

Strategic Solutions to Conflict and Stress: The case of Debney Meadows Primary School

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## **Strategic Solutions to Conflict and Stress: The case of Debney Meadows Primary School**

### *Abstract*

This paper presents a case study of DMPS, a culturally diverse school, located on a government housing estate. The school represents a microcosm of unique characteristics which, together present numerous challenges for staff. There is evidence of professional bureaucratic conflict at the school and high levels of stress are reported by the teachers. At the same time, the school demonstrates the use of a series of positive, pro-active responses and a fortunate blend of individual qualities, which work synergistically to produce a unique configuration of responses to mitigate a complex and difficult environment. The research relies on several qualitative techniques, including semi-structured interviews, observations, a focus group and document analysis, which were subsequently analysed using Nvivo. The findings thus emerged inductively from the data. The case study indicates that the use of a range of successful strategies can mitigate what would initially appear to be a complex and difficult environment. Further strategies to reduce teacher stress are also identified by the researchers, such as proactive leadership at DMPS, partnership between management and teachers, social support networks and team-teaching. This may have implications for many different types of schools and teachers.

### **Introduction**

Research for this paper began as a collaborative project between the researchers and staff of Debney Meadows Primary School (DMPS).

Debney Meadows Primary School (DMPS) is located on the grounds of the Flemington Ministry of Housing estate (Triennial School Review, 2002). It has a population of 190 students. On the surface, it looks like many other government schools, yet staff and management suggest that it is unique and different from other schools on numerous dimensions which make it a highly challenging work environment. Staff at the school report high levels of stress and low morale. This is officially reported in their Triennial School Review (TSR). School Management (principal and assistant principal) and staff report that the school 'faces significant challenges' which are uncommon to other schools. Both staff and management see the school as unique in its demographic and express a dissatisfaction with the level of support provided by government through funding.

Based on this, school staff want this project to explore and elucidate the unique character of the school, and the experiences of staff. They are especially interested in understanding the issues related to staff experience of stress. They express interest in undertaking a critical analysis of their activities in order to respond to their work processes in effective and strategic ways. In addition, management indicates that a critical analysis should include any effective responses already undertaken by staff. The staff and management of the school want to explore avenues that may be able to improve student learning outcomes, at the same time as providing more satisfying experiences for staff. The school wants to be formally acknowledged as unique by government both in funding terms and in bureaucratic processes, however, there are no formal avenues for the pursuit of this.

The following research questions were jointly developed to guide this project:

How is DMPS unique as a school?

What are the major issues associated with teacher stress and low morale at DMPS?

How does DMPS respond to their uniqueness?

### **Background and Literature Review**

There has been much debate concerning the changing role of teachers. The nineties in Victoria, has seen the closure of a number of schools, the devolution of funding decisions to schools, changes to teaching & learning standards (CSF), and increased bureaucratic pressures for higher professional standards (Victorian Auditor-General's Office 1999; Caldwell and Hayward 1998). The role of primary schools seems to have changed from essentially a teaching/educational role to encompass a much wider range of responsibilities, including counselling, welfare, social work, procurement of funding, and government lobbying (Townsend, 1998). This convergence has added layers of complexity to the role of teachers and translated to increased responsibilities and workloads (Townsend, 1998). There is

anecdotal evidence that, in the light of these changes, teachers feel overwhelmed by such demands, experiencing stress and low morale, and may perceive a decreased effectiveness in their work. (Australian Financial Review, 2001; Sydney Morning Herald, 2002; Herald Sun, 2003)

Within this environment, the Victorian Department of Education developed an accountability framework in 1994, known as Quality Assurance in Victorian Schools. The program has three key elements – a school charter, an annual report and a triennial review. Initially, this framework constituted a significant advancement in terms of measuring school performance and implementing accountability. By 1999, however, a report released by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office suggested a number of challenges, including the need for more reliable methods of measuring school performance, and the need for provision of specialist training and support for teachers from the Department (Caldwell and Spinks 1998; Caldwell and Hayward 1998).

Teacher stress has been well documented in Australian and international literature both historically and in contemporary studies (Otto, 1986; Townsend, 1998). Otto (1986) suggests that a number of conditions trouble highly stressed teachers. These include insufficient time for work, student problems that are impossible to solve given available resources, feelings of powerlessness in relation to the wider education system and particular aspects of it with which teachers disagree. According to Otto (1986:36), 'stress means distress or a state of unpleasant emotional tension as aspects of one's work or life situation are perceived as frustrating, worrying, excessively or insufficiently demanding, or threatening to one's security, confidence or desired self-image.' The potential for harmful consequences of stress have been well documented in medical literature. If excessive demands for coping responses persist, the body reaches a state of exhaustion and lowered resistance (House, 1981).

There is a body of management literature that explores incongruence and conflict between the governing bureaucracy and professionals. Organisational-professional conflict is a major area of study concerning the potential for conflict between professions and the organisations for which they work (Sorensen and Sorensen, 1974; Wallace, 1995; Lait and Wallace, 2002). This may occur 'when the values, goals and expectations of the professional are incompatible with those of their employing organisation, especially when professionals are employed in highly bureaucratic organisations' (Lait and Wallace, 2002:463). The professional is usually unprepared for organisational-professional conflict and such incongruence, may result in a stressful working experience (Leiter, 1991). Theoretically, it is proposed that bureaucratic conditions that are inconsistent with professional workers' job expectations contribute to stress.

### **Method**

The use of a qualitative methodology is well suited to this study since the research questions lend themselves to a deep level exploration which penetrates the reality of this school, as experienced by staff, in order to uncover meaning (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The motivation underlying the project, especially participants' desire for agency and inclusion, and the requirement that the project have useful, practical outcomes, supports the use of a phenomenological approach, whereby meaning is sought in the lived *experience* of individuals (Morse and Richards, 2002). The approach used in this research is broadly interpretivist in that the researchers understand that they "are no more detached from their object of study than are their informants" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within this stance, research design evolved in consultation with participants, and involved multiple methods of data collection, such as annotated discussions, observations of events, semi or unstructured interviews, participation in staff meetings, focus groups and documentary analysis. Our approach and method is contained within an "intrinsic case study" since our interest lies primarily with this school, about which we seek a better understanding (Stake, 2002, p. 437).

Field work took place over a 14 month period and was complicated by bureaucratic protocols and the busy teaching schedules of both researchers and DMPS staff. However, the extended research period also allowed for the necessary reflection in order to really grasp the themes from the "subjects' own perspectives" (Kvale, 1996).

Nvivo<sup>1</sup> was used to assist in data analysis. Our method of analysis employs the classic analytic strategies described by Miles and Huberman (1994) such as coding, recording reflections and seeking

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<sup>1</sup> Nvivo is a computer program designed to support qualitative data storage, handling and analysis.

patterns or commonalities. However, we also borrowed tools from two specific methods. We used the concept of “participant categories” from conversation analysis, (ten Have, 1998; Sacks, 1984), where researchers work with concepts or specific understandings of events by participants in a given setting. The concept of DMPS as a “unique” school is an example of a participant category which we explored in our analysis. We also used techniques from grounded theory, where data is collected and analysed simultaneously (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) so as to generate categories which are then linked to one another. As data was analysed, and the distinct categories emerged, further data was sought to validate the categories. In addition, categories were compared to enable the determination of any central categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1986). Our analysis led to the elaboration of a “small set of generalizations” which were finally “confronted” with existing theoretical constructs (Miles and Huberman, 1994) from management literatures. Given the inductive approach of our method, in the writing of this paper, precedence has been given, in a sequential sense, to discussion of the data, and this is *followed* by a discussion of theory.

### **Unique school:**

A common perception expressed by all staff is the uniqueness of DMPS. The school appears to be unique because of a combination of factors. Firstly it has a very high proportion of students “from a language background other than English (LBOTE)”. The School Principal states that “97% of children are from a non-English speaking background (NESB)”. Secondly, there are a large number of students living in poverty. This is evidenced by the large number of EMA<sup>2</sup> recipients at the school, and the fact that many of the students live in the Ministry of Housing Estate, on the school grounds. Finally, there are a large number of students targeted for Disability and Impairment (D&I) funding, which is a government benefit for students with significant physical or intellectual challenges affecting their learning abilities. These three factors are evidenced in our observation; they are noted in school documents, such as the Triennial School Review (TSR), the School Charter (SC), and both staff, Principal and consultants to the school comment on them.

The data suggests that there are two major challenges arising from the various factors outlined above. Firstly, the challenge of trying to achieve the learning outcomes as outlined in the CSF. The second major challenge comes from student behaviour issues. Staff point out that these issues are interrelated, as discussed below.

### **Achieving learning Outcomes**

The CSF indicates that Australian students must achieve learning outcomes in the areas of literacy, numeracy and other, broader concepts. Student outcomes at DMPS are affected by the presence of large numbers of NESB students, since practically all of the students are learning a second language. Cultural differences account for different educational traditions and learning styles which may conflict with local ones, and create a disadvantage for some students:

*“African cultures are oral based in transmitting knowledge whereas ours focuses on reading/writing, so produces a challenge for teachers .... Asian families are much more formally educated and entrepreneurial and they function better in our system,”*

(VP)

Literacy and learning problems at the school are compounded by the fact that a significant number of children are refugees from war torn countries, and consequently suffering from trauma which affects their learning and behaviour. According to the Principal:

*“Africans from war-torn areas, have had little formal education in their country of origin, they’re traumatized, they’ve had no culture of scholarly pursuit and no culture of reading. Thus many children have poor visual memory skills.”* (P)

### **Behavioural Challenges**

Behaviour management is the other significant challenge for the school. Again the ethnic mix of the school is one of the factors attributed to the behaviour challenges. However the high level of EMA

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<sup>2</sup> This is a Commonwealth benefit provided to low income families.

recipients and the high level of D&I funded students in combination with the high NESB factor is seen as critical by the vice-principal.

*“We have a very high number of kids with learning problems and again that’s hard data that we have. We have currently 22 kids that are funded under what we call the D&I program, the disability & impairment, which is about 12% of our population. The state average is 3 % so again another factor, laid on top of other factors that is huge, so every teacher here has probably got 3 or 4 integrated kids with an acknowledged disability in their room, with support, but not enough support, of course, its under-resourced, grossly. Again, its not unique to us, but the number of kids....Flemington Primary, which is in spitting distance, down the road, doesn’t have any integrated kids...it doesn’t have one disabled kid in its whole population.”*

*(Vice-principal)*

A key issue highlighted by staff is the large number of students who display numerous disability and impairment characteristics but are ineligible for funding. Staff point out that these students have special needs, and place an additional demand on the class, since this is in addition to the presence of D&I funded students in the classroom and the high language needs of the remaining students. This creates a stressful work environment.

The school reports a large number of “accidents”<sup>3</sup>, such as incidence of violence between students. According to the Vice-principal DMPS has ‘four times the state average’ of accidents between students, which are attributed to the cultural differences manifest in the students’ stance towards authority, conflict resolution and acceptance of difference. Moreover, a register is kept listing all the children who require monitoring and possible intervention because of health, psychological or social difficulties. The register is created by staff reporting particular problems. A large number of the school’s population is listed on the register (94/190), which is almost half of the population.<sup>4</sup> These factors are believed to contribute to the uniqueness of DMPS.

Hence, the data reveals that there are numerous specific characteristics which contribute to the dimension of uniqueness of the school and which also give rise to a challenging work environment. While each of these factors gives rise to specific challenges, it is the combination of these factors that creates a layering effect, and compounds the teaching and learning challenges at the school, giving it a unique level of complexity.

### **Teacher stress:**

The existence of high teacher stress is suggested in the TSR, which measures organisational health through a number of constructs, such as School Morale and Supportive leadership. These are reported as below the state average. Our data indicates that while teachers recognise that some stress is an inherent part of their profession, they report on above-normal stress, and attribute it to a number of factors, such as difficult student behaviours, inadequate support structures within the school, day-to-day conflicts and challenges, and high administrative demands, such as numerous meetings. Teachers describe their stress by making references to feelings of anxiety, fear or pressure, produced by regular teaching experiences, which place extraordinary demands on their skills and personal resources. Staff at DMPS consistently report on the continuous and overwhelming nature of the challenge of their day-to-day duties, frequently using terminology that suggests a battle for survival.

*“you’re dog paddling and trying to keep above water” (Grade 3-4 Teacher)*

Teachers attribute stress to the unique character of the school, as discussed in the previous section. The combination of multi-ethnic backgrounds, low levels of English, and high welfare needs of the students result in highly demanding teaching experiences in the classroom:

*“ the actual physical face-to-face teaching with the children is very challenging, is very full on all of the time. Our children are not independent workers ... a lot of schools can get their kids to work on an*

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<sup>3</sup> Schools are required to formally report the number of accidents that occur during school hours. This includes students individual injuries as well as those occurring through interaction (e.g., fighting).

<sup>4</sup> Source: Observation of the welfare support group meeting and interview with the assistant principal.

*individual level, whereas our kids need so much teacher intervention. There's a lot of need for individual assistance. So it's full on all day."*

*(Grade 5-6 Coordinator/Teacher)*

A factor causing particular stress, both in classrooms and throughout the school in general is the occurrence of regular critical incidents (e.g., assault between parents in the school community).

*"We do have a lot of serious incidents to deal with. No, they're not often trivial at all. And that's what's really difficult to follow through with. Some schools, the biggest catastrophe is that someone isn't given their lunch order. Whereas here, it's all sorts of things that you can't often deal with in two minutes. They're far reaching, and they're usually centred around welfare issues. We spend a lot of our day here, looking at those issues of welfare and how the kids are getting on."*

*(Grade 5-6 Coordinator/Teacher)*

These reports are substantiated by the leadership of the school.

*"The sort of behaviour that confronts teachers on a daily basis is really wearing for people, and again, it goes back to this being a special school."*

*(VP)*

While staff believe that the student needs are very high, they also believe that the resources directed at the school are inadequate to meet this need. This perceived inequity creates anxieties for staff which are corroborated by management at the school. Therefore, an important source of teacher stress is derived from staff perceiving the inequities surrounding the disadvantaged position of their school.

Staff and management express concerns over the public image of the school. They are concerned that the school may be perceived as one which is constantly struggling with critical incidents. This creates a negative image of the school in the local community. Moreover, staff are concerned about being perceived as an under-achieving school within the educational community and amongst their peers at other schools through the reporting requirements of the Education Department which gather data on educational outcomes. Staff beliefs about school image are associated with feelings of fear and stress at the school.

*"We're fearful of the reputation that the school is getting in the local community.....This image places stress on staff."(Vice-principal)*

It is apparent from the data that the specific characteristics of DMPS are contributing to the experience of stress among staff. However, there is also evidence that an important source of stress comes from the governing bureaucracy's in terms of frustrations experienced with constraining measuring devices and limiting funding criteria. This is further analysed in the following section of the paper.

### **Professional-organisational Conflict:**

Staff highlight three issues where there is tension between their beliefs and values and those of the education department. This tension arises from the instruments for data collection used by DEST to measure pedagogical outcomes and other DEST reporting requirements. Teachers put forward that the reporting instruments represent their students as under-achievers. However, teachers go to pains to point-out that their students do in fact make positive and realistic advances given their specific circumstances. Thus, the first issue is with the CSF, which outlines the standards that Australian students are required to meet at given year levels.

### **Conflict Arising from Measurement of Student Outcomes**

The use of this framework may not be not appropriate to assess the learning outcomes of students at DMPS, due to the characteristics of their demographic. Due to the limitations of the CSF, its use makes many of the achievements of DMPS students invisible to the governing bureaucracy and in comparison to other schools.

*"kids don't come here knowing their colours and their numbers, or even know how to write their name. What is really demoralising .....you put in the effort every year, and the kids have shown a bit of an improvement, but compared to another school, they're not at the level that they're supposed to be at"*

*(Early Years Co-ordinator)*

Teachers suggest that this framework is designed for a mainstream student setting, which is inappropriate in their unique environment. Therefore, teachers suggest it may create a negative image of the student's abilities and underlies their feeling that their efforts are defeated at the outset.

*“the kids come with so little and we're supposed to test them and its like comparing apples and oranges ...I have to try not to be worn down by that & measuring our kids progress by this because they are progressing very much; probably as much as other kids, even tho they're still not meeting benchmarks they're actually coming in at a point & making very good progress.” (Welfare Co-ordinator)*

### **Conflict Arising from School Needs**

Data collected by DEST is used to compare schools across the state of Victoria. This information is collated and represented on a framework called the “like-schools” grid. This is a scattergram that compares schools by their ESL and EMA statistics. Teachers express anxiety about not being appropriately represented because their uniqueness is hidden in this reporting device. This means that the school's needs are invisible to the governing bureaucracy and is at the root of the perceived under-resourcing of the school.

*“even the schools that are called like schools to us, you know schools with a high ESL population, high EMA recipients, they're still nothing like us. We're a real satellite school, right on the edge here. Because to fit into this group of what they call like schools from a departmental point of view, you have to have I think 26% or more non-English speaking population. You know, 26% and 98% are very different.” (Vice-principal)*

### **Conflict Arising from Funding Criteria**

DEST reporting devices are used to apportion funding to individual schools based on the schools needs for ESL support and other support suggested by the presence of poverty. However, since the staff feel that the school is mis-represented, they also feel that they are not adequately resourced given the extent of their needs.

*“government schools are staffed and funded on formulas. And the formula doesn't fit here. And because we are so unique, I mean you look at the index and the graph of the index which has every school in the state drawn, and as is understandable we sit right out here.” (Vice-principal)*

We have already mentioned the burden represented by the number of students who are ineligible for the D&I funding and who also display a large number of eligibility criteria. A consequence of the tension between reporting mechanisms and the mis-representation of the school is that staff feel isolated and unsupported by the governing bureaucracy:

*“we're like a little iceberg sort of floating along without much help from the education department as such. ...I think we really lack proper support.*

*Interviewer:*

*Why did you choose that image of the iceberg?*

*Teacher:*

*Kind of floating out there from the rest of us ... have you seen the way the education department divides the schools up. They put them into to nine groups ... so we're in group nine. But when you look at group nine, there are all of these little dots.....and then, we're up there, all on our own. We're as far on both axes as you can get.”*

*(Grade 5-6 Coordinator/Teacher)*

Clearly the tensions between the school and the reporting mechanisms including the under-resourcing of the school has a major impact on stress among staff and management.

### **Strategic responses:**

In response to the schools unique challenges, DMPS has created a unique support mechanism and is attempting to create a greater awareness of the school both in the broader community and in the eyes of the governing bureaucracy.

### **The Welfare Support Group as a unique and strategic mechanism**

The welfare support group is a multi-disciplinary team, which was created in 1986 through a government grant<sup>5</sup>. Its membership consists of a number of specialists including a school psychologist, a speech therapist, a school nurse, a paediatrician from the children's hospital, a protective worker from Human Services, and the coordinator of the local family support agency, as well as, representatives of the school.

This group is action-based and its charter is to support students and families at the school experiencing particular problems such as students facing behavioural, social and learning difficulties:

*“a family, for instance, will come up that we'll talk about, that mum might have a psychiatric issue, you know, in hospital at the moment, the protective worker might know the family, human services are involved, paediatrician might have his information to give..... it's a great way to link all those services together.” (VP)*

This group meets twice a term, (i.e., eight times per year) and addresses the issues listed in the welfare register, referred to earlier. Intervention and support is provided through the specialist skills and networks held by the members of the committee. Simply collating and maintaining this register includes a great deal of research reporting and co-ordination activities. The register ensures that all welfare issues and problems are noted and thoroughly addressed, in other words that no case will be forgotten or over-looked. As already noted in a previous section a large number of the school's population is listed on the register. This underscores the extreme need of the learning population of DMPS. There is evidence to suggest that there are only a couple of schools in Victoria which have such a support mechanism operating. The existence of this group demonstrates the deep commitment of the staff both in initiating and maintaining this group over a 16-year period. Clearly, given the time resources absorbed by this group, it is valued by the staff as serving an important role and having a positive impact. Our observation of the welfare support group meeting made it clear to us that this group plays a crucial role in addressing important obstacles for the student's complete participation in school and life in the community. The level of detail and familiarity indicated by discussion in the group gave a strong indication of commitment of the school to providing all students with the fundamentals for a successful participation within the community.

### **Raising the Profile of the School**

There is a strong view at the school that its unique character and needs are not fully visible or acknowledged by the governing bureaucracy. Thus in response to this the school has embarked on a number of initiatives designed to support the school community and to raise the profile of DMPS.

#### *Supportive events*

DMPS has been successful in securing grants for engaging a graphic artist, and circus performers in order to conduct activity-based programs. These have provided support to staff and students by engaging them in shared, uplifting activities which have both curricular and extra-curricular outcomes. For example, the graphic artist project resulted in activities which provided language based learning as well as development of other skills. The artwork produced by students within this project was later used in the production of a DMPS water-bottle, launched at a community event<sup>6</sup>, which had numerous positive outcomes for students and staff, including team-building and self-esteem effects. Remarks made by the school psychologist at this event highlighted the consistent use of a “whole child approach” at this school.

#### *Marketing strategies*

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<sup>5</sup> This is a State government initiative called ‘community child-health fellowship’.

<sup>6</sup> November 1, 2002, in a joint project with local council: “H2O for Moonee Valley Kids”.



Interviews with the school's leadership indicate that DMPS has the goal of "positioning" the school as a creative and positive force in its community. Thus, DMPS is publicising events with potential for media interest, such as the water-bottle launch, in order to develop a positive image of the school. At staff meetings, the school principal articulates a clear intention to "raise the profile" of the school, and to use the capabilities of the school in a strategic way. An example of this is the intention to develop the school as a leader in the delivery of ESL. The school has considerable skills and expertise in ESL and has been conducting in-service seminars to the wider educational community in order to position itself as a leader in this field.

### ***Discussion and Conclusion***

As previously stated DMPS is considered to be 'a special school in a mainstream setting'. Staff and administrators at the school believe that the positioning of the school in a mainstream setting maybe a source of inequity given that this imposes funding constraints. The possible disadvantage is further highlighted by the 'special' or unique character of the school population particularly in terms of its high needs. Thus funding is viewed as inadequate and the school feels misrepresented in terms of how it is benchmarked. This is seen to be due to the generalised nature of funding formulas and other reporting mechanisms, which filter out the unique characteristics and needs of the school. Australian studies on poverty, class and education note the persistence of class inequalities in contemporary Australian educational settings. Bureaucratic mechanisms governing schools may be perpetuating these inequalities (Watson, 1993).

At DMPS however, the predominate root of teacher stress may be the external demands, created by incongruence between the governing bureaucracy and the CSF versus the internal and external resources and constraints of the school. The data reveals that there is a lack of congruence between expectations of the governing bureaucracy, the CSF and the schools capacities for meeting them. Consequently, quantitative (e.g., people have more duties than they can comfortably handle) and qualitative overload (e.g., role demands requiring knowledge and skills that have not be leant) persists at the school (Otto, 1986). The lack of fit between the external demands imposed by the governing bureaucracy versus external resources and constraints of DMPS is also another factor that contributes to teacher stress (e.g., inadequate resources from DEST, given the demographic of DMPS). It is well documented in management literature, that for someone to do a task well, he or she must be granted an adequate amount of time and be provided with the necessary tools and materials.

Within the case of DMPS, incongruence exists between the expectations of the governing bureaucracy largely in terms of the educational attainment of students. There is also a lack of tangible recognition of unique demographic, and the achievements of the school and its students. In accordance with the organisation-professional conflict literature, the goals and expectations of the governing bureaucracy and the teachers are incompatible. Therefore, this conflict may compact an already stressful working experience for teachers, exacerbating role demands and veiling their achievements.

Despite the stressful working experiences of the teachers at DMPS, the response of the school and its teachers has overwhelmingly been positive. From the data and researcher observations, a possible explanation for the positive response by the teachers and school to this challenging work environment has been the existence of an active social support network. The majority of academic interest in the social support construct is concerned with the role of social support (i.e., work supervisors, co-workers, spouses and a combined category of friends and relatives) in the mitigation of stress and health-enhancement at work (House, McMichael, Wells, Kaplan and Landerman 1979). Kahn and Antonucci (1980) define social support as 'interpersonal transactions that include one or more of the following key elements: affect, affirmation and aid'. It is through the social support network and a fortunate blend of individual qualities that give rise to the use of a series of positive, pro-active responses, which work synergistically to produce a unique configuration of responses to mitigate a complex and difficult environment.

Another possible explanation for the positive response of the school and its teachers involves organisational citizenship behaviours. Management literature indicates that the effective functioning of organisations relies on the citizenship behaviours of its employees. Acts of cooperation, altruism and goodwill in organisations, which are not part of a job description, and are not paid for, are known as 'organisational citizenship behaviours' (OCB) (Organ, 1988). Also termed as "extra-role behaviour" (Morrison and Phelps, 1999), these acts are beneficial to organisations as they account for many

constructive efforts made by employees in favour of the organisation. While these are important, a recent study has identified “taking charge” as a new, and not previously identified form of OCB. Taking charge entails “voluntary and constructive efforts by individual employees to effect organisationally functional change with respect to how work is executed within the contexts of their jobs” (Morrison and Phelps, 1999). It differs from other types of OCB in that it challenges the status quo in order to bring about positive change. It is evident through the strategic responses that the teachers at DMPS are “taking charge” for the benefit of the school and students, “above and beyond” their formal job descriptions.

In light of the proceeding analysis, we offer the following recommendations for the staff and management of DMPS. First, the development of any methods to ameliorate the stressors faced by teachers must be endorsed and championed by the leadership of the school. An important starting point is to further develop dialogue between staff and management at the school concerning the issues surrounding teacher stress. The development of a partnership approach between teachers and management is a crucial first step in developing an action plan to better manage teacher stress. Second, given the existence of informal staff support, it may be pertinent to further develop these practices into more formal networks as a means of ameliorating teacher stress. Staff at the school have demonstrated success in developing mechanisms and processes for supporting students’ welfare needs (e.g., student welfare group), but to date have not formally identified and developed a plan of action for reducing their own stress. We argue that DMPS should consider developing and harnessing more formally designed support mechanisms to better cope with stress. This may also be accompanied by a range of organisational methods designed to reduce teachers stress, such as team-teaching and mentoring of junior staff. Third, the leadership of the school must continue to make approaches to the State government, illuminating the funding problems raised in this paper. A continuation of raising the profile of the school and the valuable contribution of DMPS to the community is an integral part of lobbying the State government.

In conclusion, the case of DMPS documents the experience of a culturally diverse school, located on a government housing estate. Contrary to what might be expected, and in spite of the substantial challenges faced by the school, the existence of teacher stress and professional dissatisfaction with bureaucratic constraints, the school exhibits many positive traits, such as a stable and committed staff. In addition, the school continues to respond actively to its challenges with a range of responses. The school has attempted to develop a series of strategic solutions to professional-organisational conflict and the subsequent stressful work experiences of teachers. Through the existence of staff support and a fortunate blend of individual qualities, the school is able to provide an enriched learning experience for students by developing a series of pro-active responses. This paper provides further support through the human face of teachers at DMPS for the 1999 Victorian Auditor-General’s report concerning the difficulties associated with measuring the performance of Victorian public schools.

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