Workload and the Professional Culture of Teachers

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AN INCREASE in teacher workload has been identified as an undesirable consequence of site-based school management (Leithwood et al., 1996; O’Connor and Clark, 1990; Wylie, 1997). A British study, for example, found that, as local involvement in the management of schools increased, the percentage of time teachers spent in non-teaching duties rose from 42 percent in 1971 to 56 percent in 1990 (Campbell and Neill, 1992). Similar increases have been noted with self-management in New Zealand (Wylie, 1997). Although increased workload, on its own, is not necessarily a problem, it is commonly associated with increased stress, teacher burnout and low job satisfaction (Kyriacou, 1987; Leithwood et al., 1996; O’Connor and Clark, 1990; Pithers and Fogerty, 1995; Wisniewski and Gargiulo, 1997; Wylie, 1997).

Fullan (1996) argues that structural reforms, such as site-based management, engender overload and stress in teachers because they are experienced by them as fragmented and incoherent. Since the most carefully planned structural change will unfold in a non-linear manner, the coherent visions of those who engineer restructuring from the ‘top’ are inevitably experienced as fragmented and cluttered by the teachers involved in their implementation. Fullan answers the question of how to achieve greater coherence for teachers during systemic reform by advocating the development of collaborative networks to give teachers more influence over change.

In this paper, we take a somewhat controversial position and argue that the increased workload and stress associated with a self-managing environment can be attributed, in part, to the ways in which teachers organize themselves. Teachers not only suffer from workload problems but also create them, and their greater involvement in systemic reform, as recommended by Fullan (1996), may not lead to the desired coherence of reform efforts. Our argument centres on the premise that organizing principles developed to meet the challenges of managing single-cell classrooms, such as individualism, autonomy (Bush, 1995; Fullan, 1993; Little, 1990; Smyth, 1996) and strong subject department identity (Johnson, 1990; Lee et al., 1993; MacLaughlin and Talbert, 1990; Siskin, 1994), impede the systemic thinking (Senge, 1992; Sterman, 1994) required for developing coherence in reforms which go beyond the unit of the classroom or department. When reform requires a systemic response, these organizing principles are likely to result in increased workload through fragmentation, duplication of effort and the addition of new tasks to those already existing.

We develop this argument by drawing on the relevant literature about how teachers organize their work, identifying, in particular, the autonomy accorded to individuals and departments and the relatively uncritical support which teachers offer to their colleagues. We then suggest how these organizing principles may reduce coherence and exacerbate workload and propose that a greater emphasis on systemic thinking is needed if teacher
involvement in school-wide initiatives is to be successful and manageable. Finally, we illustrate our argument through a previously unpublished school-based case study in which a group of teachers in a school with a high degree of self-management undertook a major school-wide initiative.

**Autonomy and Collegiality**

Organizational theorists have long identified schools as loosely coupled systems in which the various components, while responsive to one another, preserve their own identity through some degree of separateness (Weick, 1976). This relative independence of operation provides teachers with the autonomy to make individual judgements to deal with the uncertainty and complexity of classroom environments. While functional for the relatively independent operations of single-cell classrooms (Lee et al., 1993; Weick, 1976), autonomy can place limitations on the coherence of school-wide initiatives when it comes to mean ‘freedom from scrutiny and the largely unexamined right to exercise personal preference’ (Little, 1990: 513). If each individual decides independently how he or she will act, how does the school as an organization develop coherent responses to organizational issues?

Recent research on secondary-school organization has given a central role to the department, for it is from that unit, rather than from the school as a whole, that teachers derive their professional identity and their understanding of teaching and learning (Hargreaves and MacMillan, 1995; Lee et al., 1993; MacLaughlin and Talbert, 1990; Siskin, 1994, 1997). Although strong departmental identity may be appropriate when addressing departmental issues, school-wide initiatives require teachers to think and coordinate their efforts across departmental boundaries. As Siskin (1997) concludes from her case studies of three principals attempting to develop coherence in their school-wide visions, ‘Departmental divisions confront reformers with powerful barriers to school-wide communication and community’ (Siskin, 1997: 621).

Teachers are often encouraged to balance individual and departmental autonomy with greater collegiality as a way of promoting professionalism (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Firestone, 1996), of improving decision-making through sharing expertise (Wallace and Hall, 1994; Weick and McDaniel, 1989) and of providing coherence in systemic reform (Fullan, 1996; Hannay and Ross, 1997). Empirical examination of collegial processes in schools, however, show that the benefits of collegiality rarely live up to expectations because norms of mutual and uncritical support take precedence over enhancing the validity of information fundamental to quality decision making (Argyris, 1990; Bush, 1995; Lipman, 1997; Timperley and Robinson, 1998). For example, Little (1990) observed that supportive collegial norms often preclude discussions about curriculum or instructional practice when such discussions might imply concerns about a colleague’s competence.

**Implications for workload**

How do these norms of departmental and individual autonomy and supportive collegiality impact on teachers’ workload in a self-managing environment? It is assumed that a self-managing school will develop a school-wide vision and practices consistent with that vision (Fullan, 1996; Siskin, 1997; Hannay and Ross, 1997). Developing such a vision in a loosely coupled system is fraught, however, because alignment of strategic activities requires coordination among staff who are accustomed to a high degree of independence. Teachers who think and act within their own bounded single-cell classrooms or departments are likely
to create the fragmentation and resulting overload portrayed by Fullan (1996) as they duplicate, or even compete with, each other’s efforts. Such fragmentation is almost inevitable when systemic considerations, such as the interrelationship among individual and departmental initiatives are neglected.

Potential compounding of workload is also likely to occur when supportive collegiality and autonomy result in a reluctance to discuss the merits of current curricula or instructional practice for fear of possible exposure to implied judgements of competence (Little, 1990). The absence of such discussion leaves those seeking to introduce new initiatives with limited options for discontinuing what currently exists. New initiatives, therefore, are likely to be added to existing workloads unless individuals privately decide on discontinuation of the old.

**Systems Thinking**

We propose that if teachers are to be effective contributors to school-wide initiatives in a self-managing environment without increasing their workloads unreasonably, then they must go beyond the bounded thinking and action required for managing individual classrooms and departments to that which is more systemic. Sterman (1994: 291) identifies systems thinking as, ‘the ability to see the world as a complex system, in which we understand that “you can’t just do one thing” that “everything is connected”’. A key skill Sterman identifies for engaging in such thinking is to create maps of the structure of an issue through eliciting the knowledge and beliefs which actors bring to its discussion and resolution. Senge (1992) refers to this process as surfacing and testing mental models in ways that identify and challenge an individual’s leaps of abstraction between what actually occurs and the inferences that are made.

In uncertain environments, such as schools, individuals are likely to have very different mental models of the structure of an issue because its complexity and ambiguity will support varied causal interpretations. Sterman (1994) claims that individuals are more likely to improve their understanding of the systems they have created if they engage in a dialogue which tests their assumptions of causal structure of the issue.

Organizing principles that neglect considerations beyond a department, or preclude discussion of the merits of current practice, impede the processes Sterman (1994) and Senge (1993) describe as fundamental to systems thinking. For example, awareness of the systemic implications of individual or departmental practice is inevitably limited if teachers interact only with departmental colleagues, for they are likely to hold similar views about curriculum knowledge and how it should be organized (Siskin, 1997). Similarly, if supportive collegial norms preclude discussion of issues of instructional practice, how can models of existing instruction be challenged? When systemic rather than individual or departmental initiatives are mounted, organizing principles more compatible with systems thinking need to be employed.

In the remainder of this paper, we pursue the issue of how teachers both create and suffer from workload problems, through a school-based case study at a suburban high school which we call ‘Phoenix College’. This case illustrates how a group of teachers, representative of different departments in the school, set about improving the achievement of minority students. We argue that norms of departmental and individual autonomy led to the development of parallel structures and the addition of new tasks for this already overworked group. The problem of workload was compounded by a norm of collegiality which precluded public criticism of practices which were privately judged inadequate. In the absence
of voluntary withdrawal of such practices, the new initiatives inevitably added to the teachers’ workload.

The Case Study

Phoenix College, a large secondary school in New Zealand, had a high degree of autonomy from central authorities in the management of both its operational and teacher salary budget. The instructional programme was constrained by centrally mandated curriculum objectives, but decisions about how to organize that instruction were largely the school’s responsibility. The school wanted to improve the achievement of its Pacific students who comprised 18 percent of its enrolment. Despite its reputation for academic success, Pacific students were disproportionately represented in the school’s non-academic programme and were underperforming academically. Three years prior to the research, the principal and the school’s only Samoan teacher had attempted to address the problem by developing a multi-pronged initiative designed to improve the attendance and performance of Pacific students.

Initially, Phoenix College was one of six schools involved in a research study on how schools solve complex administrative and curricular problems. Our findings from this earlier phase of the research showed that, although Pacific student achievement had improved over the previous three years, the effectiveness of some aspects of the initiative was compromised by unresolved differences among key staff about how best to assist these students. In response to this analysis, the school decided to establish a taskforce with a brief to examine reasons for improved Pacific achievement and to determine how it could be improved further. This case study focuses on the work of this taskforce.

Method

Our initial involvement during the first phase of the research took place over a period of six months and culminated in a research report and feedback to the key staff involved in the Pacific student achievement initiative. The second phase of the research, which is the subject of this paper, involved intensive data collection over the subsequent eight months, with follow-up data gathered for a further three months.

Data-collection methods comprised audio-taping and observing 10 meetings of the taskforce. Twenty-one audio-taped interviews with the principal, taskforce members and other relevant staff were completed by the first author and a research assistant. In addition, many informal conversations took place before and after formal meetings and over the telephone. Numerous documents were analysed, including taskforce minutes, archival documents of the school’s initiatives to improve Pacific student achievement over the previous three years and trends in public examination results.

Data analysis was inductive and continued throughout the duration of the case study. It was informed by problem-based methodology (Robinson, 1993) in which the first step was to identify the taskforce’s key practices. Since we sought to explain those practices by connecting them to organizational norms existing in the school, we reconstructed the values, beliefs and practical considerations that underlay them. This reconstruction, summarized in Figure 1, took into account both the practitioners’ explanations of their practices and the frequently unstated beliefs and values that appeared to the researchers to underpin them. Given the possibility for error in this process, the accuracy of all reconstructions was checked with the relevant practitioners in feedback interviews.
Pacific Student Achievement Initiative

The work of the taskforce is briefly described in terms of the way it was structured and the processes it typically employed in its meetings. These descriptions are followed by discussion of the organizing principles that explain its operation and achievements.

Structure of Initiatives to Improve Pacific Student Achievement

Over a period of three to four years the number of programmes and initiatives to assist Pacific students at Phoenix College increased from three to 13. During this period, no programmes were discontinued or evaluated for their effectiveness, more were simply added on to those already existing. Pacific students had traditionally received assistance from three established school programmes that catered for students with English language or other learning difficulties. These included a non-academic Home Room programme, in which students were taught the core curriculum by one teacher, and two withdrawal and in-class English support programmes. These programmes are identified in Table 1 as ‘Established Programmes’. A multi-pronged initiative to improve Pacific student achievement, developed three years prior to the research, included parents, staff and students in seven new initiatives, such as a homework centre, parent support groups and staff training in teaching students for whom English is a second language (see Table 1). Student achievement in public examinations was showing a gradual improvement but still well below that of other ethnic groups. The new taskforce for Pacific student achievement, the focus of this research, was set up to examine ways to further improve Pacific student achievement. These new initiatives focused on improving home–school relationships, identification procedures for student placement, and classroom teaching and learning. In effect, this added three new initiatives to those programmes and initiatives already in operation.

Taskforce processes

The taskforce was established by calling a meeting of volunteers: 17 staff attended the initial

<table>
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<th>Programme and Initiatives</th>
<th>Time since established</th>
<th>Cumulative no. of initiatives</th>
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<td>Established programmes:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home Room, in-class and withdrawal English support</td>
<td>&gt;3 years</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Pacific student achievement initiative:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Included staff professional development, parent involvement and student support through counselling and a homework centre</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Taskforce:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Included home–school relations, identification procedures for student placement, classroom teaching and learning</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home Room taskforce:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Included home–school relations, identification procedures for student placement, classroom teaching and learning, Home Room environment</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>14</td>
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meeting with a similar number coming to a second meeting two weeks later. Approximately 50 percent of attendees were common to both meetings. At this second meeting, it was decided to establish a seven-member group who would organize the other volunteers. Initially, the taskforce selected five areas for intervention that were subsequently reduced to three. In deciding the focus of their activities, taskforce members made no mention of any of the other 10 initiatives that were already in place. When interviewed about this omission, some members explained that they were unaware of these previous initiatives. Other members were aware of them, concerned about their ineffectiveness, but reluctant to disclose their judgement. Several of the latter group believed that they could compensate for this ineffectiveness by introducing new, more effective schemes.

Taskforce members were busy people. Their competing commitments resulted in only one of the eight meetings being attended by all members of the group. Invariably, some members arrived late and others had to leave early. The members accepted this intermittent attendance as inevitable because they could all identify with the pressures of trying to meet conflicting commitments.

As the year drew to a close, five months after the initial meeting, little had been accomplished. The Samoan chairperson, Maria, was to go on leave the following year and a new chairperson was appointed. Plans were made to meet and report in the new year but these plans never happened. The explanation given to the researcher was that the new chairperson was overcommitted and unable to undertake the necessary organizational responsibilities.

**Explaining the Workload Problems**

In the remainder of this paper we offer an analysis and explanation of why members of the taskforce undertook their work in this way. To anticipate, they developed structures and processes independent of any consideration of task efficiency or impact on their workload. Eventually, these processes became so inefficient that the group failed to make any substantive recommendation on how to assist Pacific students in the school.

One obvious explanation for the limited achievement of the taskforce is the competing priorities, the timetable clashes and the constant interruptions that are an endemic feature of any large secondary school. The committee and co-curricular responsibilities of staff far exceeded the time they were able to allocate to such duties. Such an explanation is too simple, however, because the staff simultaneously suffered from and created these pressures. They unintentionally created these pressures by adding on new activities without reducing the number of those already existing, by developing parallel structures to solve similar problems, by relying on volunteers with high workloads to undertake key tasks and by uncritically accepting all suggestions for how Pacific students might be assisted.

We offer three explanations for the teachers’ actions. First, their bounded non-systemic thinking left them largely unaware that they had created an uncoordinated proliferation of many different initiatives. Second, the norm of professional autonomy reduced their capacity to hold one another accountable for the quality and efficiency of the various initiatives that were in place or for the efficiency of the taskforce processes. Thirdly, the norm of supportive collegiality led staff to uncritically support the genuine desire of colleagues to help Pacific students by volunteering to participate in yet another initiative. The relationship between these explanations, the practices of the taskforce and their achievements is summarized in Figure 1.
Bounded Non-Systemic Thinking

Strong departmentalization is an established feature of the organization of secondary schools in the United States (Hargreaves and MacMillan, 1995; MacLaughlin and Talbert, 1990; Siskin, 1994, 1997) and appears equally applicable to the New Zealand context. Departmentalization allows teachers to identify and associate with colleagues with whom they must work most closely. It becomes a limitation, however, when initiatives require systemic thinking and action beyond departmental boundaries, as in the case of the Pacific student achievement taskforce, because the complex interconnections between departments become a constraint on the change process. Potentially, the taskforce’s structure allowed for consideration of these interconnections by having cross-departmental representation on its management group. This representation, however, was insufficient to ensure the systemic thinking and actions required to cross departmental boundaries.

The most salient example of the limitations of departmentalization was the relationship between the taskforce and the Home Room Department that catered for students with special learning needs. Teaching in this department involved the integration of core subjects with few expectations that the students would sit public examinations. For the last few years, 90 percent of students in this department had been Pacific. Several members of the taskforce expressed concerns about the education offered to the students and these concerns
were reflected in their selection of issues to be investigated. At most meetings of the task-force, concerns about the Home Room Department were referred to indirectly, but in the following example the staff representative from the Home Room Department challenged another taskforce member about his implied criticism of the department. He replied to this challenge by stating:

OK, the impression I got from visiting and speaking to others is that a certain amount of work that appears to have been done in the Home Room is work that looks neat in books and occupies time. It doesn’t necessarily achieve an education in that it’s fine to have kids copying out of a book, but I don’t know if that fits with the type of learning that needs to [happen].

Similar concerns were expressed by others about student placement: ‘Well, the questions are, “Why is it that the Home Room Department has such a high percentage of Pacific Islanders in it? Why is that happening?”’

Respect for the autonomy of the Home Room Department, however, prevented taskforce members from taking any substantive action to either investigate their concerns further or influence change. Answers to the questions raised were not pursued. Respect for depart-mental autonomy also compounded workloads when a group of Pacific parents made a formal complaint about the Home Room Department. The senior management of Phoenix College chose to manage this complaint by setting up a second taskforce (see Table 1) to examine issues of student placement, teaching and learning, home–school communication and the environment of the Home Room Department. The first three issues were identical to those targeted by the taskforce for Pacific student achievement and had been included in the latter primarily because of its concern about the Home Room Department. Half the memberships of the two taskforces were common to both.

Although Maria, the Samoan chairperson, and one other member of the management group suggested both taskforces be combined, the staff member from the Home Room Department and Paul, the deputy principal, opposed this suggestion. He expressed his concerns this way:

If we suddenly went in and said we’re going to target the Home Room Department, . . . I think you’ll get a very strong reaction from others who aren’t here. They may see it as another go at the Home Room Department, whatever the intention was. In terms of what people in the department have said to me about what they’re feeling at the moment, it’s a reality that would have to be managed.

Other taskforce members accepted Paul’s argument and his offer to work in a liaison role between both groups to keep them informed of each other’s activities. The reporting never happened because he chose to work privately with the head of the Home Room Department and taskforce members did not challenge this independent decision. As a result, neither task-force influenced change. When asked by the researcher for his reasons for working in this way, Paul explained: ‘Josie [the Head of Department of the Home Room Department] has been territorial. I mean she has put up some barriers.’

Interviews of taskforce members established that they both accepted the head of depart-ment’s right to be territorial and the limitations this placed on their capacity to influence the programme, despite their privately expressed concerns about racist selection procedures and inadequate teaching. The consequences of this arrangement for workloads were that those members belonging to both groups now had twice as many meetings to attend. Even data-collection methods were duplicated, with both taskforces surveying the same Pacific parents
about home-school communication. The workload demands involved in distributing and collecting the questionnaires precluded either taskforce from collating or using the results of their surveys.

Departmental autonomy is insufficient to explain the duplication of effort and proliferation of parallel structures that occurred at Phoenix College, however, because in most instances the separate initiatives were not department based. At a deeper level, the way in which the management group set about its work reflected an inability to think and act systematically (Senge, 1992; Sterman, 1994). This inability was particularly evident in the addition of new initiatives to assist the Pacific students. The seven initiatives and three programmes identified in Table 1 already existed at the time the taskforce was established. Only one of those programmes, the Home Room Department, was ever referred to in the taskforce’s deliberations, yet several taskforce members committed considerable time to them. The taskforce’s selection of new areas for attention effectively added three more initiatives to those already in place.

The consequence of this add-on strategy was to simultaneously increase workloads and limit the energy that could be put into any one aspect of the initiative. Even the organizational demands of finding a time to meet created major workload problems because competing commitments left little flexibility in any one individual’s timetable.

The causal links we propose between bounded non-systemic thinking and the practices and consequences that arose from it are illustrated in Figure 1. We suggest that parallel structures were created and new initiatives added, with a resulting increase in workload, because coordination issues and the interconnections between roles and responsibilities were never satisfactorily addressed.

The above description could be interpreted as a problem unique to a disorganized school or the taskforce itself not be seen as representative of other school operations. Our response to the first explanation is that the school was considered to be the most effective and well managed in the district by both parents and education authorities. Applications for student places far exceeded the number available and the principal served on a national taskforce to address educational achievement issues because of this reputation as an effective educational manager. The operation of the taskforce itself was not unique in the school and the way it was set up was typical of general school operations. Both the principal and the senior management knew of the existing 10 initiatives and had reservations about the effectiveness and expense of some of them. Despite this knowledge, no requirement was placed on the group to rationalize these previous efforts. Similarly, the idea of setting up the second taskforce on the Home Room Department came from the principal. He knew of the duplication of effort but considered a separate group would more appropriately respect the autonomy of the Home Room Department and its head.

Professional Autonomy

In addition to the compartmentalized thinking and action evident at the organizational level, strong professional norms of autonomy (Bush, 1995; Fullan, 1993; Little, 1990; Smyth, 1996) and equality of authority (Timperley and Robinson, 1998) influenced the operation of the taskforce. In Figure 1, these norms are summarized as professional autonomy. Teachers’ work requires them to have considerable autonomy to make individual judgments (Lee et al., 1993) and accountability in schools is sometimes rejected through a fear that the professionalism of teachers will be undermined (Willms and Kerchoff, 1995). These norms of non-accountable autonomy at Phoenix College, however, contributed to much of the extra workload experienced by members of the management
group of the taskforce because members failed to hold their colleagues to account for not actioning agreed decisions and accepted current practice even when privately critical of its effectiveness.

Tasks agreed to at one meeting were often not carried out, a process which contributed to limited progress and wasted time at subsequent meetings. For example, on two occasions meeting dates were set, but those responsible for arranging release time from classroom duties failed to do this, with the result that few members were able to attend. Similarly, taskforce members agreed to co-opt other interested staff to develop an action plan for each of the three subgroups. By the end of the year only the home–school communication subgroup under Maria’s leadership had begun to formulate such a plan and put it into action with the parent survey. The inaction of other subgroups was not challenged. Similarly, the failure of the new chairperson to reconvene the taskforce in the new year was not raised. When asked about the reasons for accepting the lack of action, members of the taskforce management group expressed a reluctance to interfere with what they believed to be professional decisions about how to manage personal workloads. In effect, each member made autonomous decisions about their own contribution and the consequences of these decisions were treated as undiscussable.

The failure of taskforce members to hold each other to account could have been counteracted by the actions of the school’s management team. Phoenix College did have formal accountability mechanisms but these did not serve to make any members of the taskforce management group accountable for their actions. For example, the principal delegated responsibility for the taskforce to Paul, the deputy principal responsible for learning support. Paul subsequently delegated this responsibility to Maria, so she could have relevant management experience. Neither the principal nor his deputy, despite their awareness of the lack of progress, held the taskforce as a group, or any individual within it, accountable for the lack of action.

Respect for professional autonomy and a reluctance to hold each other to account contributed not only to the organizational difficulties but also to the compounding of multiple components of the initiative. Group members were reluctant to express publicly their negative judgements about some aspects of the initiative already in place. Some members of the taskforce were particularly critical of three of the seven initiatives for which Maria was responsible that had been established three years prior to the taskforce. The school management, together with two other members on the taskforce, for example were concerned about the amount of time she spent counselling individual students. Maria, on the other hand, believed that removing barriers to student achievement through individual counselling was an effective use of her time. As she expressed it to the researcher: ‘You need to look at the student as a person, the student as a learner in the school environment. . . . As a counsellor, I look at the barriers to learning.’

Rather than express their concerns directly, taskforce members would periodically ask questions of her such as: ‘How much time do you spend counselling students?’ ‘What do you think is important in your role?’ Maria answered these questions in accordance with her own beliefs about the benefits of counselling, unaware of the questioners’ privately expressed reservations about counselling as an effective use of her time. The reluctance of the members of the taskforce to engage with matters of individual professional judgement mirrored Little’s (1990: 510) description of teachers showing ‘little inclination to engage with peers . . . in ways that may jeopardize self-esteem and professional standing.’ As a result, the management group were limited to making recommendations about the addition of new components, and stymied in reviewing the worth of those already existing.
Supportive Collegiality

The value of working in collegial groups is both acclaimed as a way for teachers to benefit from the support and expertise of their colleagues (Cunningham and Gresso, 1993; Weiss and Cambone, 1994) and portrayed as a mechanism for teachers to pool their ignorance (Hargreaves, 1984) and avoid the difficult issues that may limit quality decision making (Argyris, 1990; Timperley and Robinson, 1998). In the taskforce, the supportive and inclusive attributes of collegiality prevented evaluations of current initiatives or the exercise of mutual accountability.

Norms of supportive collegiality also explained the inclusion of all interested volunteers in the work of the taskforce and the avoidance of open interpersonal conflict (Figure 1). The desire to be inclusive was graphically portrayed by the taskforce’s decision to expand its membership from seven to ten at its third meeting. Despite the coordination problems evident in the first three meetings, the group decided to expand its membership to include three other staff who had earlier expressed an interest in joining. The initial decision to restrict the management group to representatives of key areas in the school had caused considerable unease among the members, because it had led to the exclusion of the three staff who did not fit this brief. At the third meeting of the group, one member raised this:

Tom: I was impressed by the enthusiasm of those who volunteered to be in this group at the larger meeting. And then I was surprised how few of them [were] in this group—some of those people weren’t here. . . . To start with a group this small is crazy, particularly if you have the enthusiasm from those other people who carry things through.

Maria: Phillippa, Don and Susan offered to be in this group.

Tua: I reckon we pull them on.

In making this decision, taskforce members did not pause to think how an expansion of the group might affect its functioning, in particular, the time spent in coordination and the potentially increased intermittence of attendance. Although all three new members attended the fourth meeting, their subsequent attendance also became erratic.

The desire to be collegially supportive also led to an avoidance of conflict and an increasing workload in ways described above. For example, Paul advocated the establishment of parallel taskforces on the basis that the involvement of the Pacific student achievement taskforce in the Home Room Department was likely to produce a ‘very strong reaction from others who aren’t here’. Similarly, failure to examine the worth of current aspects of the initiative were partly motivated by a desire to avoid conflict with Maria who believed in the worth of the initiatives she had established. At various times over the previous three years, Paul had attempted to redirect Maria’s activities, not openly, but indirectly, by making it difficult for her to continue those he had reservations about. He used mechanisms such as timetabling her for activities other than counselling and cutting the funding for the poorly attended homework centre. Each time he had been overruled after Maria had directly approached the principal for reinstatement of previous conditions. These conflicts had not been openly discussed.

Inevitably, the tensions associated with these previous incidents manifested themselves within the taskforce, initially by an apparent inability to coordinate their efforts to arrange meeting times and staff release. Other taskforce members recognized the cause of these organizational problems but preferred to accept their continuation over discussing and resolving them. As one member said,

Yeah, there’s been a lot of baggage carried into this committee, and its primarily between Maria and Paul, the communication between them. And the rest of us are getting pulled
into it, and getting involved in that. Some of us sure as hell don’t want to be involved in that, because that’s not what we’re here for.

This member’s reluctance to discuss and resolve the ongoing conflicts and the effects it was having on group functioning was shared by others in the taskforce. Collegiality did not extend to assisting others to work out their differences. This preference for avoiding rather than resolving conflict is not restricted to teachers, but has long been recognized in the literature, ‘When a problem arises . . . the safest policy is to delay dealing with it, rather than trying to do away with it.’ (Machiavelli, 1519, in Bondanella and Musa, 1979: 240–1).

We have previously critiqued the limitations of collegiality when it is interpreted, as appeared to be the case at Phoenix College, as avoiding mutual accountability and discussion of difficult interpersonal issues (Timperley and Robinson, 1998). We have proposed that, if the potential for collegial groups is to be realized, it must be interpreted more rigorously to reflect a commitment to learning together about developing effective solutions to problems. A major implication of this position is that collegial groups must focus on their progress towards solving the problem, and identify and resolve personal and interpersonal issues that might limit their ability to do so. The taskforce lost sight of the problem they were trying to solve, that is, to improve Pacific student achievement, and allowed unresolved interpersonal conflict to limit their effectiveness.

The ineffectiveness of the taskforce could have been challenged by senior management by requiring the group to develop both an effective solution to the problem of Pacific student achievement and a way of working together that would facilitate this solution. By failing to place these requirements on the group, senior management inadvertently created conditions that allowed the taskforce to continue with ineffective processes.

**Interrelationship between Explanations**

Although we have discussed separately each of the explanations for the way in which the taskforce set about compounding workloads for its members, they are inevitably interwoven. No single organizing principle accounted for any one practice or consequence identified in Figure 1. For example, we have suggested that respect for professional autonomy led taskforce members to add on new initiatives rather than to review the worth of those already existing. An essential part of systems thinking, however, is to create maps of the structure of an issue and to publicly test the validity of the assumptions underlying such maps (Senge, 1992; Sterman, 1994). It is not possible to undertake such an exercise if norms of supportive collegiality and professional autonomy preclude challenge of current practice. Thus, the interpersonal, professional and organizational norms and practices contributed both separately and in combination to the ineffectiveness of the taskforce and to workload stress.

**Conclusions**

In this paper, we have argued that increased workload and stress associated with a self-managing environment can be attributed, in part, to the ways in which teachers organize themselves with few demands from management to do things differently. Occupational norms of departmental and professional autonomy (Lee et al., 1993; MacLaughlin and Talbert, 1990; Siskin, 1994, 1997) and supportive collegiality (Lipman, 1997; Little, 1990), while adaptive for managing the environment of a single-cell classroom, limit the systemic thinking required for school-wide initiatives. Workload is increased through fragmentation, dupli-
cation of effort, proliferation of new ideas and a reluctance to challenge colleagues. Without a change in these occupational norms, meaningful teacher involvement in school-wide initiatives is inevitably limited because workloads are not infinitely expandable.

We do not dispute the benefits of direct teacher involvement in school-wide reform efforts because it is teachers who must implement change, and their input helps them to make sense of what is happening and holds possibilities for improving the reform effort itself (Fullan, 1996; Hannay and Ross, 1997). The challenge to school managers is to facilitate the realization of the potential benefits without increasing workloads to unacceptable levels.

We suggest that the answer to this question lies primarily in teachers and school managers identifying what is required to engage effectively in school-wide reform efforts and to distinguish how this is different from classroom teaching. The operation of the Phoenix College taskforce was limited by their adoption of organizing principles more suited to managing single-cell classrooms than to managing school-wide reform. As a result, taskforce members spent many hours trying to organize themselves and fit their ever-increasing commitments into finite time schedules, rather than dealing with the complex issue of Pacific student achievement.

The role for managers in this process is to conceptualize the shifts required for teachers to be involved effectively at a systemic level, and then to create the conditions to facilitate these shifts. The first condition is creating the demand for the teachers to engage in systemic thinking. Such a demand may take the form of a requirement to map the school’s current response to the problem and demonstrate how this map interrelates with other aspects of the school system (Sterman, 1994). At Phoenix College such a map would have revealed the existing 10 initiatives to assist Pacific students and raised questions about their efficiency and effectiveness.

Senge (1992) advocates that the inferences participants bring to such a task should be publicly defended and tested because it is through dialogue that faulty assumptions can be contested and alternatives debated. This type of public testing does not typically form a part of classroom teachers’ professional lives where the performance demand is for competent classroom practice, rather than for systematic reflection on and defence of the assumptions underlying that practice.

A second condition for effective teacher involvement that does not unreasonably increase workloads is the reformulation of what it means to be collegial. If groups of teachers are to contribute to solving organizational problems, they need to be constantly mindful of their progress towards a solution and to hold each other accountable for that progress (Timperley and Robinson, 1998). Part of this condition involves taking joint responsibility for resolving the personal and interpersonal issues that may limit progress, including the implications of their joint actions for each others’ workloads. This interpretation of collegiality is very different from that advocated in much of the literature (Cunningham and Gresso, 1993; Weiss and Cambone, 1994) or that practised in many schools (Hargreaves, 1994; Little, 1990) where collegiality means working together and supporting one another.

The challenge for management is to create the demand for collegial groups to develop solutions to the identified problems and to provide the conditions that will maximize the probability for success. Phoenix College management believed that they had created these conditions by formulating the problem to be solved and providing any requested release from classroom teaching. The conditions that were missing were the demand for a solution within a reasonable timeframe and the assistance to resolve the personal and interpersonal issues that were limiting the development of an effective solution.
Respect for professional autonomy also contributed to taskforce members’ workloads. The way in which respect was interpreted precluded judgement of the quality of programmes because such judgement inevitably reflected on an individual’s professional work. In the absence of judgements about programme quality, the only question taskforce members were able to ask was ‘What more should we be doing?’ These taskforce norms reflected those within the school in that such issues were not for public discussion. The management challenge, therefore, is to develop a professional climate in which the issue of programme effectiveness becomes a legitimate subject for debate.

In this paper, we have attempted to reformulate the workload problem by challenging the common-sense notion that teachers are victims of ever-increasing demands on their time with ever-increasing workloads. This was the accepted wisdom at Phoenix College where it was claimed that the only ongoing problem with addressing the issue of Pacific student achievement was ‘We get squeezed for time, we’re all so busy.’ This formulation of the workload problem, however, goes beyond the staff at Phoenix College. Much of the literature on teacher stress and workload (Campbell and Neill, 1992; O’Connor and Clark, 1990; Whitehead and Ryba, 1995; Wylie, 1997) makes this same assumption. The possibility of reverse causation, that is, that the way in which the teachers set about their work might contribute to problems of workload, is one that we believe should also be entertained.

Notes

The authors wish to acknowledge the cooperation of Phoenix College staff and their preparedness to examine and learn about their own practice.

1. Pacific students in this context refers to those whose families have migrated to New Zealand from various South Pacific Islands, including Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Tokelau and Nuie.

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