

InSights

Literature review: Student-centred schools make the difference

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Abstract

Student-centred schools focus on designing learning experiences that recognise and respond to the individual needs of each of their students. They encourage all members of their school community to be active learners, working to enhance the educational opportunities available at their school. This literature review seeks to address and explore the hypothesis that *student-centred schools make the difference*.

The review commences by defining the concept of student-centred schooling and the various learning and educational theories that underpin related research. The authors present a model comprising six core elements of learning environments that student-centred schools demonstrate, with a focus on leadership. They also link their findings to the five professional practices in AITSL's Australian Professional Standard for Principals to illustrate how these leadership practices drive and sustain student-centred schools.

Drawing from Viviane Robinson's work on the dimensions of student-centred school leadership, together with several further dimensions identified through an environmental scan of literature, the authors consider how and in what ways student-centred schools make the difference.

Key points

Student-centred schools:

1. encompass student-centred pedagogies in the classrooms, continuous learning at all levels of the school, strong student-centred leadership and systemic support with a focus on the student. (p. 6)
2. work to understand and support student learning, rather than focusing on how best to teach or how to cover the curriculum. The primary purpose of a student-centred approach to learning is to encourage students to become active, engaged participants in their own learning experiences. (p. 17)
3. report that their students have shown 'greater confidence, more on-task learning behaviours, improved group dynamics and a greater ability to respond to a challenging curriculum'. (p.17)
4. understand that assessment is central to developing, sustaining and delivering student-centred learning. They effectively use assessment tasks to identify areas of need and to develop strategies for improving student learning. (p. 18)
5. are learner-centred and recognise that all members of the school community need to be supported in their ongoing learning. (p.21)
6. feature strong student-teacher relationships that foster a strengths-based view, rather than a problem-deficit view, and encourage setting (and meeting) higher expectations for educational outcomes. (p. 22)
7. actively create opportunities for families and communities to participate as equal partners in their children's education. They identify ways of knowing and understanding the values and culture of their community. (p. 25)
8. encourage and listen to student voice and provide legitimate forums for students to express their views and ideas, especially for marginalised students. This enhances student engagement and motivation and helps develop their capacities to contribute in a democratic society. (p. 34)

The leaders of student-centred schools:

1. work to establish a collective vision through discussions with the school community and reflections on the needs of the students, and plan how to work in a cohesive way to identify and address these needs. (p. 14)
2. need to provide teachers with the opportunities to learn and be creative in their classroom practices. (p. 18)
3. have the role of building and facilitating safe and effective professional learning communities. (p. 22)
4. demonstrate the ethics of care, justice and critique in creating an inclusive learning environment where all members can experience success. (p. 27)
5. are focused on both the leaders and the learning of the school and the wider community, and demonstrate ethics and a moral purpose in their leadership. (p. 34)

Introduction

This report offers a review of literature drawn from an environmental scan of current resources, materials and research pertaining to the leadership of student-centred schools. The purpose of this review is to address and explore the hypothesis that *student-centred schools make the difference*. Our primary focus is on how school leaders can develop and sustain a student-centred philosophy at all levels within their schools in order to increase the quality of education for all students. We draw on research literature from Australia and internationally to examine the impact that student-centred education can have on student outcomes, particularly for those students in disadvantaged contexts.

In this review, we initially explore the concept of *student-centred schools* and how this notion is nested within a range of theoretical and philosophical constructs. We draw from research into student-centred pedagogy, learner-centred education, student-centred teaching and learning, and student-centred/ learner-centred leadership to provide our description of a student-centred school. We then consider models of leading student-centred schools, drawing from the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* and looking at the large-scale student-centred reforms in Ontario, Canada.

In order to address and inform the hypothesis that *student-centred schools make the difference* in more detail, we draw on the five dimensions of school leadership that impact on student outcomes, proposed by Robinson (2011). We use these dimensions as the initial framework of our review of literature from research and practice in the area of schooling and school leadership. We extend this framework to include additional dimensions of student-centred schooling that we identified through an environmental scan of literature and highlight the ways in which student-centred schools make the difference.

What is a student-centred school?

There is a strong conviction within the education research literature that student-centred approaches to teaching and learning make a positive difference to the outcomes of all students. This approach is promoted as effective for all learners and, as such, systems of education both in Australia and internationally have advocated student-centred approaches to teaching and learning as part of their agenda to reduce inequity (Black 2006; Danzig et al. 2005; Tennessee State Board of Education 2011; Yonezawa, McClure & Jones 2012). There is strong support for the notion that 'engaged learning occurs when the lives, knowledge, interests, bodies and energies of young people are at the centre of the classroom and school' (Thomson & Comber 2003, p. 305). Moreover, global research and policy literature suggests that a student-centred approach to developing engaged learning makes a significant difference for students, particularly those in disadvantaged contexts or who have not responded to more traditional teacher-centred practices. Walsh and Black argue that 'student-centred learning underpins the practice of the comparatively few schools internationally that combine high student poverty with high achievement' (2009, p. 3).

The concept of a student-centred school, however, is not a simple idea. We propose that the idea of student-centred schools is an amalgam of theoretical constructs related to student-centred approaches to education. The term student-centred and related concepts of 'learner-centred' and 'child-centred' are used to define an array of educational approaches, informed by constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning (Vale et al. 2010).

In challenging our thinking about learning, theorists like Dewey and Piaget have led to the development of constructivist theories about how students learn. Rather than being passive recipients of knowledge, constructivist theories of learning posit that learners are active participants in creating their own knowledge by drawing connections between new information and their existing knowledge, experiences and ideas. Constructivist theories are embedded in a number of studies of student-centred learning, which explore various ways in which students learn, and propose student-centeredness as a way of valuing and building on students' prior experiences (Black 2007; Dix 2012; Vavrus, Thomas & Bartlett 2011).

Socio-cultural theories of education, on the other hand, theorised that all learning and teaching occurs within a wider social and political context. Vygotsky's work suggests that social contexts are fundamental to learning. Renshaw indicates that:

"... it is not just that the child learns from others in social contexts and during social exchange, but rather that the actual means of social interaction (language, gesture) are appropriated by the individual (internalised and transformed) to form the intramental tools for thinking, problem-solving, remembering, and so on."

Renshaw 1992, p. 2

The socio-cultural approach to student-centred learning both acknowledges and draws on the broader socio-cultural contexts in which students are located, to engage them both in learning and in the world around them. This approach to student-centred education frequently draws on critical theories of education. Atweh (2013) indicates that from this perspective, student-centred education is not only about preparing people for work but also about 'empowering' them to become active democratic participants in society. The power of this critical approach to developing students into engaged moral agents within society has been identified both at the level of the system (Vavrus, Thomas & Bartlett 2011) and of the individual (Darling-Hammond 1996).

While the research draws from different theoretical perspectives, these perspectives all share a common philosophical underpinning, which is to design learning experiences that address the needs of the student. Black (2006, p. 4) further explains the common characteristics of student-centred education, indicating that:

- It personalises teaching and learning to meet individual student needs
- It emphasises building meaning and understanding rather than completing tasks
- It is based on a challenging curriculum connected to students' lives
- It enables the student to be an active participant in his or her learning
- It encourages cooperation between students
- It is guided by rather than centred around the teacher
- It connects learning to the wider community outside the school.

In her description of student-centred education, Black (2006) includes a broad range of elements, from classroom practices to linking learning to the local community. Her definition partially reflects the breadth of literature on student-centred education and associated concepts. Research into student-centredness and learner-centredness encompasses all levels of school education, from classroom practice (Cornelius-White 2007; Yonezawa et al. 2012) to the design of national school systems (Black 2007; Levin & Fullan 2008). For the purpose of this review, we will focus on the ways in which school leaders can develop and sustain elements of student-centred leadership within their school.

We believe that, in order for a school to be recognised as truly student-centred, it must encompass all of these elements, from student-centred pedagogies in the classrooms, continuous learning at all levels of the school, strong student-centred leadership and systemic support with a focus on the student. Our definition of student-centred schools is supported by Dix (2012), who states that what distinguishes a truly student-centred school is that the values of a student-centred focus are validated, supported, articulated, and celebrated by everyone. They are not left to chance' (2012, p. 5). Drawing on these constructs, our report offers a broad definition that brings together a variety of different elements of education, from classroom practices to governance and policy, as outlined in Figure 1 with a focus on their leadership.

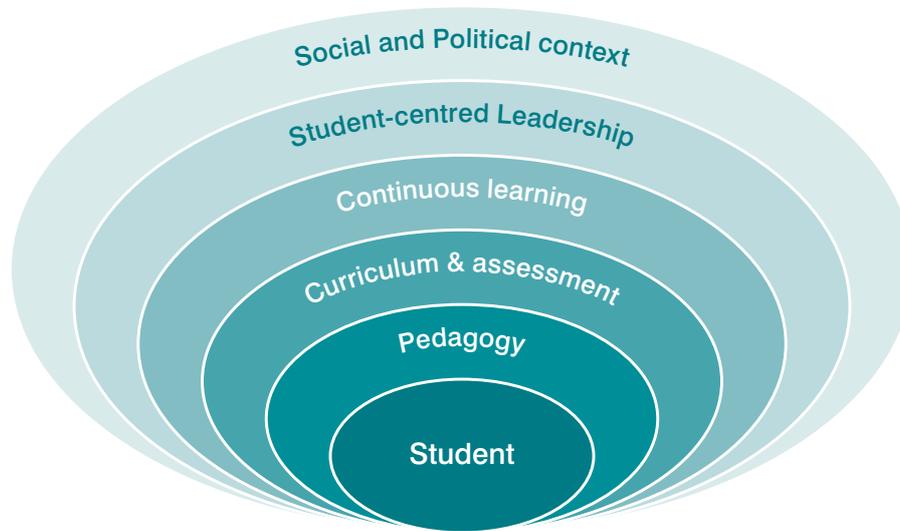


Figure 1: The student-centred school

Figure 1 provides a visual guide to our conceptualisation of the student-centred school. In accordance with the various theorisations of student-centred approaches to learning, we have placed the student at the centre. The positioning of the student at the centre reflects the belief that the individual student, his/her experiences, interests and learning styles should be the fundamental focus of the student-centred school. The next level of our figure represents the student-centred approaches to pedagogy that should be evident within every classroom in a student-centred school. Dix describes student-centred pedagogy as an approach that ‘recognizes the individuality of each student and, by extension, the primary importance of the relationship between learners and teachers. The very nature of learning is deeply affected by relationship at the fundamental level of brain development’ (2012, p. 5). In contrast to a more teacher-centred approach, students in a student-centred classroom are positioned as active participants in their own learning.

The third layer of Figure 1 represents the view that student-centred schools require new approaches to curriculum and assessment. Rather than strictly adhering to set curriculum outlines, a student-centred approach requires teachers to implement a responsive curriculum that supports both students’ learning goals and appeals to students’ interests (Atweh 2013). Similarly, student-centred schools need to move away from binary notions of summative and formative assessment.

Rather than using assessment purely for purposes of judging academic outcomes, a student-centred approach suggests that all assessment should be used to identify and tailor teaching and learning to meet the needs of all students, including the deployment of culturally fair assessment practices (Klenowski et al. 2010).

The final two layers of Figure 1 represent the work that is done by teachers and school leaders at all levels within the school. It is in these two layers of the figure that the concept of 'student-centred' approaches to education differs from 'learner-centred' education. In the latter all members of the school community are viewed as learners. Student-centred and learner-centred leadership, on the other hand, both refer to the development of organisational structures and policies that support learning for all. In our definition of a student-centred school, we believe that all members of the school community need to be engaged in continuous reflection on and improvement of their knowledge and skills. Furthermore, school leaders need to be focused on developing not only the knowledge and skills but also the institutional features required to effectively support a focus on achieving transformation, which Caldwell and Harris define as 'significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students' (2008, p.3).

Student-centred leadership

The field of student-centred leadership is relatively new, having grown out of a number of major reports that have aimed to understand the links between school leadership and student outcomes (Leithwood et al. 2004; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd 2009). We take a broader view of the goals of education, and concur with Ben Levin's (2008) argument that 'the goal for public schools should be real and meaningful gains, across a wide range of desirable student outcomes, with greater equity in those outcomes, in a way that builds and supports positive morale among all those involved in schools' (p. 62). We believe that the leadership of student-centred schools is situated within the context of equity, inclusivity and ethical leadership. Ladwig (2010), in arguing for the importance of non-measurable 'academic' outcomes, describes how in private lounge rooms across the country parents talk about what they want from schools for their children; and that very quickly in these conversations someone will point out that schooling is meant to provide many more things than just 'academic' outcomes. In their newly released Education Agenda (Fullan 2013), the highly successful Ontario province has introduced a commitment to the wellbeing of the whole student, and the wellbeing of society, which essentially consists of higher levels of student achievement and the capacity to apply what one knows. The agenda states that 'the fundamental purpose of education in an excellent system is to produce in all of its graduates — as close to 100 per cent as possible — the quality of leadership. By that we mean the capacity and commitment to act for one's own good and for the common good' (Fullan 2013, p. 9).

“Equity and diversity are strengths and resources in schools and communities. Learner-centred leaders create educational environments that value diversity and promote equity. Leaders contribute to equity and justice for all students by developing opportunities to confront and negate patterns of discrimination. School leaders are stewards who are motivated by a deeper commitment to serve the needs of their community.”

Danzig et al. 2005, p. 10

Although there is a great deal of literature around school leadership (including leadership styles), less attention has been paid to the ways in which school leadership impacts on student outcomes. Judgments around the effectiveness of leadership frequently stop short of linking leadership and student learning or outcomes (Goldring et al. 2009). Even within the literature on leadership styles, there is evidence that leaders who are focused on students yield greater effects on student learning. The New Zealand Ministry of Education commissioned a major meta-analysis of leadership research, resulting in Robinson et al.'s 2009 report 'School leadership and student outcomes: identifying what works and why'. One of the key findings of the report was that 'transformational leadership' has very small effect sizes on student outcomes, where pedagogical leadership (in which the principal participates directly with teachers) has large effect sizes. The closer leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely it is that they will have a positive impact on their students. The biggest effect size was seen when leaders were most closely associated with teaching and learning, and teacher professional learning that was focused on improving student outcomes.

Robinson (2011) argues that leadership is frequently judged in terms of other factors such as management (behaviour management, financial and administrative management and so forth), the relationships with adults in education systems (parents, staff, departmental officials and so forth) or the willingness to engage in innovation. While effective management is important, it is not sufficient to ensure good educational leadership. School leadership must encompass high quality management and a focus on ensuring procedures that ensure high quality teaching and learning.

Student-centred leadership acknowledges that school leaders need to work in tandem with teachers to enhance students' academic, personal, and social learning and outcomes. While research has shown that teachers account for a significant influence on student achievement (Hattie & Anderman 2013), the challenge for school leaders is to provide the conditions in which teachers can do their best work (Dinham 2009; Leithwood et al. 2004; National Center for School Leadership, n.d.). Leading teaching and learning places teaching and learning at the heart of schooling. As Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008 p. 636) state, 'the more leaders focus their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes'.

The mission of a student-centred educational leader, however, does not end at the school gates. Danzig et al. (2005) indicate that learner-centred leaders should be actively involved in developing leadership capacity and sustainability throughout their community, promoting equity and diversity in leadership to meet the needs of students and promoting learning about key educational topics through research and sharing their practices. In other words, while student-centred schools make some difference, in order to make a substantial difference in the lives of all students, educational leaders cannot only be focused on the activities inside their own institution.

Levin and Fullan (2008) argue that the central lesson is that sustained improvement in student outcomes requires ongoing efforts to change teaching and learning practices at a systemic level.

“Key components of this work include a small number of ambitious yet achievable goals, publicly stated; a positive stance with a focus on motivation; multi-level engagement with strong leadership; emphasis on capacity building while paying attention to results; keeping a focus on key strategies and at the same time managing other interests and issues; effective use of resources; and constant and growing transparency including public and stakeholder communication and feedback.”

Levin and Fullan 2008, p. 289

This systemic approach to reform has had global appeal with many nations working to strengthen educational leadership at all levels both within and beyond the school to improve outcomes (Pont, Nusche & Moorman 2008). In Australia, one element of this work has taken the form of the development of the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*.

Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the student-centred school

Jurisdictions around the world have developed standards and capability frameworks for school leaders and teachers as part of a wider global training, development and accountability agenda. Standards describe a common body of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to ensure quality in the professional preparation and development of leaders (Hoyle 2006). As an example, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (2011) (APSP) identifies and describes the roles and professional practices expected of school leaders in Australia. The APSP states that principals lead and manage through: vision and values; knowledge and understanding; and personal qualities and interpersonal skills, while demonstrating five professional practices:

- Leading teaching and learning
- Developing self and others
- Leading improvement, innovation and change
- Leading the management of the school
- Engaging and working with the community.

Each of these professional practices is linked in some way with the concept of leading a student-centred school and sits within the broader notions of student-centred approaches to education. The professional practice of 'leading teaching and learning' is, in particular, closely aligned to this notion. We have identified that four of the five professional practices outlined in the APSP map closely to the five leadership dimensions that effect student outcomes described by Robinson (2011), and are used to frame our approach to addressing the hypothesis that *student-centred schools make the difference*. In this review, we explore in detail, the links between these five dimensions and the professional practices described in the APSP. In order to reflect the professional standard more closely, we also provide a discussion of how the literature on student-centred education approaches the practice of 'engaging and working with the community'.

Student-centred schools make the difference

In investigating literature related to *student-centred schools make the difference*, we explore literature examining the following dimensions: establishing goals and expectations; resourcing strategically, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning and development; and ensuring a safe and orderly environment. Furthermore, drawing from themes within the literature we propose three additional dimensions of student-centred schooling, namely: engaging and working with the community, ethical leadership, and listening to student voice. These three additional dimensions will also be examined.

Establishing goals and expectations

One of the fundamental elements of the school leadership role is in establishing the goals and expectations for the school (Hallinger & Heck 1998; Leithwood & Riehl 2003; Pont, Nusche & Moorman 2008). Seashore Louis et al. (2010) reported that teachers and principals agreed that one of the most instructionally helpful leadership practices was focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement. Robinson et al. (2009) indicated that the goal-setting element of school leadership has a moderate significant mean effect size (0.42) on student learning. Their report suggested that effective school leaders should be able to set goals that are clear and identified as important. Moreover, they should be able to generate commitment to these goals within the school community.

The theme of establishing goals and expectations that are centred on student outcomes is described by Leithwood et al. (2004) as accounting for the largest proportion of a leader's impact. In their study of more than 8,000 principals and teachers across 164 schools, Leithwood et al. (2004) found that this set of practices is centred on developing shared understandings about the organisation, its activities and goals, with a common purpose or vision. Effective leaders set clear directions, establish high expectations and use data to track the progress and performance of students and teachers. Leadership, however, does not only involve establishing these goals but also requires leaders to provide the impetus for the members of their school community to work towards them. The motivation provided by leadership is described by Murphy et al. (2007) as *purpose*, which helps people within the organisation move towards these goals and expectations.

Richard DuFour (2002) reports during his 25 years as a school principal he sought to be a good 'instructional leader', and as such he devoted countless hours each year asking the wrong questions. In undertaking detailed classroom observations and reflections, he was primarily asking teacher-focused questions, such as 'what are teachers teaching, and how can I help them teach better?' He describes that change occurred only when he shifted his perspective to a student-centred approach, and began asking 'to what extent are students learning the intended outcomes expected of each course or lesson? What support can I give teachers and students to support improved learning?' According to DuFour, improvement in pedagogy and student outcomes can be achieved through a shift from helping individual staff members with improving pedagogy to working with collaborative learning teams to ensure that students are supported in their learning.

A shift from teacher-centred to student-centred schooling is unlikely to be successful if it is simply championed by a school leader. Any major change in the culture of a school requires collaborative support at all levels. Dix (2012) suggests that the roles of informal and formal leadership are pivotal in developing a student-centred school culture. Without support from leaders throughout the school, it is unlikely that a shift to a student-centred culture will become the 'normative, pervading atmosphere of the school' (Dix 2012, p. 6). All members of the school community need to believe in the need for change within their school and collaboratively set goals and expectations as to how they are going to achieve this change. The experience in Ontario would affirm the need for leaders to drive this change (Levin 2008).

Collective vision

Effective school leaders do not simply impose goals on members of the school community (Leithwood & Riehl 2003). Rather, student-centred leaders work to establish a collective vision. This collective vision emerges through discussions with the school community and reflections on the needs of the students. The development of a collective vision gains widespread support and motivates staff to engage in purposeful work towards goals. A shared vision is described by Dix as an essential 'part of what makes the learning environment coherent' (2012, p. 14). In student-centred schools, this type of collaborative vision means that all members of the school share a focus on the needs of the students. Teachers and school leaders can then plan to work in a cohesive way to identify and address these needs. Black (2007) describes these types of collaborative school cultures as having the potential for generating powerful impacts on student outcomes (p. 29).

The concept of collective goal-setting, however, does not mean that school leaders should never challenge existing ideas or propose alternative school goals. As Robinson states 'leadership does need to articulate, and at times demonstrate, alternative approaches and possibilities. But it also needs to listen to the passions of others and be a sensitive observer of what they care about' (2011, p. 49). This approach may be viewed as a form of collaborative learning community, in which all members of staff have a voice in the decision-making process.

Although the research suggests that collaborative decision making is one element of student-centred leadership and hence, the student-centred school, reshaping the culture of educational leadership is not an easy task. School leaders who hope to develop a collaborative structure for shared decision making need to develop the capacity for critical reflection and build structures for ongoing professional learning for all staff (Danzig et al. 2005). School leaders need to have a strong understanding of how to lead school reform and to develop the skills of all staff (Darling-Hammond 1996). This role of leading teacher learning and development is discussed later in the review.

Link with the Principal Standard

Robinson's (2011) dimension of 'Establishing goals and expectations' relates to the professional practice of 'Leading improvement, innovation and change'. This professional practice works in conjunction with the three leadership requirements:

1. Vision and values
2. Knowledge and understanding
3. Personal qualities and social and interpersonal skills.

These leadership requirements together with the professional practice of 'Leading improvement, innovation and change' (AITSL 2011, p. 10) clearly reflect the approaches of developing strong learning communities with collaborative decision-making processes.

Resourcing strategically

Levin and Fullan (2008) describe strategic resourcing as essential to successful improvement, but indicate money is not the critical driver and that it is important to pursue more effective use of existing resources. In fact, economic studies of educational reforms indicate that increases in financial resources alone have not impacted significantly on student outcomes. Hanushek (2004) refers to reform efforts that have simply increased funding to existent programs as 'same operations with greater intensity'. Caldwell and Harris (2008) similarly refer to financial capital in schools as necessary but not sufficient for transforming the performance of a school, even in disadvantaged contexts.

While more money may not be the answer, it is argued that strategic approaches to resource allocation can be used to lever significant amounts of change by supporting new ways of working (Levin & Fullan 2008). In their work in Ontario, Levin and Fullan found that many educational organisations did not give careful attention to the way they allocated resources (Levin & Fullan 2008). Improvement of governance and leadership should be directed in part to helping leaders make more informed decisions about how to allocate staff and other resources in light of our knowledge about effective strategies to improve learning. For example, the allocation of support staff is often not linked to teaching and learning but to special education procedures.

Similarly, Robinson et al. (2009, p. 98) describe the 'strategic' use of resources as being about securing and allocating resources that are aligned to pedagogical purposes and the needs of students rather than simply accumulating funds. This differentiates the strategic use of resources from other resourcing activities like fundraising, grant writing, or partnering with business, as these may or may not be applied in ways that serve important pedagogical purposes. Rather, it is about the careful alignment of resources to pedagogical goals.

Nevertheless, 'student-centred learning comes at a cost' (Black 2006, p. 6). Approaches to student-centred education require resources for teachers to engage in continuous learning (Darling-Hammond 1996) and time for teachers to collaborate, which add substantially to the resourcing needs of schools. Frequently systems offer schools flagged funding to develop specific skills or send their staff to particular professional development programs. This approach, however, is more focused on meeting systemic requirements than meeting the needs of students. Black (2006) suggests that a more effective approach for supporting student-centred schools may be to allocate funding that could be used for additional staffing to allow teachers the time to engage in professional learning and collaboration.

Building a collaborative learning community requires commitment and time for all staff members (Danzig et al. 2005). Providing teachers with the time to develop collaborative structures comes at a substantial cost for schools with budgets that are already stretched (Black 2006). A lack of funded time for teachers to collaborate and reflect on their professional practice is described as a significant barrier to the development of good student-centred teaching practice (Black 2007).

The research suggests, however, that schools that have already embedded student-centred processes believe that the investment is worthwhile. One school principal states: 'If you don't invest in the teacher, you can forget the whole thing. You need to support the teacher in the classroom, in their teaching practice, in teams, across the school' (Black 2006, p. 5).

Furthermore, there is evidence in the academic literature that student-centred approaches to education may actually support schools in the strategic allocation of their resources. Black (2007) suggests that some schools 'equate improvement with new programs, seizing new offerings without the ability to integrate them into existing commitments or sustain them. Ultimately, this drains their already fragile capacity' (p. 24). Student-centred schools with a strong collaborative vision, however, build their capacity to identify and implement only those strategies that meet the needs of their students. Student-centred schools also focus on the context and the knowledge and experiences that are available to them through the school and broader community. This deep knowledge of their community supports student-centred schools to identify and draw on relationships with the community to develop new opportunities for their students (Black 2006; Caldwell & Harris 2008).

Link with the Principal Standard

Robinson's (2011) student-centred leadership dimension of resourcing strategically aligns closely with the *Australian Standard for Principals* professional practice of 'Leading the management of the school'. The professional practice of ensuring that 'budgets are integrated and aligned with learning priorities' (AITSL 2011, p. 10) follows the recommendations within the literature for school leaders to ensure that the use of funding is targeted and meets the needs of the students.

Ensuring quality teaching

One of the most complex elements of introducing student-centred approaches to teaching and learning is that it dramatically shifts the previous paradigms of how 'quality teaching' is conceived (Vavrus et al. 2011). Rather than focusing on how best to teach or how to cover the curriculum, student-centred schools work to understand and support student learning. The primary purpose of a student-centred approach to learning is to encourage students to become active, engaged participants in their own learning experience. Yonezawa et al. (2012) offer a clear description of how student-centred approaches link with specific pedagogical strategies, which they refer to as 'personalization, to support students in their learning'. They state that:

“One way to capture this is to think of student-centered learning as a set of educational practices, policies, and supports that matter in building strong, capable, engaged learners, while personalization is the network of highways, channels, streets, and pathways that connect individuals engaged in these practices.”

Yonesawa et al. 2012, p. 2

Schools that have effectively implemented student-centred or personalised approaches to learning report that their students have shown 'greater confidence, more on-task learning behaviours, improved group dynamics and a greater ability to respond to a challenging curriculum' (Black 2006, p. 5). Most importantly, however, a student-centred focus in both the school leadership and pedagogical practices is viewed as an effective method of protecting students from disengagement (Yonezawa et al. 2012).

A student-centred approach to learning is more complex and variable than teaching-centred approaches. Rather than simply presenting the curriculum, teachers are required to have 'deeper knowledge of subjects and more flexible forms of pedagogy as well as tools that access student thinking so that teachers can understand it and build upon it' (Darling-Hammond 1996, p. 11). Teachers in a student-centred classroom not only require strong content knowledge but also need to have a toolkit of pedagogical approaches to their subjects that they can use to meet the individual needs of diverse groups of students (Cornelius-White 2007; Vavrus et al. 2011; Yonezawa et al. 2012). Furthermore, teachers adopting a student-centred approach must be adept in 'knowing the developmental, cognitive, and learning styles of our students and ensuring that instruction is well matched to each' (Dix 2012, p. 11).

The role of assessment is central to developing, sustaining and delivering student-centred learning. Assessment, as it is described here, is not about the high-stakes examination and comparison of student performance. Rather, it is about effectively using assessment tasks to identify areas of need and develop strategies for the improvement of student learning (DuFour 2002). Teachers and school leaders in student-centred schools should be competent in designing, implementing and analysing results from a range of assessment tools (Dix 2012). Assessment in student-centred schools should develop a continuous and robust approach to understanding student needs (Vavrus et al. 2011). This approach is described by Dix (2012, p. 7) as a continuous 'feedback loop', through which assessment can help teachers become more aware of the needs and strengths of both the student and the pedagogical methods that the teacher employs. In this way, Dix suggests assessment in student-centred schools should not only be used for the summative evaluation of students but also as a barometer of how teachers and the school are performing.

More than 20 years ago, Michael Fullan coined the term 'pressure and support' (Levin & Fullan 2008). However, Levin and Fullan (2008) argue that many leaders and systems have focused too heavily on 'pressure' with negative impacts on teacher motivation. To build capacity, they argue that what is needed is a strategy that increases the collective effectiveness of a group to raise the bar and close the gap of student learning. In the Ontario reform model, it involved developing individual and collective (1) knowledge and competencies, (2) resources, and (3) motivation.

Capacity building, ongoing collaboration and an effective system of feedback and reflection are all key elements in leading quality teaching in a student-centred school. The meta-analysis by Robinson et al. (2009) found that leadership for quality teaching within a school was achieved via:

- Leaders actively engaging in collegial discussions on instructional matters, particularly how instruction impacts on student achievement
- Leaders actively overseeing the instructional program
- Leaders actively undertaking classroom observations and providing feedback and support for teachers
- Leaders actively and systematically monitoring student progress. This data was used to evaluate student progress, adjust teaching, plan the weekly program, and so forth.

Student-centred leaders need to develop organisational structures that support teachers to learn, practice and reflect on a variety of approaches to pedagogy and assessment that align with the needs of their students (Black 2007). Furthermore, teachers need to be given the opportunity to experiment and take risks in their professional practices by trying new, creative approaches to support student learning.

It is important to note that no single teacher can or should be expected to master the full range of approaches for assessment and pedagogy. Teachers within a student-centred school are required to continuously learn, reflect upon and develop their knowledge and skills. They are challenged to develop new understandings, relationships and approaches to student learning every time they meet a new group of students (Vavrus 2011). In addition to continuous professional learning, the most effective approach to developing a strong, student-centred school requires teacher collegiality and cooperation (Black 2007). These features of continuing professional learning and developing collaborative professional communities within schools are discussed further in the next section of the review.

The Link with the Principal Standard

The dimension of 'ensuring quality teaching' aligns with the professional practice of 'Leading teaching and learning' from the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*. The description of this practice indicates that school leaders play a key role in setting high expectations for teachers, developing a culture of effective teaching and establishing a 'consistent and continuous school-wide focus on individual students' achievement' (AITSL 2011, p. 9).

In order to achieve these goals, however, student-centred leadership needs to provide teachers with the opportunities to learn and be creative in their classroom practices. Furthermore, school leaders and teachers need to develop their skills in using assessment to provide a 'continuous feedback loop' (Dix 2012, p. 7) that supports ongoing reflection and improvement of professional practice.

Leading teacher learning and development

Robinson states that the dimension of 'leading teacher learning and development' includes 'the most powerful leadership practices in terms of impact on student achievement' (2011 p. 123). Her statement supports Levin and Fullan's (2008) description of capacity building as the single most important element of achieving improved student outcomes. Following our review of literature, we believe that this element of leadership is most effective when it aligns with both the concept of 'student-centred' and 'learner-centred' education. The difference in this case is that student-centred schooling focuses predominantly on meeting the needs of the students. In learner-centred schools, however, all members of the school community are viewed as learners and there is a shared focus on their ongoing development (Danzig et al. 2005).

Dix (2012) describes the process of continuous professional learning and improvement as both an integral element of student-centred schools and also a way that these student-centred approaches and values can develop within a school. Dix describes teachers in student-centred schools as seeking continual improvement of their own skills and abilities as teachers. According to Dix, 'where learning is highly valued and seen as lifelong—a process not only for students but for teachers—a positive school culture with student-centered values is likely to take root' (2012, p. 14). The complexities associated with engaging in student-centred pedagogies and trying to identify and meet the needs of individual students mean that teachers in student-centred schools are not only willing to improve their skills but, in fact, demand further learning (Black 2007). Learner-centred and student-centred school leaders need to develop and implement 'policies structures and resources that support continued teacher development' (Black 2006, p. 4).

Pedagogical and instructional leadership have a long history. In the 1970s and 1980s, many believed that the key responsibility of principals was instructional leadership and curriculum improvement (Murphy & Hallinger 1992). According to Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (2007), while there are examples of direct instructional leadership by principals, the more typical path is indirect, working through and with others to develop the skills of teachers. Seashore Louis et al. (2010) suggest that leaders are able to have the greatest impact on student achievement when they develop and strengthen professional communities. In this case, an environment is created in which teachers work together to improve their practice with a focus on improving student learning.

Black (2007) explains that each of the case study schools involved in her research into student-centred practice in disadvantaged contexts has developed professional learning communities to improve their knowledge and skills and share their learning. Teachers in these schools meet regularly to plan together, share ideas, share practices and engage in informal mentoring and coaching. This type of learning community has been shown to be highly effective both in improving teachers' professional practice and wellbeing and in improving student learning (Darling-Hammond 1996; Dix 2012). In such an environment, school leaders need to form relationships with teachers based on mutual respect, support and a shared vision. The establishment of professional

communities suggests a model of the learner-centred leader as a 'community builder' (Danzig et al. 2005, p. 8) and as a facilitator who supports teacher learning. The time required to build these communities and offer support for teacher professional learning, however, is costly and requires leaders to be strategic in their use of limited resources.

Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford's (2007) case studies illustrate how leaders can have substantial effects on student outcomes. For example, one principal increased student results in standardised testing, increased the number of students being offered university entrance, and increased student enrolments. She achieved these gains by primarily focusing on attracting, retaining and developing staff, promoting shared leadership and decision making, developing personal and professional capacity of staff through a focus on improving teaching and learning, and building relationships. According to Levin (2007), hiring and firing of staff simply shifts the problem. It is teacher development with a focus on student learning that is imperative. The study of more than 8,000 principals and teachers in North America by Seashore Louis et al. (2010) found that leadership targeted at improving instruction has a significant effect on teachers, and indirectly on student achievement.

Link with the Principal Standard

The corresponding professional practice 'Developing self and others' (AITSL 2011, p. 9) aligns closely with the concept of 'learner-centred' education in which all members of the school community are viewed as learners. The description of this practice recognises principals' roles as both a community-builder and a facilitator, who is required to support teachers in working to develop their professional learning.

An integral feature of the professional practice is that school leaders, as well as teachers, need to focus on their ongoing development in order to improve school practices.

Ensuring a safe and orderly environment

In order to support student and staff wellbeing and develop a context that is supportive of effective learning, school leaders need to ensure that the school environment is safe and orderly. Robinson (2011) prioritises this dimension of leadership stating that 'if students and staff do not feel physically and psychologically safe, if discipline codes are perceived as unfair and inconsistently enforced, then little progress is likely in the improvement of teaching and learning' (p. 125). As such, the dimension of managing a safe and orderly environment that supports the physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing of all members of the school community is a necessary platform for developing school improvement processes. In an orderly environment, teachers can focus on teaching and students can focus on learning (Robinson et al. 2009, p. 101). Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2004) found that effective leaders ensure that all the organisational structures and conditions established within a school support rather than inhibit quality teaching and learning.

In school contexts where students do not feel safe and supported, they face the potential for disengagement from schooling. Students who become disengaged from school face the possibility of a number of academic and social issues, including behaviour issues, absenteeism, poor academic outcomes and, in some cases, failure to complete school (Mitchell, Forsyth & Robinson 2008). A possible counterbalance to these issues could be offered by positive teacher-student relationships (Van Maele & Van Houtte 2011). Positive trusting relationships between staff and students hold a key to developing environments in which everyone feels safe and supported. Student-centred leadership supports these relationships by encouraging all members of the school community to treat one another with respect (Dix 2012).

When following a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, school staff are encouraged to develop relationships with and learn about their students, their experiences and their approaches to learning. A strong relationship with students enables teachers to identify students' specific academic needs and develop effective approaches for overcoming any barriers to learning (Yonezawa et al. 2012). Student-centred pedagogical approaches can stimulate students' interests in tasks by making them relevant to their personal experience and develop critical approaches to learning. These relational, targeted approaches to student learning have been shown to have positive impacts on students' academic outcomes (Vavrus et al. 2011).

Furthermore, Dix (2012) suggests that a student-centred focus can overcome potentially detrimental perceptions that staff hold about students. When teachers form relationships with their students and get to know their interests, their backgrounds and their experiences, they are able to focus on 'the strengths of each child, and not just the problems they bring' (Dix 2012, p. 13). When relationships between teachers are based on respect, empathy and mutual understanding, teachers tend to hold higher expectations for their students (Dix 2012; Vavrus et al. 2011). More importantly, when students feel cared about in the school environment, they are more likely to work to meet these expectations.

Positive, trusting relationships between teachers and students not only hold the potential to improve student learning but also to improve and even protect the psychological and emotional wellbeing of students. When students trust their teachers, they are more likely to report issues like bullying in the school context (Colorado Trust 2008). Conversely, teachers who have developed strong relationships with their students may be able to better identify when a student is struggling and needs further support. Dix states that 'As educators, we cannot be responsible for all that goes on in a student's life, but the more we are aware, the deeper and more useful is our assessment of students' needs' (2012, p. 10).

Link with the Principal Standard

This dimension of leadership of ensuring a safe and orderly environment has some relationship to the professional practice described as 'Leading the management of the school' (AITSL 2011, p. 10). While this professional practice indicates that school leaders need to 'manage the school's human, physical and financial resources' and provide 'an effective and safe learning environment' (AITSL 2011, p. 10), more emphasis could be placed on establishing relationships between students and staff for the wellbeing of all.

Additional Dimensions

Our review of literature has provided detailed accounts of how the five dimensions of leadership outlined by Robinson (2011) can work together within a student-centred school. In seeking to address the hypothesis that '*student-centred schools make the difference*', however, we have identified three dimensions that have emerged from the literature as aspects of the student-centred school. These dimensions include (1) engaging and working with the community; (2) ethical leadership, and; (3) listening to student voice. Each of these is now considered.

1. Engaging and working with the community

This first dimension, engaging and working with the community, reflects one of the professional practices described in the APSP. The research literature on student-centred approaches to education indicates that in order to understand students' lived realities, student-centred schools must take into account community and family contexts. Student-centred learning is supported by establishing and maintaining close links between parents, communities and schools. Harrison and Greenfield (2011) argue that quality teaching occurs in contexts that are governed by strong collaborations among teachers and the community. Research into school education at all levels, however, has highlighted the potential benefits of school leaders developing positive and supportive relationships with representatives from the school's environment, which can result in increased understanding of the students and their community and even increased resourcing for schools (Caldwell & Harris 2008; Leithwood & Riehl 2003).

In student-centred schools with collaborative partnerships, leadership models also value democratic participation, and leaders embrace difference. However, Cannella (2000) argues that those who are often identified as the major stakeholders (including students, parents and communities) in educational discourse are frequently given no voice, much less equal or democratic partnership in the process.

This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities who are frequently misrepresented and misunderstood by schools (Luke et al. 2013). In a major evaluation of a nationwide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education program by Luke et al. (2013) many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members described the reluctance of schools to give students, parents or communities genuine involvement in the running of schools. Many commented that they were often not informed about meetings, or when invited, had no prior information about the purpose of meetings (2013, p. 102). In one school, specific 'outspoken' individuals were not invited to a forum and this disqualified them from membership on a school committee. In another instance, a school reportedly exaggerated community input at particular events. Community members were invited to an end-of-year 'lunch', asked questions about issues; and this was subsequently written up as 'community consultation'. In other words, whilst there was an appearance of community and parental involvement in many schools, it was focused on processes that allowed leaders to 'tick a box' rather than on genuine engagement.

In order to redress the imbalance of power in schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars (McLaughlin, et al. 2012) have advocated for authentic partnerships between schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Bond (2010) argues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not want to be constructed by a 'whitefella system' (p. 304) which is the dispenser of truth about the needs and requirements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. According to Bond, non-Indigenous teachers must develop close relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (students and communities), and allow students, community members and Elders to become policy makers in their communities.

Soliman (cited in McLaughlin et al. 2012, p. 183) theorised that there is a continuum of community participation in schools, ranging from minimal school-family contact to authentic partnerships between schools and communities. Soliman's model describes a range of community participation in schools from:

- 'assimilationist' schools where teachers interpret low parental involvement as 'lack of interest' in their school's education
- 'integrationist' schools where communication relies on individual teachers, and school-based structures such as specific literacy programs and newsletters
- 'delegationist' schools where community are co-educators, designing and organising school-based activities; and there are formal links with community reference groups
- 'autonomous' schools where there are non-traditional partnerships and decision making is accorded to the community.

McLaughlin et al. (2012) argue that there are very few examples of 'autonomous' non-traditional partnerships, where schools communities and students are given the power to make decisions or engage in schools in a substantive way. Assimilationist and integrationist models are much more common and based on the deficit construction of Indigenous families and students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars such as Nakata (1993, 2007), Rigney (2002) and Martin (2007) have long argued that the deficit positioning of students and families has been a major impediment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student success. Similarly, Comber and Kamler (2004) and Thomson (2002) have argued that students living in poverty or from other minoritised groups have been positioned as somehow deficient, which inhibits teachers' and schools' perceptions of themselves as having the agency to 'make a difference'.

When schools are student-centred, families and communities are given opportunities to participate as equal partners in their children's education. Building workable community partnerships is worthwhile for all schools, but especially for schools in disadvantaged areas (Black 2007). As Bishop (2008) has argued, understanding students and families in new ways (and avoiding deficit discourses) is crucial for closing equity gaps in the education system.

Focusing on community presses school leaders to ask questions about community values, particularly values around educational equity and social justice. Danzig et al. (2005) argue that the leaders of tomorrow's schools will be more heavily involved in defining purpose and establishing vision than in maintaining the status quo. This commitment will involve greater attention not only to the culture of schools, but also to the ways of knowing and values of parents, families, and communities (Danzig et al. 2005).

Link with the Principal Standard

The principal standard highlights 'Engaging and Working with the Community' (AITSL 2011, p. 11) as one of the five professional practices for school leaders. As such, the professional practice encompasses concepts of working with the community to 'create a culture of inclusion' (AITSL 2013, p. 21) and to build their understanding of the diverse social, political and cultural context in which the school works. Furthermore, school leaders are positioned as both influential members of the community and facilitators of collaborative partnerships (AITSL 2013).

2. Ethical Leadership

A second dimension that we propose is central to developing and sustaining effective leadership in a student-centred school is the concept of ethical leadership (Campbell 1997; Ciulla 2006; Duignan 2006; Starratt 2007). Ciulla (2006) maintains that ethics lies at the heart of leadership while Walker and Shakotko (2009) claim that educational leadership is a values-based activity. As a values-based activity, educational leaders are often confronted with a myriad of challenges and expectations that put considerable demands upon their time, emotional energy and expertise (Duignan 2006). In the current climate, school leaders have found themselves on centre stage in relation to issues pertaining to improving school performance for all students (Mulford, Cranston & Ehrich 2009). Yet, the nature of their work has the potential to pull them in different directions (Badaracco 1992). For example, leaders face tensions due to competing accountabilities such as those between students and staff on the one hand and the demands for compliance by the department and system on the other (Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber 2006). It is against this backdrop of competing demands and complexity that leaders need to make decisions that strive to treat all parties (teachers, students, parents, community members) respectfully and justly. We would argue that ethical leaders are leaders who act justly, fairly, and professionally and in the best interests of their students and staff. Due to their special location in the school, educational leaders have access to structures and processes that affect teaching and learning (Starratt 2007). Hence, and as argued earlier in this review, educational leaders are well-placed to impact positively on teachers' work by creating conditions that support inclusive, equitable and quality learning for all students. As such, when considering the leadership of a student-centred school, one needs to consider the ethical dimensions and implications of this leadership.

For the purposes of this review, ethical leadership is defined as a social, relational practice concerned with the moral purpose of education (Angus 2006). It thus promotes core values of inclusion, collaboration, and social justice when working with staff and students in school communities. Following the seminal work of Starratt (1996), ethical school leadership practice comprises three interconnected ethics: an ethic of care, justice and critique.

An ethic of care refers to a standpoint of regard (Starratt 1996) for the dignity and worth of individuals. It prizes relationships with students, teachers and community members. The notion of an ethic of care ties closely with the concepts raised throughout this review of meeting the individual needs of all members of the school community and providing them with opportunities for learning.

An ethic of justice according to Starratt (1996) involves fair and equitable treatment of people. For leaders it is about fostering an environment whereby shared and collaborative practices operate. Building a sense of a community lies at the centre of this ethic. This ethic of justice is also reflected in the central goal of student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, through its focus on ensuring success for all.

An ethic of critique involves the questioning of current policies/practices to improve learning for all students. It rests on the assumption that inequality and injustice exist in social practices and relationships and for this reason there is an urgent need to redress such injustices. As Starratt (1996) maintains, the challenge is to make these social arrangements more responsive to the needs of all in the community. The concept of an ethic of critique echoes the call for student-centred leaders to extend their leadership beyond the school gates and work to reform educational practices within their local community and school system (Danzig et al. 2005).

Evidence suggests that to promote achievement of all students, particularly those from disadvantaged and marginalised communities, school leadership needs to be democratic, relational and transformational (Angus 2006; Blackmore 2010; Slee 2011). The design of equitable and inclusive school reform involves educators at all levels collaborating with communities to ensure all students' educational interests are met long-term (McNaughton 2011). Schools that are successful in improving students' learning in equitable ways do so through developing an inclusive organisational culture, where staff, students and parents are valued and treated with respect (Carrington 1999; Dyson, Howes & Roberts 2002). Leading an ethical professional school community requires 'collective action to improve the quality of life in a community' (Perkins & Zimmerman 1995, p. 571), which includes involving teachers in ongoing and systematic inquiries about student learning (Comber & Kamler 2009). Against the current backdrop of high stakes assessment of educators' work and student learning (Klenowski 2009), there is an urgent need that school leaders be guided by ethical principles and practices that continue to address equity (Blackmore 2010).

An ethical approach to school leadership requires the principal to lead and work alongside middle managers and teachers to create an inclusive learning community for improved educational outcomes for all students. This approach to leadership is one that is fully supportive of student-centred schools.

Link with the Principal Standard

This dimension of leadership of ethical leadership has some relationship to the professional practice described as 'Leading the management of the school' (AITSL 2011, p. 10). While the concept of ethics has not been explored as part of student-centred leadership by Robinson (2011), our review of literature has raised ethics and inclusion as highly relevant to establishing and sustaining a student-centred school.

The dimension of ethical leadership links closely to the attribute described by AITSL, which indicates an effective school leader 'models ethical practices' (AITSL 2013, p. 18). The attribute described by AITSL (2013) echoes the interconnected ethics defined by Starratt (1996). An ethics of care is reflected in the description of the attribute that a school leader 'promotes democratic values' and 'advocates for the rights of students and the school' (AITSL 2013, p. 18). The AITSL attribute aligns with Starratt's description of an ethics of responsibility in the need for school leaders to show consistency in their values and their work. Finally, the ethics of critique is represented in the description that the school leader 'is prepared to challenge actions, behaviours and practices that are not ethical' (AITSL 2013, p. 18).

3. Listening to Student Voice

The concept of listening to student voice is central to the idea of student-centred pedagogies (Toshalis & Nakkula 2012). There has been significant research to indicate that when they are given opportunities to give input into their learning experiences, their levels of engagement and motivation rise and student performance may increase (Babcock 2011; Lerin 2006; Toshalis & Nakkula 2012). There is some indication that the effects of incorporating student voice into schooling may be particularly strong for students who have been seen as marginalised (Fielding 2010). There is a growing trend for the repositioning of young people from being passive recipients of knowledge to being active partners in learning and leadership. There has been a history of involving students as peer mentors or coaches, or as members of a student council. Authentic involvement in a student-centred school, however, may take many forms, such as the active engagement of students as planners, researchers, teachers and trainers and advocates throughout their education (Fletcher 2010). Students may act as evaluators of their teachers or even as active democratic participants in school governance processes (Fielding 2010).

The importance of developing students as active and democratic citizens was raised almost a century ago by John Dewey (1916), who emphasised the potential for confusion and conflict when students and teachers experience differing educational and personal purposes. Dewey (1916, p. 114) argued that it is the teacher's responsibility to adjust education according to individual students saying that 'an educational aim must be founded upon the intrinsic activities and needs (including original instincts and acquired habits) of the given individual to be educated'. His writing was centred on the importance of democracy and the role of education in producing certain kinds of citizens. The need to develop wise citizens, as well as academically successful students, is a key focus of Ontario's latest education strategy (Fullan 2013). There is some suggestion that student-centred approaches, particularly those that use participatory teaching methods, have a substantial impact on students developing the ability to apply democratic ideals outside the classroom and engage in their community (Darling-Hammond 1996; Vavrus et al. 2011). By enabling students to participate in decision-making processes, schools may not only have an impact on their students' development as democratic citizens but also promote the improvement of the school overall. Lerin (2006) uses the example of a school council to argue that the successful implementation of avenues for students to engage in decision-making processes can provide a fertile learning environment for both students and teachers. Mitra (2008) further indicates that the utilisation of student voice in school reform efforts can make a significant impact to student outcomes.

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) warn that even when activities appear to place students in the role of a more active, cooperative learner, seemingly respecting student voices, leaders must ensure implementation produces authentic achievement. They argue that the challenge is not simply to listen to student voice, adopt innovative teaching techniques or to find new locations for learning, but to deliberately counteract two persistent maladies that make conventional schooling inauthentic: 1) Often the work students do does not allow them to use their minds well. 2) The work has no intrinsic meaning or value to students beyond achieving success in school. That is, programs must be focused on the intellectual quality of student learning or on the social and interpersonal matters that impact on students' lives within the school.

Fielding (2006) argues that engaging with these social and interpersonal matters requires schools to be informed by student perspectives and judgments. This is a shift from traditional schooling models and requires genuine programs rather than tokenistic 'shopping lists' of student engagement programs. Fielding (2006) has theorised that in order for schools to become student-centred learning communities, they must engage in radical reform that engages students both formally and informally through both traditional programs such as buddying and mentoring, as well as new programs that give students greater power in schools, for example, by engaging students on staff appointment panels, holding student focus groups and surveys, and other student-led initiatives (for example, school ambassadors and co-researchers). Although there has been a wave of programs aimed at listening to student voice in schools, Fielding argues that, in some cases, these programs are superficial and unable to bring about change in the moral development of students.

In the Australian context, there is evidence that minority groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, do not currently feel that schools are student-centred, and that this impedes their ability to succeed at school. In the *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (Burgess & Berwick 2009), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students described school systems that were baffling and that made them feel like outsiders. Students described the vital importance of teachers who made them feel that school was a place of belonging; who listened, cared and treated them fairly; had a sense of humour and did not stereotype them; and who believed in their success and cared about their wellbeing.

In order to redress the imbalance of power in schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars (McLaughlin, et al. 2012) have advocated for authentic student voice and partnerships between schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. McLaughlin et al. (2012) describes the importance of equal partnerships and connections between parents and schools, including community participation in educational decision making, and the performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Luke et al. (2013) describe many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers and students as perceiving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and community engagement as a type of superficial consultation. Programs such as student leadership programs were seen to be valuable, but often targeted at individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, rather than being focused on developing all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. One parent said that:

"I found at the school there never seems to be somebody ... targeting Aboriginal kids - not just one kid. But why not target them ['kids that muck up'], then try and get them involved in the school so that they can go to the leadership programme. Don't target these kids that you know are going to make it because of their family background."

Luke 2013, p. 98

Across the extensive corpus of community and school-based interviews, short answer survey responses and the focus groups analysed by Luke et al. (2013), there were few reported examples of substantive community engagement, or student-centred schools that engaged in genuine programs aimed at understanding student goals, aspirations, concerns, ways of knowing or understanding.

In New Zealand, the work of Russell Bishop and colleagues instantiates the claim that Indigenous students have historically felt that schools do not understand them (Bishop & Berryman 2006). Bishop, O'Sullivan and Berryman's work with Maori students in New Zealand is a case in point (2010). While students in Bishops' *Te Kotahatinga* program repeatedly identified relationships between teachers and students as the crucial factor in their being able to effectively engage in education, teachers reported that the students themselves were the main influence on their educational outcomes (in deficit terms). The crucial implication was that understanding and listening to students changed the way that teachers and schools positioned themselves as able to bring about change. When students were blamed for their own failure, teachers and schools felt frustrated and without agency. When schools listened to students, teachers and schools began to understand that they had the power to bring about these necessary changes and drastically improve student success. Interestingly, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieved greater success, so did their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers.

It has been repeatedly demonstrated in academic literature (Harrison 2008; Luke et al. 2013) that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' approaches to learning and ways of knowing are frequently misinterpreted by teachers and schools. In order to avoid this misconception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, schools and teachers must invest time and effort in listening to students and communities. Doing so allows schools to take responsibility for student success, rather than continuing to 'blame the victim'.

Listening to all voices is also important for school leaders since, as Kohm and Nance (2007) argue, when principals receive polite but incomplete feedback, or only listen to the loudest voices, they can easily be blindsided. Student-centred schools allow hidden information to find legitimate forums for expression. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) caution that in the most effective schools, students' agency is respected but is not prioritised above educational needs. They further argue that, in a context of school accountability and standards, there seems to be little room for schools to have the flexibility and creativity required to support and implement students' ideas. In order to establish and maintain a student-centred school and use student voice, school leaders may need 'to advocate for a reform agenda that challenges current standardizing practice' (Toshalis & Nakkula 2012, p. 31).

Link with the Principal Standard

Unlike the previous two dimensions that we have identified, listening to student voice is not identified as a professional practice or an attribute for school leaders. The concept of encouraging 'active engagement of students and a strong student voice' is embedded within the description of the leadership attribute, entitled 'creates a student-centred school' (AITSL 2013, p. 9). Encouraging student voice is not only central to creating a student-centred school. It can also support student engagement and motivation and develop students' capacities as democratic citizens. For school leaders, truly listening to their students can enhance their understanding of the students and give a voice to those students who have historically been marginalised.

Conclusion

This report has offered a critical review of literature to address the hypothesis that *student-centred schools make the difference*. We have explored literature outlining research, policy and practice from Australia and internationally with the aim of uncovering ways in which school leaders can establish and maintain a student-centred school that improves the quality of education for all students. In particular, we have focused on how building a student-centred school can make the difference for students who are most likely to face challenges in their education, including socio-economic disadvantage and students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

In order to address the hypothesis that *student-centred schools make the difference*, we first had to examine the concept of student-centred schools. Our environmental scan of literature identified a substantial body of knowledge around student-centred pedagogies and student-centred teaching and learning. Furthermore, researchers such as Robinson (2011) have examined the notion of 'student-centred leadership'. Despite the wealth of materials focusing on the theoretical and philosophical concept of student-centredness, there was no clear definition of what constitutes a 'student-centred school' and hence we proposed our own definition. Informed by constructivist and socio-cultural theories of education, our definition of a student-centred school places the opportunities for learning and wellbeing of all students at the centre of their organisation.

A student-centred school, according to our definition, is characterised by focusing on the needs and desires of students at all levels of the organisation, from the student-centred pedagogies in the classroom to student-centred leadership. We describe student-centred leaders as being focused both on the learners and the learning of the school and the wider community, and demonstrating ethics and a moral purpose in their leadership.

In her study of student-centred leadership Robinson (2011) devised five dimensions of school leadership that we have used as a framework for our exploration of the hypothesis that *student-centred schools make the difference*.

These five areas are:

1. Establishing goals and expectations

The research literature suggests that setting school goals and expectations is central to the role of school leadership. According to the student-centred ethos, the goals and expectations of a school need to be focused on improving student outcomes (Leithwood et al. 2004). Furthermore, these goals should not be imposed by a single leader. Rather, effective leaders of student-centred schools need to work with all members of the school community to establish collective goals (Leithwood & Riehl 2003). This may mean working with informal and formal leaders in the school (Dix 2012), collaborating with members of the broader community and encouraging student input into decision making (Mitra 2008; Toshalis & Nakkula 2012).

2. Resourcing strategically

Strategic resourcing is imperative in all school contexts to ensure that the limited resources available to schools are used effectively. In a student-centred school, resources are allocated according to where they can best support student learning (Robinson et al. 2009). Teachers need both time and resources for continuous and collaborative professional learning to stay at the forefront of professional knowledge. While Black indicates that 'student-centred learning comes at a cost' (Black 2006, p. 6), those who have embedded student-centred processes indicate that the commitment of resources is worthwhile in terms of student learning.

3. Ensuring quality teaching

Quality teaching is central to the business of all schools. In a student-centred school, however, the traditional paradigm of teaching quality is altered (Vavrus et al. 2011). The focus of student-centred classrooms is on personalising learning to ensure that the content and pedagogical approaches engage and meet students' learning needs. Our examination of literature highlighted the role of self-reflection and assessment in providing feedback on pedagogical practices and student needs.

Teachers in a student-centred school need to be able to consistently assess and improve their practices using a 'continuous feedback loop' (Dix 2012, p. 7). Furthermore, they need to work in collaboration with their colleagues to ensure that the quality of pedagogy throughout the school is consistently high.

4. Leading teacher learning and development

This dimension of student-centred leadership is reported to have the greatest impact on student outcomes (Robinson 2011). It is closely linked with ensuring quality teaching as effective leaders of student-centred schools view all members of the school community as learners. A focus on continuous learning and improvement is described as both a central element of student-centred teaching and learning and also as a method used to embed and sustain student-centred approaches in a school (Dix 2012). We argue that the literature clearly demonstrates that student-centred leaders need to develop organisational structures and practices that support teachers to collaboratively learn, use and review different pedagogical practices through the development of professional learning communities (Black 2007; Seashore Louis et al. 2010). This concept differs somewhat from the idea of instructional leadership. Rather than functioning as the leader of teaching and learning in the school, the student-centred leader needs to act as a facilitator and 'community builder' (Danzig et al. 2005, p. 8) to establish collaborative communities that can support professional learning.

5. Ensuring a safe and orderly environment

The final dimension of student-centred leadership described by Robinson (2011) is a focus on a safe and orderly school environment. The research into student wellbeing highlights that when students do not feel safe and supported in their school environment, they are more likely to disengage from their learning (Mitchell, Forsyth & Robinson 2008). The focus on students promoted by student-centred schools, however, may offer a counterbalance to these issues. By building positive teacher-student relationships, characterised by trust, students are more likely to feel comfortable in their school environment and may be more engaged and motivated to learn (Dix 2012; Van Maele & Van Houtte 2011).

The review of literature into policies and practices associated with the concept of student-centred schooling raised a range of other issues that did not fit into the framework provided by Robinson's (2011) dimensions of student-centred leadership. In reviewing the literature, three further themes were identified that we propose as additional dimensions to consider for a student-centred school. These include:

- Working with the wider community
- Ethical Leadership
- Student voice

We have explored each of the additional three dimensions with a focus on how they address the hypothesis that *student-centred schools make the difference*. In particular, we have highlighted how these dimensions can support potentially marginalised or disadvantaged groups in the community to become engaged with learning through a student-centred approach.

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