in adding to the literature on managing problem behaviour and the role principals play in ensuring there are effective and flexible approaches to this ongoing challenge for schools.

Collaboration and collegiality among principals within an LMG was considered a high priority for all principals interviewed. The development of the LMG where primary school principals met with the high school principals on a regular basis was positively highlighted in all interviews. Collegiality among principals and collaboration between principals and their staff are important elements of the LMG model. This was also reinforced in a guide to establishing a community of schools in New Zealand that suggested establishing good collaboration between local schools was vital and resulted in improved learning for students (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015). The effective collaboration among principals maintained links with LMG business such as with face-to-face regular meetings or through emails and phone calls. Collegial relationships among principals provided personal support as well as benefited the local school communities through providing school-based programs that suited the needs of students, staff, and parents.

The primary and secondary school principals in this study were in agreement with the idea of simultaneously addressing engagement in learning and behaviour. Principals in this study utilised the idea of an LMG as a whole-learning community and saw professional learning as an opportunity to expand their primary and secondary staff's teaching skills from kindergarten to Year 12 within a local area. The LMG-combined professional learning approach was well supported in five out of six LMGs, where all staff from primary and high schools came together to share professional learning programs for both learning and behaviour.

School staff working together across schools for a common purpose was the topic for a British study (Freeman, Wertheim, & Trinder, 2014) that found that cross-school professional training that targeted local needs was successful in providing a consistent approach to whole-school systems for both curriculum and behaviour, and increased commitment by staff to the process. Muijs, West, and Ainscow (2010) similarly suggested that working in networks between schools enables more time for reflection on new processes and motivates school staff while learning from each other and engaging in new initiatives. The LMGs in this study created their own LMG-based networks for professional learning, and the principals discussed this priority in regular LMG meetings and provided opportunities and access to funding and resources for staff.

According to principals, professional learning opportunities relating to the management of student behaviour were regularly offered to classroom teachers. Principals reported that the focus of professional learning activities was democratically agreed upon by staff during staff meetings and review procedures and often discussed at principal LMG meetings. Principals also reported that being able to meet with other principals in their LMG allowed flexibility in professional learning opportunities, but also personal support and camaraderie and discussion about problematic or difficult issues. There was an agreed understanding within the LMG about how to approach the local school community to better include more suitable and effective engagement with learning and behaviour.

The aspects of good leadership as suggested by Sugai (2012), such as using evidence-based practices, recognising staff accomplishments, integrating academic and behavioural supports, establishing local professional expertise, and participating actively in leadership, were evident in most of the principal interviews. Professional learning focused solely on behavioural strategies is less likely to significantly improve a student's engagement (Angus et al., 2010; McDonald, 2013). Improved professional learning based on both behaviour and learning engagement for all schools, led by effective principals, within the LMG, with a local focus, was commented on by principals as important, as it supported the idea that primary school through to high school was a continuum of learning and engagement. Much of the research on the links between learning

engagement and student behaviour suggests that there needs to be ongoing support and professional learning from leaders (Johnson & Sullivan, 2014).

All principals commented on a whole-school approach as essential and the preferred approach to ensure consistency across school staff. This notion of whole-school approaches was reinforced by Peaston (2011), who investigated strategies that were being used in mainstream primary and middle schools to include children with behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties. Peaston suggested that the implementation of a whole-school approach ensured that consistent strategies and a positive attitude toward inclusive principles and language facilitated the integration and acceptance of students with problem behaviour as integral members of the school community rather than isolating them as individuals requiring a separate program.

To ensure that there was an important consistent approach across the LMGs using an agreed framework, principals took on the role of coordinators and were implementing or developing the whole-school approach across an LMG. The type of support provided to others within a collective (such as the LMG) was supported by research into developing sustainable and effective implementation of whole-school approaches across a number of schools. Bradshaw and Pas (2011, p. 534) suggested that implementation will be sustained to ensure better outcomes if there is consistency across all the sites. An effective leader is needed to ensure this occurs (Sugai, 2012). In this study, the LMGs identified the need for a consistent approach across primary and high schools, and most had chosen PBL as a framework to assist in this practice. Jordan et al. (2009, p. 17) reinforced that once local needs have been identified, schools should implement evidence-based practices such as implementing a common approach. The idea of a common approach for behaviour and learning across, and between, all the schools within the LMG was a focus of principals and reinforced collectively in LMG meetings.

The LMG model offers many effective elements that aim to support students with problem behaviour and also aims to prevent future problems. The LMG model implemented by the LMGs provided a way for principals to:

1. collaborate effectively and support each other both personally and professionally;
2. develop and implement an effective collaborative approach to professional learning for behaviour and engagement across primary and high schools for school staff;
3. increase the likelihood of a common language for rules and procedures between primary and high schools through professional and community partnerships;
4. utilise the expertise of school staff to promote behaviour and learning from kindergarten through to Year 12; and
5. consistently apply a whole-school framework, such as PBL, that considers the local community and reflects their common needs.

Through motivating their school staff, providing professional learning opportunities, and adjusting working conditions, principals can influence the improvement of student learning and teaching strategies (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008).

Currently, school leaders must make careful decisions with limited budgets and personnel on how to manage and maintain high levels of educational fidelity while catering to the individual needs of students. Principals also need trusted support and camaraderie with other leaders who understand their local community's challenges in behaviour and learning. The LMG model enables schools to make decisions about how to support their local community and improve the outcomes for their students through shared systematic behaviour management approaches and effective professional learning of teachers. The advantages of schools working together and pooling resources and expertise will improve both the learning and behaviour outcomes for all students. This study contributes to the literature on behaviour management approaches through developing the professional learning of teachers, informed leadership practices, whole-school approaches, and improved engagement of students with problem behaviour in schools.

### Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that school principals play a key role in implementing an LMG approach for schools to address student problem behaviour. School principals are considered pivotal in developing a local community response to address the unique needs of students from kindergarten through to Year 12 within their local area. The value of an effective LMG collegiate principal is directly linked to what schools do to support their own community of teachers, students, parents, and executives. The role of the school principal within an LMG is to establish common approaches to managing student behaviour, shared resources and purpose between schools, and shared professional learning for teachers.

The results of the current study suggest that schools can be active members of an LMG model and develop learning and behaviour professional learning opportunities focused on local needs and a commitment to engaging students in classroom activities through quality teaching and consistent behaviour expectations from kindergarten through to Year 12. The benefits of a principal's collegiate and supportive environment, and implementation practices, across an LMG lead to better outcomes for principals, schools, teachers, and specifically for students with problem behaviour within their local schools.

### Limitations

The findings of this study should not be considered as representative of all LMGs in Australia. The study consisted of government schools in one educational region of NSW. However, it could be considered a reasonable representation of the views of those schools involved in an LMG-cohort approach. This study could be replicated in a larger study across an educational region of NSW. This would provide additional information on ways to improve principal collegiate support around implementation practices. It would also inform educational jurisdictions and leadership groups on the management of behaviour in schools with a focus on the kindergarten-to-Year-12 continuum of learning and behaviour.

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