

The data story of professional school cultures: Exploring self-awareness and professional trust

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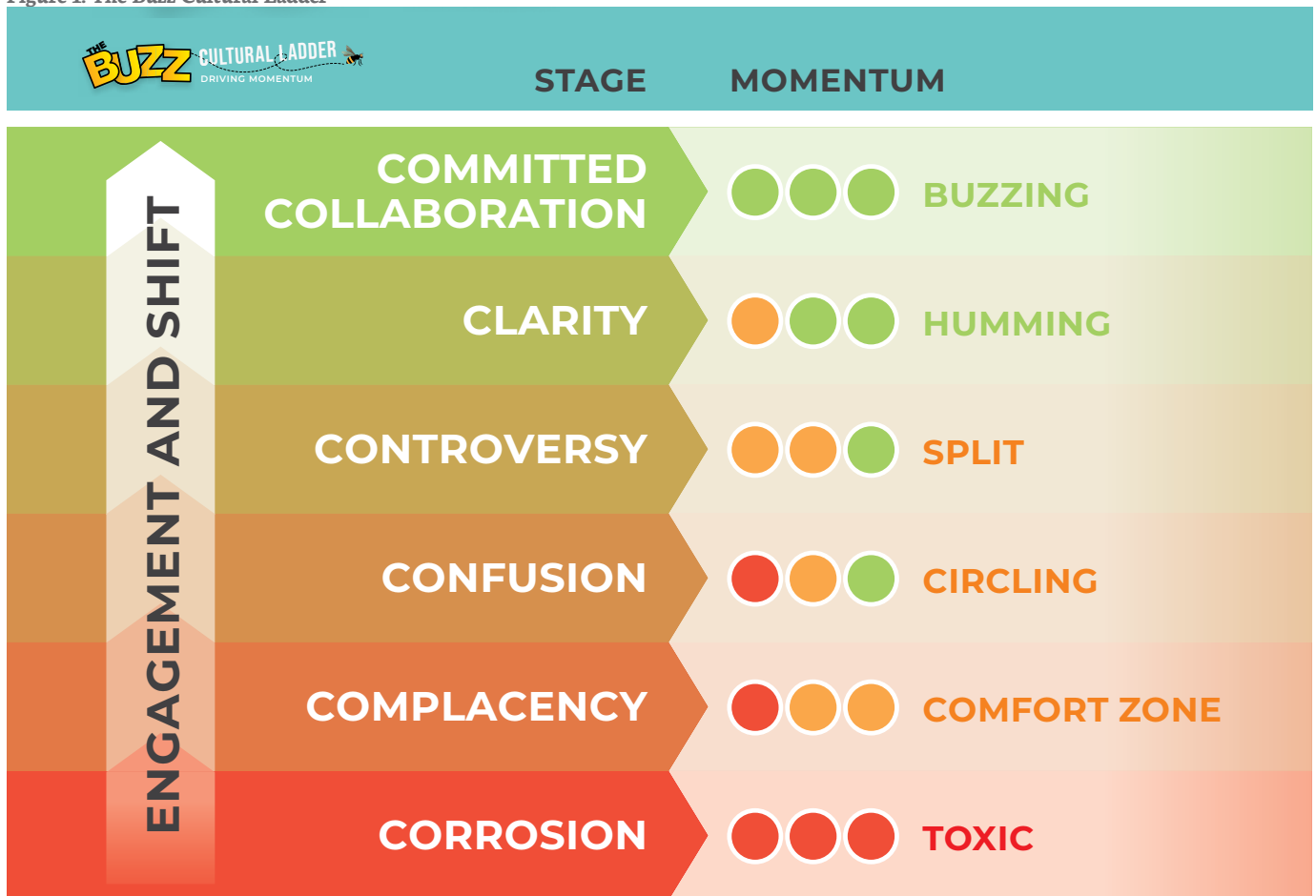


The development of a robust professional culture within schools has been given considerable attention and research in recent years. Culture has been recognised as a pivotal factor for improvement and transformation in the educational landscape. Collaborative efforts aimed at addressing areas of improvement have been identified as the driving force behind meaningful shifts in teaching and learning. In over seventeen years of experience I have worked with a diverse range of schools, some on the journey from fostering a culture of growth, collaboration, and profound learning into innovation and creativity, to those breaking free from divisive, blame-oriented cultures. Most schools fall somewhere along a continuum between these two extremes. This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of professional learning cultures within schools by examining rich data collected from over 11,000 respondents in various regions of Australia. It uncovers valuable insights that provide a data story of school cultures.

The Buzz Cultural Model

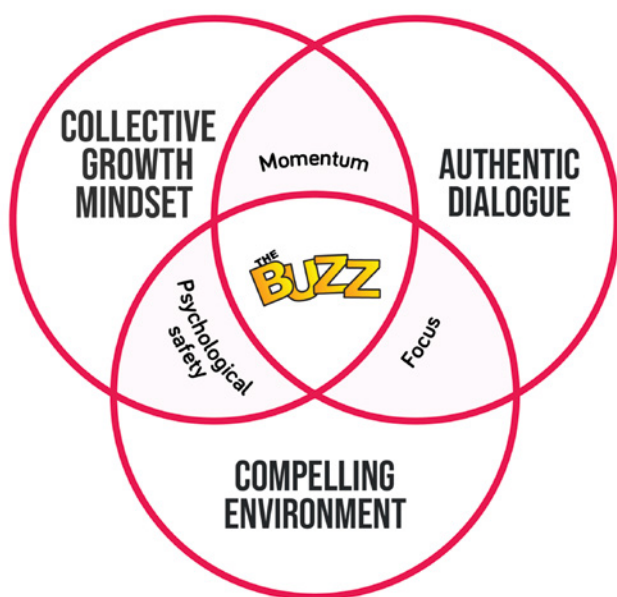
In 2015, I introduced The Buzz Cultural Model in my book *The Buzz - Creating a Thriving and Collaborative Staff Learning Culture* which was developed based on insights gained from working closely with hundreds of schools over the previous ten year period. This model conceptualises the levels of school culture (corrosion, complacency, confusion, controversy, clarity, committed collaboration) using a cultural ladder (see Figure 1) and relies on three critical pillars (See Figure 2). The critical pillars include a *collective growth mindset* where we are learners who expand our thinking and approaches both individually and collectively; a *compelling environment* where we are drawn to learning together due to the processes, energy, and psychological safety we bring to the table; and *authentic dialogue* where we focus on discussing things that expand our positive impact on students.

Figure 1: The Buzz Cultural Ladder



Taken from *The Buzz - Creating a Thriving & Collaborative Learning Culture* (p. 24) by T. Ezard, 2015, T. Ezard Pty Ltd.

Figure 2: The Buzz Culture Pillars: Elements of a Thriving Learning Culture



Taken from *Ferocious Warmth, School Leaders who Inspire and Transform* (p. 118) by T. Ezard, 2021, T. Ezard Pty Ltd.

The Buzz Diagnostic Tool

In 2018, a collaborative effort with Dr. Emily Yorkston, an experienced evaluator and policy analyst, and the online platform company Evaluation Solutions resulted in the creation of The Buzz Diagnostic Tool to assess educators' perceptions on the culture in their school. The resulting output gives schools valuable insight into the levels of the ladder that staff feel is reflective of them and, more broadly, how their educators perceive the prevailing culture. To date, over 11,000 individual educators and more than 500 schools, spanning various educational sectors and regions, have utilised this diagnostic. The data primarily originates from schools in Victoria and Queensland, Australia, but also includes contributions from other Australian states and territories, New Zealand, Singapore, China, and the United Kingdom. Demographic data captures role, education sector, school setting - primary, secondary or K-12, and state/territory or country.

The diagnostic poses questions to participants regarding their individual contributions to their schools' professional culture and their experiences within the collective culture. Responses are scored on a scale ranging from 1 (Not at all like me/my school) to 5 (Exactly like me/my school). These questions provide in-depth insights within the framework of the three pillars: mindset, environment, and authentic dialogue, as depicted in Figure 2. There are 20 questions in all regarding the individual's perception of their contribution to the school professional culture, comprising seven mindset, seven

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environment and six dialogue questions; another 18 questions focussed on the individual’s perception of the collective culture, comprising seven mindset, five environment and six dialogue questions. The overall mean score for each of the three pillars is then used to categorise the result into one of four levels (low, low-medium, medium-high or high) based on preset mean-score ranges. These results are then mapped to The Buzz ladder via a conceptual model that considers the 64 possible combinations of scores across the three pillars.

Qualitative and contextual data are also gathered through open-ended questions exploring the strengths and areas for improvement in the professional learning culture. This qualitative data provides a richer sense of the specific strengths or challenges as seen by individuals and also provides thematic insights. The aggregated data offers schools a snapshot of their staff’s perception of the culture, and enables benchmarking against other schools. This combined data then serves as a foundation for strategic decisions aimed at strengthening the overall culture.

Intriguing insights from The Buzz Diagnostic

More broadly, however, it is possible to consider trends and insights across all 11,000 respondents to consider what educators believe about school culture and their role in it. There are many useful insights that are worth reflecting on and sharing in this AEL edition that considers the use of data in schools as a way of thinking not only about what the data says but what we can learn about our cultures. Through a process of ranking the individual question mean scores against cultural levels and demographic data, as well as drawing from pattern detection and exploration in the field to assist in the interpretation and analysis, some interesting results come up. There are four key themes that emerge across the data set that tell an intriguing story of our educators, leaders, and their school cultures. These are teacher self-perception and awareness, moving from “I” to “we,” the interconnection of trust and dialogue, and the impact of leadership. Each of these is now considered.

1. Self-Perception and awareness

Educators generally view themselves as strong learners and contributors to their professional learning culture. Statements such as “I’m willing to experiment to achieve optimal learning outcomes,” “I’m curious about my colleagues’ teaching approaches,” and “I’m open to feedback on my teaching” consistently receive mean scores of 4.4 (out of five) and above. However, a notable challenge arises in shifting from individual contributions to a collective culture. Some schools report high self-perceptions but significantly lower collective scores, highlighting the need for increased self-awareness. (“It’s not me, it’s everyone else”).

The challenge of establishing a comprehensive school-wide approach to teaching and learning transformation is evident in the data from The Buzz Diagnostic. Schools scoring at lower levels on the cultural ladder often perceive themselves as making individual contributions to the culture, but this commitment does not always translate into a collective effort. There have been instances where every respondent

to the diagnostic survey rated themselves as positively contributing to the culture, yet the overall school results indicated much lower results.

For instance, the statement “I’m open to receiving feedback on my teaching” has a healthy mean score of 4.3 in schools with a “Corrosive” culture, rising to 4.9 in schools embracing “Committed Collaboration.” This suggests that a significant number of professionals believe they are open to feedback. However, when we shift our focus to looking at the same data at the collective level, a different picture emerges. In “Corrosion” and “Complacency” cultures, the bottom two levels, the difference is striking. “As a school, we are open to receiving feedback on our teaching practice” records a mean score of only 2.5 in “Corrosive” cultures, and 3.0 at “Complacency” while schools at the “Committed Collaboration” level reach a mean score of 4.9.

One of the hurdles in transforming culture lies in the varying levels of self-awareness among educators. As individuals become more cognisant of how their behaviour and mindset contribute to the collective culture – either fostering or hindering it – a significant transformation in their actions and intentions can occur. Notably, lower cultural levels often exhibit a lack of self-awareness regarding the impact of their behaviour on colleagues. Transitioning toward collective efficacy necessitates a shift from “I” to “we,” where the emphasis is on what “we” are collectively creating rather than individual contributions. In several instances, I have encountered situations where influential staff members resist authentic collaboration and exhibit unproductive or unprofessional behaviour, despite vocally expressing their positive contributions compared to others.

When I examine this insight and disconnect with teams through our discussions, it highlights the importance of accurate self-awareness in fostering a collective culture. It also initiates a valuable discourse and inquiry into the behaviours and structures that can be introduced or removed within the school to support a more impactful culture. This encourages a greater understanding of the individual contribution to “systemness” at the local level, “when people become aware that they are part of a larger entity, and strive to understand their own context, as they build connections with other levels in order to improve the system as a whole” (Fullan & Quinn, 2023, p. 10).

2. Moving from “I” to “we”

Effective professional learning cultures emphasise a collective approach, supported by individuals with a strong commitment to learning and collaboration. Schools at the highest cultural level, “Committed Collaboration,” exhibit high results in collective “we” statements, indicating a strong sense of unity and shared purpose. In contrast, schools at lower cultural levels predominantly feature high results in individual “I” statements, revealing a good foundation, but a need for greater collective focus to also be strengthened.

For schools sitting at the top of the cultural ladder (“Committed Collaboration”), the top statements are all collective “we” statements:

“As a school we are committed to inspiring excellence in our teaching community” has a mean of 5.0.

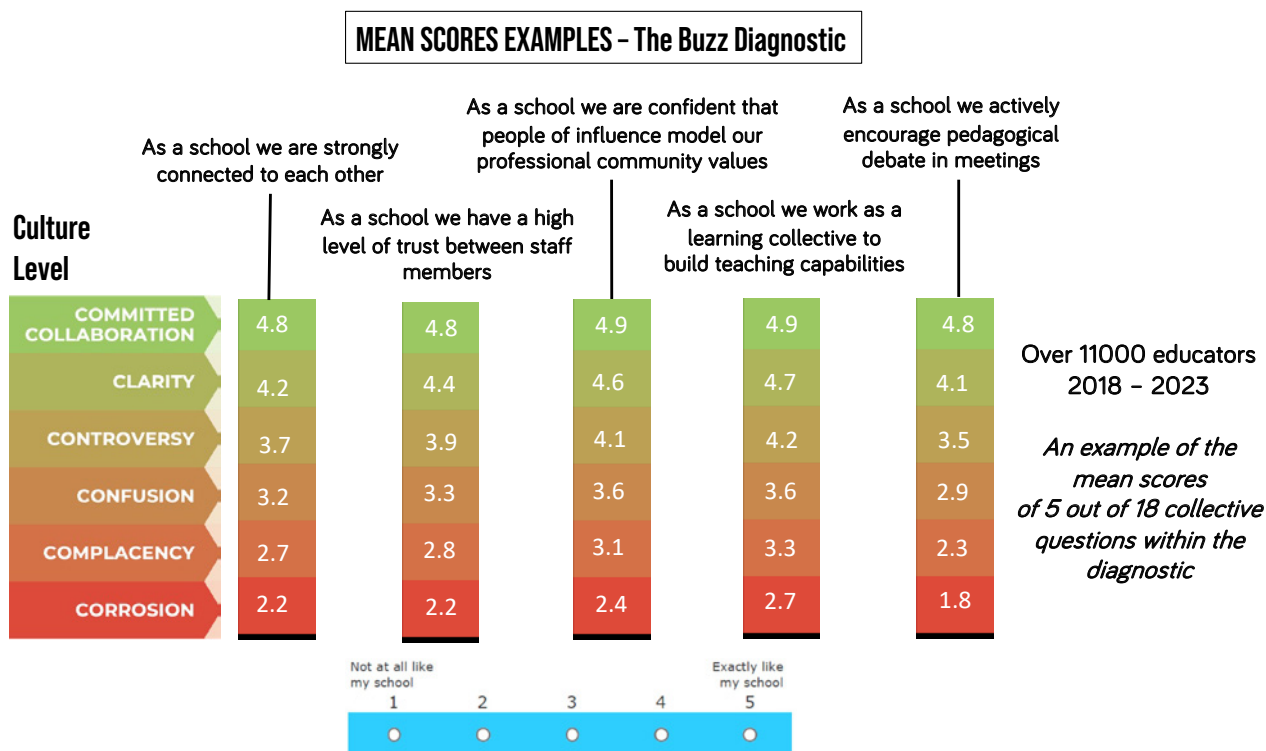
The following statements all receive a mean score of 4.9.

“As a school we have a culture where people feel safe to collaborate”

“As a school we use a variety of learning processes in our professional learning meetings”

“As a school we are open to receiving feedback on our teaching practices”

Figure 3: Mean Score Examples - The Buzz Diagnostic Aggregated Data Analysis 2023



Taken from *Leading and Creating Deep Collaborative Cultures* by T. Ezard, 2023, Presentation.

“As a school we are open to giving feedback on our teaching practices”

“As a school we discuss teaching and learning strategies using evidence to inform our dialogue”

These aforementioned statements echo the meaning of the term “collaborative professionalism,” a hallmark of the attitude of the schools sitting at the top level of the culture ladder. This concept captures both the “sharing, talking, trusting, co-creating, and learning. But it also values other verbs such as challenging, critiquing, including empowering and debating” (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2017, p. 15).

For the remaining five cultural levels, the top statements are all “I” statements, with the following having the highest means:

“I’m willing to listen to other’s perspectives with an open mind”

“I’m excited by learning opportunities that build my teaching skills”

“I behave consistent with the school values”

“I am open to receiving feedback on my teaching”

The power of the collective for real change and transformation is the key, yet perhaps difficult to achieve without focus and intent.

3. The interconnection of trust and dialogue

Professional trust emerges as a crucial outcome of collective work as well as a determinant. Trust is embedded in every facet of behaviour, interaction, structure, and process within a school’s leadership. Deep dialogue and open, curiosity-driven conversations foster trust and psychological safety, enabling meaningful collaboration. The Buzz diagnostic data supports the link between effective professional learning cultures, evidence-based dialogue, and pedagogical debate, showcasing elevated levels of trust and connection in top-performing

schools. In her book, *Collective Efficacy*, Jenni Donohoo notes, “Without the establishment and maintenance of trust as part of the shift in culture, teacher teams may resist engaging in the depth of discussion needed to critically assess their beliefs” (Donohoo, 2017, p. 81).

My practice-based research in this field has unveiled a fascinating relationship between the cultivation of trust and engaging in deep dialogue and debate. When we approach discussions with curiosity rather than defensiveness, we create a fertile ground for addressing the most critical aspects of our work and lives. Demonstrating openness to influence and displaying empathy and interest in others, especially in conversations that go beyond surface-level interactions, plays a pivotal role in building psychological safety. As we consistently engage in such interactions, trust and safety naturally flourish. People observe how we handle challenging and dynamic conversations and gauge whether the environment is conducive to open dialogue or not. Timothy R. Clark, a respected researcher and author, characterises psychological safety as “an environment of rewarded vulnerability” (2023, p. 4). Given our ongoing efforts to transform education to meet the needs of our students and the complexities of the world, courage and vulnerability become essential. The trust and connection among us establish a secure space for embracing challenges.

The Buzz diagnostic data corroborates the belief that high-quality professional learning cultures, underpinned by evidence-based dialogue, pedagogical debate, and an open feedback environment, also exhibit high levels of trust and connection. Results from schools at the top two levels of the cultural ladder consistently show mean scores of 4.8 for statements such as:

- “as a school, we are strongly connected to each other” and
- “as a school, we have high levels of trust.”

Additionally, these schools report equally high mean scores for actively encouraging pedagogical debate, fostering feedback cultures, promoting collective learning to enhance teaching capabilities, and engaging in discussions about teaching and learning strategies using evidence to guide our dialogue.

Conversely, at the lower end of the cultural ladder, the data reveals a similar correlation between the lack of trust and connection and the inability to engage effectively in debates, challenges, and learning. Schools categorised as “Corrosion” in the culture ladder exhibit mean scores of 2.2 for both connection and trust, with a mean score of only 1.8 for actively encouraging pedagogical debate in meetings, 2.5 for openness to giving and receiving feedback, and 2.7 for fostering a collective approach to enhancing teaching capabilities. Examples of mean results from the aggregated data in Figure 3 show the results against culture levels of questions relating to trust and connection, as well as working as a collective and pedagogical debate. When trust is lacking, and individuals do not feel safe collaborating, the sharing of practices and participation in collective learning spaces become problematic. This diminishes our willingness to take risks outside our comfort zones, hindering innovation and stifling creativity.

4. The Impact of leadership

Leaders who embody what I term “ferocious warmth” (Ezard, 2021), characterised by a balance of high challenge and high support, and head and heart, play a pivotal role in shaping school culture. They have a strong vision for the school in co-creation with the community. In all of them I found highly insightful and reflective leaders, aware of their impact on others who also build that capacity in their wider leadership teams. They devote time to introspection. They model integrity, learning, curiosity and professional behaviours. This in turn influences the norms of behaviour, “the way we do things around here.” They are also willing to be courageous when they see behaviours that detract from the culture and create environments that are explicit about the type of culture being co-designed. The Buzz Diagnostic aligns with these findings, indicating differences in results across cultural levels concerning vision, acceptable behaviours, and value-driven conduct. The mean scores for “as a school we are confident that people of influence model our professional community values” shown in Figure 3 point to this alignment.

Conclusion

Collective efficacy calls for collective vulnerability and courage as we continue to examine and iterate the education we provide in our schools and systems. When cultures focus only on results and not relationships, the level of authentic dialogue and building the capacity of all suffers. The exploration within schools of self-awareness and professional trust within professional learning cultures improves collective efforts in transforming education. The Buzz Cultural Model and Diagnostic Tool provide valuable insights for schools seeking to enhance their professional culture. Ultimately, fostering a collective approach, nurturing trust, and effective leadership are key elements in achieving positive educational transformation.

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Tracey Ezard, FACEL, is known for her “ferocious warmth” leadership approach and professional collaborative culture work. Tracey’s collaborative framework, “The Buzz,” which creates an environment of learning, trust and innovation, and “ferocious warmth” are used in schools, networks, and systems in Australia, and schools in New Zealand, UK, Singapore and China. Her career began as an educator and school leader in the Victorian State system and she has been running her own practice since 2005. Tracey is the author of three books, a National Fellow of ACEL and Fellow of ACELVic, and the 2022 recipient of the ACELVic Hedley Beare Educator of the Year Award.