

‘WORKING FROM THE BOOT OF A RED FALCON’: THE IMPACT OF MAJOR FIRES IN FOUR AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

Adele Nye

University of New England

ABSTRACT

When a major fire occurs in a school, the impact can be felt for years to come. How the school community rebuilds depends on strong leadership and the resilience of the members of that community. This article explores the stories of four Australian schools, two rural NSW schools, Kelso High School and Oxley High School and two urban schools; Lyneham Public School, in Canberra, ACT and St Clair High School in Sydney. The research draws from qualitative interviews with school leaders as well as textual sources such as newspapers, social media and departmental documents. Through a comparative lens, the story of determined principals, teachers, students and parents is revealed. In each case the school emerges from significant misfortune to become a stronger school driven by a shared determination.

Key words: recovery, leadership, rebuilding, schools and fire

INTRODUCTION

Australian schools and their communities are well attuned to the risks of bush fires, yet each year schools suffer varying degrees of loss and damage to arson and accidental fires. Little attention has been paid to these fires; how they occur or how schools rebuild afterwards. This article presents the findings a recent study that seeks to begin to address this gap by exploring five aspects of the recovery period: the immediate dispersal of children, the experiences of the teachers, the use of demountable buildings, fundraising, leadership and finally the outcomes and the legacy of these fires. It utilizes data from a series of qualitative interviews with principals and executive teachers who have faced these challenges and also draws from an examination of textual data including newspapers, social media, and official departmental online sources. Early indications in the data analysis share a perception that leadership qualities, the resilience and strength of community and their collective willingness to engage in reciprocity lay at the core of successful rebuilding. ‘Working from the boot of a car’ is how Paul Sterling, Principal of Kelso High School, described his average day to *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Ben Rushton in 2005, in the aftermath of a major fire. Bereft of a school, administrative records or materials, and with his children and staff scattered across the region his car had to suffice as a mobile office. It quickly became evident in this research endeavour that adaptation, innovation and an open mind were essential qualities for those involved in the rebuilding and recovery of a school after a fire.

School fires cause major disruption to school communities, cost the public millions in damages and leave a powerful legacy that can last decades. Since 2000 there have been 1454 significant fires in NSW education properties (FRNSW, 2014). This study seeks to share a portion of these stories by examining the experiences of two rural schools, and two urban schools one in Sydney, NSW and

one in Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory. This paper will identify the ways in which school communities deal with fires from the first response phase, the early days that follow the fire, and the longer recovery and the rebuilding phase. Focusing largely on the school as a workplace, this paper will reveal the concentration on the skills and capacity of the leadership, the teachers and the administrative staff.

There is a significant need for research into the impact of fires in schools. A literature search revealed that there has been no qualitative research on the school community and the legacy of fires. There has been little practical and statistical information available other than that of the dated reports by the Bureau of Crime and Statistics (Burns, 1991) and the Institute of Criminology (Geason & Wilson, 1990). Both of these reports emerged at a time when fires in schools were causing significant concern and revealed that the cost of fires in schools has been enormous. In 1987-88, for example, the cost of arson (in all its forms) had reached an alarming \$100 million per year in New South Wales alone (Geason & Wilson, 1990, p. 45). In the following years a number of schemes were implemented, including a crime prevention workshop program, a permanent education / police task force, a Safety and Security Directorate in the Department of Education and Training, the property Schools Action Program and an intensive security fencing scheme (Drabsch, 2003, p. 25). By 2013, the NSW Fire Brigade reported that these undertakings were having an impact on the number of fires in schools (2013, p. 29). As a result of this, the urgency to address the problem of fires and arson which had been felt by administrators and services during the 1980s, dissipated somewhat.

The interviews undertaken for this study indicated that in the aftermath of any major school fire the local community immediately looks to school leadership and management for guidance. The schools needed be rebuilt in terms of the physical structure, but it is also essential to reaffirm a sense of belonging and community. The leaders, primarily the school principals, demonstrated a propensity towards collective and shared leadership and much of the literature supports this view as good practice. The literature related to the value of collective leadership in schools (for example Wilhelmson, 2006, p. 497; Mulford, 2005) showed the transformative potential of collaborative partnerships, particularly on the involvement of teachers in decision making. It was also evident that the principals forged communities of practice as they navigated the recovery period. They promoted collective learning, shared goals and practice, and in particular, collaborative dialogues and peripheral learning spaces, with mentoring relationships erasing the obvious presence of workplace hierarchies (Wenger, McDermott, & Williams, 2002). In the face of the catastrophic fires the interviews showed that resource managers, principals, teachers and community leaders draw from, and contribute to, this community of practice during the recovery and rebuilding process.

In their literature survey on crises (of all kinds) in schools, Smith and Riley (2012) have proposed five categories of crises that may occur; short term, cathartic, long term, one-off and infectious (pp. 59-60) and commented that:

The simple reality is, however, that many crises will occur in a school without any warning signs whatever, overt or institutional, because contributing events are outside the schools' control and outside of its information and communication systems (2012, p. 62).

The types of fires explored in this paper tend to fit within their fourth category, *One-off crisis* (2012, p. 60). In each case the fires occurred unexpectedly and the school leadership were called out, often in the early hours of the night, and required immediately to switch into crisis management capacity.

Smith and Riley have argued there is a significant gap in the research on leadership and crises in schools (2012, p. 65). They cite Devitt and Borodzicz (2008) who suggest this gap is due to the contextual nature of the crises. Simply put, they do not occur with any regularity and theorizing the response of leadership is therefore difficult (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 65). Moreover, the departmental records, government investigations and policy documents only go part way to

revealing the story of major loss in schools. It is therefore worthwhile, to explore the stories of leadership, the impact on school communities and how they cope and rebuild.

METHODOLOGY

This research was inspired by data from a broader qualitative study of the lived experiences of teachers in rural high schools. That study was designed to provide an ethnographic snap shot of the lives of teachers and identify aspects of personal significance and leadership in the work place. As in many qualitative studies, narratives can emerge unexpectedly. In turn the opportunity for a deeper examination of the issue is presented. In this case a comment was made stating that after a major fire, the timetabling committee had to rewrite the timetable seven times in the year. This points to a particularly significant and tumultuous impact on the educational work place and it was likely that there may be more unrecognised circumstances that should be examined.

The data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with key figures in three of the schools as well as the examination of documents relating to the fires and social media grabs. There were hundreds of school fires recorded in newspaper reports, parliamentary records, departmental web sites and online community forums. For the purpose of this paper, four significant school fires were chosen to be examined in depth: The two urban school fires occurred more than four decades apart and two rural school fires occurred in 2005 and 2012.

In each case selected for this study, the media covered the fire and the aftermath extensively, offering an insight into the experiences of the school community. The sources of data are by their nature inherently problematic. Newspaper interviews with principals and other staff after a major crisis are likely to reflect a desire to build confidence, show the strength of the community, and the value in rebuilding. This paper acknowledges that these sources offer a very particular narrative so as to gain a different perspective; in depth qualitative interviews with key figures were also undertaken.

The analysis used is largely a socio-historical survey of both the text and images. It was useful to employ an element of critical analysis of the discourse of the crisis and the aftermath. The analysis makes use of the situated knowledge garnered by staff, emergency workers and students as they tell their stories through various mediums (Harraway, 1991; Lang, 2011). This process highlighted the liminal spaces and absences that exist in these moments of major crises. When a school is physically erased the sense of loss extends beyond the initial shock and into the very practical issues of finding somewhere for students to come to 'next morning' and into the years of recovery that follow. This type of discourse resonates with place based research building on a crossroad of *multiple situated knowledges* (Stanford Friedman, 1996, p. 15), sense of belonging, transformation, and indeed the sense of loss that comes from erasure of place (Somerville, 2011). The work of Gruenwald (2003a, p. 9, 2003b, p. 644) and Soja (1996) alert us to the discussion of place in terms of the politics of power and governance. Exploring notions of re/inhabiting or the sense of being dislodged from places and work, or recovery of place in the damaged schools, can be viewed with a new transitional lens. This becomes evident when one considers how students and teachers occupy temporary spaces such as demountables, which, a few years down the track, are the familiar home for new students, and then, new buildings emerging years later become colonizing entities in the school landscape.

The temporal and liminal nature of the physical landscape is a useful position from which to assess the recovery and redevelopment periods. The lived experience for the school community will be variable depending on which space and for whom we examine. The 'boot of the red falcon' is one such liminal space: an absurd temporal space, yet also a crucial administrative tool for maintaining normalcy for a school population dispersed across so many locations.

THE FIRES: AN OVERVIEW

Across Australia, schools have been the subject of numerous arson attacks and accidental fire damage. Many are minor fires; however, some cause major and sometimes total devastation. The Nye, A. (2016). 'Working from the boot of a red falcon': The impact of major fires in four Australian schools. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, Vol. 26 (1), pp. 83–98.

fires at Lyneham Public School, St Clair High School, Kelso High School and Oxley High School, were selected for this study from the many thousands, because of the major impact they had on the school communities and the significant media coverage in the aftermath.

Lyneham Public School

In the early hours of the morning of Saturday June 21st 1969, arsonists struck at the 11 year old uninsured Lyneham Public School. There were no fire alarms or sprinklers installed (*The Canberra Times*, June 24, 1969, p. 3). The fire that destroyed the School was a large one. Upon his retirement, the ACT Fire commissioner, Jack Mundy, described the fire at Lyneham Public School as the biggest fire he ever attended in the ACT (*The Canberra Times*, October 14, 1980, p. 3). It was estimated that the cost of the damage was \$750,000 (1969, June 23, p. 1) and it would not be until early 1971 that the newly built school was again operational (Lyneham School Board, 2008).

The Principal, J. Sutherland, and Infants Mistress, Rona Blanchard, wrote to the community to both rally support and bring comfort in the days following the fire:

The utter devastation of such a fire appears to reduce to nothing the hours of devotion and efforts parents and teachers, and the sacrifice of monetary donations of the past 10 years. May we say that all was not wasted. The spirit, loyalty and effort of all of those who were pioneers are the very stimulus which now gives us courage and faith to tackle the colossal task of starting again. (Sutherland and Blanchard, 1969)

In 2011 a memory page was constructed for the school. Ex teacher Helen Harvey recalled the following story:

My first vivid memory was of 'The Fire', for although I was on maternity leave, I was given the job of minding the babies of the Staff while they donned raincoats and galoshes to search through the still dripping school rubble for records or anything else of value to the school community. They arrived back, wet, cold and filthy to collect the babies!

Fire fighters continued to tell the story of the Lyneham school fire and two of them in receiving awards of recognition for their years of service would raise this fire as among the most significant of their careers (*The Canberra Times*, 1979, p. 3, 1980, p. 3).

The Lyneham school fire is one of two fires discussed in this paper where it was determined that the fire was caused by an arsonist. Harold Tonkin, aged 19 years, faced a sentence of three and a half years in prison while the court took into account his history of depression and isolation. Newspaper reports painted him as a sad figure in need of psychiatric care (*The Canberra Times*, September 26, 1969, p. 10).

Kelso High School

On Friday night 8.30 pm on 19th August 2005, the Kelso High School was almost entirely destroyed by fire. The cause has never been determined. It was built in 1978 and was one of two large rural high schools in the Bathurst / Orange area in central New South Wales with 750 students. Principal Paul Sterling recalled:

I got a phone call during that night saying the school was on fire and I walked outside and I looked into the distance and all I could see was this big ball of flames.

The wooden structures burnt quickly with more than a hundred fire fighters fighting the blaze (NSWTF, 2005). Eighteen brigades from as far away as Penrith were involved. Social media contributor 'white rabbit' stated that so ferocious was the fire, that one fire engine caught alight during the blaze (2005). NSW Fire Brigade Superintendent Ian Krimmer observed: *The school was connected by a series of corridors with the wind just driving the fire through* (SMH, 2005). Similarly, Superintendent Tony Grant stated: *They were confronted by a very aggressive fire fanned by strong winds* (SMH 2005).

In the light of the morning the school community was faced with large scale devastation and an enormous task of maintaining schooling. Administrative staff had fortunately backed up the school's records off site, but personal property, resources, sports and circus equipment were all lost (NSWTF, 2005). Being a rural community there were limited options for placement of students and they were dispersed between TAFE, Charles Sturt University and West Kelso Public and Kelso Public Schools (ABC, 2005):

The school was scattered across five different campuses. The Principal, Paul Sterling, worked from the boot of a red Falcon and Year twelve finished its schooling in the unfamiliar classrooms of the local TAFE (Baker, 2005).

Oxley High School

Built in 1968, Oxley High School is located in Tamworth, a rural town in the northwest of New South Wales. The fire that devastated the Castlereagh block was well alight by 4 am on 17th March 2012. The school was home to more than 1200 students.

Castlereagh Block constituted a quarter of the school buildings. It held the school library, and English and Physical Education departments. Five classrooms, two science labs and the English staff book room were all destroyed. In addition the library, three more classrooms and three administrative offices were damaged (O'Brien, 2012a). The loss of resources was felt by teaching, counselling, executive and administrative staff (O'Brien, 2012a). While the building suffered most damage on the second floor, for safety reasons it was entirely demolished. At the time of writing the site is bare and one of the sporting fields is host to numerous temporary buildings.

It took three hours for forty five firefighters from Tamworth and Gunnedah (a town 76kms away) to bring the fire under control (Clifford, 2012). The school was closed for a day while investigations were undertaken (Ingall, 2012). The remains of the building were eventually demolished as one teacher stated:

I cried (at the time of the fire) but it was worse to have the building sitting there all charred and mangled. Oh it was horrid.

The loss of the many teaching resources was sorely felt as indicated in the comments from an executive staff member:

And they were gone. Kaput. You know. And that had an impact on those particular people. you spend years and years and years gathering stuff together and all of a sudden it is gone. There is a sort of sinking feeling.

The final damage costs were estimated to be more than \$10 million. Three years after the fire two young men, one a former student, were charged with arson (Chillingworth, 2015). At the time of writing neither had attended court proceedings. Notably the reporting of these charges was relatively devoid of the discourse identifiable in the media reports of the 1969 fire at Lyneham. In this case the men were not publically identified, as they were juveniles at the time of the crime. The charge details are however forthcoming in the media with a description of how the fire was believed to have started by the two.

St Clair High School

St Clair High School was a modern high school located in Western Sydney with a diverse population of 900 students. On 29th June 2014 a fire broke out at 1.30 am in the large three story complex at St Clair high school. The principal Chris Presland was immediately called to the site where fire fighters reported that this was, *the biggest school fire since Kelso*. Eighty percent of the school was destroyed including thirty classrooms, four staffrooms and a library. It was determined that the cause of the fire was an electrical fault.

Mr Presland's leadership was described by the local parliamentary member for Mulgoa, Ms Tanya Davies, as *calm and steadfast* as he described the huge fire that engulfed the building, and the many requirements of the first response teams, the media and the departmental procedures. In the light of the following day the focus was shifted to the school's future landscape, where it would be located and how it might function.

The school was functioning in demountable buildings in a record 10 days. This herculean effort was a reflection of the strong leadership in the school as well as the pivotal role the school already played in the community. St Clair is located off the main rail links in Sydney and while this had some isolating effects, it also culminated in a strong connection with business and community and the *busy and engaged school*. At the time of writing the rebuilding process is still in the planning stages, but as a demountable school it is functioning to full capacity.

Rebuilding school communities after major disruption and trauma requires a rethinking of social capital, resilience, of space, individuals' roles and their contributions. Considering how individuals, teachers, students and past students all respond to the disruption and displacement offers insights into how people deal with radical change in an environment that is usually so longstanding unchangeable and familiar.

THE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The fires have had an immense impact on teachers and students not only with the loss of material goods, but also through the disruption to the rhythm of their lives. It was quickly evident in the interviews that quality leadership was essential to bring together the school community and put forward a workable vision of the future. Smith and Riley have argued that returning the school community to some degree of normalcy as quickly as possible after a crisis is crucial (2012, p. 64). The interviews with principals and a regional director confirmed this resolutely.

In the case of these large school fires the teachers, students and community evidently drew from the diverse resources and networks within the community as they faced the enormity of the challenge. Political scientist and researcher in disaster, Aldrich, has argued strongly for the bonding, bridging and linking of social capital as being essential to reconstruction (Red Cross, 2012, p. 14). He suggests that collective participation within the community and giving voice to stakeholders, are crucial factors in rebuilding (Red Cross, 2012, p. 14). In the following cases it will be evident that these factors are indeed the staples for rebuilding.

The teachers of Lyneham Public School were not covered for any loss unless they had taken private insurance. Two teachers suffered considerable losses including paintings regarded as family heirlooms, which were to be used as inspiration for a lesson. Another teacher had valuable charts and maps in their classroom (*The Canberra Times*, June 24 1969, p. 3).

At Kelso teachers were said to have lost twenty-six years of resources. A past teacher from Kelso High School wrote on social media:

I was up with some of the Kelso teachers today, donating urgent resources and books to the History staff because they have lost EVERYTHING in the fire ... A new timetable has meant they have half an hour for lunch, during which time they may have to travel. At the same time they have to restore some stability and continuity to their students as well as personally cope with the disaster.

The students at Kelso High School were named 'the comeback kids' by the *Sydney Morning Herald* after succeeding in attending their first HSC exams less than two months after the fire (Baker, 2005). School Captain Pamela Rudge stated: *We just got focused and did the best we could* (Baker, 2005). Teachers at Kelso High school were involved in the rethinking of the how to teach across so many locations. They came up with the idea of team teaching which involved teaching across facilities but creating an innovative, cohesive and cooperative team at each location.

At Oxley the English department lost their text book room, classrooms were destroyed, the library suffered water and smoke damage and key administrative offices and their records were destroyed. By Term 2, only months after the fire, the newly arrived deputy Principal wrote in the school newsletter:

The school has a great collegial and friendly feel about it, especially with the immense problems of Term 1. The true character of people, both young and old, often comes to the fore after a disaster and I must say how impressed I am with the way students and staff responded in getting on with the job of teaching and learning without the Castlereagh Block (Jones, May 2012).

At St Clair High School everything was destroyed and staff lost all of their material resources. Like Kelso, teachers were well informed and involved in the recovery process from the first emergency meeting. As an experienced principal, Mr Presland was aware that while most staff would be patient and resourceful he would have to be alert to the inevitable 'dip' among some staff where the reality of the long haul settles in and people can sort of start to get a little bit selfish about things. Administrative and general staff were also very much effected by the fire. The principal described the arrival of the replacement texts, which involved extensive cataloguing and then dispersal, reporting: *We actually bought the general assistant a little golf cart with a trailer, it sounds like a strange thing to say but there was literally hundreds and hundreds of boxes of book to be moved.*

AFTER THE FIRE: THE TRANSIENT CLASSROOM

In the days, weeks and even months after the fires the students were generally ferried to neighbouring schools, TAFEs or in the case of Kelso, the local university. In each of the four schools discussed the teachers and principals strove to create transient classrooms within a day of the fire. These liminal spaces would become the students' new homes for an unknown period of time. They were often hastily borrowed spaces and in the first instance became a refuge for the students. As the months pass and they took on a level of permanence and familiarity the students' perceptions changed to feelings of belonging, resilience and hope.

In Lyneham, for example, children were transported each morning from the school gate to schools in neighbouring suburbs including Turner, North Ainslie, Ainslie, Watson, Hackett and Downer Primary Schools (*The Canberra Times*, June 23 1969, p. 8). The children were returned each afternoon to make their way home in the usual manner. The local newspaper, *The Canberra Times*, showed photographs of the children with the caption, *Lyneham Primary school children inspect their burnt out classrooms before boarding buses which took them to other schools yesterday* (June 25 1969, p. 10). Thus there was no time, or perhaps even intent, to hide the disaster from the children, indeed the youngest of the infants children stayed on site and were housed in the few classrooms that had escaped the fire (*The Canberra Times*, June 23 1969, p. 8).

At Kelso High School students were dispersed across the Bathurst educational community. Year 10 and 11 students were sent to Charles Sturt University while Year 12 students, who were two months away from their first HSC exams, were sent to the Bathurst TAFE campus. Years 7, 8 and 9 were dispersed between the university, Bathurst West and Kelso Public Schools (ABC, 2005). One month after the fire, the local member for the NSW Legislative Assembly, Mr Gerard Martin, stated in the NSW parliament:

It was a remarkable effort by Paul Sterling, Carol McDiarmid, the regional director, and Tina Slattery, Bathurst Schools District Director. Working with the asset management team they did a magnificent job to pull this together. The bureaucracy, which we often criticise, must be congratulated on the seamless way in which they responded under great pressure. Paul Sterling, school principal, was a real rock throughout the whole process (2005).

In contrast to the Lyneham and Kelso schools, Oxley and St Clair were largely able to keep their students within the school and did not need to take up offers of help from or utilization of space

Nye, A. (2016). 'Working from the boot of a red falcon': The impact of major fires in four Australian schools. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, Vol. 26 (1), pp. 83–98.

in the neighbouring TAFE campus (Van Aanholt & Sheridan, 2012, Smith, 2014). At Oxley High school students were asked to stay home for one day as staff turned to the task of housing students and classes. Unlike forty years earlier when Lyneham children were allowed to inspect their burnt classrooms, monitors were brought into the Oxley High to ensure the air quality matched appropriate guidelines (Jones, 2012a).

The changes in practice aim to minimize the distress of dislocation but it does then mean the school site becomes both construction site and demountable 'city'. The temporality of this dual habitation brings both positive and negative outcomes for the school community.

DEMOUNTABLES

The NSW assets management teams of the Department of Education and Training were crucial figures in the aftermath of school fires. These teams supply demountables and also oversee the funding and construction of the new buildings. Their management of finances and materials is a significant feat. There were, in 2013, nearly 6000 demountables in NSW, with 1600 in storage and these incur an annual maintenance bill of \$20 million (NSW DEC, 2013). Their story is acknowledged but has not been investigated in this research. Principals reported the significance of partnership with assets management teams. In the first instance this partnership involves demountables.

In each of the schools demountables, or 'transportable classrooms' as they were known in 1969, were used. Kelso High School erected sixty; at Oxley High School twenty were erected within five months and at Lyneham twenty-two were erected (1970). The school sites took on new looks and cultural identities; in Kelso a sign declaring 'KHS is Home' was erected in front of the school (Baker, 2005). By the time the new buildings were complete students described their time as a *demountable hell* where home economics classes had access to only one sink (Campion, 2008). At Oxley a 'demountable city' known as D Block was built on a sports field to accommodate the lost office and classroom space (Jones, 2012b). There is continued uncertainty as to how long the demountables will be needed despite plans for the construction of a new building expected in the next twelve months. Initial predictions suggested they would be required for only two years (O'Brien, May, 2012).

Time passes soon enough in high school years as one Kelso student, Laura, wrote on a social media forum:

It was a long time ago but it feels like yesterday... next year we get to move into the new school out of the demountables ... I was in year 8 at the time and now I am in year 10 nearly 11! (2005a)

Another Laura, (though possibly the same Kelso High School student), berated other commentators on the SMH blog for suggesting the demountables were less than adequate. For her, coming back together was important to her wellbeing.

Don't you get it?! Its great that they're conducting lessons on the oval in demountables. The whole idea is to get us students back together again. Its been about four weeks since I watched my school burn down and its probably been the hardest four weeks of my life so far. Not being able to see all of my friends and not seeing my teachers together and happy is so hard and I don't think you understand what its like to see the heartache in their eyes everyday as I do. Who cares if they have to teach on the oval? At least they'll be happy again (2005b).

The great thing about Oxley High School is the way we all pull together in times of adversity and this was evident during this time. Asset Management and the DEC moved very quick to have 20 demountable buildings in place and our students and teachers occupied them in record time. It give me great pleasure in announcing that the re-building program is well under way in the planning process for a new building (Jones, 2012, p. 1).

COMMUNITY FUNDRAISING

Fundraising to restock school resources can play a crucial role in the re-invigoration of the school community. The unique type of community of practice that develops at this time is worthy of examination. In each instance local people emerged after the fires with fundraising ideas and projects. This is reflective of the intersecting communities of practice; that is the wider community (public) and private (within the school) working together (Wenger et al., 2002).

The devastation at Lyneham School prompted a huge effort by the local and broader community of Canberra. A fire relief fund was immediately set up and within a fortnight it had raised \$1600 cash and \$500 worth of equipment. Popular musicians Cole Joy of the Joy Boys and Sandy Scott sold autographed photographs at the local Palings music store (*The Canberra Times*, July 5 1969, p. 10). One month later a ten-mile walkathon of 400 walkers was held raising \$3100 (*The Canberra Times*, July 21 1969, p. 1) and was followed a week later with a dance at nearby Gundaroo Hall, raising \$116 (*The Canberra Times*, July 29 1969, p. 7). The following month a national competition for amateur organists linked with the school fund raising effort and staged a contest in the Monaro Mall (*The Canberra Times*, August 25 1969, p. 7). The efforts would continue for a number of years. A former student recalled:

Both my parents Bill and Marta Samal were actively involved in the P&C and P&F respectively for many years. My father was the Treasurer of the P&C at the time the school burnt down and was very involved with all the fund raising activities (Milena Samal, 2011).

The fundraising efforts for rebuilding Kelso were also extensive with \$130,000 eventually collected (Baker, 2005). The council and local RSL acted as collectors of donations and the local bus company rallied to assist the manoeuvring of the school population (Martin, 2005). Kelso students had been about to perform at the Rock Eisteddfod so local businesses assisted in materials to rebuild sets and to help parents repair damaged costumes and wigs (Hazzard, 2005). The Kelso High School performers came second in the regional finals for the Rock Eisteddfod but in a collegial twist, the winners, St Peters Catholic College, Tuggerah, donated the prize money to the Kelso High fund raising efforts (Martin, 2005). The school Waterwatch team lost all of the equipment they used to test the water quality in local waterways. Just months later they were offered replacement equipment by the national Wildlife Preservation Society (WPSA, 2005) and in the following years have been consistent winners in the *Champions of the Catchment* competition run by the Central West Catchment Management Authority.

Fundraising at Oxley was already established with an Antiques Fair and an International Night prior to the fire. They, and an additional Camp Oxley, offering camping space for tourists during the Tamworth Country Music Festival, all contribute to rebuilding and accumulating more resources (Belt, 2013).

In each school the diversity of the fund raising is immediately evident. Researchers have argued that creativity and lateral thinking are imperative in these post crisis times (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 66). Equally, they suggest that those in leadership roles needs to communicate well with all stakeholders at many levels as well as to be able to work effectively with the media (Smith & Riley, 2012; Howat et al., 2010). In contrast to Lyneham and Kelso, St Clair High School was inundated with resources from schools and community bodies, but found themselves with no place to store them. They also found that a proportion of the contributions were outdated and therefore only minimally useful. The help was, however welcomed and as the principal stated, *that is another chapter in itself, the support from everywhere was amazing*. In each of the school fires, the media, and more recently, social media have played key roles in this phase.

RESILIENCE AND LEADERSHIP

Resilience is regarded as a process rather than a single event and involves firstly, adversity and secondly, a positive adaptation (Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543). In the aftermath of each Nye, A. (2016). 'Working form the boot of a red falcon': The impact of major fires in four Australian schools. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, Vol. 26 (1), pp. 83–98.

of the fires there were commendations of the stoicism and resourcefulness of the staff notably there was a willingness to pull together and work with limited remaining resources. O'Brien, of Oxley High School, wrote:

As principal I am extremely proud of their ability to adjust quickly to the forced changes and the concern shown towards each other during this difficult time (March 2012).

Similarly the Principal of Kelso High School, Paul Sterling, stated:

They have done it hard. First they were relocated to other schools in the area for one year then they relocated to demountables for another year (The Daily Telegraph, January 30 2008).

The Lyneham Public School community demonstrated an unerring commitment to the rebuilding process, but was faced with ongoing difficulties. After many months of community fund raising, the Lyneham teachers tackled long delays in moving into the new school buildings. Of particular concern were newly bought resources at risk of theft as secure access to the school was delayed (December 3 1970, p. 3). A decade later, the school was still dealing with the legacy of the fire with declining student numbers. Despite these difficulties, the resilience of the Lyneham teachers was evident in their determination to offer innovative opportunities and attract new students (Gaind, 1981, p. 6).

Much is made of the collective spirit and efforts of the school communities, yet it is also pertinent to note the iconic status of individuals in leadership both in schools and the fire service. In the aftermath of the fires the media were the source of stories of individual recognition. The Kelso Principal, renowned for working from the boot of his car became a regional director (Cox, 2010). In the case of the Lyneham fire, while the principal was widely recognized, it was the firemen who gained most media attention (*The Canberra Times*, October 14, 1980, p. 3). In the aftermath of the St Clair fire the principal's comment to the media- *Our kids, our school, our site, day one* - became a rally cry for the whole community as they rushed to build the demountable school in just 10 days before the school holidays concluded and school resumed. In both St Clair and Kelso both principals described the first response meeting of teaching staff held in darkened or borrowed spaces and the way in which those meetings, the rolls of 'butchers paper' and brain storming recovery priority lists became part of the folk lore. The stories of these temporal spaces evoked mixed narratives of shock, resilience and optimism.

The resilience of the children was also evident in the interviews, media reports and school newsletters. The media played an important role in highlighting the achievements of children in following years. For example, reports of the Kelso students' success in the Waterwatch competitions and their performances at the Rock Eisteddfod indicate that many children were able to bounce back. At Oxley the students were heavily involved in the fund raising events soon after the fire.

The discourse of these media reports assumed a broad homogeneity of the student cohorts and student experience, which is somewhat unrealistic. Principals and executives indicated that there were some occasional problems among students such as different groups claiming ownership to the limited spaces in the playgrounds. Overwhelmingly however, they suggested the students' adaptability was notable. While students studying for their final year exams, the NSW Higher School Certificate were recognised as the most vulnerable, they were also recognised for their crucial contribution. Specifically, at St Clair, they assisted in the dissemination of accurate information via social media networks. At both St Clair and Kelso the school captains were singled out as having played vital roles in offering the student perspective with the many journalists and the media.

OUTCOMES

The direct outcomes of major fires in schools are, as found in this study, varied. There were examples of the development of new ideas for logistical procedures, and the rethinking of policy on security following the early fires. It is predictable that these would be linked to safety and prevention of future fires. The less predictable outcomes of the research included the emergent narratives of leadership practices, the pedagogy and collegial practice in the work place. A closer examination of the recovery period indicates the opportunity for innovation, adaptability and a new sense of personal and professional resilience within the workplace.

In the aftermath of major fires it is natural to look to what could have been done to prevent the fires. Smith and Riley refer to this period as the *Review, reflect and learn phase* (2012, p. 640). In the case of major fires it is pertinent to note that after two of the three fires discussed in this article, significant policy changes were called for at a parliamentary level and, in the case of Lyneham, implemented. After the Lyneham fire, the ACT Department of Education and Science stated all primary schools would have fire alarms installed (1970, p. 13). This was however only after some debate and dispute as to who was responsible for the files relating to the value of the school and its assets. Indeed it was also argued that the ready access of fire extinguishers constituted adequate protection until concerns came in from parents after the Lyneham fire (1970).

After the Kelso fire, the opposition called for security fencing for schools at risk of vandalism (Hazzard, 2005). The new school did not get security fencing until 2009 (DEC, 2013). By 2014 it was reported in the media that while 308 schools still need fences, less than a quarter would have them by mid 2014 (Bodkin & McClellan, 2013). The complete rebuilding of Kelso High School, later known as Dennison College, meant it was declared the only school in the Bathurst region to be declared asbestos free (*The Western Advocate*, June 17 2013).

There were other unexpected outcomes such as the employment of alternative practices to accommodate the loss of resources. Five years after the fire at Lyneham Public School, the library won a \$200 prize for innovative teaching practices. The teacher librarian, Mrs England, had developed a scheme by which *books were supplemented with records, tape cassettes, transparencies and film strips* (*The Canberra Times*, September 18 1974, p. 3). Children were also involved in this production process as part of their self-directed studies. Such innovation was reflective of imaginative thinking, and adaptation.

At Kelso High School, the fire prompted an entire rethink about the delivery of high school education in the region. The principal described a new sense of close cooperation developed in the immediate aftermath of the fire with Bathurst High School, but in the long term, the two schools joined to form a college. This meant children in their senior years had broad choice of subject areas with 80-90 courses available. New curriculum and teaching strategies were introduced, as were new opportunities for staff professional advancement. Staff such as the Industrial Arts teachers, were able to advise the building contractors and asset management on the needs and designs of their particular discipline areas. Some of these ideas were then implanted in other new school designs. Principal Paul Sterling's approach consistently reflected his assertion that the fire would not shape the school's future rather, the school community would determine their future.

The St Clair High School fire, still very recent at the time of writing, is yet to demonstrate a specific legacy. It is arguable however that the principal and his executives implemented a very different response to the aftermath to that in the other schools. This was most evident in the statement: *Our kids, our school, our site, day one*. It was a radical decision to refuse to follow the usual path of sending students to multiple sites while transitional demountables were brought in. It was a commendable choice based on a desire to promote feelings of well-being, strength and resilience across the school community and sets a precedence for the future.

CONCLUSION

Schools and their communities can become intrinsically linked over a lifetime. As ex-student Amanda Stevens described her feelings about the Kelso High School fire:

It was my second home, I spent the best seven years there I met friends for life there and my mother went there too. I was crushed when I saw it burn down (Campion, 2008).

The school environment is, for most students and teachers, a safe place to which they travel on a daily basis over a period of years. It is a source of personal identity, feeling of belonging and a springboard to adult life. When such a site is damaged or destroyed there is an inevitable impact on all members of the community. Tracking the resilience of teachers, students and the broader community during the initial aftermath and the rebuilding period affirms the connection between school communities and the built environment. Making decisions around rebuilding requires both reflective and future thinking and as St Clair principal, Chris Presland, stated he needed to ask himself: *what would people in five, ten, twenty years' time thank you for?*

The findings of the study highlighted the school leadership and their ability to be resilient and innovative. These were the qualities that become part of recovery folklore. It would be personal innovation and qualities that would be best remembered more so than departmental strategies and buildings. There are lessons to be learnt from their reactions and possibilities for professional development strategies for educational staff in the future. Smith and Riley concluded there is an urgent need to develop departmental planning to deal with major crises (of any kind) in schools (2012, p. 69). Major fires in schools are just one type of crisis faced by schools and their communities and it is clear that they can have catastrophic outcomes. As the principal of St Clair High School stated: *the working out what you need to do in the midst of a disaster should not be done in the midst of a disaster.* Planning is essential. From the principal of Kelso High school, came the recognition of the value of teachers contributing to the new directions and possibilities for the building of the new school, both in terms of pedagogy and physical structure.

By examining the early stages of recovery, the leadership capacity of the school community has emerged as a crucial factor. The leadership team must adapt, work and innovate with the teachers and staff, parents, the broader community, the assets management teams and other schools. Given the unexpected nature of this type of critical incident, it is a time that all those connected to the school draw on their capacity for resilience and work together to return normalcy for the students. This paper has presented a brief insight into just a few aspects of the experiences of four schools New South Wales Schools and therefore serves as a preliminary scoping narrative to future research in the field.

REFERENCES

- Australian Capital Territory Government Education and Training. (2014). *Critical / Non-critical incident management and reporting procedure*. Retrieved from http://www.det.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/360536/CNCIMR_Procedure.pdf
- Alarm systems planned. *The Canberra Times*, October 21 1970, p. 13.
- Back to business after blaze at Oxley High School. *Northern Daily Leader*, March 23 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.northerndailyleader.com.au/story/98414/back-to-business-after-blaze-at-oxley-high-school-tamworth/>
- Baker, J. (2005). Trial by fire puts school in a class of its own. *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 18. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/trial-by-fire-puts-school-in-a-class-of-its-own/2005/10/17/1129401198352.html>
- Belt, R. (2013). All good taste at Oxley High School's 30th International Night. *Northern Daily Leader*, March 3. Retrieved from <http://www.northerndailyleader.com.au/story/1338246/all-good-taste-at-oxley-high-schools-30th-international-night/>
- Bodkin, P., & McClellan, B. (2013). 308 schools need security fences, but less than a quarter will receive before mid-2014. *The Daily Telegraph*, September 20. Retrieved from <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/schools-need-security-fences-but-less-than-a-quarter-will-receive-before-mid2014/story-fniocx12-1226723545403>
- Burns, L. (1991) *School arson in New South Wales*. New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, ISBN 0 7305 8680 4.
- Campion, V. (2008). New campus at Kelso High in Bathurst rises from ashes. *Daily Telegraph*, January 30. Retrieved from <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/new-school-rises-from-ashes/story-e6freuzi-111115429430>
- Chillingworth, B. (2015). Man admits to school fire. *Northern Daily Leader*, August 4. Retrieved from <http://www.northerndailyleader.com.au/story/3257759/man-admits-to-school-fire/>
- Clifford, C. (2012). Fire ravages Oxley High. *ABC News*, March 19. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-03-19/fire-ravages-oxley-high/3899522>
- Contest for organists. *The Canberra Times*, August 25 1969, p. 7.
- Cox, L. (2010). New role for respected. *The Western Advocate*. Retrieved from <http://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/911827/new-role-for-respected-educator/>
- Dance aids fire fund. *The Canberra Times*, July 29 1969, p. 7.
- Devitt, K., & Borodzicz, E. (2008). Interwoven Leadership: The missing link in multi-agency response. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 16(4), 209–215.
- Drabsch, T. (2003). *Arson: Briefing paper 2/2003*. Sydney: NSW Parliament. Retrieved from http://www.aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/bfab/bfab001.pdf
- Father, son both firemen. *The Canberra Times*, February 3 1979, p. 3–4.
- Fire & Rescue, New South Wales (FRNSW) (2014). *Ignition factor by educational property*. Personal Correspondence with FRNSW Information Officer.
- Fire loss refunds are doubtful. *The Canberra Times*, June 25 1969, p. 8.
- Gaind, R. (1969). Lyneham Primary rises from ashes with space to expand. *The Canberra Times*, March 29, p. 6.
- Geason, S., & Wilson, P. (1990). *Preventing graffiti and vandalism*. Australian Institute of Criminology: Canberra, ACT.
- Gruenewald, D. (2003a). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *American*
- Nye, A. (2016). 'Working from the boot of a red falcon': The impact of major fires in four Australian schools. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, Vol. 26 (1), pp. 83–98.

- Educational Research Journal*, 32 (4), 3–12.
- Gruenewald, D. (2003b). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place conscious education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(3), 619–654.
- Harvie, H. (2011) *Memories of ex teachers and students*. Retrieved from http://www.lynehamps.act.edu.au/our_history/memories_vignettes
- Harraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs and women*. New York: Routledge.
- Hazzard, B. (2005). Kelso High School fire. *Parliamentary Report Hansard Transcript*, September 14, p. 17772. Retrieved from <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA20050914034>
- Holiday for Lyneham School today. *The Canberra Times*, June 23 1969, p .8.
- Howat, H., Curtis, N., Landry, S., Farmer, K., Kroll, T., & Douglass, J. (2010). Lessons from crisis recovery in schools: How hurricanes impacted in schools, families and the community. *School Leadership and Management*, 32(5), 487–501.
- Ingall, J. (2012). School students to return in the wake of fire at Tamworth’s Oxley High School. *ABC New England North West*, March 19. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2012/03/19/3456255.htm>
- Johnson, J (2011). New recognition for water-wise students. *Western Advocate*, September 4. Retrieved from <http://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/920367/new-recognition-for-water-wise-students/>
- Jones, R. (2012a). Principal’s Report. *Oxley High School Annual School Report*. NSW Government. Retrieved from http://www.oxley-h.schools.nsw.edu.au/documents/3183316/3195319/ASR%202012_8455.pdf
- Jones, R. (2012b.) Deputy Principal’s message. *Oxley High School Logbook* 45, 3. Retrieved from http://www.oxleyh.schools.nsw.edu.au/cmsresources/misc//2012may_logbook_1342744515625.pdf
- Kelso High School students sent to CSU. *ABC News Online*, August 25 2005. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2005-08-25/kelso-high-school-students-sent-to-csu/2088386>
- Lang, J. (2011). Epistemologies of situated knowledges: ‘Troubling’ knowledge in philosophy of education. *Educational Theory*, 61 (1), 75–96.
- Laura (2005a). Kelso High School burnt down, *Public.fokti Comments*. Retrieved from http://pedro23.fotki.com/bathurst--new-sout/kelso_high_school/viewcomments.html
- Luther, S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). A construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71 (3), 543–562.
- Lyneham School wins prize. *The Canberra Times*, September 18 1974, p. 3.
- Lyneham fire: No sprinkler or alarm in School. *The Canberra Times*, June 24 1969, p. 3.
- Lyneham School Board, (2008). *Lyneham Primary School Board Report 2008*. ACT: ACT Government Education and Training. Retrieved from http://cms1.ed.act.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/174164/Lyneham_Primary_School_Annual_Board_Report_2008.pdf
- Martin, G. (2005). Matter of importance. *Parliamentary Report Hansard Transcript*, p. 17759. <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA20050914021>
- Memory vignettes, (2011). *Lyneham Public School*. Retrieved from http://www.lynehamps.act.edu.au/our_history/memories_vignettes
- More aid for Lyneham school. *The Canberra Times*, July 5 1969 p. 10.

- Mulford, B. (2005). *Leadership for school and student learning – what do we know?* Nottingham: NCSL.
- NSW Department of Education and Community (2014). *How to be a safer school: Safety and Security Directorate*. Retrieved from <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/adminsupport/safetysecurity/htbass.pdf>
- O'Brien, T. (2012a). Principal's message. *Oxley High School Log Book*. March, 4, p. 1. Retrieved from http://www.oxleyh.schools.nsw.edu.au/cmsresources/misc//marchy2012logbook_1342744461455.pdf
- O'Brien, T. (2012b). Principal's message. *Oxley Anchor*, May. Retrieved from http://www.oxleyh.schools.nsw.edu.au/cmsresources/misc//may2012_1342744415471.pdf
- Only Kelso High asbestos free. *The Western Advocate*, June 17 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/1576097/only-kelso-high-is-asbestos-free/>
- Oxley High (2012). Oxley fire. *nsw.edu.news*. Retrieved from <http://www.oxleyh.schools.nsw.edu.au/news/oxley-fire-on-sunday-morning-18-march-at-4-00am-a-fire-destroyed-the-top-floor-of-castlereagh-block?pparam&old>
- New South Wales Teachers Federation, (2005, August 22). *Kelso High School*. Retrieved from <http://www.nswtf.org.au/node/802>
- New South Wales Fire Brigade (2013). *Fire and Rescue Annual Report 2012/13*. Retrieved from <https://www.opengov.nsw.gov.au/publication/13621>
- New South Wales Department of Education and Training. (2013). *Demountable and permanent accommodation in schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/statistics-and-research/key-statistics-information/demountable-buildings-jul13.pdf>
- Plans to make the city virtually fire free. *Canberra Times*, October 14 1980, p. 3.
- Portable schools. *The Canberra Times*, December 7 1970, p.11.
- Red Cross (2012). *Relationships matter: The application of social capital to disaster resilience*. National Disaster Resilience Roundtable, 20th September 2012, Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from http://www.redcross.org.au/files/12-011_RED_Roundtable_Report_v3-F-web.pdf
- Retired Kelso teacher (2005). My old school yard – when it was still there. *SMH Blog*. Retrieved from http://blogs.smh.com.au/radar/archives/2005/08/georgia_lewis_r.html?page=2#comments
- Samal, M. (2011). *Memories of ex teachers and students*. Retrieved from http://www.lynehamps.act.edu.au/our_history/memories_vignettes
- \$750,000 Damage in Lyneham Primary school fire. *The Canberra Times*, June 23 1969, p. 1.
- Smith, A. (2014). St Clair High School rises from the ashes to reopen for a new term. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16th July 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/st-clair-high-school-rises-from-the-ashes-to-reopen-for-a-new-term-20140715-zt8dh.html>
- Smith, L., & Riley, D. (2012). School leadership in times of crisis. *School Leadership and Management*, 32(1), 57–71.
- Sniffer dogs called in to check school fire. *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 20 2005. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/sniffer-dogs-called-in-to-check-school-fire/2005/08/20/1124435175732.html>

- Somerville, M., Davies, B., Power, K., Gannon, S., & de Carteret, P. (2011). *Place pedagogy change*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Soja, E. (1996) *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real and imagined places*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.
- Stanford Friedman, S. (1996). Beyond gynocriticism and gynesis: The geographies of identity and the future of feminist criticism. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 15(1), 12–40.
- Sutherland, J., & Blanchard, R. (1969). Lyneham fire (Letters to the Editor). *The Canberra Times*, June 24, p. 2.
- Teachers' loss not covered. *The Canberra Times*, June 24 1969, p. 3.
- Tonkin Imprisoned for 3 ½ Years. *The Canberra Times*, September 25 1969, p. 10.
- Van Aanholt, J., & Sheridan, H. (2012) School faces toughest test after million dollar fire. *Northern Daily Leader*, March 19. Retrieved from <http://www.northerndailyleader.com.au/story/98299/school-faces-toughest-test-after-million-dollar-fire/>
- Walkathon held to aid Lyneham Primary School Fire Relief Fund. *The Canberra Times*, July 21 1969, p. 1.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., Snyder R., & Williams, M. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Press.
- Wilhelmson, L. (2006). Transformative learning in joint leadership. *Journal of Workplace Learning* 18, 7/8, 495–507.
- White Rabbit, (2005). Untitled post. *Board of Studies Community Forum*. Retrieved from <http://community.boredofstudies.org/214/news-current-affairs-politics/kelso-high-school-destroyed-fire-82102.html>
- WikiNews, (2005). *Destroyed Kelso High School to be rebuilt*. 22nd December. Retrieved from http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Destroyed_Kelso_High_School_to_be_rebuilt
- Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia (2005). *Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia helps Kelso High Waterwatch Group recover from school fire*. Retrieved from http://www.australianwildlife.net.au/pdf/grant/grant_group_2005_kelso.pdf