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**“Lazarus” school rising: Finding renewed hope with a
“little help from our friends”**

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“Lazarus” school rising: Finding renewed hope with a “little help from our friends”

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Abstract

This article examines the nature of sudden and sweeping organisational change when a public secondary school facing closure reframed the ideological components of schooling, finding renewed hope and direction for the future. It also attempts to explain how organisational change can take place through university-led action research, activating school community support to become a science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) school, securing funding sustainability, political and bureaucratic support, and a new regional school and university partnership. Finally, it seeks to understand how teachers and leaders make sense of their new STEAM organisational identity and how they are reflecting upon this in their new work ahead.

This single bounded case study used a “sequential transformative strategy” involving an initial phase of action research reframing schooling purpose as a STEAM school. This was followed by semi-structured teacher and leader interviews hermeneutically analysed, constituting a two part project with a theoretical lens of social science theory. The theoretical perspective of Meighan’s component theory informs the analysis of the two methodologies.

Keywords: *STEAM; organisational change; reframing pedagogy*

Introduction

You may be forgiven for not fully comprehending the professional uncertainty and emotional turmoil experienced by school leaders and teachers when situated on the precipice of school closure because of falling enrolments. You would have to experience it to truly know it. But imagine if you have been a member of that school’s leadership or teaching team for ten years or more where threat of closure has been a perpetually sobering occurrence. What would that feel like? How would that affect the way you teach and lead? How would it affect the way others learn? This case study tells of such a story. It is a story that needs to be told with theoretical acumen and descriptive finesse to show how any school faced with similar dire circumstances can learn from the “Lazarus School Rising” case study. The story increases awareness of the power of partnerships, the competitiveness of the educational marketplace and the need to unlearn and learn afresh schooling practices towards a market “savvy” form of schooling ideology, purpose and practice.

In this case study, the school leadership and governing council welcomed a university and a neighbouring school strategic partnership proposal to become a STEAM school. The proposal came just before the “midnight hour” of voting for closure approached. A new STEAM school vision and mission was welcomed, engendering support from high political places. For Lazarus Secondary School, the hope of finding a competitive edge in a “survival of the fittest” schooling marketplace (Connell, 2015) became a living reality. Their decision tells a story of how and why leaders and teaching staff were prepared to embrace their new STEAM approach. This case study describes how a more hopeful future was achieved through university-led activism with key school and community actors, agitating for a curriculum that fostered school sustainability, turnaround and reinvigoration.

Holding on to institutionalised ways of “doing” schooling year after year meant that this school (which we rename as “Lazarus”, a well-known New Testament biblical story of a well-loved and respected man rising from the grave) was unable to find a competitive edge to attract new student enrolments. During the 1970s and 1980s the school catered for 800 students but over a ten-year period it had become residualised by school market competition, catering for only 120 enrolments in 2016 of which 40 were students in the Disability Unit. Year after year Lazarus was positioned on the brink of closure, only kept alive by a slim majority of school parents voting to keep the school going. According to the principal, in November 2016, facing another closure vote, amidst “negative local media” press and “toxic social media” and a multi-million-dollar education department plan to relocate the students to a nearby school, the school’s end looked imminent.

In a “reimagining” process, described as “an exploration of community tactics driven by a social justice mandate” through action research, a proposal was provided to the principal to repurpose the school with a focus on STEAM.

Methodology

A single bounded case study involved an initial phase of action research (Kemmis, 2006; Kemmis & Taggart, 1988, 2005; Carr & Kemmis, 1983) to support a residualised school from impending closure. This was then followed by eight semi-structured teacher and leader interviews hermeneutically analysed, constituting a two-phase project with a theoretical lens of social science theory using Meighan’s sociological component theory. The component theory approach was first developed by Meighan (1981) and has since been used to articulate ideologies within multi-cultural contexts (May, 1992), Christian education (Giles, 1995) curriculum development (Brown 1988) and the de-schooling movement (Meighan & Siraj-Blatchford, 2003). The theoretical perspective of Meighan’s sociological component theory underscores the use of the two methodologies briefly described below. The component theories approach provides a direct link between one’s philosophy, with its implicit assumptions, and

the explicit principles and practices that are associated with that philosophy (Giles 1995; Knight 1989). Ideologies considered as shared understandings when framed using component theories can assist in the fleshing out of a new expression of education elicited across interviews. Our major question was; “What is the ideological nature of STEAM schooling as seen from the principal and teachers’ perspective?” A second was “How are the leaders and teachers engaging with their new ideological approach to schooling?”

The mixed methods nature of this study involves a two part research project using a theoretical lens of social science theory overlaying the sequential research approach. These overlaying research approaches comprised Part 1—the action research enterprise to invoke a new and sustainable STEAM school identity and purpose, followed by Part 2—interviews with the teacher and leader participants about how they understood and experienced the unfolding STEAM agenda brought into being by the action research. Part 2 allowed us to give voice to diverse perspectives to better advocate for marginalised participants and better understand a phenomenon and process that is changing as a result of being researched. According to Cresswell and Cresswell (2017), little scholarly work has been done on this method with little guidance on how to use the transformative vision to guide the methods. Of note, the findings in the first action research phase became the focus in the second semi-structured interviews phase.

In Part 1, action research was used in the beginning months of the study, prior to the community school closure vote. This type of research was described by Carr and Kemmis (1983) as “making the probing character of strategic action problematic” and “reconstructing past action on the basis of observation and future action in the light of reflection” with the problem “resolved by a living dialectic of action and reflection” (p. 160).

In Part 2 of the study, semi structured leader and teacher interviews were undertaken using hermeneutic methodology as outlined below by Paterson and Higgs.

In practice this involves repeatedly and cyclically moving between the parts or aspects of the phenomenon and the whole, with the objective of gaining a growing understanding of the phenomenon. (Paterson & Higgs, 2005, p. 345)

Gadamer (1975,1981) described this process as an ongoing hermeneutic circle of interpretation, manifesting in a continual movement of seeking understanding by the researchers derived from the whole (entire data sets), to the part (individual interview data sets and their component meanings), and then back to the whole. This meant in practice that we involved ourselves in a “to-ing” and “fro-ing” of the interview data, seeking themed meanings from the individual interview data sets and their components of meaning, and then returning to the whole data sets to configure whole of study meanings.

Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to gather data from participants through both open and closed questions. The intention was to gain in-depth understandings of

how the new STEAM educational ideology of the school was being understood and wrestled with by staff. Semi-structured interviews allow for dialogue around observations made by the participants and the researchers, the exploration of patterns within the participants' responses, as well as the opportunity to "member check" the transcripts. Each participant was individually interviewed, for a period of 45–60 minutes using a digital recorder.

Part 3 provides an analysis and discussion of the data emanating from the action research and the leader and teacher interviews. These activities took place after the school voted to stay open, and worked to becoming a new STEAM school.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded as conversations. Prompts elicited the interview subjects' stories of reform, with occasional interviewer guidance toward key subject areas. The conversations were initially analysed through narrative analysis. This analysis focused on how the teachers identified as teachers across their careers, and within the context of school reform. How these teachers were disposed to particular pedagogical and curriculum approaches was also a key consideration. The open interview process was channelled toward the teachers' dispositions to STEAM and organisational change. The interview subjects' stories were distilled and developed into a precis outlining the key lines of dialogue, and the key themes. One of these key themes concerning how the new STEAM ideological schooling agenda was made sense of and engaged with by the teachers and leaders is reported on in depth in Part 2 of this paper.

The thematic analysis followed a thematised life history approach. This approach places the subject within their broader life history, their employment history leading to the interview subjects' current circumstances. The analysis is sociological and phenomenological in that it is concerned with the construction of the interview subjects' interests and concerns as well as the question of agency within the described structural relations of the school and education system. Palmer (1998) has described this as a fleshing out process of "authoring" or "scripting" our way, and dynamically managing the presenting paradoxes.

Part 1: "Lazarus" secondary school dying and rising again

School leadership and teaching can be wearing day in, day out, if a school is losing enrolments and, as a consequence, facing impending closure. Many schools have been closed after years facing negative social and mainstream media exposure that impact enrolments. Schools close after losing out to new school competition in the region. With metropolitan schools situated on valuable land that can be sold for real estate development, a school closure deal can mean a cash bonanza for the state. Lazarus school, which is situated on major arterial roads, with excellent public transport access and growing real estate developments nearby, could find itself in such a perilous situation. Lazarus school has a community drama centre, a

well-regarded special education unit and basketball programme, and extensive grounds and convenient geographical positioning near a large university. It also had a school activist parent group fighting to keep the school going.

Through the research team’s regional educational networks we learnt that historical primary feeder schools were in some cases not advertising to parents the possibility of enrolling their children at “Lazarus”. The school was considered to be close to “closure” or mistakenly, closure was considered *fait accompli*. Many of the nearby principals from the feeder primary schools believed that school closure was certain and gave this message to prospective secondary school parents, further dismantling any chance of enrolment growth at Lazarus. The school’s image in the community represented a “loss of faith” in the quality of teaching and learning processes and, because of the school’s very small size, it had become known for having to rationalise its senior secondary curriculum options. However, community support for its Special Education Unit was very positive. We posited that a new “brand” of schooling emanating from a repurposing of the school’s educational mission and vision could offer renewed hope for the school to become sustainable. Especially if that “brand” met a regional market need not catered for, and also met the needs of the current students. A school delivering on a STEAM agenda seemed an appropriate fit for this market gap.

Why STEAM for Lazarus School?

STEAM schools are known internationally as a form of schooling that recognises what may be lost in preoccupations with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) agendas (Australian Government, 2015). According to Taylor (2016), STEAM is an educational approach to learning that uses science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics as access points for guiding student inquiry, dialogue, and critical thinking. Taylor (2016), citing other research in the area (Clark, 2014; Stoelinga, Silk, Reddy & Rahman, 2015), argues that early research studies on ground-breaking STEAM curricula in the US demonstrated that learning activities integrating science, technology and the arts successfully engage minority and disadvantaged students, resulting in improved literacy and numeracy competencies. From ongoing research in STEAM schools, Taylor argued STEAM education can enrich and expand the scope of STEM education. It can empower teachers to engage in school-based curriculum development and involve teachers in developing a humanistic vision of 21st century education and their role as professionals as well as providing a creative design space for teachers in different learning areas to collaborate in developing integrated curricula.

Greene (1999) and Robinson (2011), cited in Hogan and Down (2016), acknowledge how STEAM agendas in schools can also enable young people to flourish when they are given the opportunity to use their imagination and creativity through the arts and vice-versa. According to Hogan and Down (2016), STEAM approaches to learning advance the view that students don’t have to choose between the arts and sciences—they can do both. They also

make a societal argument of need for the inter-disciplinary approach to teaching and learning that a STEAM agenda in schools can evoke:

The big questions confronting society today provide important insights into the integrated nature of the world. Solutions to complex social, economic and political problems are not simple, linear or one-dimensional. Nor can answers be found in any one discipline, for instance economics. (Hogan & Down, 2016, p. 51)

Alongside this, Maeda (2013) in Hogan and Down (2016) highlighted the significance of inserting the A(rts) into STEM to address societal problems with futures intent:

Science, technology, engineering and math – the STEM subjects – alone will not lead to the kind of breathtaking innovation the 21st century demands. Innovation happens when convergent thinkers, who march straight ahead towards their goal, combine forces with divergent thinkers – those who professionally wander, who are comfortable being uncomfortable, and who look for what is real. (p. 1)

Arts educators Bucheli, Goldberg and Philips (1991) extended these STEAM learning advantages by indicating how participation in the arts is integral to the development of cognitive skills such as listening, thinking, problem solving and decision making. But they go further than this in their assessment of the advantages.

The arts can nurture a sense of belonging, or community; they can foster a sense of being apart, or of being an individual. By acknowledging the role of the arts in our lives and in education, we acknowledge what makes individuals whole. (p. 25)

An acknowledgement of what the arts can offer to learning and job futures aligns with a 2016 report from the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) which argues that young people will be hardest hit by diminishing work opportunities in the future work economy across many traditional vocational work areas, heightening the need for new interdisciplinary and inquiry-based pedagogies in schools as a consequence: “In order to promote 21st century skills development, the OECD has recommended that educational institutions introduce a wider mix of pedagogies including cross-curricular content and team teaching and greater use of inquiry and project-based learning”. (FYA, 2016, p. 20).

What is needed, according to the FYA, are new schooling practices that better prepare young people with the necessary entrepreneurial capabilities, involving interdisciplinary learning and relational fluidities (soft skills) to flexibly adapt to the presenting and future work changes necessitated by the continuing onset of automation, digitalisation and globalisation. Schools nurturing collaborative entrepreneurial skills are posited as a defining feature of

need for the future work economy. STEAM approaches can deliver on this futures-oriented need. As a consequence, a STEAM proposal vision statement and scoping plan highlighting learning and engagement advantages within an entrepreneurial futures-oriented stance was provided to the principal to consider.

Part 2: Leader and teacher interview accounts of becoming a STEAM school

Facing down the abyss of school closure can mean many things to teachers and leaders. For some, it can mean saying goodbye to a place of work, farewelling cherished colleagues, feelings of teaching and leadership failure, or entering into a chasm of uncertainty about job futures plagued with professional doubt. For others, it may signal the need for change and be welcomed as such. But in this case study, these feelings are repositioned into a school that will not close, buoyed by a 10-million-dollar investment from the Department of Education to continue and grow as a STEAM entity. It also means that what was once known as familiar teaching and learning practices are no more. The “world” has changed overnight and this change introduces different lived experiences from stakeholders exposed to the change. We now turn to these interview renditions as they presented as key themes from the Lazarus teachers and leaders.

The principal

For the principal, the STEAM intervention and new schooling ideology was presented as a genuine expression of partnered support. This new approach could make a valuable contribution to offering needed educational options in the region:

Some good friends from the Uni, people of colleagues that I'd worked with when I was in central office, and Adventure High School came along and said, we've got a bit of a dream. What if we work together and we created something else here? Still a secondary school, still can you keep your arts focus, but if we actually, rather than going down the big push around STEM, we look at STEAM, we make us unique. (Principal, 2017)

From our perspective as researchers, this form of researcher action was an expression of societal care. University educational leadership staff who care about public schooling understand that the purposes of public schools are more than ensuring social mobility for young people, but also about offering an education that fosters social cohesion, a more robust democracy and a fairer society (Berman, 2014; Reid, 2012, 2010, 2003).

This form of care takes university researchers away from working in a research partnership motivated solely by “getting a dollar”, or to increase a researcher’s status or job prospects, a hallmark of neoliberal universities (Connell, 2013), but rather represents a form of altruistic enterprise to work with socially just intent in offering support. It speaks

of relational leadership as a form of authentic care, much needed in increasingly fragmented communities across Australia (MacKay, 2018).

The principal indicated that the Lazarus historical storyline was valued in the university STEAM proposal and the consequent re-visioning of the school. She indicated this when she explained that Lazarus was: “still a secondary school, still keep your arts focus...we’re still small by design.” It was a strategy that never discounted storyline, but rather appreciatively built on the good things the school was proud of. She also recognised the immediate benefits of formalised supportive partnerships with the university and the nearby STEM school, not only for her school, but also for these new partners:

We’re still small by design—and we draw upon the learning from AHS around integrated learning, inquiry-based learning, and build on their STEM learning but create a whole new entity. AHS gets to learn in this space because they only go from 10, 11 and 12; they don’t have experience in year 8 and 9 curriculum. We draw upon their expertise, they draw ours. (Principal, 2017)

The principal welcomed the university volunteer curriculum redesign support at Lazarus in the Arts and STEM and the collaborative professional formation approach offered by nearby AHS.

But it was more the staff and parent reception to the new STEAM agenda that took us by surprise. Parents broke into applause when they heard about the new STEAM educational partnership “settlement” at governing council between the university and AHS. For us, this gave parents a sense of certainty that they had not felt for months and gave everyone a reinvigorated sense of purpose.

According to the principal, many of the teachers could readily see compelling reasons for their renewed sense of purpose. But this renewal meant radical schooling change.

So, the three key bits of the big shift of the STEAM focus, inquiry-based learning, and the interdisciplinary approach, none of which we had any experience in. When we’re talking about these things, it’s all about pedagogy and practice, and when you’re fronting up to teachers and saying, look here’s our future, this is going to be really exciting, but you basically have to change everything you do. (Principal, 2017)

Changing everything you do as a teacher is hard work that needs time and nuanced support. It represents a call to new teacher labour that is not always going to be engaged with by all. The principal demonstrated sensitive relational awareness backed by considerable professional experience and expertise in recognising that this level of change would be a “tricky business” for many of her staff. She understood it meant a mandatory reworking of professional identity

in people’s working lives. So, beyond the hard interdisciplinary curriculum work ahead for all of the staff, there was acknowledgement of the many personal changes required in how teachers understood and undertook their new work. Teacher professional identities had been “shaken from their foundations overnight”.

So that’s the uphill push in this... that we’re hitting on this; the staff have gone: yep, yep, we’re on to it. We want to be part of this. There were a couple who said, ah, I don’t think this is me. No, I don’t think I can do that. That’s fine, we get that, we now have to try and support them to be where they want to be because they don’t want to be here. (Principal, 2017)

The principal was profoundly aware that the new STEAM agenda was not going to be a “good fit” for some of her staff, but it was going to work for those who were flexible enough to embrace new learning that expressed their willingness to make STEAM work.

We’re actually really asking teachers to do something—to change something that is actually really personal. This is about the way they work, the way they teach, the way they think, the way they plan and when they’ve taught—and they’ve developed strong expertise as “secondaries” do in their learning and teaching area, and now we’re saying great, draw on that, but do this differently, and that differently, and that differently. (Principal, 2017)

For some teachers becoming a STEAM school presented an exciting challenge, for others they felt they were too late in their careers to change. The school leadership were enthusiastic and encouraging of a group of staff with differing levels of engagement with the process.

The teachers

As can be expected, there was clear recognition across the teacher interviews that this “brave and bold” new STEAM agenda would require considerable changes to teaching practices and how they worked together as a staff. Many of the teachers were not sure what this would mean for them. This uncertainty presented across the interviews.

Look, for us to go on this journey is scary...I think it’s great (referring to the new STEAM direction). I mean it’s all that stuff about we know we’ve got to prep students for a world that we don’t even know anything about. (Teacher 6, Senior Leader, 2017)

Most teachers took this as an exciting new learning adventure, others were somewhat scared and losing sleep at night, and a few others (the minority) saw this as their time to depart. Established historical practices were no longer going to “cut it” in this new order. Despite the uncertainty, all of the teachers recognised the need for change and believed STEAM was possibly the best way forward. In other words, the new agenda got the “phenomenological nod” (van Manen, 1990, p. 27) of approval from the vast majority of the teaching staff.

Professional identity and work

One teacher explained the STEAM agenda as a need for professional reinvention of self which aligned closely with the principal's reflections and considerations during interview.

A need to reinvent ourselves because we're threatened as a school by falling enrolments—we have for some time—they have now reached a critical level where we've had to consider what sort of edge we could develop and how that could most benefit student learning outcomes and our practice. (Teacher 1, Mainstream School, 2017)

This teacher imagined the changing “nature” of the work ahead. Here, professional work change was highlighted within the phrase “provides you with a huge redefinition of what you're doing and how you're doing it”. A positive orientation to the ideological change was provided with words like “growth we need”, “re-kick the school” and “an edge given that it will be STEAM-based” and “I would love to be here because it's a STEAM school”.

You've got to reconsider the nature of how you've written all your programmes, you've got to see how that can fit into some of the SACE [South Australian Certificate of Education] work even. It still provides you with a huge redefinition of what you're doing and how you're doing it. So, while challenging, it could provide us with the growth we need and the attraction we need for the wider public and the students out there to re-kick the school in a direction which the rest of the nation is going, but with more of an edge given that it will be STEAM-based. (Teacher 1, Mainstream School, 2017)

Similar positively framed statements presented in the interview account provided by Teacher 3 who also embraced the STEAM ideological shift:

It's got a lot of work that needs to be done, so it's got potential and being — going to be the only school in South Australia ... as the STEAM school. (Teacher 3, Mainstream School, 2017)

This teacher also provided her reflections about what STEAM could offer young people in terms of developing capabilities for critical thinking and creativity (ACARA, 2016). It was clear to us that he/she had been reading STEAM literature and thinking about ensuing school STEAM planning and professional development discussions.

I think the Australian people and government should invest into Lazarus regarding the STEAM because of the arts. STEM has forgotten the arts—the arts is your inspiration, your critical thinking, your creativity ... the STEAM school will be a school where they will be able to find a direction somewhere, from west to east,

north to south, in a global space, in a world to find a brighter future. (Teacher 3, Mainstream School, 2017)

Another teacher of more traditional disposition displayed pragmatism and frustration in his rendition of the change. Highlighting the immensity of the challenge, he argued if the nearby STEM school had been pursuing change for over ten years and was still trying to work it out, then Lazarus was not a school he wanted to be in. For him, the future at Lazarus presented as a school consumed in change for the next decade. At his career stage, this was seen as too unsettling and confronting in terms of required new learning and new classroom practices. He saw this as his time to leave.

I think I'm very traditional. Then referring to new partner AHS—Ten years and they're still going. They're still working on it. They said it themselves when we went there. They're still trying to work it out. It's not really arts-based pedagogy. Art's included in the STEAM process. It's part of the whole thing of science and technology and the rest of it. I don't have a problem with it. I'm more worried about how I am going to deliver my maths and science in this sort of arrangement. I've been here eight years. I just had a chat with the principal. I said look, if I had my choice, I wouldn't be here next year. I'll apply for whatever. (Teacher 2, Mainstream School, 2017)

Time

Concerns about the “time” needed to get STEAM in place presented across all of the interviews:

I think one of the challenges is going to be having the time to modify programs and things like that to make the change, because change doesn't just happen. We've got a lot of ground stuff that has to go through with it. (Teacher 4, Disability Unit in the Mainstream School, 2017)

We need time really—the time is clicking away. We need time to reflect and explore materials, explore knowledge, explore what you're doing before you get to explore—to teach and to get to know your students. (Teacher 3, Mainstream School, 2017)

I think perhaps in the last few years ... I feel like we've gone through a lot more changes in terms of our training and development, our growth in certain areas, and this STEAM approach is yet another change that is keeping us brain active constantly. (Teacher 4, Disability Unit in the Mainstream School, 2017)

The time needed to turn around the school and to understand what STEAM really meant for a teacher's practice in this turnaround introduced feelings of fear leading to lack of sleep for some.

So, I guess one of the problems I have is that I'm perhaps not keeping up with all the reading I should be. I don't fully understand the whole STEAM thing yet, so that's keeping me up at night. (Teacher 4, Disability Unit in the Mainstream School, 2017)

Reconceptualising curriculum

On changing classroom teaching practices, there were positives about a STEAM interdisciplinary curriculum pilot recently trialled where teachers gathered around an environmental topic of inquiry and worked together in designing interdisciplinary curriculum within cross-disciplinary teaching arrangements. The collaborative nature of this new way of working was welcomed by most.

When we did our (STEAM) pilot project, I really enjoyed the collaboration with other teachers. I really enjoyed getting students to come up with questions and being more investigative themselves. (Teacher 4, Disability Unit in the Mainstream School)

We all work together in the unit but our subjects are sort of separate, but we're moving towards inquiry-based learning where we sort of work as a group on a project. (Teacher 5, Disability Unit in the Mainstream School) So it's going to maybe take a little longer for us to work through the inquiry-based learning and that kind of stuff with disability students. I think the only challenge would be to get everybody on the same page that we are actually going to be doing this...so I think we need to have more discussions about it and how we're going to do it. (Teacher 7, Disability Unit in the Mainstream School)

Inquiry-based thematic projects undertaken by teachers across disciplines within teaching teams had been an ongoing approach pursued by AHS for well over ten years. For the Lazarus staff, this was a totally new way of working and called them into co-designing curriculum and reframing pedagogical work collectively, a radically different working approach from the siloed classroom delivery model that dominated previous teaching practices. There was acknowledgement, however, that this new way of working was needed in a world calling for young people who not only have discipline content knowledges, but who can apply content knowledge to topical issues of concern from different disciplines in collaborative and creative ways.

On the enrolment and marketing front, there was universal agreement that the school needed to quickly establish a market edge in their region to attract new enrolments. This gave the new STEAM agenda a high stakes market feel—*increase enrolments or perish!*

So, in summary, the interviews indicated how Lazarus school was metaphorically

positioned at the “tip of the iceberg”. This was nicely captured by a senior leader when she said:

So we're really only at the tip of the iceberg but let's go. We're actually moving into a whole new reconceptualisation of the place.... (Teacher 6, senior leader, 2017)

Part 3: Discussion

Dominant neoliberal public policy in Australia continues to coerce principals into maintaining historical schooling design logics and constrained individual schooling purposes for individual social mobility and economic realities, distracting focus from the larger purposes of education and changing work futures (Reid, 2012, 2018). These pressures work to subvert the work of principals and teachers from enabling robust and engaging student learning practices to flourish and chain secondary schooling design to historical and, in some instances, redundant conventional forms (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Tobin 1994), leaving students with fragmentary and disconnected understandings (Bills, Giles, & Rogers, 2017).

With all public secondary schools in Australia situated within a dominant public policy regime that demands compliance, standardisation and having to do more with less (AITSL, 2017; Bills, 2018; Comber & Nixon, 2009; Goff & Sanborn, 2013), the dominant educational rhetoric towards innovation seems seriously compromised and problematic. Principals are grappling with public policy ideology and demands that are filled with mixed messages and de-contextualised prescriptions (Bills, 2018; Bills et al., 2017; Starr 2014) about what constitutes “good” schooling. In the face of dominant economic rationalist ideology, we would argue that the most important resource that leaders have is their ability to understand, analyse, and imagine (Thomson, Gunter & Blackmore, 2014) in order to relationally lead public schools attuned to their local context. These abilities point to the priority of understanding the unique purposes of public education, being attuned to what the education marketplace is calling for, relational sensibilities that promote these purposes and courageous educational leadership that is always sensitive to local context (Bills et al., 2017).

With dominant policy rhetoric emanating from the South Australian Department for Education being, “Children and young people at the centre of everything we do” (DECD 2010, 2014), public school principals are ironically required to practise an authentic and courageous expression of this mantra that questions the system to which this rhetoric belongs and speaks back with a model of practice that is genuinely concerned for socially just, relational and humanistic educational praxis (Bills, 2018; Bills et al. 2017; Bills et al. 2016). For Lazarus school, ongoing compliance to the standards rhetoric of what the “good” school is, and how it should behave, had placed it in an unwinnable market position. It was losing enrolments and

facing closure in an educational marketplace resplendent with well-publicised comprehensive academic schools that “sucked” prospective student enrolments away from Lazarus. Luck and good fortune played a part in this successful change agenda.

Lazarus had sufficient political leverage forged through a partnership agreement with two influential entities, the nearby university and AHS, to be seen by the educational bureaucracy as a school worthy of significant funding support for its new STEAM agenda.

Reframing the school’s ideological framework was reflective of how action research, with its ongoing spirals of action and reflection, represents a powerful methodology for enacting institutional and political change when the process is imbued with critical discernment and networked political involvement informing the action steps. The action research recognised the highly influential stakeholder power-groups, and sought these groups through negotiation for a more hopeful future for Lazarus. If the method in this instance had lacked this action reflection interplay, the possibilities of engendering new life at Lazarus would have been missed.

University education faculties can offer critical insights for schools into ways to address falling enrolments and foster organisational change to become market-place competitive. An examination of the social and political networks in play, and the power relationships that can be exploited within these social networks, can help schools see a way through the abyss of impending closure. In other words, by activating political allies through action research, school turnaround can be made possible.

This research also illustrated each participant’s ongoing attempt to establish linkages between their repositioned professional identities and educational philosophies that underpinned their ideology in praxis. This rearticulation of their teacher identities occurred in their context as a repurposed STEAM school. Attending sensitively to school organisational storylines as an ideological representation of experiences, perceptions and meanings from the past that influence the present was crucial to the success of the action research STEAM intervention. These different ideologies exist as shared understandings in the form of an organisational philosophy (Schein, 2010). Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford (1997) indicate that ideology is defined as a broad interlocked set of ideas and beliefs about the world held by a group of people that they demonstrate to various audiences in both behaviour and conversation. These systems of belief are usually seen as *the way things really are* by the groups holding them, and they become the taken-for-granted way of making sense of the world. Ideologies by their nature engage in competitive processes of legitimation and incorporation, where dominant and minority ideologies play out their political agendas in public and private spaces. These competitive processes are systemic to being human and can be seen and told in every organisation. In this case study, the nature and movement of the ideological positioning shows the interplay between the dominant, taken for granted storyline

in tension with the revisionist STEAM storyline that came into play.

Those in positional power must at times display the courage to let go of dominant ideologies of schooling to allow a new storyline trajectory to take shape. In this case study, the Lazarus historical storyline was not ignored in the school’s new ideological framing. In fact, what was valued in the past was held onto in the new framing, an appreciative approach that helped the teachers and the parents see that their new journey built upon what the parent and teacher community valued in the past. In this instance, the teachers were given more hope through the radical “market savvy” school re-visioning. This called the leader into strategic considerations of how to move the school forward along this new trajectory. “While leaders in any organisation hold positional power, they need to strategically consider how they engage with the system’s and the school’s dominant ideology” (Bills et al., 2017, p. 5).

In other words, what presented across the interviews as quite remarkable was the ready acceptance and engagement of the teachers with STEAM, which was fostered by leader and researcher strategic attunement to ensure the best from the past was brought into the new organisational reframing for the future. Organisational storylines are never linear or singular (Giles, 2015). For example, closer inspection of the Lazarus storyline reveals that the emergence of a new STEAM ideology of schooling represented a break from the dominant ideology of doing schooling in South Australia. Lazarus became the first STEAM school in South Australia. When new ideologies of schooling become embodied by leaders, new aspirations and intentions that build upon a school’s storyline can manifest. Therefore, in the context of this research, the leaders and teachers understanding of a new philosophy of STEAM in public education became more important and more challenging than ever before. They were all grappling with this new philosophy across the interviews. The component theory approach used in the analysis of the data enabled the new ideology of education at Lazarus to be seen as an interplay of various component theories.

Significant components of education which were considered hermeneutically from the leader and teacher interviews undertaken in this research. We positioned these components as (1) schooling purposes (2) school structure, (3) school culture, and (4) school pedagogical/curricular components. These components are illustrated in Figure 1, highlighting the key STEAM component moves underway at Lazarus.

Conclusion

For “Lazarus” Secondary School, the hope of finding a competitive edge in a “survival of the fittest” schooling marketplace became a living reality when agents with high stakeholder power and influence were activated through university-led action research with a social entrepreneurial flavour to incite a school community’s embrace of becoming a STEAM school (Weerawardena & Sullivan Mort, 2001). The school leaders and teachers saw reason for radical schooling change and in large part welcomed the school’s new purpose and vision, despite the hard work they

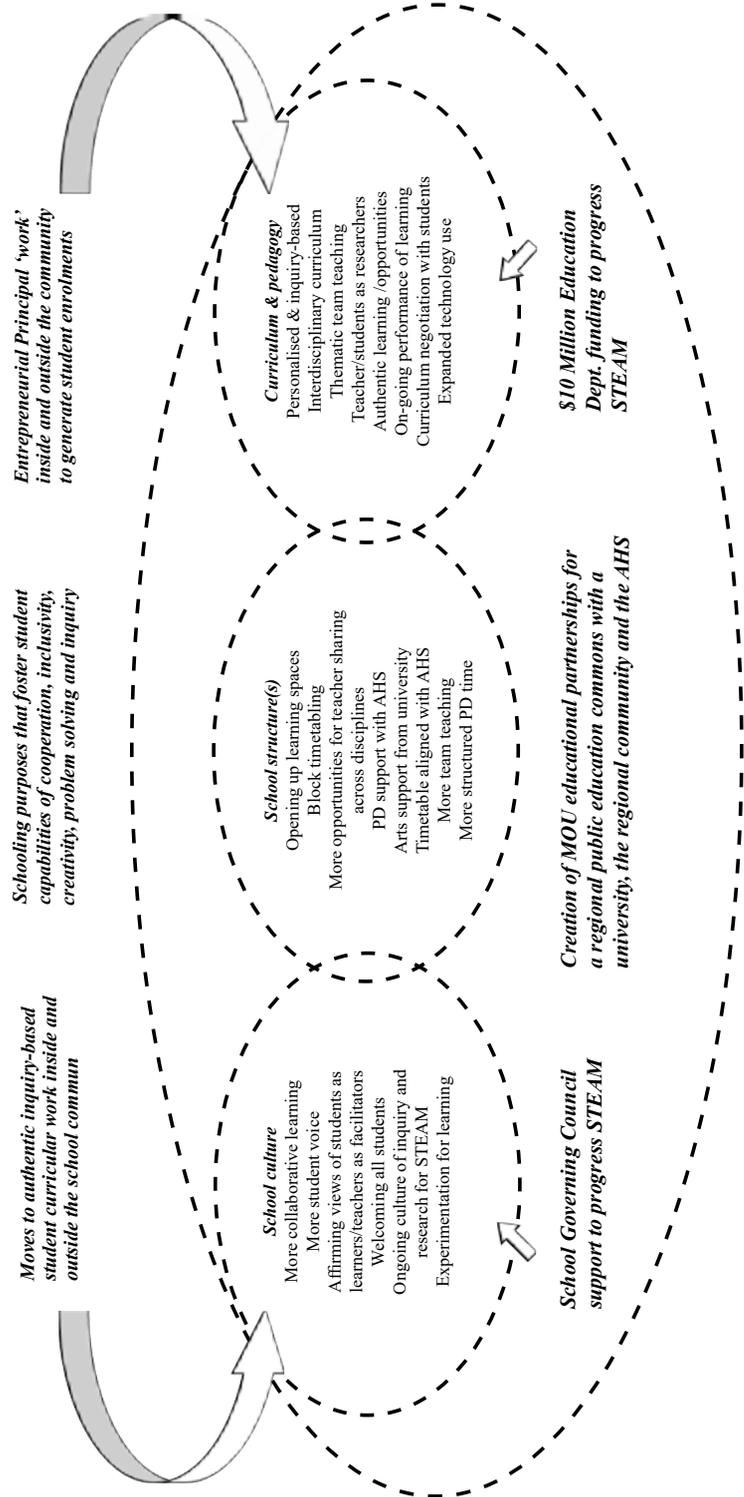


Figure 1.:Becoming STEAM” ‘Lazarus School’ Ideological Components

acknowledged as needed to reposition their professional selves in their teaching and learning endeavours with young people and with each other.

For school leaders in other schools, a key learning in this case study is to always “see” student learning engagement as a key indicative feature of schooling success or lack thereof. When learning engagement is found to be waning, the parent community starts talking and the extended community “grapevine” eventually hears a negative schooling message that will cause them to “vote with their feet” in terms of future schooling enrolment. To avoid these situations, school leadership must embrace an ongoing culture of research and inquiry (Reid, 2018) with critical stakeholders in tow to help reinvigorate the project of schooling before all is lost.

Organisational change to radically overhaul a school’s modus operandi can seem near impossible unless key actors and relationships are activated to support the change. The motivation can come from several areas; national policy driven mandates (for example, AHS with its STEM agenda), leaders who see the need and who are courageous enough to “put their career on the line” out of care for the learning needs of their community (Bills et. al, 2017) or in the case of Lazarus, schools facing impending closure. Through a relationally attuned action research endeavour, “Lazarus” became the first public education STEAM school in South Australia, promised ten million dollars of government funding to do their regeneration work. Teacher and leader interview accounts of how they made sense of their new ideological STEAM schooling trajectory following a parent vote to stay open indicated a “seeing-ness” of the need for change and an overall willingness to embrace the change. This willingness was due to (1) an acceptance by staff and parents that no change meant certain closure and (2) the strategy behind the STEAM ideological shift valued school success from the past and recognised this in a new schooling form for the future. In all of this, “time” and “timing” is of the essence for renewed professional teacher and student growth at Lazarus.

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Appendix 1: Extract from News Story by Caleb Bond, Hills Valley Weekly Messenger, September 7, 2017 2:20pm

HEADLINE: Lazarus High School to Have Full Year 8 Class in 2018 following Increase in Enrolments

LAZARUS High School—on the brink of a merger just 12 months ago—will have a stand-alone Year 8 class for the first time in many years following an increase in enrolments. The school will have at least 22 new Year 8 students start in 2018, compared with just 11 this year, allowing for the single-level class. The new students will take the school’s total number to 160—up from 150 this year, one of the smallest public high school enrolment figures in the state—as it continues to rebuild after serious merger talks.

The principal ... said the 2018 figures were indicative of a positive future for the school following a “challenging” year. “This is the beginning of the way back up again,” she said. “We’re really excited that people are taking us seriously and people still know the school’s still here.

The school has partnered with the nearby Adventure High School and a University to create a science, maths, sports and arts focus—and next year’s students would be the first to participate in that program. “I’m really convinced that once we move through the next six months and people see what we’re doing... we expect to see an improvement again on that number,” the principal said.