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## TRACING THE STAGES OF SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM DEVELOPMENT IN NEW ZEALAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS: INSIGHTS AND ISSUES

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### ABSTRACT

Senior Leadership Teams abound as the most common permanent team found in New Zealand schools, yet there is a paucity of research studies on the nature of team leadership and the development of these teams – particularly in primary school settings. Findings from individual interviews with principals and focus group interviews with team members in five Auckland primary schools confirm that leadership is consistently the single most important feature of developing a Senior Leadership Team into a high performing team. Paradoxically, the study also points to a lack of leadership knowledge and action in relation to specific developmental activity for teams. Using a well-known universal model of the stages of team development (forming, storming, norming, and performing) to analyse perceptions of practice, it was found that in all of the teams in this study principal leadership did not extend to the formal development of the team. This research concludes that the performance of Senior Leadership Teams could be enhanced if principals and Senior Leadership Team members were provided with research-based and practical insights into (1) the dynamic processes at work within a team and (2) the leadership behaviours and actions that are most appropriate to move the team through the team development process.

**Keywords:** team leadership, team development, senior leadership teams, primary schools, New Zealand



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## INTRODUCTION

We know a great deal about the nature of teams from research undertaken in the general field of management and leadership and there is a relatively small amount of literature that has contributed to our knowledge of teams in educational settings, albeit mostly in secondary schools. The literature that focuses on the nature of Senior Leadership Teams in schools dates back to the 1990s which coincides with the reforms of educational management in several countries that created a more demanding role for the school principal and consequently a move within schools to create collaborative structures and processes that would enable the sharing of leadership tasks (Bush & Glover, 2012; Cardno, 2012). Early studies focused for example on the work of senior management teams in secondary schools (Wallace & Hall, 1994; Wallace & Huckman, 1996); the changing management practices of primary school heads challenged by role expansion (Johnston & Pickersgill, 1997; Cranston & Ehrich, 2005); and the emergence of the Senior Leadership Team in both secondary and primary school settings in New Zealand (Cardno, 1998). In the following decade the terms senior management and senior leadership seem to be used synonymously in relation to these teams with the nomenclature allowing 'leadership' to predominate in the most recent literature (see for example Barnett & McCormick, 2012).

It is now commonplace for a New Zealand primary school to be organised with a Senior Leadership Team at the peak of the structural hierarchy. In the main these team comprise the principal, deputy principal, and assistant principal(s) who are the designated senior leaders in these schools. Sometimes other senior staff are invited to join the team. The members of a Senior Leadership Team jointly undertake the achievement of school goals and to this end their work involves cascaded monitoring of the work of others in a form of structural distribution of leadership (Cardno, 2012; Gronn, 2003). Similar patterns are evident in the case of the United Kingdom where recent research into the performance of teams in primary, secondary and special schools associated the prevalence of these teams with the popular idea of distributing leadership and assumptions made about the impact of this type of leadership on improving student learning outcomes (Bush, Abbot, Glover, Goodall & Smith, 2012; Bush & Glover, 2014). As Tetzlaff (2016) notes, "Senior Leadership Teams have become an organisational 'must have' and are now the most common permanent team found in New Zealand schools" (p. 2). There is a paucity of research studies on the nature, work, capability or development of these teams in primary school settings, yet they appear to play a significant role as a team in achieving the goals and aspirations of their schools.

### *Characteristics of Effective Teamwork*

Outside of education there is a huge literature related to teams and teamwork, some of which has relevance for school settings especially in relation to establishing what characterises an effective team (Adair, 1997; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Sheard & Kakabadse, 2002). A fundamental difference between a group of people who occasionally come together to work and a 'team' is that a team has a clear goal and it is accountable for its performance in achieving this. Knowing this is important for all team members. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) stress that all members of a team need to have a common conception of the nature and role of that team. They say that, "a team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (p. 112).

In his seminal work on teams, Adair (1986) refers to the key elements that constitute the work of a team leader. An effective team requires leadership that is focused on the three overlapping areas of (1) achieving the task, (2) developing the individual, and (3) building and maintaining the team. Across the literature that deals with teams in many settings inside and outside education one comes across lists of features that should be cultivated in the team to make teamwork effective. Wheelan (2016) for example provides a list of characteristics associated with high performing teams. Another such list is drawn from the work of Preskill and Torres (1999, p. 30) who say that effective teams:



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- Are open and honest
- View mistakes as opportunities to learn
- Have energy and enthusiasm
- Share information internally and externally
- Hold each other accountable for their actions
- Create a comfortable environment where humour and fun are valued
- Have a clear shared purpose and direction
- Encourage members to challenge and support each other
- Establish a climate of trust
- Develop methods for managing and resolving conflict
- Encourage creativity and flexibility
- Have individuals who facilitate meetings that enable all of the above.

These characteristics can be grouped into three broad areas that are fundamental requirements of effective teamwork and are consistently evident in the literature (Cardno, 2012). The first requirement is that the team has a purpose, is clear about their goals and how each member contributes to overall achievement. The second requirement is that the team functions in an open, honest manner with the ability to critique and learn from one another. The third requirement is that teams need leadership, not only to achieve the first and second requirements, but also to provide development opportunities for individuals and for the team as a whole.

### ***Team Leadership***

The primary characteristic of an effective team is that it is led. Team leadership is essential whether this is viewed as an individual or a shared activity. One of the key responsibilities of a team leader is to set direction and communicate expectations to the team. In addition, a leader must take responsibility for building and maintaining effective team operations. In an effective team there is a formal leader who must foster shared leadership within the team (Zaccaro, Heinen & Shuffler, 2009). In the case of short-life project teams, the team often does not exist long enough for the leader to have a significant impact on the development of others. However, in permanent teams, such as a Senior Leadership Team in school settings, leaders are not only able to hone their own skills but are also able to develop the skills of other members, thus creating shared expertise.

Leaders are essential in a permanent team to ensure that the team establishes structures and processes to guide their operation. It is the leader who is in a position to foster a culture of productive teamwork in which there can be open and honest conversation in a climate of high trust and high accountability (Cardno, 2012). In a study of senior leadership team practices in Australian schools, Barnett and McCormick found that the “principals understood the critical role of their input in shaping the conditions for successful team interaction and performance” (2012, p. 663). Sheard and Kakabadse (2002) identified leadership as a critical feature of team development because the leader must be able to recognise the stage of development that the team has reached and know how to move it forward to the next stage. Leaders, in short, create the conditions for effective team operation and their key task is to develop the team, as a team. This involves building the team. This leadership demand suggests that leaders themselves must firstly, be knowledgeable about the notion of team effectiveness and secondly, have the skills to build the team (Tetzlaff, 2016).



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## **Team Development**

Cardno (2012) asserts, “team-building is one of the key dimensions of team leadership” (p. 152) and Preskill and Torres (1999) remind us that a team does not start out with the capability to effectively achieve all that is expected of it. In fact, these authors assert that “a team’s ability to work together does not develop instantaneously; it does not occur without great effort, patience, and humility” (p 24). Team-building is the most important leadership task – it is what good leaders do according to Adair (1985, 1997). The nomenclature, team-building and team development is often used synonymously to signify the bringing together and growth of a group of people into a team that is productive and high performing: that is, able to achieve its goals.

The concept of team development is well documented in the general organisational literature (Sheard & Kakabadse, 2004; Tuckman, 1965; Wheelan, 2016). Cardno (1998) identified a low emphasis on team development in a baseline survey of team prevalence and practice in New Zealand schools. More recently this deficiency has been observed by Bush et al. (2012) who say, “While there is a raft of literature on professional development for leadership, there is comparatively little on the development of teams” (p. 25). In their research they found that most of the Senior Leadership Teams researched in English schools focused on such things as the significance of the time they had been together, social activities, meetings, days planning together, coaching, mentoring and individual professional development. In their extensive research Wallace and Hall (1994) note that Senior Leadership Team development was both unplanned and structured. Time spent working together was considered important, collegial support, humour and social activities featured. Structured activities included individuals attending training courses, residential courses, review days, meetings and the use of outside facilitators. Barnett and McCormick (2012) have highlighted in their study that the principals retained responsibility for development and that this development focused on individual team members rather than the team as a whole.

To successfully transform a heterogeneous group into a high performing team requires all members of the team working through an all-inclusive development process (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Sheard & Kakabadse, 2004). There is no specificity in the literature in terms of distinguishing between newly created and established teams when applying theories of development to team practices. However, as Cardno (1998) asserts, schools have both long-life permanent teams and short-life project teams in which membership changes create a new mix of people who must learn to work together to function effectively as a team.

For people to become acquainted with team members’ values and beliefs, their strengths and weaknesses and to assess their own role within the team takes time as team members adapt their behaviour to optimise their individual involvement in the team (Sheard & Kakabadse, 2004). Several models have been developed to explain this process of team development. Representative examples include the four stage model of Hensey (2001), the punctuated equilibrium model of Gersick (1988), the integrated model of group development of Wheelan (2016), the team and leadership framework of Sheard and Kakabadse (2004) and the classic model of Tuckman (1965). The models of Hensey (2001) and Wheelan (2016) have close similarities to the *forming, storming, norming and performing* stages of Tuckman (1965). The landscapes of Sheard and Kakabadse (2004) is an extension of the Tuckman (1965) model. The model of Gersick (1988) describes teams as developing rapidly to their midpoint at which point they go through a dramatic reorganisation. This model is often regarded as being in opposition to that of Tuckman (1965) but recent research suggests that aspects of both can be functioning during the process of group development (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006).

The five stages of the Tuckman and Jensen (2010) model are:

*Forming* – In the first stage the team forms and there is uncertainty about the nature of the team’s task, members are anxious, concerned about acceptance, are polite and enthusiastic. Members may not know each other so mutual trust is minimal and they are guarded with their thoughts and ideas.



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*Storming* – This stage is characterised by conflict and lack of cohesion around interpersonal relationships as members begin to compete for influence, identify their role, process expectations and how they will work together. Members may respond emotionally against the viability of the task and resist the efforts of the leader to manage the team.

*Norming* – Cohesion starts to develop as members establish protocols, norms of behaviour, resolve differences, and clarify roles. Communication, closer relations and mutual support develops and they begin to co-operate to perform the group's task.

*Performing* – Group energy is channelled into performing the task and members are interdependent, motivated and conflict is addressed without the consequences of earlier stages. The team has high morale and is performing effectively.

*Adjourning* – For project teams the completion of the project will bring a sense of satisfaction at completing the task, but sadness due to the dissolution of the team.

This model was not based on original empirical data but conceptualised existing research data and theoretical principles which the authors believed required further research. It is noteworthy that in a review of articles to establish whether this model had been empirically tested Tuckman and Jensen (2010) found few studies that reported empirical data and most were written from a theoretical perspective. In relation education settings there is neither theorising or empirical evidence to examine the practices of team development or the influence of leadership in team-building.

In the corporate sector, the model of Tuckman (1965) has been expanded by Sheard and Kakabadse (2004) from their research on team development in a multinational engineering company (Sheard & Kakabadse, 2002) to provide a detailed and complimentary *Integrated Team Development Process, Team Landscape and Leadership Landscape* that can be applied to team development and leadership. The *Integrated Team Development Process* has the features of the Tuckman (1965) model with a predictable and reoccurring progression through *forming, storming, norming and performing*. They have introduced a *Forming Opt Out stage*, after the *Forming* stage, to describe the process whereby some members of the team do not enter the *Storming* stage, refuse to let go of the past and become disengaged when they realise what will be required of them. This opting out may not be apparent to other team members as they enter the *Storming/Norming Stages*. As the team moves towards *Performing* the opting out becomes apparent, thus sending the team into another *Storming/Norming* cycle. Breaking out of this cycle is very difficult and requires a skilled leader to identify defensive processes, create common understandings and rebuild team relationships.

There is no evidence of theories of team-building such as the Tuckman model being researched in the context of school leadership teams. The seminal literature on teams in educational settings dating back to the 1990s makes cursory mention of stages of team development (see for example Wallace & Huckman, 1996). Even the more contemporary literature such as the work of Bush (2012), and Cardno (2012) whilst mentioning these stages of development does not examine them in detail and report no studies that have investigated how these stages have relevance to team practices. Bush, Abbott, Glover, Goodall and Smith (2012) refer to team-building in their research in very general terms with no reference to specific team building exercises. It is this particular gap in the literature that this paper addresses. We know that Senior Leadership Teams have existed in New Zealand primary schools for at least two decades and that they are mechanisms for exerting and spreading leadership. We also know that these teams are vested with considerable accountability for achieving school goals yet paradoxically, their development is a low priority (Cardno, 1998). The study reported in this paper set out to discover the attention paid to team development and team-building in particular and how this was accomplished in the case of



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five New Zealand primary schools viewed through the lens of stages of team development (Tuckman, 1965; Sheard and Kakabadse, 2004).

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of the principal's leadership role and the practices of team development experienced in Senior Leadership Teams in primary schools. One perspective of a qualitative methodology involves researchers collecting data from people in their own specific situations that can be analysed qualitatively and attempting to understand or interpret the meanings of their experiences as understood by or from the point of view of the participants (Cresswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lichtman, 2013). Following what Bryman (2012) describes as placing stress "on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants" (p. 380), this study reports application of a qualitative methodology committed to an interpretive approach. The concern was to establish the meanings people attributed to their experiences with the view to identifying emerging themes from the data (Bryman, 2012; Cresswell, 2014) because it is these experiences that influence the actions people take (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). According to Bryman (2012) the application of inductive reasoning to the perspective of the participants' worldviews enables the researcher to discover and ground their understanding of this world while retaining the integrity of those who provided the data.

Qualitative researchers would argue that research can only be done within "its own social and cultural location" (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 35), and using methods that allow for flexibility are valued for their capacity to provide a compilation of useful understandings of peoples' experiences. For this study semi-structured individual and group interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Wellington, 2015) allowed data to be gathered from differing perspectives in five primary school leadership teams. The data collected through the two methods applied was analysed using thematic coding to identify themes and sub-themes that related to the broad categories established through the review of pertinent literature. To increase validity, the interview transcripts were returned to the participants for verification and a summary of the key points from the focus group interviews was also made available to those who participated. Consolidated findings reflect the use of multiple-method and multiple-perspective triangulation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) to bring together strands from both methods and the perspectives of both principals and team members.

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling was used to select the Senior Leadership Teams for this study. In all, five principals were interviewed individually and five focus group interviews with five entire leadership teams were held. Altogether twenty team members and five principals participated. Davidson and Tolich (2003) describe these approaches as an intentional and rational selection of who to include in the sample based on the information needed and where it can be found. In this study there was no intention to make generalisations from the findings hence representation of the possible sample population was not a consideration. Recruiting participants was a challenging task. Because the research involved both individual and group interviews it was necessary to be open with potential principals and team members about the impossibility of maintaining anonymity. It was also essential to stress the importance of confidentiality beyond the bounds of the group data-collection events. The composition of primary school Senior Leadership Teams traditionally include the Principal, Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal and in some situations Senior Teachers. These teams work very closely together making it very difficult to keep decisions confidential within the team. The researcher visited several primary schools which had indicated some interest in participation and spoke to the whole Senior Leadership Team (including the principal) together to gain agreement to participate. Only schools where every member of the Senior Leadership Team agreed to participate were contacted to formally complete the written consent forms. It was made clear during the recruitment conversation that the school/team would participate in the study only if all members replied to agree to participate and that the Senior Leadership Team's continuation in the project would



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be conditional on all team members choosing to remain in the project. The five teams initially recruited 'stayed the distance' for the duration of this project and we are extremely grateful to them for their generous sharing of information that has furthered our knowledge and understanding of team leadership and development in the context of primary school Senior Leadership Teams.

## FINDINGS

The findings from this study are presented in two sections: firstly, those related to the principal's role as the leader of the Senior Leadership Team, and secondly, findings about team development practices in the five schools. In each of these sections the perspectives of principals and other team members are presented. The schools have been called East, West, North, South and Central. The average number of team members in these schools was five, comprising the Deputy Principal and Assistant Principal in all cases with Senior Teachers making up the number.

### *The Principal's Role as Team Leader*

The five principals participating in this study affirmed, without exception, that their role involved leading the Senior Leadership Team and that the work of the team centred on achieving the goals of the school. All the principals indicated that they provided the direction, the vision, and set the broad school goals and that these were discussed and shared with the team. Consequently, team members were delegated tasks to achieve specific school goals. Each senior leader in the Senior Leadership Team subsequently worked with their own team so that leadership cascaded through the school to focus on improving student achievement. As one principal stated:

*"The purpose of the senior leadership team is primarily to lead their team of teachers that is going to enhance the learning and achievement of their students" (North School Principal).*

The principals saw their role as supporting the Senior Leadership Team and members of that team supported their teachers in enacting their responsibility for student learning. Furthermore, almost all the principals referred to the strategic nature of their role in leading a team that had a strategic function. Together, the principal and the team implemented the school's vision. The principals also felt it was important for their communications with the team to be consistently shared at other levels of the school hierarchy. A strong thread throughout, concerning role perceptions held by the principals, was that the existence of the Senior Leadership Team allowed them to share and spread the burdens of school leadership.

*"So you are not alone! It is the workload, probably the biggest thing is sharing that workload" (Central School Principal).*

All five of the principals interviewed in this study strongly advocated that a key function of their role was to develop the staff members in the team and support them to build their capabilities. They all commented on the importance of building relationships as a means of developing trust. These principals saw themselves as role models, coaches, mentors and supporters of individuals in the team, saying such things as, "I guess the challenge is trying to get the support right for them" (South School Principal). Only one of these five principals commented on development of the team as a whole in the context of losing team members and said:

*"When you lose too many at one hit, that can be tricky as well. If you try to think about succession planning, you want to have the school not fall over just because [...] walked out" (East School Principal).*



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From the perspective of Senior Leadership Team members, team leadership was positional with no one questioning the adoption of this role by the principal, however, the leadership role was consistently defined in terms of school leadership rather than team leadership per se. For example, a team member from Central School asserts that it entails the principal providing the vision and the team helps her to achieve this. Another team member from this school recognised the need for the team to spread the workload, and said. "It's too hard to do on your own. It's a huge job".

The perception that the principal's leadership role extended to concern for the development of members of the leadership team was strong and voiced by many of the focus group participants. One participant from West School states:

*"[...] has been very good at mentoring and developing and giving you the opportunities to take something that you are passionate about and run with it and develop your skills as you go along" (West School 1).*

Comments of this nature were common and confirm that team leaders make the development of individual team members a priority, yet do not focus on the development of the team as a *team*.

## **Team Development Practices**

Principals in this study viewed the Senior Leadership Team as a place where opportunities for development were available to the team members. In short, questions about team development were invariably answered from the viewpoint of professional development for individuals in the team, not from a perspective of team-building. The data collected in individual principal interviews and in the focus group interviews with the five teams has been analysed using the four stages of team building (forming, storming, norming and performing) to frame the display of findings.

### **Forming**

None of the principals in this research had given any formal consideration to the notion of developing their Senior Leadership Team 'as a team' rather, they had considered the needs of individuals. Furthermore, none of these principals was familiar with the theories associated with building a team or developing a team. A noteworthy finding in this study is that the issue of team formation does not arise in the thinking or actions of the principals because in these permanent teams, membership is inherently positional and there is infrequent change of members. If membership does change it usually involves only one member at a time. All but one of the schools in this study had relatively long-serving principals and one principal commented that the infrequent appointment of a new member had little impact on the team.

*"We haven't had that stage for a while because it's such a stable team. A new person coming in doesn't actually create enough ripples for it to be the forming part" (East School Principal).*

This assumption that new members would be easily absorbed into the team was expressed strongly in relation to internal school appointees who "were already familiar with the culture so it's just a matter of providing them with information that fills gaps in their knowledge of school systems" (East School Principal).

From the perspective of team members there is concurrence on the view that an internal appointee is likely to fit into the team more easily than an external appointee. East School team members commented on the practice of



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growing leadership within the school and having people ready to fill vacancies in the Senior Leadership Team. She stated:

*"I came to leadership meetings for the first term every week just to get a feel of what happens. That was before I was appointed and X and I worked together for two terms to coach me through it" (East School 5).*

However, the team members who were external appointments described feelings of shock, being overwhelmed, isolation. One recalled it as a daunting experience and said:

*"As a new member – I think I was the only one –it was a bit difficult being the only new kid on the block because the team was so settled before I arrived" (North School 1).*

At South School the principal was new – both to the school and the Senior Leadership Team and the Deputy Principal played a key role in her induction to the school, informing her of processes and discussing what she observed. But in relation to the team itself, the principal recalls just stepping into the formal leadership role that was her prerogative. Nevertheless, the principals were aware that when there was a gap in the team and they were in a position to appoint a new person, it was an opportunity to find someone who "would fit with the existing culture and dynamics of the team" (North School Principal). All the principals mentioned strategies they used to support and integrate new members into the team such as providing the new team member with a mentor, making themselves available for regular discussions. No formal induction processes had been established specifically for induction to the Senior Leadership Team in any of the five schools and this applied to the principal who in one school was the newest member of the team.

### **Storming**

For the new principal in this study, her own recollection of going through a storming phase was recent and strong. She had found herself at odds with the existing culture of the team at the outset and needed to resist making changes until she felt that she had earned the trust of the team. She commented:

*"It took probably about six months to gain that trust. It wasn't nasty. So, it was about not changing things too quickly – it was about going with what was already going and what was good and then, us as a team, looking at what wasn't going good and what we were going to do as a team" (Central School Principal).*

All the Senior Leadership Teams and their leaders acknowledged that the storming stage did exist in relation to absorbing new members, even though these were infrequent occurrences. They recognised that new and existing members were nervous about how interpersonal relationships would play out. There was also apprehension about how the new member might influence other team members. West School Principal admits to having thoughts about how new members will be connected or disconnected to the team and whether they will threaten or undermine him.

Not all teams want to acknowledge concerns or challenge the behaviour of new members and one of the principals talked about this in the following way, saying, "I think robust discussions are really important, and I think conflict if it is open, that's OK. It's the ones that are not expressed, those are the tricky ones" (South School Principal).



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Several respondents in the focus group meetings also recalled incidents of storming behaviour where colleagues and they had differing views or the even greater difficulty of working without knowing the actual views of others. One member expressed the view that it was so much easier to communicate disagreements when the new team member was an internal appointment, well known to the other team members. Externally appointed team members and leaders found themselves in a position where only time would tell if the team could work together because storming communication was latent and not facilitated to open up possibly conflicting views. This was specifically expressed in relation to the new principal in the South School team. A team member from this school described how the principal had joined a team with a very strong and cohesive existing culture. The team was waiting for the principal to initiate a conversation in which she conveyed to the team her opinion of the team. He said:

*"We know what we think of her, but we don't really know what she thinks about us. We are very cohesive and we are quite strongly in a culture of doing things a certain way" (South School 1).*

There is certainly evidence that the potential for storming involving the surfacing rather than the suppression of conflict and disagreement exists. There also appears to be considerable reluctance to engage in a storming phase in the course of constituting a team with new membership. The key finding to report here is the generally held view that "storming could take time to work through and there was always the danger of team members refusing to fully commit to the team and its goals" (Tetzlaff, 2015, p. 66).

### **Norming**

In spite of the leaders and members of these leadership teams acknowledging the importance of opening up to one another about concerns and recognising that this rarely if ever happened, they all commented on certain norms or values that they believed were essential to team effectiveness. Primacy of place was accorded to the value of cohesiveness with communication, trust and collaboration also being considered as important norms for the team.

In the findings of this study there is considerable evidence of the importance placed on the norming stage of team building although working to gain the commitment of the team to a common set of values and goals may not actually have been linked to the notion of norming by the participants in this study. Nevertheless, all the principals wanted to build cohesive teams and believed that a key strategy to achieve this was effective communication. The principals from Central, South and East schools were consistent in declaring that good communication was essential to achieve clarity about team understandings to enable the team to work together effectively. At South School for example, the principal described how the team used conversation to define and understand the role of the team. At East School a buddy system is used for new team members, pairing the new appointee with an experienced team member to show them the ropes. In all of the schools in the study, documentation of expectations, role descriptions and written practices and protocols related in the main to individual position holders such as the Deputy Principal or Syndicate Leaders and not, in all cases, to the Senior Leadership Teams as a whole. One exception was Central School where protocols specific to team meetings were in use and communicated clear norms as this statement confirms:

*"So we have protocols for our meetings. We always have our protocols that we follow. Everyone's opinion is valued and listened to. Those types of things" (Central School 2).*

The team members from West School confirmed the perception that although many values were espoused in terms of school-wide importance and individual expectations there was little norming practice within the team itself. One team member from this school suggested that if the storming stage was not being attended to by



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bringing it out into the open, there was the potential for on-going storming to interfere with the team becoming cohesive and achieving their goals. She said,

*“That is where it starts, if you have got a leadership team that is at loggerheads all the time, that is soon going to filter through” (West School 1).*

Where norming was strong, it was related to the clarification of their roles (which normally occurred outside of the team meetings) and through the mentoring of new team members by experienced members. It was recognised that norming took time and what was significant is that it was not practised as a *team* activity.

### **Performing**

In the consolidated view of the principals in this study the Senior Leadership Team was performing effectively when their work resulted in the achievement of school goals. Most of the principals observed that when the team was performing effectively there was a flow-on effect throughout the school, with a central focus on student learning. They used comments like “the school was orderly and everyone was learning” (East School Principal) and “I think there is a good feeling within the school, they are organised and have got their minds on data and where the kids are at” (Central School Principal).

The principals saw their role as sustaining the good work of the team, creating settings for getting the team’s work done and dealing with conflict constructively. The mechanism for supporting team performance was the regular, weekly team meeting led by the principal. Two schools however created more time for the team to meet – assigning full days to planning forums for example. Every one of the principals referred in some way to the need for healthy debate when the team met to solve problems. They said they welcomed robust conversations, reflective practice, and decisions based on quality information. They also believed that a high performing team could agree to disagree; once agreement was reached then ‘cabinet rules’ applied. A principal commented,

*“We are welcome to discuss and debate and disagree, but there is a formal professional setting for that to happen in, and once we leave that, whatever the consensus that is decided, that is what we support. I think sometimes we have open debates, arguments and conflict and that is healthy to get to a point where we can agree” (West School Principal).*

Team members across all five schools reiterated that the measure of performing effectively was how well the team goals and their own professional goals were met. The majority of teams felt they were performing very well and drew great satisfaction from being able to complete tasks, meet deadlines and see how their efforts had resulted in improved student learning outcomes. Without an exception the team members of all five teams affirmed that their performance was aimed at improving student achievement. There was strong consensus about the importance of the team meetings because it allowed the team to be accountable and report on how it was performing. Team members expected the principal to monitor team members’ achievement of goals and discuss the kind of support required by a member if a goal was not being achieved. Another important aspect of meeting together was the need to connect the team as one member states.

*“I think our Thursday meeting is a really important time because it’s about the practicals of having to get these things done but also the big picture stuff and where do we want to head. That connecting is very valuable every week” (East School 3).*



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Other than the regular meetings and monitoring of the team's performance which included discussion of how the team was progressing in achieving agreed goals, no specific development activity that focused on the practices of the team itself was identified by participants in this study.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The prominence of Senior Leadership Teams in education settings is evidence that they are an essential element of school organisation structure. They have become a means of sharing the burden of leadership to focus on learning and teaching in schools. They operate to achieve goals that lead to better learning outcomes for students and based on the findings of this study, the team members and their leaders believe that the team is important, performs well and is a conduit for collective leadership. Two key issues have emerged from the findings of this research. One relates to the nature of the principal's leadership of their Senior Leadership Team. The other relates to critical omissions of team leadership at key transition points along the stages of team development nominated as forming, storming, norming and performing (Tuckman, 1965).

### *Principals' Leadership Practices*

Findings from this study in conjunction with many authors (Adair, 1997; Bush et al., 2012; Cardno, 2012) confirm that leadership is consistently the single most important feature of developing a Senior Leadership Team into a high performing team. In the perceptions of the principals themselves and in the views held by team members, it is the principal who is consistently seen as the direction provider, the setter of school goals that impact on the work of the team and the monitor of the team's achievement of these goals.

This study confirms that it is the principal who clarifies roles and determines the contribution of members to the team and this is consistent with the findings of other studies, for example Goodall (2013) who highlights the importance of the leader communicating expectations. In the case of this research, however, the members of the team were confirmed in their professional rather than team roles through formal job descriptions. These positional roles determined their membership in the team. The question arises as to whether these sorts of teams, created on the basis of positional status and generally serving the purposes of the principal, can really be considered to be teams at all. None of the five teams researched in this study had goals that were unique to their team. Instead, their focus was on school-wide goals whilst the literature is adamant that a critical element of effectiveness is the development of clear goals for the *team* (Adair, 1986; Preskill & Torres, 1999).

This study also provided two insights into leadership in these school settings. First, within the schools there is leadership resulting from the principal's legitimate leadership role; and second, leadership is shared and enacted with other members of the team. It is together that they perform the key leadership roles in the team and the wider school. Principals and team members shared responsibility in an interdependent process that allowed the team to perform effectively as borne out in the studies of Sheard and Kakabadse (2004) and Wheelan (2016).

Both the principals and their leadership team members described leadership in relation to strategic direction setting, monitoring team members' achievement of professional goals and providing support and development that was targeted at specific individuals in specific positions. The latter activity mirrors a finding in the research of Barnett and McCormick (2012) who also found that principals acknowledged their responsibility for the development of team members – as individuals. Whilst acceding that all of these are leadership practices and are reflected in the literature (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008) none of the principals in this study spoke about their leadership in direct relation to building the team. It appears that the very notion of 'team leadership' is



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absent in their thinking, understandings and action. So, while the participants in this study claim to lead and be led both singly and jointly, the paradox is that they evidence a lack of understanding about exactly what *team* leadership is and how it can be used to develop teams.

### ***Critical Omissions of Leadership***

By using Tuckman's (1965) theory about the stages of team development (forming, storming, norming, and performing) to analyse perceptions of practice, it was found that in all of the teams in this study principal leadership did not extend to the formal development of the team. The findings show that aspects of team-management and managing relationships are vital at each critical transition point or stage of development. One critical point at which leadership is essential in teambuilding is at the stage when a team is confident enough to show less dependence on the leader's direction. At this stage teams are ready to enter a storming stage where they are prepared to challenge one another and the leader about goals and procedures. Team leaders must be prepared to let the storming occur and even encourage it because as Wheelan (2016, p. 27) asserts "only through resolution of task conflicts and the development of a unified view of the group's purpose and procedures can true collaboration be achieved". This is a time when leaders must allow rather than suppress conflict because as this study shows if the conflict is not addressed it will only resurface at a later stage. If leaders can lead the whole team towards the surfacing of beliefs and assumptions in an effort to establish norms that are important for the team, this is the most effective leadership task and one that is generally not performed well (Cardno, 2012; Tetzlaff, 2016; Wheelan, 2016). When principals are unaware of the notion of developmental stages in teams they are unlikely to accord significance to this particular stage of 'storming' that has critical implications for moving the team to the 'norming' stage where shared values of teamwork are put into practice. Shared norms are built on a platform of trust which in turn rests on a foundation of honesty and respect. Without the ability to reach this stage of agreed values and expectations, the team will not be able to progress to the fourth stage of 'performing' as a highly developed team. This stage is intended to be highly work intensive (Wheelan, 2016); productive (Cardno, 2012); and effective (Adair, 1997).

This research concludes that the performance of Senior Leadership Teams could be enhanced if principals and Senior Leadership Team members were provided with a greater understanding of and insight into the dynamic processes at work within a team and the leadership behaviours and actions that are most appropriate to move the team through the team development process.



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