Volunteer engagement and diversity

Building parent participation in P&Cs across Western Australia

Katherine Sugars & Megan Paull

volunteeringWA

WACSSO

MU Murdoch University

Authors

Katherine Sugars BSc Hons MBA PhD

   Lecturer, School of Management and Marketing, Murdoch Business School, College of Business

   katherine.sugars@murdoch.edu.au

Megan Paull BA MBus (HRM) PhD

   Head of Management and Marketing, Murdoch Business School, College of Business

   m.paull@murdoch.edu.au

Cite this report

Sugars, K. & Paull, M. (2024). *Volunteer engagement: Building parent participation in P&Cs across Western Australia*. Murdoch University

Front cover image acknowledgement

Gates, A.J., Ke, Q., Varol, O. & Barabási, A. (2019). Nature's reach: Narrow work has broad impact. *Nature, 575*(7781), 32–34. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03308-7

Learn from the people

Plan with the people

Begin with what they have

Build on what they know

Of the best leaders

When the task is accomplished

The people all remark

We have done it ourselves

Lao-tzu

Executive summary

Recruiting and retaining volunteers, especially a diverse representation of volunteers, is an ongoing and problematic task for P&C committee members. The challenge of finding volunteers and increasing the diversity of volunteers is not unique to the P&C setting nor to Australia. Volunteering—as we know it—is in decline, with COVID-19 causing further disruption to volunteering initiatives and community building in general.

Volunteering, and the decline in volunteering, are well researched but not in a P&C context, which has some unique features compared to other nonprofit and volunteer-led organisations. The most obvious disadvantage is that parents tend to move on from the P&C when their children leave the school, so length of service is limited, but a large advantage is that parents are highly motivated to be involved in their children's lives.

We were retained by WACSSO to research the perennial question of how to maintain a diverse team of volunteers to organise, support, and engage in P&C initiatives.

We have drawn on collective experience and knowledge to identify a practical and versatile framework for building a base of volunteers. We identified areas where knowledge can be shared, as well as where expertise is more sparsely distributed and knowledge-building is warranted.

Analysis of data from 238 surveys and 14 in-depth interviews using mixed methods approach, in conjunction with knowledge from literature, suggests the following:

- P&Cs operate in a wide range of schools throughout Western Australia, with complex, situational challenges requiring flexible approaches.

- Approaches to increasing volunteer numbers and diversity are inseparable from approaches to developing any aspect of P&C functioning and community building.

- P&C situational analysis, ideation, planning, activities, and operations can be improved using a four-dimensional model developed from emerging research themes. The model, or framework, is based on four findings:

  - P&Cs that embed foundational principles of nonprofit and volunteer-led organising—identified in this research as volunteering, community, purpose,

objectives, culture, process, and leadership—more readily attract and retain volunteers.

- o Positive change occurs when individuals and groups in the community reflect on and make sense of their current situation, create options, find agency, resources and support, and act.

- o Initiatives by planners, doers, and relaters can all be successful, as can teamwork combining different styles.

- o People are drawn to and stay in P&Cs where they feel belonging, purpose, and enjoyment.

WACCSO supports P&Cs via an ongoing process of identifying knowledge gaps and facilitating knowledge sharing, knowledge building, and capacity building. We hope WACSSO may use our research findings in the future, as a tool to enhance this process. Knowledge gaps identified during the research process—and gaps explicitly identified by participants—are noted in the report to WACSSO. A number of suggestions are made in the report but two areas stood out where literature offers a variety of perspectives not present in the data (see Appendices A and B).

- Limited substantive progress on enhancing diversity and inclusion was identified in participant stories.

- Various approaches to situational analysis and planning are viable, yet this is the step where many P&Cs got "stuck" either through lack of confidence, perceived lack of expertise, or lack of awareness of legitimate options.

The purpose of this report is to communicate our research findings to WACSSO. Further, we have collaborated on a resource for P&Cs, based on the four dimensions framework.

Table of contents

Contents

Introduction

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school students in Western Australia. The WACSSO vision is that every student in WA has access to the best education possible and WACSSO partners with Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs) to advance public education. WACSSO provides services and representation at State and National level for more than 650 P&Cs in Western Australia. Guiding and supporting P&Cs is a core focus of the organisation.

Recruiting parent volunteers has been identified as a perennial problem for P&Cs, an issue made more challenging by the events of recent years. Despite motivation to volunteer being one of the most researched topics in volunteering, research had shown that volunteer numbers have been declining, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this downward trend (Biddle, et al, 2022; Forner et. al, 2022; Holmes, et al. 2022; Mex, 2022; Stukas & Wilson, 2022).

P&Cs are valuable contributors to public education. P&Cs provide schools with support including fundraising[1], community events, classroom resources, running of canteens and uniform shops, and most importantly improving parent engagement with children's education and building the school community. P&Cs also have special-interest subcommittees that focus on, for example, programs for sport or music, the school grounds or facilities, or school community engagement areas such as dad's groups. One factor in P&C retention of volunteers is that as students graduate from schools, their parents tend to step back from volunteering in the school setting, often to move on to other volunteer roles.

This project is a collaboration between WACSSO and Murdoch University, funded in part by Volunteering WA through its Small Research Grant Program. The aim was to investigate and identify strategies which might assist P&Cs in recruiting a wider pool of volunteers.

---

[1] In 2021 P&Cs donated an estimated total of $17 million to school communities. On average, individual P&Cs donated a total of $26,113 throughout the year.

Research questions and objectives

Three broad research questions were the focus of this research:

- What works and does not work to recruit and retain parent volunteers to P&Cs across Western Australia?

- What can be done to increase participation in P&C activities?

- How can P&Cs increase the participation and inclusion of a more diverse range of parents?

Guided by these three research questions, specific objectives of the research were identified:

- Identify the challenges experienced by P&Cs across WA in recruiting and retaining volunteers.

- Identify success stories about P&Cs increasing parent engagement.

- Explore opportunities and barriers for increased diversity and inclusion in P&Cs.

- Develop and publish a range of implementable strategies for P&Cs to increase parent engagement.

Research approach

Following discussions with WACSSO, a mixed methods approach was employed to ensure breadth and depth of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Jehn & Jonsen, 2010; Miles et al., 2014). An online survey of individuals involved in P&Cs was combined with an interactive presentation and in-depth interviews. The mixed methods approach allowed story gathering from P&Cs across Western Australia. This research was approved by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethic Committee (2023/038).

Online survey

The online survey included both closed and open-ended questions and sought original and out-of-the-box text answers in anticipation of hearing successful (and unsuccessful) experiences of volunteering, both inside and outside P&Cs. This openness to finding examples of positive progress sought to counter some of the current narratives around difficulty recruiting volunteers. We were looking for new perspectives that could provide a step change or mind shift, as well as tacit knowledge that enables incremental improvement. We sought to hear about tried and tested mindsets and methods which were successful for some P&Cs, even if not others, and we included specific questions relating to diversity and inclusion.

WACSSO assisted in recruitment to the survey via their email distribution list, after which snowballing followed as members were encouraged to forward the survey, especially to P&C non-members. The median time to complete the 43-question survey was 26 minutes. We received a total of 238 responses to the survey, providing quantitative and qualitative data.

Sense-check at WACSSO Conference

We facilitated an interactive plenary session of the August 2023 WACSSO Conference. Experienced and novice P&C volunteers from metropolitan, regional, and rural schools of various sizes and year level were present. A presentation of preliminary findings sought feedback from attendees via personal-device responses to questions, posed at specific points in the workshop. This information provided useful feedback, and identified priorities.

Interviews

Semi-structured individual "discovery" interviews (Bridges et al., 2008) of 30 to 60 minutes were conducted with 14 people (9 female, 5 male). These were sampled from the set of survey respondents. People who expressed interest in being interviewed (79 individuals) were sorted into metropolitan and regional, and male and female, and interviewees were randomly selected from within these categories and invited to participate. Interviews continued until a degree of data saturation was observed, and the period for data gathering expired.

Interviews were conducted on Teams to enable recording and transcription, and to ensure people living in remote areas of Western Australia could participate. It was envisaged that different geographical contexts would provide different opportunities and barriers for P&Cs in recruiting and retaining volunteers, and different considerations for enhancing diversity and inclusion. Once transcripts were checked for accuracy, and deidentified, audio recordings were deleted to preserve the anonymity of interviewees.

Data analysis

Analysis was undertaken in an iterative manner. Survey responses were used to build a profile of respondents and gather stories from the qualitative responses. The analysis of open-ended text survey responses and interviews was undertaken with top-down exploration for expected themes and bottom up coding to identify new and emerging themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Once interview analysis had reached maturity, a cross comparison was done to check for consistency between survey and interview themes, and to identify new ideas emerging from interviews. Back checking these ideas against the survey responses yielded further insights which informed the analysis.

Of the 238 survey respondents, only 31 had never served on a P&C committee. Knowledge and experiences shared needed to be considered in this light during data analysis. This was especially relevant in sections where creative approaches and reframing has been suggested; after all, if the solutions all existed based on current assumptions and tacit knowledge, this would not be an ongoing problem and this research would not be necessary. The experiences of people who had not volunteered—and ideas notably absent from the data—provided valuable insight.

Respondents at a glance

Data collection

	Survey responses	Interview offers	Interviews
Unspecified	6		
Male	28	7	5
Female	206	70	9

Number of respondents (y-axis: 0, 50, 100, 150, 200, 250, 300)
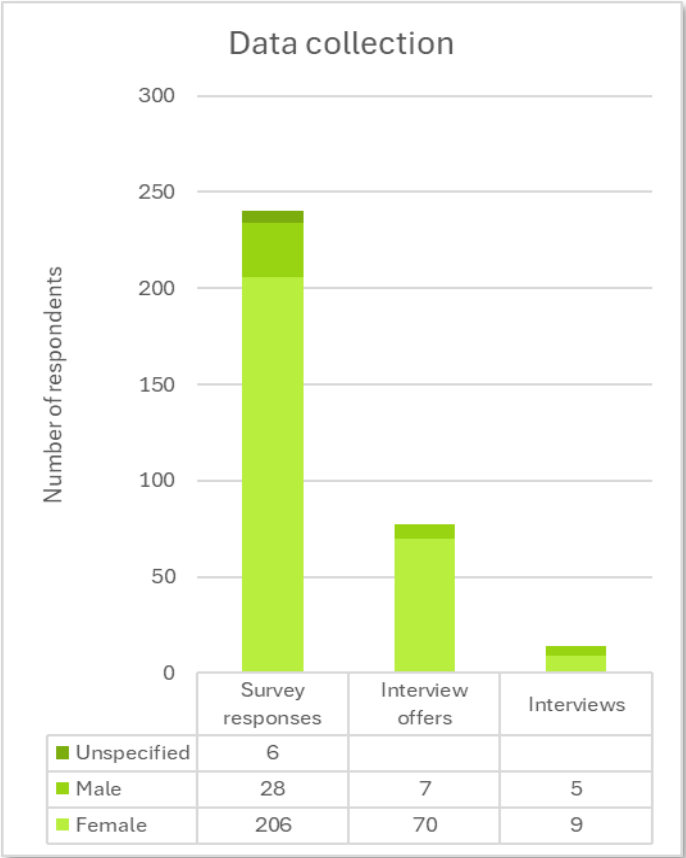
Typical respondent

- Female
- 35–45 years
- Primary school children
- English speaking
- Metropolitan
- P&C committee
- Doing other volunteering

Geographical Representation

Legend: Metro N, Metro S, Metro E, Regional N, Regional S, Region E

Age of children

Category	Value
Kindy or pre-primary	46
Lower primary	117
Upper primary	107
High school	78
I don't have children at school	10

Volunteer roles

Category	Value
P&C committee	207
School volunteer associated with P&C	148
School volunteer not associated with P&C	143
Volunteer somewhere else	128
I have not been a volunteer	4

Diverse representation in respondent sample

- I identify in category but not as diverse
- I don't identify as diverse
- I identify as diverse in a P&C context

Types of diversity in respondent sample

- Family situation not always catered for
- Age not typical in P&C context
- Gender not typical in P&C context
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- LGBTQIA+
- Have a disability
- Born overseas
- Language other than English at home
- Member of minority culture
- Other diversity (e.g., neurodiverse)

0 10 20 30 40 50 60

Findings

Understanding context: Recruitment capacity depends on overall functioning

Social dynamics, experience and expertise, and access to resources vary widely across P&Cs in Western Australia. Common features exist, but each P&C operates in its own unique and complex situation (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Members of P&Cs are informed, capable, and engaged people, who are best-placed to know their school environment, and to determine actions that are both possible and likely to be effective. They can, however, benefit from knowledge, and experience. Our research shows there is no singular top-down, best practice, or simple solution for building a pool of volunteers. The proposed framework aims to provide a supportive structure, allow generation of new possibilities from each unique starting point, and help people find the confidence and agency they need to do the things they decide they want to do. The model can be used in diverse contexts and reapplied as situations evolve; it is designed to be enduring, flexible, and accessible.

We found a complex and strong interrelationship between P&Cs that self-assess as functioning well, and P&Cs reporting larger pools of volunteers. Initiatives that targeted more, or more diverse, volunteers tended to be more effective in cases where other aspects of functioning were perceived as working well. Complementary to this, improving functioning or culture was reported to increase volunteer numbers, even without a direct recruiting initiative. It is clear that strong volunteer teams and strongly functioning P&Cs are related in a virtuous cycle (and vice versa). We concluded from these observations that it was unrealistic to separate general functioning from volunteer recruitment and engagement. Our proposed model, therefore, focuses on defining dimensions common to *strongly functioning P&Cs*, though where possible we have used illustrative examples that highlight *volunteering and engagement*.

This report proposes an evidence-based model for investigating problems and opportunities in diverse P&Cs, in order to initiate changes to strengthen P&C functioning, increase parent engagement in P&C activities, and increase the number and diversity of volunteers. The model can be used directly by P&Cs for specific situations or for building overall strength and performance. Additionally, it could be used by WACSSO to augment existing processes of identifying and addressing areas where they can offer the most valuable support to P&Cs. We have applied the model to the research data to identify

current knowledge gaps and blind-spots, and ideas for leveraging research insights, focusing on those which are (a) realistic or straightforward to address, (b) create the most inertia, (c) consume time and resources unnecessarily (d) are hard to see from an insider perspective, or (e) have the most potential for improvement. Quotes and stories from participants are interspersed throughout.

Model in four dimensions

Findings in four dimensions emerged from data:

- P&Cs that embed foundational principles of nonprofit and volunteer-led organising—identified in this research as volunteering, community, purpose, objectives, culture, process, and leadership—more readily attract and retain volunteers.

> **Keep it simple**
>
> *"P&Cs operate well when there are a group of dedicated, passionate people running them."*

- Positive change occurs when individuals and groups in the community reflect on and make sense of their current situation, create options, find agency, resources and support, and act.

- Initiatives by planners, doers, and relaters can all be successful, as can teamwork combining different styles.

- People are drawn to and stay in P&Cs where they feel belonging, purpose, and enjoyment.

Combined in the model, these dimensions work synergistically as a flexible and comprehensive resource to help people define, build, and maintain a P&C and school community they want to be part of.

Dimension 1: The 7 principles of P&C volunteer organising

The first research question driving the project was "What works and does not work to recruit and retain parent volunteers to P&Cs across Western Australia?" There was no clear answer to this in the data, which is unsurprising given each P&C operates in a unique social system which reacts in its own way. If the same methods worked everywhere, the problem would already be solved, and this research would not be needed. The data does, however, provide valuable information which can help achieve the same end by different routes.

P&Cs that people identified as "successful" and "enjoyable to be involved in" were also those that reported they had "plenty of volunteers." In complex social systems, such as P&Cs,

interconnections exist which make it possible to intervene and make change indirectly and multi-directionally. Analysing what successful and enjoyable-to-be-part-of P&Cs have in common can therefore provide information about what aspects of organising are fundamental and why. Consequently, in any context, this dimension of the model can help people identify a variety of interventions with potential to improve a P&C's function, culture, and volunteer numbers. So, what characterises organisations perceived in this way? Table 1 outlines seven characteristics clear in the data.

P&Cs perceived as "successful"

Analysing what respondents see as a "successful" P&C generated seven themes: "volunteering," "community," "purpose," "objectives," "culture," "process," and "leadership."

Table 1 lists each theme and examples of responses categorised as belonging to that theme. For example, "fundraising" is categorised as an objective, and "good meetings" are part of process. Interpretations of what "good" means varied widely: good fundraising was described as "enough for what is needed," "as much as possible," "to have money in the bank," and "to spend the money that is raised on the cohort that raises it." Good meetings were described as "short and business-like" but also as "relaxed and not officious." This variation is expected and shows that each P&C reflects its members and local community. There is no correct or best way to enact these aspects of organising, rather each P&C may consider and choose what is right for them—at this time—and for other members of the community they are aiming to engage. The advantage of identifying the common characteristics of P&Cs functioning well, is to provide a comprehensive but finite list of factors to consider.

These characteristics can be thought of as foundational principles of P&C volunteer organising. They are evidence-based—since they emerged from context-specific research data—but they also align with basic principles of nonprofit organising, therefore knowledge, and a wealth of experience, already exists within the P&C community—and volunteer literature—and these principles will be familiar to many.

Table 1 Characteristics of P&Cs perceived as successful and fun to be a part of: Principles of P&C organising

Volunteering	Many willing coordinators and volunteers	Give time generously	Share the work, flexible about contributing	Active, committed, vibrant, happy, engaged	We have a volunteering mindset
Community	Create school community and sense of belonging	Collaborate, work in harmony	Connect people, build bridges and networks, make friends	Representative and inclusive	We connect people
Purpose	To benefit all children and the school	To give students better school experiences	To make a difference	Valued by school community	We know why we are here
Objectives	Run well-attended, fun events	Fundraise for infrastructure and resources	Listen to needs of families	Provide services canteen, uniform shop	We achieve our shared goals
Culture	Friendly, inclusive, encouraging, safe; diverse	Teamwork, listen to everyone, variety of skills and ideas	Creative and positive	Limit conflict, cliques, individual agendas, personality clashes	We are welcoming and fun
Process	Strong communication skills and strategy	Coordinated effort	Organisational memory and knowledge sharing	Good meetings	We are organised and communicate well
Leadership	Facilitate progress	Share roles, responsibility and power, supportive team	Respect and harness diversity	Good governance	We realise our potential

Framing in the negative and barriers to success

Some responses to questions about success were framed in the negative—what success does *not* look like. This is not necessarily an indication of negativity. Events or circumstances that appear wrong or do not conform to expectations are more readily noticed and defined than those which contribute to the smooth running of an organisation, and attention given to such cues is invaluable (Weick et al., 2005). Furthermore, responses to questions about barriers fit the same themes already identified—or a mirror image. This is helpful because it shows the foundational principles are the same, regardless of perspective. Indeed, considering multiple perspectives can generate more flexible and creative options—and multiple people with conflicting perspectives may still be able to agree on which issues need addressing. Importantly, we originally aimed to identify "opportunities and barriers" but found "foundational organising principles" to be a more useful framing, which is less dependent on how a situation is judged and by whom.

Dimension 1: P&C organising principles

P&Cs that identify as successful and enjoyable to be a part of share seven fundamental characteristics—they have a volunteering mindset, they connect people, they know why they are there, they achieve their shared goals, they are welcoming and fun, they are organised and communicate well, and they realise their potential—and operating using these P&C organising principles correlates with attracting and retaining volunteers.

Seven foundational principles in action

The story in Table 2, below, illustrates how the seven principles can be applied to improve a situation overall, and over time, and ultimately build a strong volunteer roster. Since each principle is interconnected, improving one—or several in combination—can affect others in a positive way; gains from a single change will be multiple and self-reinforcing. The property of interconnectedness is useful when an issue cannot be worked on directly, even if it is one perceived as pivotal. Members of this P&C understood there were some key problems affecting their culture that they had no control over (e.g., temporary principals) but they still had agency to change this situation (i.e., redefine purpose and leave negative conversations about how the school was functioning in the past). They—perhaps unconsciously, perhaps not—made use of the interaction between the principles of leadership, culture, and purpose. Later they were able to leverage the interaction between a much improved leader

situation (principal and president), more positive culture, and shared objectives in line with purpose, to greatly increase their volunteer base. Other P&Cs can learn from this story; the model provides a framework for identifying the interacting characteristics of a strongly functioning P&C.

Gains made in this school community were iterative—they didn't solve everything at once—rather their forward progress evolved over a period of two years. Step-wise improvement is discussed in the next section which illustrates the action cycle dimension of the model.

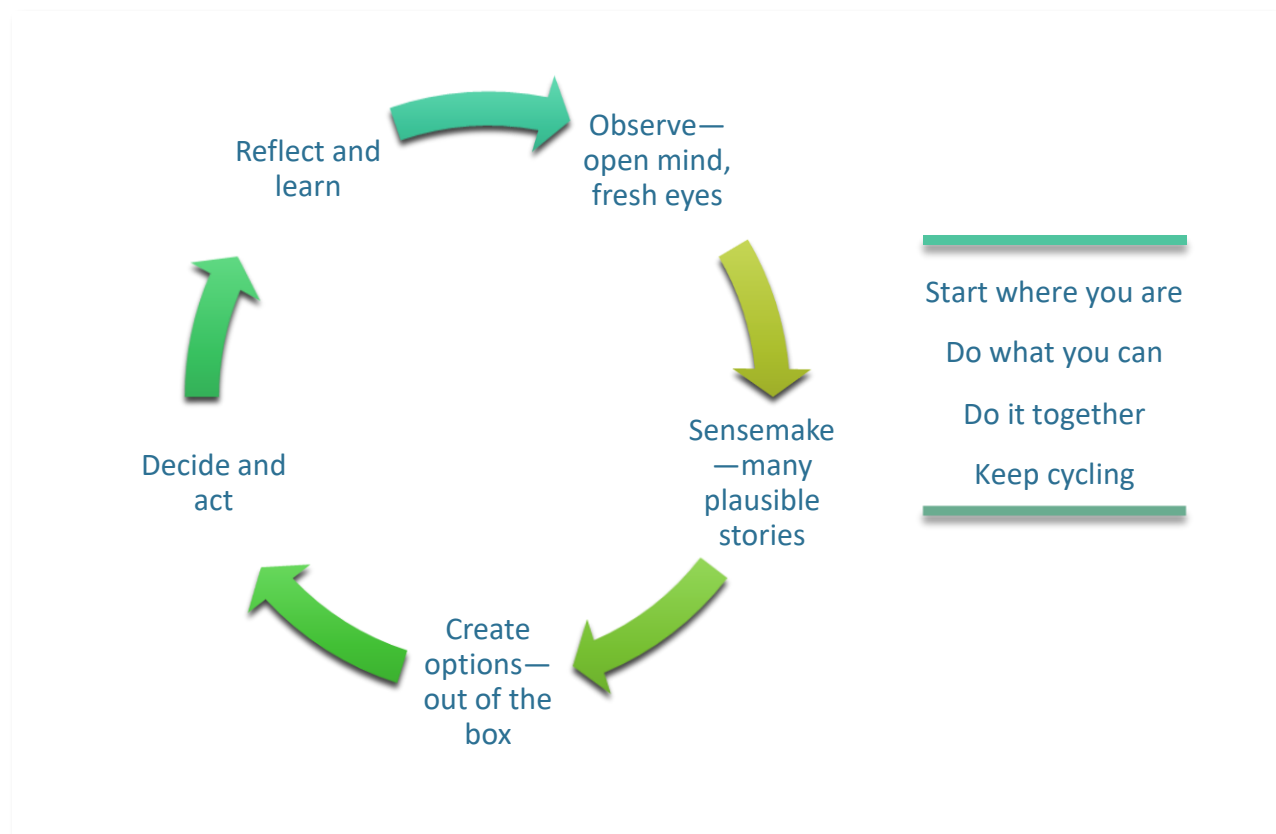*Table 2 Illustration of the seven P&C principles in a participant story*

Assessing situation, taking action, outcomes	Principles involved
The school had a series of temporary principals, and the P&C evolved into the forum where people brought their inevitable concerns about the resulting disruptions at school. P&C members were dealing with constant negativity and issues they were powerless to address.	Leadership (unstable) Culture (negative atmosphere) Purpose (unclear, off track)
They made a decision to clarify their purpose and communicate this to the school community.	Purpose Process (communication)
The atmosphere got much better, but they still felt directionless. They were spending money on ad hoc projects as they came up for consideration, and the work was still falling to a small group of individuals.	Leadership (ongoing improvement) Culture (looking up) Objectives (not clear, not shared) Volunteering (load unbalanced)
One member had strategic planning experience and presented a plan to the P&C committee for consideration, which they decided to adopt.	Leadership (take responsibility) Process (planning) Objectives (clarified and shared)
They knew they were in a high-socioeconomic area and significant fundraising was possible, but people were busy. Committee members were united and motivated, however. Furthermore, they had a new, permanent school principal who was encouraging and collaborative.	Process (assess situation) Volunteering (motivation) Community (collaboration) Leadership (shared and mutually supportive)
They asked the school community in a simple multi-choice survey what they would like to fundraise for. They split the roles and jobs into smaller chunks, and put the sign-up roster online, to make volunteering more accessible for time-poor parents and to share the load.	Objectives (listen to families) Volunteering (share the load, flexible on contribution) Process (easy to sign-up) Culture (welcoming, accepting)
They now have a large roster of volunteers to help with activities, and committee members get to enjoy activities with their children. They raised money for an adventure playground. The atmosphere is friendly and fun and they have high participation in P&C activities.	Volunteering (willing and shared) Objectives (shared and achieved) Culture (healthy) Community (engaged)

Dimension 2: The action cycle

Research objectives included to "identify the *challenges* experienced by P&Cs across WA in recruiting and retaining volunteers." Common challenges were found—but the same challenges were not resolved in the same way in each story—so perhaps a more useful emerging objective is "identify *how members of a community define and overcome challenges* experienced by P&Cs across WA in recruiting and retaining volunteers."

In every case of overcoming challenges, there was a pattern. Someone—a person or a group of people—made a conscious decision to change the status quo. Their interventions included common steps in a concerted action sequence: observe, sensemake, create options, decide and act, and reflect and learn (see Figure 1). The entry point into the action cycle varied, according to opportunity and people's strengths, but the elements were consistent.

Figure 1 Action cycle observed in good-news stories

Observe—
open mind,
fresh eyes

Reflect and
learn

Decide and
act

Sensemake
—many
plausible
stories

Create
options—
out of the
box

Start where you are

Do what you can

Do it together

Keep cycling

Start where you are, do what you can

People who shared their stories had all taken different approaches to their unique situations. Yet two pieces of advice participants shared stood out for their sagacity—"start where you are" and "do what you can." These ideas are manifested in the research finding that people entered the action cycle at different stages, with initiatives of varying ambition.

What mattered was they progressed to the next step of the cycle, and the one after that… Some people sparked remarkable change with "Hey, let's have a disco." Others with a strategic overhaul. Some reflected on how their activities and way of welcoming appear to people with different perspectives and experiences. Still others went right back to first principles, questioning their core purpose and any assumptions that may be unintentionally creating (self-imposed) limits on agency.[2] Or unconscious judgments they were making about people or outcomes—shift "they won't" to "they might if we…"

Parts of the cycle were done as a group and parts by individuals, but which ones were which was context-specific. In each case, however, shared plans, shared work, and shared enjoyment were eventually realised.

Stuck? It is easy to relate!

"Even though our numbers are low there is no real active drive for recruitment apart from a note in the newsletter. This may be due to the discouragement that very few put their hand up. It seems to be a circular pattern that we can't escape."

---

[2] Double-loop learning is a concept attributed to Chris Argyris, which is based on the premise that the way we understand and define a situation can be what creates the situation. Argyris proposes that organisations can resolve problems and be more innovative when feedback from the real world is used to adjust mental models and decision-making rules before new decisions are made.

Dimension 2: Action cycle

P&Cs that achieved positive change shared the characteristic of taking concerted action. Steps in the action cycle common to most stories were observing, sensemaking, creating options, making decisions and acting, and reflecting and learning. Action cycles were observed to be both concurrent and follow one after the other. The action cycle was entered at different steps, depending on the people and the situation.

Dimension 3: Embrace your own style of doing things

Stories told in interviews suggest a third piece of sage advice—"embrace your own style of doing things" (Figure 2). The wide variety of stories of how people on P&Cs created vibrant school communities—with many volunteers and a happy P&C—illustrate how positive change can start anywhere and be initiated and maintained by people with vastly different styles. If you are a planner, make a plan (and get a team onboard). If you are a relater, create a sense of welcome and being valued (and build a team). If you are a doer, organise an event and have some fun together (as a team). If you have more than one style on your team, all the better. Use your strengths.

This capacity to embrace different styles may be extended to ideas, perspectives, and cultures… opening up opportunities to attract all kinds of people to engage in P&C operations an activities.

The notion of the power of diversity is not new. What the research told us, however, was that volunteers make assumptions about what a leader should "be" like which are unnecessarily narrow— and self-talk can stop them taking a leadership role, simply because they do not see themselves like that. No matter your personal style, you can be a leader: lead projects, be on the Executive, initiate change, run events, get a team working well together, and inspire others.

When people feel comfortable being themselves, and embrace their own style of doing things, this gives others tacit permission to do the same. This creates a relaxed atmosphere, with lower barriers for participating and feeling a sense of belonging.

Figure 2: Planners, doers, and relaters, embrace your own style
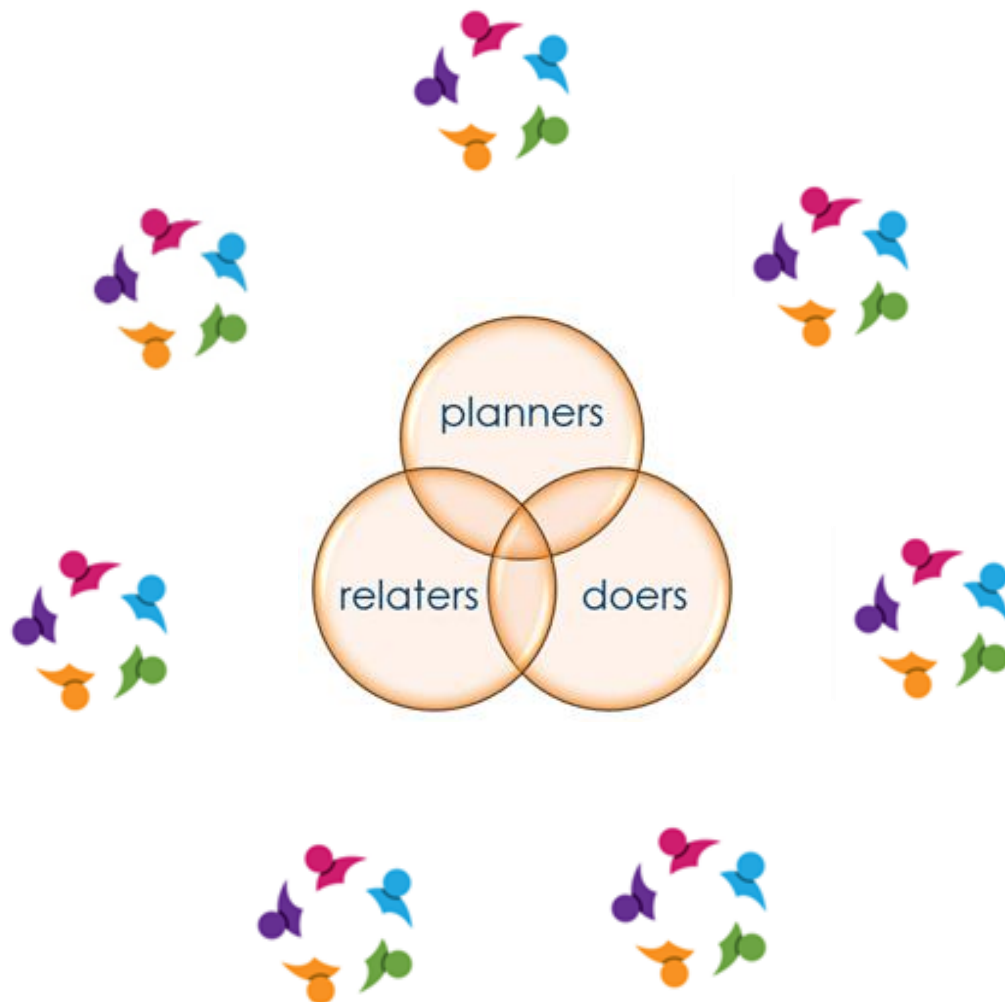
Dimension 3: Embrace your own style

Initiatives by planners, doers, and relaters were all reported as successful, as was teamwork combining different styles. By embracing their own style of doing things, people were able to achieve objectives, and create a relaxed atmosphere where other volunteers felt welcome and believed their contribution was valued.

Leaders and leadership styles

Leaders, too, came in all shapes and sizes. The line between the efforts of individuals and the efforts of a community was a blurry one. Many people spoke with the deepest respect for tireless efforts of their P&C president or others who demonstrated leadership. Leaders of one kind of another are an indispensable part of the community. Ultimately the plans, the culture, the activities, the purpose and goals, the work, the responsibility, and the celebration belong to everyone—you do not need a title or formal authority to be a leader. When many people in your community show leadership, and you work as a team, you have strong group leadership capacity. This spreads the work, reduces the risk of turnover, and expands the number of people who "have skin in the game."

> *"Our times have changed and so have our expectations. P&C as well as any other volunteer associations have to adapt to survive.... I'd love to be a part of a group of people who helps facilitate the change in where our P&Cs go from here. There's definitely change afoot."*

It was clear in responses that some people wanted to be involved to the extent of feeling a sense of ownership and responsibility for the P&C.[3] When they felt heard and appreciated, they were more likely to stay. These were potential volunteers for P&C committee positions. If they felt excluded from idea-creation and decision-making—and left never to return—then more was lost than someone who may take their turn on a roster.

People did not appreciate "autocratic" leadership styles or cliques. The underlying theme in responses that mentioned autocratic leadership or powerful cliques was the distribution or sharing of power and responsibility, and communication that was exclusionary (even unintentionally) exacerbated the sense of being excluded from decision that mattered, including future direction. In contrast, people expressed appreciation and admiration of—and a sense of being inspired by—dynamic and energetic leaders who were open to the ideas of others and shared decision-making. How "strong" a leader was perceived to be was not inversely correlated with how empowered others felt. Power is not a finite thing; a leader can be powerful *and* empower others. People felt resentment and disempowerment when the powerful leader actively or inadvertently *blocked* others from being involved in decision making and agenda setting. Inclusive and empowering leaders create a shared sense

---

[3] Other people preferred to be directed and have a discrete job to do, at least for now.

of security and optimism, a welcoming and safe culture and—by sharing responsibility—attract other natural leaders and build group leadership capacity.

Getting great outcomes by coordinating available people, resources, and opportunities is a valuable leader skill. Leaders and leadership affect everything in an organisation, but it takes a team. In the story below, the author notes the contrast between leaders, and explains why they stayed in the organisation long enough to support the leader they thought would make a positive difference to the culture and operations of the P&C. Supporting leaders is an invaluable act—as is insurrection, when needed.

The pivotal role of the leader

"Initially the leadership of our school was incredibly bad, however I was only on the periphery during this period and did not experience the worst of it... Then the leadership team of the P&C was autocratic and cliquey... I witnessed the disparaging way that they talked to other committee members, and I never felt comfortable questioning or making suggestions.

"It was when that team stepped down and another stepped up that I really saw the worst of them. They would still attend meetings and instead of mentoring and helping the incoming committee, they would lie in wait for them to make mistakes and then point them out within the meetings. Some days I felt that they had already made a list of things to spring on the committee to upset the meeting proceedings and try to derail motions, especially when it was time critical. The mood of the meetings was always quite tense during that year.

"It was a credit to the President that she managed to push through, and I feel shame that I never stood up and called them out on their bad behaviour. I would never stand for it now. That was when I considered leaving as the atmosphere was toxic. I decided to stay as the President was trying her best to ensure a culture change and I felt she needed the moral support.

"Over the next three years the P&C she built was truly inclusive and supportive. It is a joy to be part of something that she created. We now have a new exec committee, however she remains in the background as a general committee member and has mentored and coached us through the changeover.

Dimension 4: Belonging, purpose, and enjoyment

Belonging, purpose and enjoyment emerged as primary motivations for people to volunteer in P&Cs and get involved in P&C activities at school. Respondents said they wanted to "do something of value with other people" and "be part of a community and make friends." This finding is consistent with current research on volunteering in other contexts.

> **Belonging can begin the minute a child is enrolled**
>
> *"I want to be close to what is happening for my child in her school. I want to help make the school community a fun place. I want to help."*

> **Boundaries are social constructions, they are permeable and overlap—they are moveable, too, and can stretch.**
>
> *"I wanted to know more about how things work and how decisions were made. I wanted my children to feel like the school belonged to them and I wanted that feeling to be shared by my friends who could not speak English. I wanted to have a more inclusive vibe. "I want to help."*

Belonging

Participants expressed a sense of belonging—or not belonging—in several ways. First, "friendliness" rated second only to "communication" as pivotal to building a successful P&C that was enjoyable to be part of. Feeling welcome and included was key for people to return after their first time. Being friendly was only the first step, however, and not enough to keep people fully engaged and contributing, nor to break down barriers to inclusion.

Second, feeling listened to and involved in planning was important for long-term commitment, which translates to feeling trusted to be part of the decision-making, and sharing the responsibility and influence. In contrast, feeling like a "bum on a seat" to make quorum, having suggestions repeatedly "shot down," and the existence of powerful or exclusive cliques led to people withdrawing. The importance of feeling needed was also demonstrated in the context of highly effective committees being unintentionally intimidating or appearing as if they do not need more volunteers: "I was hesitant to join as it felt so 'exclusive.'"

> **Responsibility and belonging go hand in hand**
>
> *"We could more actively invite people to key planning meetings to get them to have more ownership."*

Third, respondents' sense of not belonging sometimes stemmed from the impression that the P&C did not belong *to them*, and by "them" we mean parents (or certain groups of parents). Participants identified the importance of an appropriate balance of power on the P&C, particularly between parents and school staff members: principal and teachers. Some respondents felt they were there to rubber stamp the principal's decisions, and others stated there were so many teachers on the P&C the parent cohort were routinely outvoted. There were also mentions of overt, casual, or unintentional but systemic racism: "no offence but some of the committee 'rules' are very 'white' and stuffy or exclude normal people." Unsurprisingly, there were numerous comments about wanting to get past the unwanted "P&C mums" stereotype. In short, identifying as a valued part of the team was dependent on both individual and systemic factors.

> It's not for everyone
>
> *"Some people do not feel engaged with the education system."*

Fourth, some members of the school community may not want to, choose to, or know how to develop a sense of belonging with the P&C, school community, school, or education system. Belonging—or identifying with a group—is a personal choice. This choice may be influenced by formative experiences, other priorities, or not being familiar with western-style volunteering. A survey respondent replied to a question about barriers to volunteering with "not knowing what is P&C" which is helpful to remember when building engagement with school members from other cultural backgrounds.

Purpose

Having a shared purpose, feeling purposeful, and knowing efforts were for a good purpose—the school and the children—were recognised by many as motivators for getting past hurdles and maintaining energy and enthusiasm. Sharing in *defining* purpose and objectives and achieving tangible positive outcomes reinforced all three motivators: belonging and enjoyment as well as purpose. Participants indicated they often benefitted by developing their own skills and experience, and several said they liked being able to

> Volunteering has an intrinsic purpose
>
> *"I have volunteered on P&Cs for many years and I have benefited from the skills I have gained through volunteering. It's now my turn to help others volunteer. My children, now grown, know how important volunteer work is—in small communities especially. I believe my life and my family's life has been made richer because of our volunteer work."*

contribute their existing skills and experience to help the school and the children. "I had the skills to lead the P&C, having been President at my children's primary school as well. It needed leadership and someone who understood the role, the constitution and governance. I am good at that." A good number of people also made note of the intrinsic value volunteering served in their own lives.

A clear link was articulated by participants between likelihood to volunteer or stay on the P&C and feeling valued, including by the wider school community: "I haven't thought of leaving because I make an important contribution that is valued by the school."

Enjoyment

The social side of volunteering—the fun side for volunteers as well as for children and their families—echoed throughout people's responses. "We could establish a bit of a social side to the group—so it's not always meetings and asking for things/volunteer roles—but maybe also some 'fun' for those tireless members that show up time and time again."

> #### Have a blast!
>
> *"I love events—it is what I do for work. Organising events for students to have a blast or fundraising for a really cool addition to the school."*

Participants stated—time and again—the importance of valuing the role of the P&C to nurture and build community and connection among the school's population. Actually, this extended to the wider P&C network, and connecting with and helping each other. This social connection is a part of belonging, but making friends, working together, and simply having conversations with other human beings is also a large part of why people enjoy serving on a P&C committee or helping at an event.

When asked what makes being a member of a P&C *enjoyable*—as distinct from *successful*—people put a greater emphasis on relationships and community. The word cloud in Figure 3 shows the

> #### Fun is contagious
>
> *"The more events you hold the more infectious it becomes as people can see how fun they are!"*

school at the centre, surrounded by people, community, welcome, together, ideas, inclusive, fun, work, everyone, supportive, positive, students, kids, goals, help, kind… The difference in responses between successful and enjoyable was subtle but clear, and emphasises that the trifecta of belonging, purpose, and enjoyment cannot safely be reduced to a focus on process and purpose without risking a reduction in involvement and engagement over time.

Burnout

Stories of participants emphasise the personal nature of volunteering experiences, and the stark contrast between positive and negative experiences. Burnout was a significant factor in people not enjoying themselves anymore, and lack of enjoyment was almost always cited as a precursor to withdrawal. "I am burnt out and thinking of quitting." Burnout is not easy to avoid, since it can develop as a confluence of other common issues, and it is serious.

> You are allowed to step back—only you need to give yourself permission, no one else
>
> *"Exhaustion has been a big factor for me so I have backed out of as many roles as I can. Have been trying to get someone to take on my current role for six months now as it's too much for one person. I now often feel resentment rather than enjoyment when doing P&C work. I have been doing it for five years, undertaking several major roles every year and I'm burnt out. For me also some negative experiences my children have had at the school where I have felt unsupported by the admin have made me not want to volunteer anymore."*

Burnout can be guarded against by being mindful of cues indicating an absence of belonging, purpose, and enjoyment. Being aware is the first step to resolving a feeling of unease, either as an individual, as a committee, or in a community in general. On a practical note, sometimes stepping away from a pivotal role has to be done, replacement or no replacement. Indeed sometimes it is easier to find someone to *step into a gap* than to *replace* an experienced and respected committee member.

Leveraging motivators: Belonging, commitment, and enjoyment

Knowing that belonging, purpose, and enjoyment are key motivators for people to volunteer— and keep volunteering—is useful for building and maintaining a volunteer-friendly P&C, devising well-attended P&C activities, and developing communication and inclusivity.

First, acknowledging all three motivations as equally valuable helps legitimise the social, fun side of community organising. Running a P&C can feel like a serious commitment, involving hard work, time and energy, and even a little piece of your soul, so it helps to know having fun and making friends is not a distraction from the "real" work, it is purposeful and valuable.

Second, awareness of these three motivators can provide pointers for making sense of people's actions or an ambiguous situation or to break through the status quo. Guarding against burnout is worth putting thought and effort into, so there is value in being mindful of subtle clues in people's language and behaviour—and in your own thoughts and feelings.

Third, knowing the three core reasons people volunteer on P&Cs can bolster the effectiveness of communication and recruiting strategies. Initiatives and structures are more likely to be effective if they are designed with two things front of mind: people value belonging, purpose, and enjoyment, and everyone has a different interpretation of what it means to belong, have purpose, and enjoy themselves.

Dimension 4: Belonging, purpose, and enjoyment

People are drawn to and stay in P&C communities where they feel belonging, purpose, and enjoyment. Communication and recruitment initiatives can be informed by this knowledge. People are less susceptible to burnout when these motivators are tangible for them.
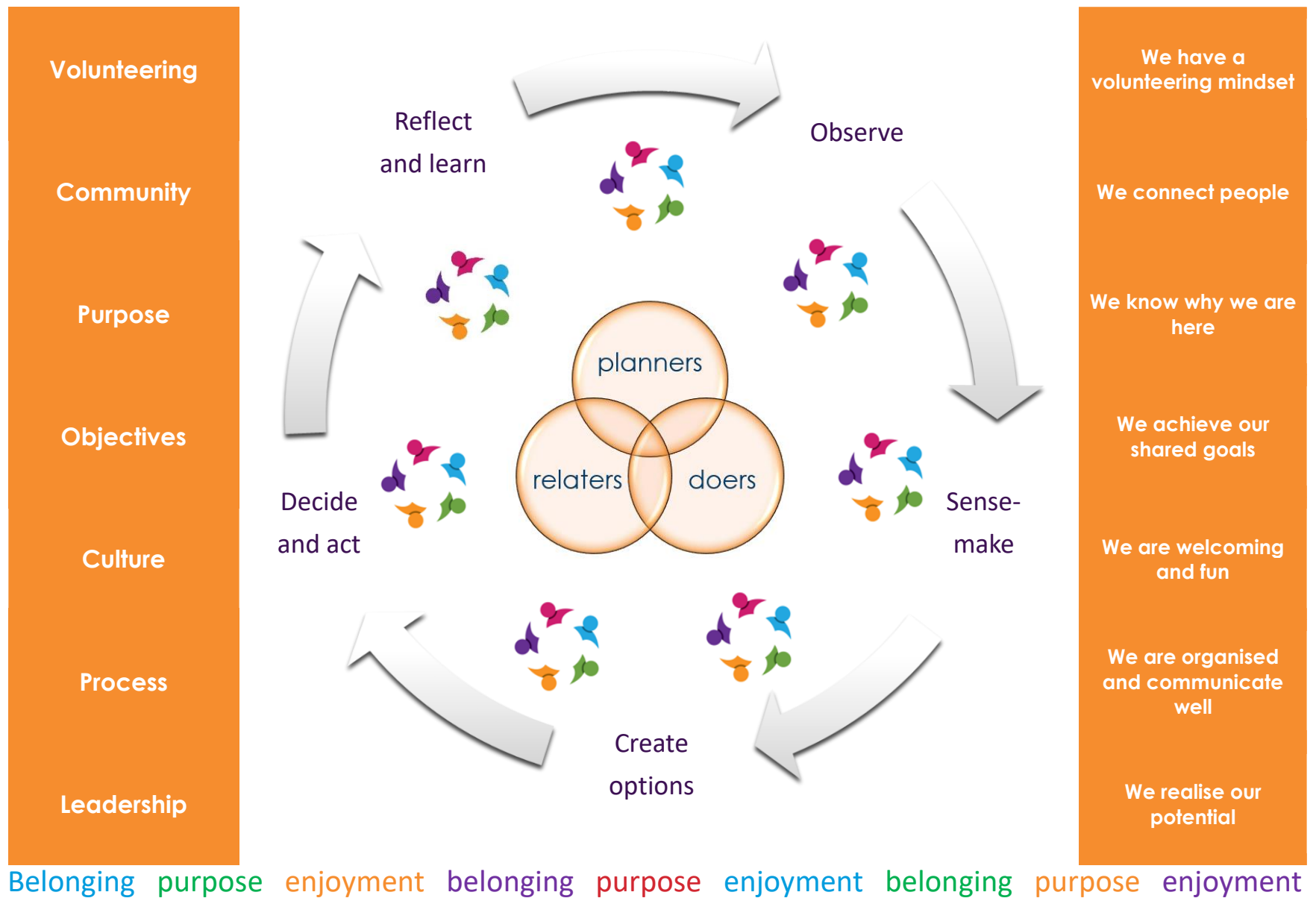
Figure 5 Four dimensions framework. *When all four dimensions are combined they provide a powerful tool for groups to analyse, create, strategise, and act. They can be used to bolster overall functioning of the P&C, to identify and leverage strengths, to break through stuck situations, or to target particular areas—including volunteer recruitment and diversity and inclusion.*

Recommendations

Applying the model

Leveraging all four interconnected dimensions—the seven principles, the action cycle, all kinds of people with all kinds of styles, and belonging, purpose, and enjoyment—creates flexibility and synergies. No matter your situation—now or in the future—you can identify a variety of potential approaches to a seemingly stuck situation, by using the framework.

What can P&Cs do?

Every P&C can do something. What they do will depend on who the people are, their resources and restraints, and what they are trying to achieve. The framework developed from research findings provides multiple points of potential intervention, a sense of how different dynamics are interrelated, and why they matter in volunteer-led organising. The model is both comprehensive and approachable, and can therefore be used strategically or opportunistically, to assist in planning major change or to work on one specific area of P&C functionality. Any or all of the four dimensions may be explored to generate desired outcomes.

1. Develop and maintain P&C principles of organising

Seven fundamental principles of volunteer-led organising were common to P&Cs that self-identified as functioning well and attracting a solid base of volunteers: "volunteering," "community," "purpose," "objectives," "culture," "process," and "leadership." Reviewing and acting on these principles can diagnose problems, be a lever for change, and build capacity and resilience. P&Cs exist in a complex organisational and social dynamic, which can feel restrictive, but also means that indirect actions can positively affect multiple aspects of functioning. This is especially helpful if you have to work around a problem that is out of your direct control or feels too big to tackle. Accessing training and sharing existing knowledge are both good ways to build knowledge of these principles and hence capacity among P&Cs members. The following questions can stimulate discussion and reflection and help identify possible areas of focus and approaches.

Volunteering. Are we doing this willingly and generously? Are we mindful that our own volunteering is our own choice and other people have different experiences with schools and schooling and different capacities and priorities in their life? Are we creative and flexible about the contributions of volunteers? Do we appreciate our volunteers? Is volunteering in our P&C easy (online), welcoming, purposeful, and fun?

Community. Do we create a sense of community and belonging? For everyone? Could we build connections beyond what we currently see as our "boundaries"? Do we communicate with other P&Cs and WACSSO? Are our committee members visible and approachable? Do we facilitate multiple, communication channels between people? Are they multidirectional, formal and informal, active and passive? Are we mindful of creating volunteering opportunities and engagement experiences that are equitable, diverse, and inclusive? Is our P&C representative of all age groups and cultures in our school? Are there any segments of the community who are not engaged? What do we know and not know about these segments of the community? What might our P&C committee and activities look like from their perspective? How can we better understand and connect with them? Do we create volunteering opportunities and run events that are fun and include everyone?

Purpose. Do we have a shared understanding of the purpose of a P&C? What about our P&C? Do we, through our actions, help others in the community to understand and value our purpose? To contribute to it? Is our purpose aligned with the school's? Do we keep our shared purpose clearly in mind when making decisions? Would we benefit from considering whether we achieve the "objects of our association" in the constitution? Do we aim to give children better school experiences? Do our actions benefit all children and the school? Does the school community value our contribution? Do we make a difference?

Objectives. Do we have clear objectives that align with our purpose? Are these objectives shared with the school community? Does the school community have real input into these objectives? Do we focus our efforts on the needs and interests of families? How do we know what these are? Do we ask them? Do we run fun, well-attended events? Do we raise money for resources and infrastructure? Do we provide valued services, such as a canteen and uniform shop? Do we take advantage of opportunities, and include people in achieving our goals?

Culture. Are our events (including meetings) friendly, welcoming, and safe? Do we encourage people to contribute in creative and positive ways that are meaningful to them? Do we listen to everyone? Do we work as a team? Do we have diverse skills, perspectives, and styles? Do we aspire to

include and encourage all segments of the school community? Do we actively address personal conflicts and difficult people? Are we mindful of cliques, real or perceived? Are we self-aware, and willing to hear criticism and new ideas?

Process. Are we organised? Do we strike the right balance between structured and flexible, formal and informal? Do we coordinate our efforts? Do we keep our records, processes, and policies clear and available? Is our governance transparent? Are our written policies aligned with our real-life actions? Do we have clear roles and responsibilities, and built-in redundancy for mutual support and risk management? Do we have the best possible communication plan, processes, and styles? Does this include multiple ways to both inform and to listen? Can families—at any time—easily find information about the P&C's purpose, activities, committee members, and opportunities to be involved? Do we utilise technology? Do we learn from experience and preserve knowledge? Do we pass on our knowledge to future committee members?

Leadership. Do we share leadership, power, and responsibility in a way that works for us, and helps us achieve our objectives? Do we support and trust each other? Can we diversify our roles and build leadership capacity in our committee and our school community? Can we build a more productive relationship with the school principal and staff? Can we share our skills and knowledge with others and help other P&Cs build their capacity? Do we resolve problems and create opportunities together? Do we value and harness diversity? Do we realise our potential as a team? Do we seek opportunities to learn from others, including WACSSO?

2. Enter the action cycle

Each school and each P&C is unique and complex, and problem-solving usually means tackling "wicked problems" which are hard to define and require constant energy input to keep progressing. However, complex situations are also inherently changeable: multiple levers and interconnection between parts enables indirect intervention and magnifies the effect of your efforts. Even when you feel completely stuck, there is always something you can do—even if it is removing yourself.

Start where you are. What do we observe? What is drawing our attention? What do we think we know? If we have tried a lot of things and nothing seems to be working, what assumptions could we have made subconsciously that are keeping us stuck in the same mindset? What resources and constraints exist? What agency do we have? Which people? How much energy? How much time? What skills and knowledge? What ideas? Can we access more help, more resources, or more expertise? What is the one problem we have that seems to limit us the most? What is a problem or opportunity we have

that might be relatively straightforward to address? What is our highest priority? Do we have short- and long-term priorities? What is something we can do, to get us closer to our goals, that feels possible right now? Where do we think we are in the action cycle? Have we skipped anything or gotten stuck anywhere? How do we—as individuals or collectively—make sense of our situation? Do we agree on where we are?

Do what you can. How can we generate creative options? Should we start small and safe or go big? What do we have to gain, and to risk? Is our goal modest and close or aspirational and long-term? Do we want to act strategically or opportunistically? If we cannot see a way to act directly, can we act indirectly? Are we thinking "and" rather than "or"? Will this plan or action help us achieve our objectives in a way that is aligned with the principles of volunteer-led organising? With our purpose? How will we decide what to do and who will be involved in the decision? What do we want to do? What will we do? Who will do what and by when? Time to act.

Do it together. Sharing the load and creating synergies are key tenets of volunteer-led community organising. How much of this process can be done as a committee or community and how much by individuals? What kinds of working groups will be both communal and effective for this activity? What is the best time and the best way to articulate and share my ideas with other committee members, or our ideas with the school community? How can we encourage the community to engage with and feel invested in these ideas?

Keep cycling. What happened? What did we experience? What did we gain? What did we learn? How can reflecting enable us to apply insight, knowledge, and experience in other contexts or on our next adventure? Can we involve more people earlier to allow them a sense of ownership? Can we achieve the same ends with less effort? How can we leverage our gains? Can we be more ambitious next time? More inclusive? What is the next logical thing? Is there anything we need to fix? How can we capture this knowledge for the benefit of future volunteers?

3. Embrace your own style

Successful initiatives by planners, doers, and relaters were all evident in the stories collected for this research. No single "correct" or "best" way to do things was dominant. Relaxed self-confidence enabled people to act in a friendly and welcoming way. Adapting style and approach to different situations and combining different strengths through teamwork were both effective and empowering.

Embracing your own style of doing things does not mean being over-confident and oblivious to how your style affects others. Self-awareness, and valuing the styles of others, builds respectful relationships and powerful teams. Diversity and inclusion are a natural extension of an "embrace your own style" mindset and attitude.

Do we value our own strengths and embrace our own styles? When looking for more volunteers, do we embrace their style? Do we set expectations or conduct business as usual in a way that is difficult for other people or strange from other perspectives? Do we actively search for people with styles different from our own? Do we have a harmonious mixture of planners, doers, and relaters on our committee? What role do I play on this committee (and does this my natural style)? Do we trust each other, and coordinate in a way that makes the best use of everyone's strengths? Does one style dominate our agenda, processes, or culture? Does everyone have responsibility for, and influence over, decision-making, including what options are considered, what criteria are applied to judge, and the process by which decisions are made, communicated, and enacted? Do we all take responsibility for working together, what is valued, how we behave, resolving conflicts, and how we share power?

4. Nurture belonging, purpose, and enjoyment

Remember that belonging, purpose, and enjoyment are common elements of P&Cs that people are drawn to and enjoy being a part of. Nurturing these valuable facets of P&C experiences will attract volunteers and guard against burnout. By using mindful self-reflection, intervention points can be identified.

- Do I belong here? Does everyone have the chance to feel the same sense of belonging? Is my contribution valued? Is everyone's? Does this organisation feels like it belongs to all of us? Do we have any processes or attitudes that could be alien, unintentionally daunting, or upsetting for some people?

- Do I know my purpose for being here? Does everyone? Is our planning and our energy focused on our purpose and objectives? If they are misaligned, would it be better for the school community to change what we actually do… or review our espoused purpose? Am I making a difference? Are we making a difference together?

- Am I enjoying this experience? Is everyone? Are we enjoying working together? Are we creating enjoyable experiences for everyone? Do we create comfortable situations where people can meet each other, socialise, make friends, and build relationships? Are we having

fun? Do we value enjoyment and belonging just as much as getting the job done? Do we celebrate our contributions?

- What—specifically—is it about this activity, person, or routine, that is inclusive, productive, or enjoyable (or exclusive, unproductive, or unenjoyable) that we can apply (or ameliorate) in other contexts?

- Do we understand the motivations driving our volunteers and members? In general, and as individuals? Do we take care of ourselves and each other, and guard against burnout?

What can WACSSO do?

Participants expressed interest in support from WACSSO, usually when they identified resources they needed to make progress but could not readily or efficiently access within their community, or they felt stuck or powerless. Participants expressed appreciation for WACSSO undertaking this research into volunteer recruitment, saying it is "much needed" and looking forward to having access to the findings. Aside from a lack of volunteers, three other "lacks" were commonly voiced by interviewees: lack of time, lack of resources, and lack of expertise including fresh ideas.

> **Share what you know, learn from others**
>
> *"It would be helpful to have more ways to share what we do, and ways to make it less daunting such as fundraising 'playbooks', more collaboration between other P&Cs to share resources, learnings and ideas."*

Knowledge-sharing, knowledge-building, and capacity-building

People suggested a number of practical ways WACSSO could create or facilitate time and cost efficiencies and knowledge-sharing across the sector. The research also identified a need for knowledge-building, for example in encouraging greater diversity and inclusion, as this knowledge did not seem widely embodied in P&Cs (yet). Potential also exists for significant gains through enhanced P&C communication strategies, for example, tailoring communication for different stakeholders.

Sharing and building knowledge would enrich overall capacity of the Western Australian P&C family. Raising capacity would strengthen resilience to committee member turnover, provide new opportunities to enhance the experiences of WA schoolchildren and their families, and make impossible problems seem approachable.

From the research, we identified a number of areas that could, realistically, benefit from knowledge sharing and knowledge building. These are elaborated in the following section. WACSSO can leverage this research by revisiting this process periodically: canvassing P&Cs; using the model to identify emerging needs and new knowledge with the potential to help other groups; and considering whether strengthening may be most effectively achieved via facilitating knowledge-sharing, knowledge-building, or capacity-building.

What can we do together?

Different kinds of problems can be approached in different ways. Not all are equally straightforward or equally difficult to resolve. Knowing how ubiquitous the problem is, who else is having the same problem—or who else is managing well with this problem, helps to define the most effective approach to leverage knowledge and expertise existing within the organisation (see Table 3). Shared knowledge development helps everyone.

Table 3 Summary of knowledge development approaches

Approach	When?	Who?
Knowledge capture	Tacit knowledge, especially when it is specialised; when certain people know	P&C executive and event planners, State Councillors
Knowledge sharing	Tacit and formal knowledge; when some people already know	P&C–P&C, WACSSO–P&C, facilitated by State Councillors and digital communication tools
Knowledge building	Formal knowledge; when not many people know, or we are ready to learn more	WACSSO (e.g., research, training)
Capacity building	When many people knowing makes us better and more sustainable	WACSSO leadership

Current areas for knowledge sharing, knowledge building, and capacity building

From our researcher perspective, using the framework, we were able to identify some areas worth considering for sharing and building knowledge. We explore these areas here, and offer some suggestions about how tacit knowledge and experience, research insights, and literature on volunteering and nonprofit organising could be adapted and applied. WACSSO can repeat this process in years to come, using insider knowledge and experience and new academic research to systematically identify new areas that would benefit from attention.

Unique combination of issues, critical issues, or too many issues at once

It was clear from the survey and interviews that every P&C situation is unique, and those in the direst situations tended to have the fewest resources—and the least agency—to change their situation. The most difficult situations to start a fresh approach or get an initiative going occurred when lack of practical resources (e.g., time, money, knowledge, experience), intersected with critical social issues. Social issues include leader problems; social divisions or personal conflicts; low community participation, transient population, or high percentage of non-English speaking families; lack of school support or active obstruction; and external change (e.g., legislation).

Challenges often occur in clusters and are interdependent. Practical problems are not usually a complete block, but they can feel like it when there are not enough people with ideas and energy to solve them, when people are not communicating or cooperating, or when more powerful entities have the final say. Lack of resources makes everything else harder for the few people determined to build something. No bookkeeping experience within a committee can mean someone must learn how, which is somewhat easier with licensed software, which may not be affordable. All that takes time away from working towards community engagement and organising fun activities. These issues have been manageable, according to determined respondents, unless they coincide with power or people problems.

Changes to health and safety legislation for canteens, for example, have been onerous for some P&Cs. Several P&Cs shared their canteen closure stories; most only ran their canteen as a service to families, not for profit, one or two days a week. One school community held a regular cheese-toastie day which was wonderfully popular with students and served as a regular community-building activity, but complying with legal requirements they saw as making it too difficult to continue. Whether this legislation was intended to stop such simple and good-hearted activities or not does not change the

disheartening reality when a more powerful entity says no. Falling into this category were difficult relationships and powerful factions.

Yet there was someone who cared enough to want to change things (and complete our survey). Strategies for pushing through such situations included being happy with small wins, gradually gathering a team to share the vision and the work, biding time until opportunity arises, and getting outside help. WACSSO or a "mentor P&C" could have a support role in providing resources, knowledge, and moral support in these cases. While it would be prohibitive to provide this kind of intensive support to all P&Cs, not all P&Cs need it. This research shows there is a need to help some P&Cs and school communities, so they have the same opportunities as others to build something valuable.

Unique needs of high schools

Survey responses confirmed anecdotal evidence that primary school P&Cs are thriving more than high school P&Cs. There was strong evidence that a pivotal factor in this is the child's growing independence, and their enthusiasm (or lack of) for their parents being a presence at the school. The needs of families with children in high school are different, as are the needs of the school for the P&C's support (or not) in building community and fundraising. Data also confirms a higher likelihood of both parents being in full-time work or study once children reach high school. Burnout from primary school P&C participation and moving to other volunteering positions, for example on sporting club committees, were cited as other lifestyle factors affecting high school P&C participation.

> Kids grow up—volunteering at their high school is a different dynamic
>
> *"My kids enjoyed me being at all the events when they were younger—they thought I worked for the school."*

Respondents who spoke about their high schools P&C's, while fewer in number, were nevertheless equally as committed as their primary school counterparts to running a valued and valuable P&C. One high school P&C had successfully, and over a long period, run the canteen and uniform shop; these are valuable contributions to a school community. Several saw potential benefits that were not necessarily being leveraged, such as parent advocacy and education. As noted earlier, a sense of belonging can depend on "ownership" of the P&C, including determining its purpose, and a sense of feeling needed and having a meaningful role to play. Several respondents noted that the introduction of school boards has had an impact on the role of a P&C in the school, and provided an

alternative forum for parents to volunteer. We detected a common belief that people who wanted a "real say" now prefer to be on the board than the P&C. However, the perception that parents have more influence over decisions made at schools from a position on the board is arguable. P&Cs have the opportunity to find a new niche, perhaps focused on parent and family wellbeing, where their independent incorporation as an association is advantageous.

Secondary school P&C committee members may decide it would open up options for them if they did a needs analysis and redefined their purpose—or recommitted to their existing purpose—taking their particular school and school community into account. WACSSO State Councillors can guide P&Cs in this process: using their local knowledge and practical experience of change management, and by helping them see transformative change as an opportunity.

> **Might your P&C benefit from redefining purpose?**
>
> *"In a high school environment, it's harder to give meaningful volunteer roles outside office bearer roles. I think people would volunteer if there were other roles available."*

Options for situational analysis and planning

The decline of volunteer numbers, and how P&Cs can keep a sense of community alive in schools is what is referred to as a wicked problem. Wicked problems are complex and challenging. They involve social dynamics, resources, logistics, knowledge, and real-world constraints. There is no one right way to define the problem, they are never permanently "fixed," and the situation requires constant energy and commitment to maintain the desired experiences and outcomes. The outcome of implementing a solution is unknown and cannot be reversed. Cause and effect uncertainty is high, and many variables are not under the control of the planners, but the outcome matters.

Many respondents expressed a sense of feeling stuck and having no good options, for example, for recruiting volunteers or increasing diversity. The model proposed here is a purpose-built, situation-specific tool for doing situational analysis (see *What can P&Cs do?* section for questions to reflect on when considering the current situation).[4] P&Cs may benefit from guidance in using the four dimensions framework proposed here, and from help in generating creative options that stretch perceived bounds of agency and resources.

---

[4] In situations where interpersonal conflict, power struggles, or factional conflict is a complicating factor, the lived experience theory of schism, developed from doctoral research in small nonprofit organisations in Western Australia may be useful for situational analysis and planning (Sugars, 2022).

Consciously planning on a strategic level was only occasionally articulated by participants, either in interviews or survey responses, even for those who evidently did work out what was happening, make a plan, and enact it. There was an appetite expressed for training in strategic planning. What was noted, however, was people instinctively used various *other* effective planning approaches known in academic literature—besides strategic planning—though they did not label them. These included sensemaking, positive deviance, and scenario planning; a brief outline of all four is in Appendix B.

Opportunity exists for WACSSO training resources to embrace these four strategies, as a more natural fit in the P&C context, more aligned with volunteering values, and more doable by all committee members. Combining the steps of situational analysis and planning in the same workshop would likely be more effective as it can be hard to separate the process of moving from problem identification to resolution—though the tools for each step are different.

Foundational P&C organising principles—building capacity

Participants in this research study have clearly indicated that nonprofit organising principles are what characterise a successful P&C and one they would enjoy being a part of. Their "knowledge" of "the right way to do it" was generally drawn from experience and instinct—what is sometimes called tacit knowledge. They did not necessarily, however, frame answers from the perspective of, say, someone experienced in nonprofit organising or with theoretical knowledge, who would be able to articulate why these ways of working are effective, how they interact, and how they relate to a nonprofit and volunteering values framework. Therefore we believe there is potential to implement these principles with more awareness and intent—and with more confidence and creativity.

The realities and ethos of volunteering and volunteer organising are distinct and valuable (Eikenberry, 2009; Maier et al., 2016). Yet members of community organisations are more likely to have worked in business contexts and have related business expertise than to have worked in nonprofit or volunteer organisations (Harris, 2015).

Running a P&C is distinct from leading or working in other sectors, and easy familiarity with the differences cannot be taken for granted, nor the capacity to articulate what is unique about volunteer-run organisations. People's expectations are different, and so is the power structure. For example, people are more likely to want to feel valued, assert a perceived right to have a say in decisions, and expect to be treated as an equal. With remuneration out of the picture, and the power vested in positions of authority less dominant, motivation and control factors taken for granted in business

settings are not available (e.g., it is very hard to sack a conflict-creating volunteer, and motivations to contribute as a volunteer are typically more personal than transactional). Leading a nonprofit or volunteer-led organisation takes all kinds of skills. Yet no qualifications are deemed necessary.

It is well-established that nonprofit and volunteer organisations are becoming more business-like in goals, rhetoric, and management (Maier et al., 2016). There are benefits to be gained from explicit training in volunteer-led and nonprofit organisation and leadership.

Communication is the connection between people that builds a community

If you want to bring people together and build a community, you cannot go wrong by starting with communication. It can *always* be better, or different, or more reliable, or more inclusive, or more fun, or more accessible, or broader, or richer, or more innovative, or engaging, or meaningful…

We have done everything possible. Or have we?

"We are a small school community, we have active social media, a newsletter once a term sent out via email and on social media and placed up at the P&C-run uniform shop. New families receive a welcome in the P&C brochure, we speak about the P&C each year at the kindy welcome day, P&C information goes in the school newsletter, notes about P&C activities and events go home directly to families, the president speaks each year at the end of year ceremony, we run the school disco and the faction carnival cake stall and various other high visibility events, each class/teacher is assigned one P&C event each year to find parent volunteers for. If parents don't know about volunteer opportunities, then they'd probably miss the presence of the sun in the sky."

Members of this P&C committee quite rightly believe they have gone to a lot of effort to communicate with everyone in their school community. And yet… each of these examples of communication is top-down, uni-directional, informational, or "for" people. An analysis of communication strategies designed specifically for community-building is not in the scope of this research project, but there is certainly room to bolster knowledge and flexibility in this area. We would be remiss, for example, not to identify that potential connectivity and sense of belonging and ownership is being lost because communication modes do not routinely facilitate *dialogue*.

Lack of understanding of the value and purpose of the P&C, reported as a barrier to volunteering by participants, is an example of a solvable problem with communication as a good starting

point. Other problems identified by participants could also be addressed with a concerted communication plan, for example knowledge capture, or communicating with families who speak languages other than English.

One simple, practical suggestion was to get someone bilingual in the school community to read the school newsletter on an easy-to-access YouTube video. The video could include the P&C secretary being interviewed by their translator, which makes another connection, builds another bridge, and could be done in a warm, engaging, and even funny way.

The kinds of questions P&Cs could reflect on include: how personal are our asks? Is our communication mostly informational? Is it a dialogue? Is informal communication healthy and creative or gossipy and concentrated in small groups or cliques? Is communication a valuable input to decision making or mostly telling people our decisions? Do we use multiple modes and channels of communication? Is our communication engaging and fun?

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of aspects of organising to P&C functioning and culture (researcher generated *a priori*). Rated most often as "pivotal" was communication. WACSSO training in communication in the context of community building is a perfect knowledge-building opportunity to strengthen multiple aspects of P&C functioning.

"We waste time reinventing the wheel"

Governance and management support was identified by participants as a target area for reducing volunteer time wasted by "reinventing the wheel." Many of the needs identified by participants in this section are ideal candidates for knowledge sharing, as a number of P&Cs are doing these things well.

Be organised—and thoughtful—about supporting each other, by capturing and sharing knowledge

"We try to retain outgoing executive in less demanding but support roles e.g., on subcommittees or as vice president. We try to keep all roles distinct so that we aren't so dependent on 3 or 4 people. We recognise fundraising committee and events is a large commitment, so each person on the committee is responsible for one event, then others support them. We try to keep a list of tasks for each event, attendance numbers, equipment, what needs to be purchased, to make it easier next time."

Knowledge capture and handovers

Reinventing happened within committees (e.g., quiz night to quiz night); between P&C committees in the same school (e.g., when prominent individuals leave, there is a mass turnover of committee members, or simply due to record keeping and handovers that are skimpy or rushed); and between P&Cs (e.g., how to manage canteen orders). Several participants expressed the sensible suggestion that "P&Cs would do well to document their roles and processes to help with clearly communicating roles and expectations for volunteers. Making it easier for new people to come up to speed."

> **Respect what people have done before you, help the people who come after you**
>
> *"I have watched at least three turnovers of P&C committees at my school—often the new people come in very enthusiastic but also somewhat dismissive of the work that has been done in the past only to burn out a few years later. Respectful and collaborative relationships between old and new parents are key for succession planning."*

From the reverse perspective, there were also stories of organised and well-used on-line filing systems being thrown out by a new committee, which people found disheartening—quite reasonably, given how much effort is involved in setting up an effective and accessible system.

Areas of shared knowledge specified by participants

Interviewees and survey respondents said they would like "a lot more direction for the technical side of running an organisation." Opinion was split whether these ought to be standardised across the state (required) or varied and completely optional (we recommend optional—"sharing" not prescribing). Specifically, people mentioned

- communication platform hosting

- identifying the best apps to use for organising volunteers at an event and for bookings and payments

- checklists for annual reporting requirements (and how to log in)

- document storage options (and/or hosting)

- suggested document storage structure

- document templates, e.g., minutes

- event planning outlines and guidelines

- grant writing was identified as an area of low experience and high time investment; it would help to have "assistance with grant writing—that takes up a lot of time and people are busy with their own jobs"

- how to write a press release (and take good photos) so your local paper will publish a story

- shared policies, especially complaint and conflict resolution

- calendar of compliance requirements for incorporated entities in Western Australia

- accounting guidelines, templates, shared accounting software licences

- payroll and occupational health and safety for canteens and

- help keeping up with legislative requirements and changes.

Document management

WACSSO could help P&Cs in managing documents and passing on tacit knowledge by providing a sharing platform and curating the best contributions. This would be of practical help and may also alleviate tension and uncertainty some less experienced P&C members or potential volunteers have about taking an executive role, ultimately aiding recruiting efforts.

Digital platforms and licence agreements

A focus for sharing practical knowledge to enable efficiency gains and cost saving was digital platforms and tools, which are particularly fast-changing. Reported by participants was P&Cs using outdated apps and sharing platforms due to difficulty keeping up with new technology and changeover costs; spending time researching the best app, for example for bookings and payments, and not necessarily ending up with the optimal system; bringing a whole committee together on a single communication and document sharing platform; and software for tasks such as bookkeeping and publishing. Shared licence agreements were mentioned more than once.

> **P&C committee members perform the same role as paid professionals**
>
> *"We are volunteers not businesses. We are not being paid. Support for our treasurers is a big problem especially when the P&C is operating the canteen and the uniform shop. Latest tax implications that have just come in have added to the already giant work load. Volunteer organisations need support not more work."*

Policies and constitution

Policies can be daunting to write, and knowledge of relevant legislation can be imperfect and has a high time cost. Some are straightforward (e.g., sun smart) so sharing makes sense. Some are hard to write because contingencies abound and the best process is debatable (e.g., policies addressing racism, conflict, or exclusion). Sharing policies and discussing how useful they turned out to be in practice is well worthwhile for developing a better policy. Some responses included the request to have a short list of mediators and conflict negotiators who are recommended, in case one is needed.

The constitution was mentioned in the context of being not well understood by P&C members, or not many being familiar with its contents. It is not unusual for a constitution to sit in a dusty cupboard until conflict breaks out, but it is good for many reasons to align what is done in practice with what the rules of the P&C *say* should be done. A participant said the one thing they would change to make life easier would be to refresh, rather than amend (no more "band-aid fixes") the constitution, so it was a "user-friendly" and "practical" living document they could use as a guide.

Advocacy and cutting red tape

Participants often expressed frustration at red tape: administration perceived as unnecessary, and state-wide regulations that do not fit them and restrict them from doing simple and good things. Several P&Cs have closed their canteens, and uniform shops are being outsourced. There was angst about Working With Children checks, and in some cases P&Cs were doing more paperwork than they needed to, in other cases WWC checks were merely proving to be one more barrier to easy and inclusive volunteering.

Participants often mentioned their support for WACSSO to advocate with the state government around reducing red tape, since red tape was seen as a significant disincentive to volunteer and a waste of precious volunteer time and resources. "The government wants people to build stronger communities by giving freely of their time and then place barriers to prevent participation."

> A common and relatable frustration
>
> *"Less red tape would be a good start. If the canteen was not so over regulated we'd have heaps of vollies, but to help out you have to do a food training certificate and have a WWC now, it's ridiculous."*

This is not strictly a knowledge sharing situation, but it was the case that some P&Cs were doing more work than necessary—or eliminating activities—because they did not understand the legislation.

A desire for a platform for *P&C to P&C* communication was mentioned multiple times. Many participants in the study used unofficial social media groups to share ideas and knowledge and for mutual support.

Several interviewees described events hosted by their local government representative, where they got together with other P&Cs in their area. They noted first that it was lovely to have catering done for them—they felt valued and appreciated. But the main benefit was the chance to network with other people who may be having similar problems and successes, and this was seen as both useful and affirming. Neither of these examples of knowledge sharing are used by (or available to) all member P&Cs, but there may be room for such initiatives on a whole-of-WA basis, if facilitated by WACSSO.

Knowledge sharing to save reinventing the wheel is a technical, task-oriented problem (rather than a complex social problem) and therefore is manageable, if logistically complicated. Time invested would pay off many times over for P&Cs in the future, and reinforce the perception of being supported.

When it is about people: Cliques, politics, power, and conflict

People problems were peppered throughout the data, though interviewees were more able than survey respondents to offer deep insight, with open conversation having a marked influence on what people were willing to discuss.[5] The survey contained multiple reminders not to mention the name of any person or school,[6] and respondents were relatively objective in style and circumspect in their answers to questions involving conflict of any kind. Interviewees, however, mentioned, implied, or pinpointed conflict, personality clashes, cliques, and cultural conflict (e.g., racism) as a barrier to volunteering and a barrier to trust and therefore to the harmonious and successful running of a P&C.

These—often personal and painful—disclosures highlight the influence of individuals and relationships on how well P&Cs function and progress, and the experience of volunteering for the P&C. They were also some of the most "stuck" situations described, and this is not surprising because cliques, politics, power, and conflict are hard to talk about. Attempts to resolve can be high-risk because of the unpredictability of responses, and the real chance that what you do will make the situations worse,

---

[5] Interviews were recorded and transcribed, so the difference in openness is more likely to be attributed to the mode of communication than the fact of being "on record."

[6] This was to comply with extra requirements of the Department of Education, despite the deidentification of data being included in the method proposed to and accepted by the Murdoch University Ethics Committee.

especially for you, personally. There were many subtle variations on people problems, as collated in Table 4.

Are there workable and effective solutions to relationship and people problems? Yes. Is it easy? No. Are strategies transferable, and outcomes predictable, and policies reliable and practical? Not really, there are so many contingencies that it is very difficult to write the perfect policy document for all situations.

Another of the difficulties of relying exclusively on "following process" is simply that it is often relationships or personalities *within the executive committee itself* that contribute to the problem, and they are responsible for running an object process—which is simply not realistic while values, judgments, and emotions exist (Sugars, 2022). Further, policy and process is often weaponised to manipulate a situation in a such a way that it can be justified and rationalised—legally if not always ethically. Weaponisation of process typically escalates the situation, adding the complication that people are now at odds over the method by which the situation should be resolved, as well as the outcome. Further, it inflames the situation, because people feel manipulated and much relationship damage can be done.

Open and honest conflict resolution can be very hard, especially in cases of cliques or abuse of power situations, or when the situation has already escalated. It takes courage to stay open to the needs and criticisms of others. Waiting and withdrawing are also valid choices for self-care.

While every situation is different, people can apply their experience and knowledge to novel situations, and leadership or conflict resolution training is a valuable investment. Board self-assessment is an important part of governing with integrity and transparency, and the mark of a top-notch committee.

Formal processes are perhaps a luxury on a volunteer committee, especially when other priorities are considered, but informal self-refection and honest and open communication is a matchless approach when it is about people. It takes skill, knowledge, experience, courage, and compassion to handle people problems with minimum fallout. It is not a job for the faint-hearted, and compassion and support for the person who is responsible for "handling it" can go a long way. It can also help to feel compassion for the often well-meaning and long-serving person (or people) perceived to be creating issues for others. Resolving the conflict is almost always a huge relief and the start of a more enjoyable and productive period.

Table 4 Common and intractable people problems on P&Cs

Difficult person	Conflict on the P&C is a big one. People have stated that "if that person is on the committee I won't join."
Handling difficult people in volunteer setting	"Main barrier is difficult personalities. At work they have to keep themselves in check, but in this setting there is nothing stopping them from misbehaving and frankly acting like naughty children."
Self-care	"I once quit the P&C for a year rather than work with a specific person."
Committee conflict	"Conflict within the P&C can be a major barrier especially if it makes people uncomfortable to sit throughout a meeting. We unfortunately lived that experience, and it took a very kind, brave and compassionate volunteer nominating for President to change that experience for all of us. We went from an autocratic governance to one of collaboration and equality."
Leadership is a hard job and indispensable	"I had to ask a member of the committee to step down due to excessive conflict. This was done in an amicable way as the team member themselves recognised the situation was excessive. To their credit they still volunteered to help behind the scenes but not attend meetings. This was a tough situation, but it set the P&C up well for a more harmonious environment which has now attracted a lot of new members. It was not a pleasant experience for me."
Lack of skill in conflict resolution	"Conflict within the P&C can be damaging to personal and professional reputations. There is little support to mediate when this occurs, i.e., mediators with conflict negotiation strengths. It is often easier to leave, rather than speak up to benefit the school and P&C."
Left unresolved, blocks potential	"It is very difficult to get someone who is not performing their role properly on a P&C to leave. This normally means other capable people leave instead."
Cliques and factions	"Our P&C has group conflicts and factions. It isn't very nice at the moment. This needs to be fixed."
Divisions, even unintentional	"Our P&C has a group of friends. Although they are very friendly to other P&C members there are two groups—the clique and the other P&C members."
Entrenched power in a clique	"Make the President and executive roles for one year role, to discourage the same people to be in power all the time surrounding themselves with their friends. People with new ideas and energy leave after the first meeting as they can see immediately which kind of game is played in such an environment"[7]
P&C–School relationship	"Poor relationship with principal (relatively common and highly impactful)"
Entrenched power imbalance	"A few parents I got to know left for the same reasons I keep thinking of leaving: not being listened to, too much power with a few people, Principal relies on P&C money and help so supports the few individuals who get to decide things. There are too many teachers in the meetings so the school and the group of P&C friends always have the majority. The rest of the parents remain without any option to be heard. This causes a lot of frustration and absolutely no will to help or enter the P&C."
Bullying, exclusion	"Bullying, not being inclusive of new members."
Everyday tension of working as a group	"This one's easy but hard to manage. The people :) we undo ourselves. It's how the leadership of the team manage through these pressures when there's a strong group of people all wanting the same end but their own way to get there. People need leadership and HR training these days to manage 'today's committees'."

---

[7] We do not recommend this solution, because it is using a technical fix to solve a people problem—a form of weaponisation of process—and furthermore is not practical because the rule is easily broken when no one else is volunteering to be President. It also has opportunity costs, because continuity of leaders is valuable for making significant process.

As can be seen in the table, there are many factors to consider, and many variants of social and relational conflict. Conflict resolution training of any kind is always a good investment. Mentoring can also be helpful; leaders can be under pressure and extremely isolated when dealing with conflict in a way that preserves dignity and privacy of all parties.

Conscious and unconscious biases

Unconscious bias and assumptions—and negative judgments made about parents not currently volunteering—can be difficult to articulate and to shift. Systemic inequalities and familiar ways of doing things are just as hard to recognise as social constructions—not "reality"—and arguably even more difficult to change. Progress can be made through critical self-reflection; cultural awareness and knowledge; creative planning work; inclusive and multi-modal communication strategies; and sharing successful initiatives. These are all potential areas for knowledge building in the form of WACSSO training or a training course tailored for P&Cs.

Judgment

Two findings from the research, one surprising and one unsurprising, are discussed here, and diversity is treated in more detail in a separate section. Surprisingly, not everyone who complete the survey demonstrated a volunteering mindset and attitude in their response to being asked why people do not get involved. We refer to the premise—also identified in survey data—that volunteering includes an element of "willingness" and "choice" whereas some respondents appeared to assume contributing to the P&C was something everybody "should" do—a civic "duty." Lack of time was cited often as a barrier, for example, but not deemed a "valid" reason to say no: "People think they are busy or believe because they have younger children they are unable to do any volunteer work. *We feel many people use whatever they can as an excuse*" [our emphasis].

> Judgment, conscious or unconscious, can take time to shift
>
> *Parents choosing not to volunteer for the P&C were judged as "not valuing their children enough to take time out for the kids and help out," "just lazy and selfish parents who think there will always be someone else doing the job," and having a "lack of care for other human beings."*

This kind of judgement reinforces negative experiences of recruiting, cliques, and an "us and them" group dynamic. Even if not explicitly expressed, people sense judgment. If a new person does

volunteer, they are then faced with a choice of identifying with the "people who do all the work" or the rest of the community, which likely includes their friends, all of whom are potential volunteers. Furthermore, a viewpoint like this foments resentment and martyrdom, and can lead to conflict and burnout. P&Cs with large volunteer bases, on the other hand, showed a more open and accepting mindset and attitude, recognizing that everyone's life, past experiences, culture, and priorities are different, and that they themselves are volunteering because they choose to and they enjoy it. This kind of shift in outlook is not simple to make; awareness may be a first step.

Stigma

The unsurprising finding was a desire to "remove the stigma of the P&C mum." Contributing to reinforcing a gender imbalance, were a good number of comments about the "perception that it's for women only." Nonetheless, progress was observed in the gender aspect of diverse representation (see EDI section on gender).

> **Participants yearned for a different reputation**
>
> *If I could change anything I would... "start fresh without all the urban myths and stereotypes about what P&Cs, and the people who are in them, are like."*

Gender stereotypes

Interviews were done with several men who served as president of the P&C, one saying that it was the women on the committee who urged him to nominate. Considering the small proportion of men in the survey sample, there appeared to be a disproportionate number in leader roles; one all-male executive said they now had trouble recruiting women.

Negative perceptions persist about women's leadership and organisational ability—perpetuated by both women and men—

> *"I am the only male on the P&C. Being the only male and working full time I find the organisation strategies of the mostly stay at home mums in the P&C to be very challenging. There is little structure in place to support work to be done at a time suitable for the individual. There is lots of group chat that takes a long time to consume rather than clear, succinct tasks."*

—as well as stereotyping of women's rational decision-making capacity:

> *"More dads!! We really need more dads to get involved for so many reasons—the busy bee, support in the executive roles, to take the emotion out of decisions, and to provide more hands on deck."*

Conscious and unconscious bias are perhaps the most complex and sensitive of issues to explore among a P&C membership, but vital for developing awareness, and a diverse and inclusive P&C community.

> *"Our P&C isn't diverse. Nor do they have procedures, policies and guides in place to keep members safe from racism like I experienced."*

Equity, diversity and inclusion

Finding strategies for increasing diversity and inclusion in P&Cs was an important objective of this research. The research was designed to elicit tacit knowledge from participants, and this question was the one most affected by the limits of sampling, which meant the dominant perspective in the responses was from people who do not identify as diverse and are already part of the P&C family. The survey was completed mostly by women (90%), but men were more equally represented in interviews. Gender was also the area where the most progress has been made, for example, male committee representation and men's groups activities.

The survey data includes views from people identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (8%) and who speak a language other than English at home (18%), yet fewer strategies for cultural inclusion were shared. This section discusses how participants framed equity, diversity and inclusion in the context of searching for volunteers and running a P&C, describes some modest successes, and finally looks to the volunteering literature for more strategies to boost diverse representation.

To begin with, the research objectives and what participants seemed to want to gain from the research are not quite aligned. While there was agreement that diverse participation in P&C activities was important and desirable, data showed stronger agreement that all age levels should be represented on the P&C than the P&C be representative of cultural groups in the school (Figure 4).

Furthermore, if given a choice between more diversity and more volunteers, respondents prioritised more volunteers, with the most "strongly agree" responses being for the statement "It doesn't matter who is on the P&C, so long as they are parents committed in the role and the school." As well as the view that this issue is irrelevant, there was also some disagreement with the statement "diverse P&Cs have more potential." Some respondents expressed the view that focusing on diversity and inclusion is counterproductive, and actually divides people.

Food for thought—not everyone sees increasing diversity as a goal

"I do not care and nor would most people, how diverse and inclusive P&Cs are. We are all volunteers and what we care about is having other people volunteer. We could not care one way or the other what nationality they are or what age group they represent. That is a totally weird concept you are going down, worried about diversity & inclusivity on a P&C. Our priority is getting anyone to join up to increase members and volunteers. Who cares where they come from or what they represent?"

So it cannot be assumed that all P&Cs have a priority, or even a medium or long-term goal, to increase diversity and inclusion. Most responses, however, stated or assumed positive change would include "adding other demographics and cultures" since "currently the entire P&C is white women in their 30's and 40's."

Our view is that including a greater diversity of people on the P&C is ethically and socially desirable, and from a practical perspective it is not a matter of choosing one priority over the other. Rather doing both can fulfil both objectives at the same time—"and" not "or"—since increasing diverse representation naturally increases the pool of potential volunteers and the number of social networks P&Cs have access to.
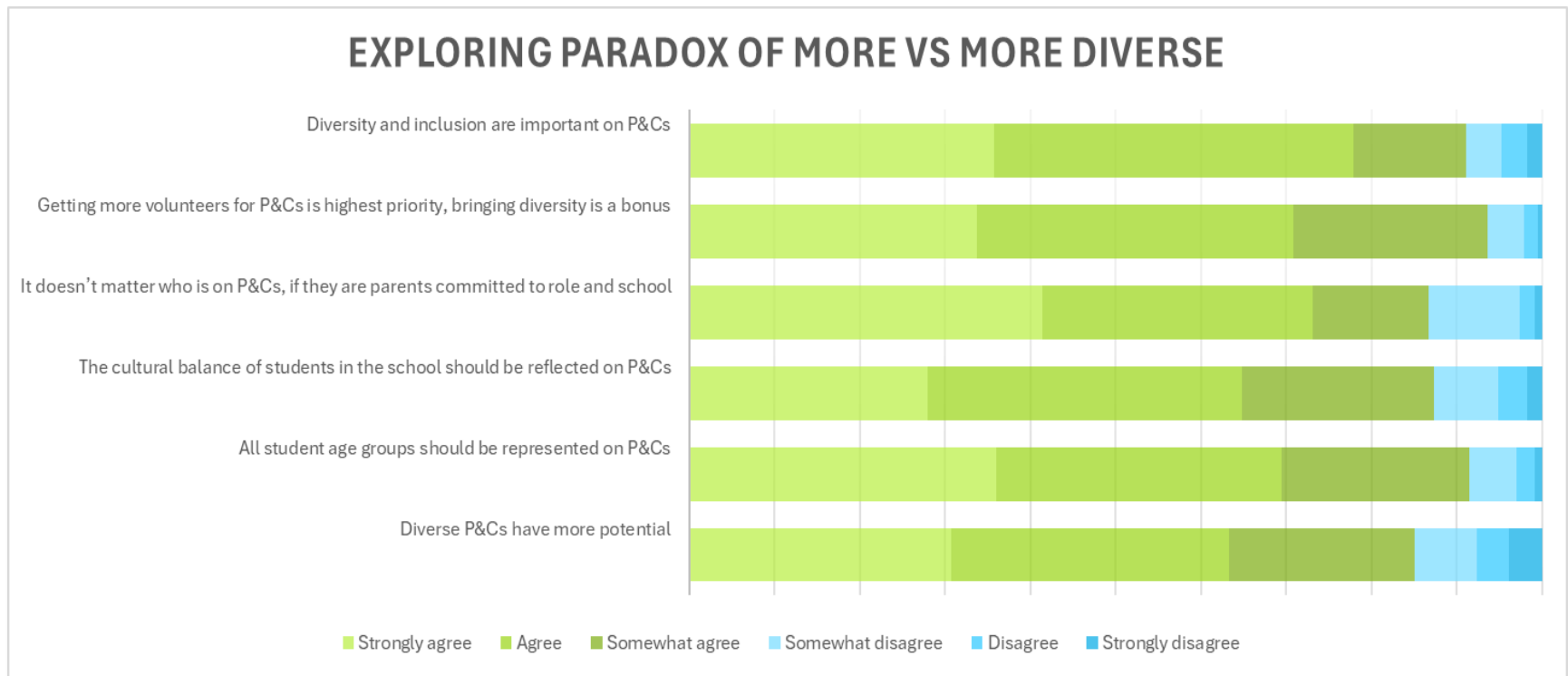
Data showed differentiation in how participants were working towards inclusion, depending on the type of minority group. Different categories of diverse or minority communities were perceived to be easier or harder to include, and progress towards their inclusion more or less likely—and sought after. Different approaches were needed to work towards a gender balance than towards cultural representation, for instance.

School years of children

School years of children was mentioned quite often, and the importance of representation from all age groups was rated higher than the importance of cultural representation. Helpful strategies for ensuring a spread of ages being involved in P&C activities included having a representative from each class and allocating specific event organising to each class. The fundraising needs of Year 6 was something P&Cs considered, to make sure the fundraising load and use of funds was fair.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated social distancing were noted as disrupting the continuity of community and network building, and parents' sense of involvement with the school. So, there is a risk that some P&Cs will experience, or are experiencing, a gap in their volunteer flow. This will require working harder or more creatively to engage the affected parent group, who did not form a sense of belonging in the parent or school community when their children first started school. There is also the likelihood that members of a committee have served together for longer, which brings the inevitable risk of a mass turnover. Handovers will be even more important in this case.

Participants reported focusing on recruiting parents with a range of school ages. Early involvement will obviously lead to a longer period of engagement, since many people stop volunteering once their children leave school.

> Class reps help balance year group representation and add another communication channel to the network
>
> *"It would help if each year group had class reps and a strategic plan to allocate events to and communicate/plan... it's very hard to gain volunteers without these. Our last school had a very successful P&C with each year group having class reps and private fb groups."*

Age of volunteers

The age of volunteers was not a feature of responses; 6% of survey responses said they fell outside the normal age range for a volunteer at school. Most volunteers were the parents of children who were school age. The exceptions to this were grandparents and long-serving presidents asked to stay on after their children left the school. The value of older volunteers is undeniable, however some reservations were expressed, such as older volunteers were less flexible, for example in complying with health and safety regulations in the canteen. Based purely on existing numbers, and the potential to increase that number proportionally, a targeted initiative based on grandparents or community members may not yield a large number of new volunteers.

Single parents

Issues of inequitable access for single parents were raised in the data, for example, child care and time constraints are problematic for attending meetings. However, this was the same for all families, not exclusively single parent families.

LGBTQI+

There was little or no commentary on LGBTQI+ inclusion or exclusion in the data, with people identifying as such represented in the participant sample at a similar level to the general population. This seems to be a reflection of societal attitudes in Western Australia and, similar to gender, while LGBTQI+ identification is a meaningful personal identity, it need not spatially or socially isolate people into a subgroup within a school community, as cultural identity and English proficiency can. This observation may not reflect everyone's reality; one respondent in a small-town community did feel excluded based simply on being a vegetarian, because apparently in that town being vegetarian is a "bit strange."

Gender

Analysing the data on gender representation uncovered many opportunities for future research, that is to say there were mixed messages, and it is over-reaching to draw conclusions. The balance of gender in the survey responses indicates that P&Cs are largely still the domain of women, with 88% of participants being women. Interviews, however, suggested that male participation is concentrated in some P&Cs and some roles. Men appeared more likely to take leader roles than other roles, like president or treasurer, and men tended to cluster on particular committees. Two male-dominated committees reported having trouble recruiting women to their executive, one after reporting they had

"fixed" all the systems so they worked properly. Men were also highly likely to offer their expertise and experience in an interview.

Initiatives to engage men in P&C and school activities—reported as going well—were fathers' or dads' groups. These were, variously, independently run, run by the P&C, or supported by the P&C. There are insights about culture, dominant culture, and belonging to be gleaned from these observations but the research was not designed to do this and it is out of the project's scope.

Are P&Cs culturally diverse? If not, why not? What can we do about it?

Culture was the most problematic barrier to inclusion observed in the data, especially when this included a different language, religion, skin colour, or intersectionality. White South African women, for instance, had no problem with participation.

Data showed perceived boundaries between "us and them" when it came to cultural subgroups, even when there was no antipathy. It is natural for identification with a cultural subgroup to be stronger than identification with the school community or as an Australian citizen. This kind of subgroup identification engenders a sense of "not belonging." A story was told about someone who thought the P&C was not for them because she was not a "citizen."

> **Minority cultural groups are underrepresented on P&Cs**
>
> *"Diversity—at our school we have 60% of Indian/Asian extraction. Whereas the P&C has 86% Caucasian members and only 14% Indian."*

Furthermore, the concept of volunteering as westerners understand it is foreign to many cultures where helping each other is an everyday expectation.

Other parents have had traumatic school experiences themselves and do not want to identify with or be involved in school-related activities.

Collective volunteering (as opposed to individual volunteering)

Learning from the research may be useful, however; for example, successful recruiting of men, and of parents with children in a particular age group, involved recruiting or engaging—not one[8]—but a

---

[8] The pros and cons of recruiting a single "representative" of a minority culture are discussed in the literature section in Appendix A.

number of people at once (the whole subgroup, not individuals).[9] Much of this research project studies the *individual* motivations people have for volunteering. People of other cultures have an even more communal culture than Australians, and it appears even Australians like to join up to something new with their mates.

This framing may be worth trying—what might motivate the Muslim *community*, for example, to volunteer? What benefits might the Muslim *community* enjoy if members were to engage more fully in P&C events and volunteering? Further, how might this perspective affect communication strategy? Does it mean approach Muslim *community leaders*, even if they are not parents at the school, rather than communicating with each family separately, via a school newsletter for example?

Spatial proximity and social interaction

A practical difference between the gender divide and the cultural divide is that spatially—in day-to-day life—men and women interact frequently, often in the same household. The mere fact of proximity provides the opportunity to feel comfortable together in social situations and to make shared decisions, and even to be persuaded to volunteer for the P&C: "My wife was heavily involved and needed more helpers." Causation is not assumed, that is, who is to say which comes first? Feeling comfortable, negotiating decisions, or volunteering? It does not matter, change one and they are all affected.

The same spatial proximity and social interaction does not necessarily occur between different cultural groups. A first step to inclusion of culturally diverse groups (or anyone) may be regular, low-risk social contact with current members. "I think more fundraisers aimed at getting parents involved—quiz nights or car washes—might get parents to see the P&C is social and fun, not all business all the time." Many activities P&Cs run are just "for the children" and parents do the work to make this happen. Parent involvement can be enhanced by hosting activities designed for children *and* parents to socialise.

---

[9] The distinction between one person being socially mobile between subgroups and the whole subgroup changing their status is discussed as part of social identity theory.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.

Research by Fiol and colleagues showed that a subgroup are more likely to integrate into a superordinate group if they can maintain their subgroup identity and add the new identity, than if they are asked to give up their subgroup identity for the new one.

Fiol, C. M., Pratt, M. G., & O'Connor, E. J. (2009). Managing intractable identity conflicts. *Academy of Management Review*, *34*(1), 32–55. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27759984

Locus of control and personal responsibility

A person who can potentially act as a bridge between two subgroups is in a somewhat unenviable position. They can be relied on too much as a "representative" and they are only one person. They can also feel like a token, feel like their voice is not heard, or be consistently outvoted.[10]

Participants described events they organised specifically with the aim of including families from minority cultures, and many reported they had poor attendance and engagement. They then made the very reasonable point that their time and energy is limited and so they give priority to events they know are going to work and provide benefit for the majority of the community.

There is the option to recruit someone—perhaps someone who bridges the cultural divide—*and their friends* to run an event, or part of an event. Responsibility begets a stronger sense of ownership and involvement than mere attendance, as discussed earlier.

Perhaps reframing the problem may help.

Tokenism or small wins?

Training in cultural awareness and how to engage a culturally diverse community could be helpful, especially when culture-specific. All-Halal sausages at P&C events, for instance, was mentioned a few times. This is easily accessible cultural knowledge, but a deeper understanding may be needed.

Using Halal sausages shows welcome and willingness to cater for different needs. This will hopefully increase inclusion at events, though progress may take time. As discussed earlier, however, belonging includes a sense of ownership and participation in decision-making. Catering for others' needs is not the same as others being integrally involved in planning and strategising; not when it comes to developing a sense of belonging.

Most successful cultural initiatives involved small wins. These are still worthwhile steps, however. People feel good about taking that step. Feeling good about it translates to a positive mindset, thinking creatively, and trying again, and to sharing ideas.

---

[10] Studies of women on boards suggests that having a single representative of a minority is not effective in creating cultural change.

> **Small wins help make the effort seem worthwhile (also... persist)**
>
> *"The P&C is voluntary... Putting more expectations on volunteers is only going to stretch resources, time and the want to help. It's a tough one to balance this one. Once you start where do you stop? Many of the things we've done in the past to be inclusive for projects and events haven't been used. This makes all the prep work a waste of time and disappointing for volunteers. But in the case of our canteen our staff are now including Halal items. Has taken some time but finally have a small following making the extra work, time and cost worthwhile"*

Language

Language is cited as a barrier to communication. Low-cost translation is easier now than it has ever been, with the help of technology. For example, a bilingual school member can read the newsletter on video or audio, generative AI can be used for translating, images are a powerful communication tool, and informal communication networks can be leveraged.

The ASK

People are more likely to volunteer when they are asked (Bekkers et al., 2016), but we are more likely to ask in the same way, and more likely to ask the people we know (van Overbeeke et al., 2022).

> *"If I'm running a P&C event, I always recruit my friends... because it's hard to get volunteers any other way."*

Person-to-person asking is not viable for a whole community, but people are more likely to volunteer when asked, so a targeted plan may be called for. People who are already helping out are good potential volunteers (statements in this section on "the ask" are elaborated in overview of literature, Lockstone-Binney et al., 2022).

Who are you asking? How are you asking? Is it personal? Is it interactive? When are you asking? How many times are you asking? How many different ways are you asking? What language are you asking in?

Cultural segregation is a systemic and enduring social phenomenon, why expect P&C members to fix it?

An insightful observation was made by some participants: no one in the world is succeeding at integrating dominant cultures and subcultures, within the dominant culture's milieu. "It's a systemic problem, how do they expect us to solve it?" This is true, and it is completely understandable why people would feel "at a loss and just trying to do their best." Sometimes, however, it is possible to make a difference in a smaller environment even when it seems impossible to make global societal change.

Consider who you are asking, how, and to do what?

"I think there are cultural barriers to volunteering—some cultures are notoriously shy and aren't keen to put themselves forward. Other religions/cultures have a requirement for community contribution and we need to be better at capitalising on those people when they come forward. We are also our own worst enemies that once you are on the P&C you keep asking the same people to help so that same core group keep getting asked to help as they are generally yes people."
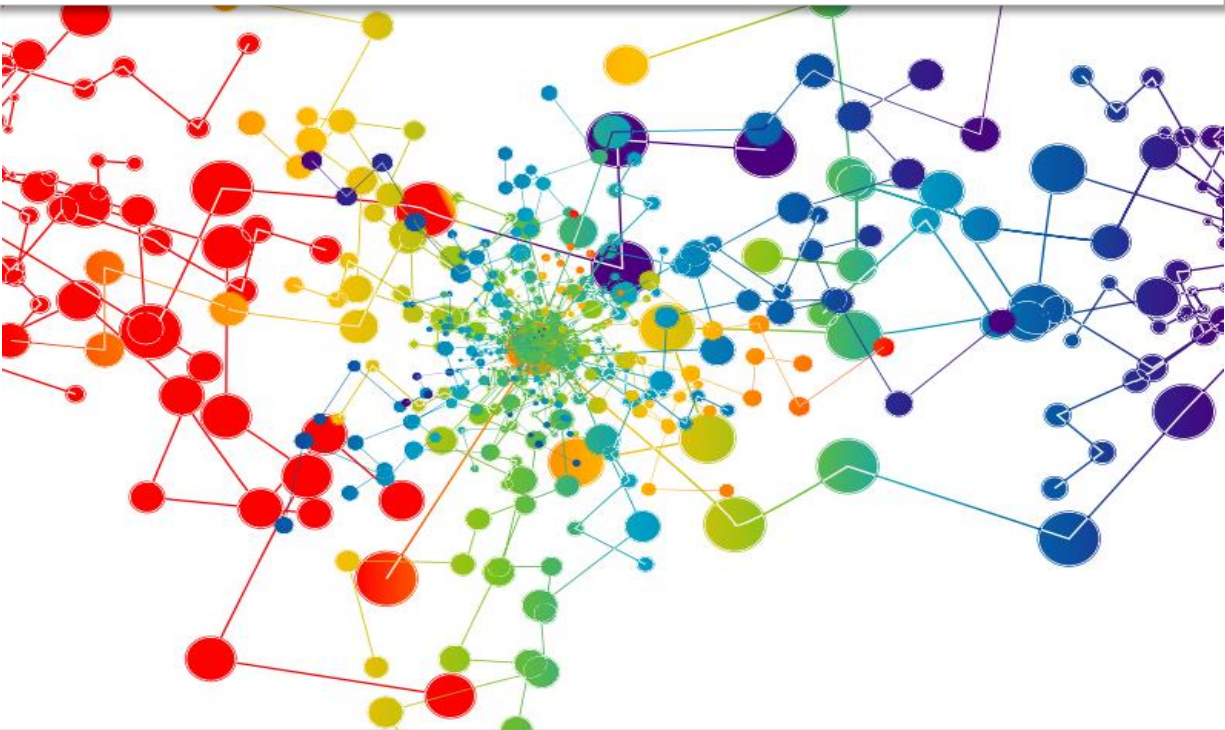
Increase your pool of volunteers via other people's social networks (be willing to relinquish control)

"I have found by getting many different volunteers to run one small activity each they can all use their own networks and it is easier to get help because you're not drawing on the same pool of people. Once someone has helped with a specific event it is likely they will help the next time that style event is run."

Finally, how can WACSSO help with diversity?

There was limited knowledge and experience in increasing diversity identified in responses, and therefore a knowledge-sharing approach is unlikely to be effective, and furthermore appetite was lukewarm. Not for lack of wanting to do more in this area rather, understandably, the priority is to put effort into (a) activities members know how to do and (b) initiatives that are more likely to be successful.

Progress may remain slow unless WACSSO takes the lead in increasing diversity and inclusion in parent participation in P&Cs across WA. This could include increasing the knowledge base (training), sharing positive initiatives (communication), advising individual P&Cs (support), and modelling a positive mindset and attitude.

"The support WACSSO gives our P&C and the chance to go to conferences seems to have motivated our membership to be more than just fundraisers. We have been able to raise issues that our remote school faces. Support is really important."

Have realistic expectations and be kind to yourself, you are not expected to solve inequality today

"To be perfectly honest I have no idea how to get our P&C to be more culturally diverse. I am at a loss and I'm just trying to do my best."

Increasing diverse participation: Top tips from literature

Creating inclusive environments

An inclusive environment is not static, it evolves to meet the community's needs. Organisations can work to create a culture where all volunteers feel valued and respected. This includes examining current practices. A welcoming atmosphere strives to include all voices and offers an environment where individuals feel safe to express their identities and concerns without fear of discrimination or retaliation. Respectful debate, and opportunities for dissent are part of this atmosphere.

Making it easy to join in

Creation of a welcoming atmosphere means not only an absence of barriers, but a visible presence of support. This includes, for example, support networks through buddy systems, mentoring, and community groups to help new volunteers from diverse backgrounds feel welcome. It also includes consideration of cost, language, and access to technology when designing activities or setting up events and meetings.

Training and education

Training and education about how the organisation works, and what is expected, can be accompanied by training and resources to increase awareness and understanding of cultural diversity. Ongoing education includes cultural competence and inclusive practices and is a continuous process. Training and awareness raising includes understanding, recognising and combating biases including unconscious bias and racism; conflict resolution mechanisms; active bystander training; a strong stance against all forms of harassment and discrimination; and messaging about creation of a more inclusive environment for all. It is important that training and education are included in policies and approaches recognising that individuals may have multiple, intersecting identities that affect their experiences. Awareness raising among existing members and volunteers makes the environment more welcoming for newcomers. Programs focusing on empowering underrepresented communities by providing opportunities that enhance their capacity to participate and lead will also be beneficial in developing new leaders.

Recruitment, accessibility, and engagement

To encourage potential newcomers to consider joining, it helps to use inclusive language in calls for more volunteers; actively reach out to diverse communities; and consciously seek to minimise barriers that might prevent people from volunteering. Willingness to look at communication, physical,

and logistical accessibility for potential volunteers with specific needs will help those potential newcomers feel welcome.

Structural and systemic changes

Diverse representation within the leadership and governance structures of organisations will lead to changes overall just simply because diverse thinking brings new ideas and new perspectives. Seeking to actively embed EDI principles into core policies and plans, will integrate them into the organisation. This includes provision of sufficient resources, including funding, time, and materials allocated to EDI initiatives both standalone and embedded. Such changes will improve capacity to provide customised support and resources that recognise the diverse needs and experiences of volunteers, including flexible volunteering options.

Self-awareness, monitoring and evaluation

Regular self-assessments to monitor the inclusivity of volunteer programs can include feedback mechanisms to encourage feedback from volunteers about their experiences. Importantly, use this information to make improvements. Publicly share EDI commitments and actions and provide regular updates on achievements and challenges; this increases the visibility of what is happening, increases awareness, and leads to a more welcoming atmosphere.

Partnerships and community engagement

Community outreach and collaboration can raise awareness about volunteer opportunities and the benefits of volunteering in the school community. This might include partnering with other community organisations who better understand and meet the needs of different communities. Offering to support community-led initiatives as a reciprocal arrangement can benefit everyone and can serve to ensure that the initiatives are relevant and beneficial to the community, and that community members have a say in decision-making processes. [Note, insight from this project supports this theory, especially for engaging diverse cultures in school activities.]

Recognition and celebration

Recognising and celebrating the contributions of volunteers from diverse backgrounds through awards and public acknowledgment can be developed—taking care to avoid patronising or disrespectful approaches or embarrassment. This includes promoting understanding and inclusivity, by incorporating cultural celebrations and practices into volunteer activities—again taking care to avoid patronising, tokenistic, or disrespectful approaches.

Shared understanding of volunteering as a concept

Volunteering is not a universal concept, with many cultures valuing community participation—not as an extra or additional activity—simply part of being in a community. This can mean two things: first, individuals may not recognise what they are doing as volunteering. Second, it can mean being asked to volunteer is a foreign concept, so people may not know what to expect and are more likely to decline just due to uncertainty.

Conclusion

P&C volunteers are generous, capable, and motivated people. They face and overcome any number of obstacles to achieve their aim of making every child's school experience better, and every family's experience of schooling more connected and enjoyable. The four dimensions model (Figure 5, p. 32) is presented here in the hope that this research can support P&Cs and have practical and long-term impact on volunteer experiences.

We have also presented the idea of classifying current issues—and those identified in future—as aspects of P&C organising that can be improved through knowledge-sharing, knowledge-building, and capacity building. We hope this will help WACSSO choose focus areas, prioritise what seems possible and useful right now and what valuable skills can be built up over time.

Thank you for the opportunity to do this research, and for your support and engagement throughout the project.

Glossary

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)—principles aimed at creating fair and welcoming environments where everyone can thrive, regardless of their background or identity.

Equity—ensuring everyone has access to the same opportunities by providing the resources they need to succeed. It's about fairness—not necessarily treating everyone the same—giving people what they need to be on an equal footing.

Diversity—ensuring the presence of different kinds of people in a group. These differences might be, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status.

Inclusion—ensuring everyone feels valued and included, regardless of their differences. This involves ensuring that everyone feels respected, heard, and able to participate fully.

Group Leadership Capacity—the capacity of a group to harness available leadership resources, and collectively enact leadership to meet the needs of the group

References

Allison, M., & Kaye, J. (2011). *Strategic planning for nonprofit organizations: A practical guide and workbook*. John Wiley & Sons.

Baillie Smith, M., Thomas, N., & Hazeldine, S. (2021). Rethinking volunteering and cosmopolitanism: Beyond individual mobilities and personal transformations. *Geopolitics*, *26*(5), 1353–1375. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1666106

Baxter, G., & Kilderry, A. (2022). Family school partnership discourse: Inconsistencies, misrepresentation, and counter narratives. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *109*, 103561. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2246683

Baxter, G., & Toe, D. (2024). Abandoning a discourse of poverty to develop equitable educational practices through family school partnerships. *Educational Review*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2246683

Bekkers, R., van Ingen, E., de Wit, A., & van Groenou, M. B. (2016). Why do people volunteer? A review of the literature. 45th ARNOVA Conference, Washington DC,.

Bridges, J., Gray, W., Box, G., & Machin, S. (2008). Discovery interviews: A mechanism for user involvement. *International Journal of Older People Nursing*, *3*(3), 206–210. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-3743.2008.00128.x

Chen, J., Wang, C., & Tang, Y. (2022). Knowledge mapping of volunteer motivation: A bibliometric analysis and cross-cultural comparative study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 883150. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.883150

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.

Dury, S., De Donder, L., De Witte, N., Buffel, T., Jacquet, W., & Verté, D. (2015). To volunteer or not: The influence of individual characteristics, resources, and social factors on the likelihood of volunteering by older adults. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *44*(6), 1107–1128. https://doi.org/ 10.1177/0899764014556773

Eikenberry, A. M. (2009). Refusing the market: A democratic discourse for voluntary and nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *38*(4), 582–596. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764009333686

Enjolras, B. (2021). Explaining the varieties of volunteering in Europe: A capability approach. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *32*(6), 1187–1212. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00347-5

Fiol, C. M., Pratt, M. G., & O'Connor, E. J. (2009). Managing intractable identity conflicts. *Academy of Management Review*, *34*(1), 32–55. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27759984

Forner, V. W., Holtrop, D., Boezeman, E. J., Slemp, G. R., Kotek, M., Kragt, D., Askovic, M., & Johnson, A. (2024). Predictors of turnover amongst volunteers: A systematic review and meta analysis. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *45*(3), 434–458. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2729

Forster, J. (1997). *Potential of a lifetime: The Carnegie TSB Foundation third aged volunteering report*. Carnegie, United Kingdom Trust.

Gerrard, J., & Savage, G. C. (2022). The governing parent-citizen: Dividing and valorising parent

labour through school governance. *Journal of Education Policy*, *37*(5), 744–761.

https://doi.org/10/1080/02680939.2021.1877357

Goodall, J., & Montgomery, C. (2014). Parental involvement to parental engagement: A

continuum. . *Educational Review*, *66*(4), 399–410.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.781576

Graham, A., Truscott, J., O'Byrne, C., Considine, G., Hampshire, A., Creagh, S., & Western, M.

(2021). Disadvantaged families' experiences of home-school partnerships: Navigating

agency, expectations and stigma. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *25*(11),

1236–1251. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1607913

Greenspan, I., & Walk, M. (2024). Informal volunteering and immigrant generations: exploring

overlooked dimensions in immigrant volunteering research. *VOLUNTAS: International

Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *35*(1), 23–35.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-023-00563-1

Harris, M. E. (2015). Organizational challenges of community associations: Applying nonprofit

research to real-world problems. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *44*(4), 796–

813. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764014533996

Haski-Leventhal, D., Metz, E., Hogg, E., Ibrahim, B., Smith, D., & Wang, L. (2016). Volunteering in

three life stages. In D. Smith, R. Stebbins, & J. Grotz (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of

volunteering, civic participation, and nonprofit associations* (Vol. 1, pp. 682–701).

Haski-Leventhal, D., Oppenheimer, M., Holmes, K., Lockstone-Binney, L., Alony, I., & Ong, F.

(2019). The conceptualization of volunteering among nonvolunteers: Using the net-cost

approach to expand definitions and dimensions of volunteering. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *48*(2_suppl), 30S–51S. https://doi.org/10.1007s11266-023-00563-1

Haski‑Leventhal, D., Meijs, L. C., Lockstone‑Binney, L., Holmes, K., & Oppenheimer, M. (2018). Measuring volunteerability and the capacity to volunteer among non‑volunteers: Implications for social policy. *Social Policy & Administration*, *52*(5), 1139–1167. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00407-w

Holtrop, D., Soo, C., Gagné, M., Kragt, D., Dunlop, P. D., & Luksyte, A. (2024). Exploring Volunteer Turnover Reasons, Intentions, and Behavior. *Group & Organization Management*. https://doi.org/10.1177/10596011241237841

Hopkins, B., & Dowell, D. (2022). Recruitment and retention in not-for-profit organisations: tailored strategies for younger and older volunteers. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, *44*(1), 259–273. https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-10-2020-0450

Hustinx, L., Grubb, A., Rameder, P., & Shachar, I. Y. (2022). Inequality in volunteering: Building a new research front. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *33*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-022-00455-w

Jehn, K. A., & Jonsen, K. (2010). A multimethod approach to the study of sensitive organizational issues. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, *4*(4), 313–341. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689810380920

Kao, J.-C., Cho, C.-C., & Kao, R.-H. (2023). Perceived organizational support and organizational citizenship behavior–A study of the moderating effect of volunteer participation motivation, and cross-level effect of transformational leadership and organizational

climate. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1082130.

https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1082130

Kulik, L. (2017). Volunteering during an emergency: A life stage perspective. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *46*(2), 419–441.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764016655621

Lockstone-Binney, L., Holmes, K., Meijs, L. C., Oppenheimer, M., Haski-Leventhal, D., & Taplin, R. (2022). Growing the volunteer pool: Identifying non-volunteers most likely to volunteer. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *33*(4), 777–794. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00407-w

Lopina, E., & Rogelberg, S. (2013). Recruitment, retention, and motivation of volunteers in the nonprofit sector: A volunteer socialisation perspective. . In J. Olson-Buchanan, L. Bryan, & L. Thompson (Eds.), *Using industrial–organizational psychology for the greater good: Helping those who help others.* Routledge.

Lowe, K., Harrison, N., Tennent, C., Guenther, J., Vass, G., & Moodie, N. (2019). Factors affecting the development of school and Indigenous community engagement: A systematic review. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *46*(2), 253–271.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00314-6

Maier, F., Meyer, M., & Steinbereithner, M. (2016). Nonprofit organizations becoming business-like: A systematic review. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *45*(1), 64–86.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764014561796

Maitlis, S., & Christianson, M. (2014). Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving

forward. *Academy of Management Annals*, *8*(1), 57–125.

https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2014.873177

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods

sourcebook* (3. ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://go.exlibris.link/Dcv7lB36

Musick, M. A., & Wilson, J. (2007). *Volunteers: A social profile*. Indiana University Press.

Nursey-Bray, M., Masud-All-Kamal, M., Di Giacomo, M., & Millcock, S. (2022). Building

community resilience through youth volunteering: towards a new model. *Regional

Studies, Regional Science*, *9*(1), 242–263.

https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2022.2067004

Pascale, R. T., & Sternin, J. (2005). Your company's secret change agents. *Harvard Business

Review*, *83*(5), 72–81.

Peucker, M. (2020). Muslim community volunteering: The civic-religious 'culture of

benevolence'and its sociopolitical implications. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*,

46(11), 2367–2386. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1543020

Piller, I., Bruzon, A. S., & Torsh, H. (2023). Monolingual school websites as barriers to parent

engagement. *Language and Education*, *37*(3), 328–345.

https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2021.2010744

Prout Quicke, S., & Biddle, N. (2017). School (non-) attendance and 'mobile cultures':

theoretical and empirical insights from Indigenous Australia. *Race Ethnicity and

Education*, *20*(1), 57–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1150831

Randle, M., & Dolnicar, S. (2012). Attracting volunteers in highly multicultural societies: A

marketing challenge. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, *24*(4), 351–369.

Rowe, E., & Perry, L. B. (2020). Inequalities in the private funding of public schools: Parent

financial contributions and school socioeconomic status. *Journal of Educational*

Administration and History, *52*(1), 42–59.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2019.1689234

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods*, *15*(1), 85–

109. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X02239569

Schoemaker, P. J. (1995). Scenario planning: a tool for strategic thinking. *MIT Sloan*

Management Review.

Stefanick, L., Best-Bertwistle, R., & Race, L. S. (2020). Retaining volunteers in the age of

precarious work. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, *32*(2), 124–146.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2018.1526747

Sternin, J. (2002). Positive deviance: A new paradigm for addressing today's problems today.

Journal of corporate citizenship(5), 57–62.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/jcorpciti.5.57

Storr, R. (2021). Commitment, resistance and indifference toward diversity amongst community

cricket volunteers. *Sport in Society*, *25*(1), 86–104.

https://doi.org/10.1080/17437,2020,1773432

Sugars, K. (2022). *A lived experience theory of schism (LETS): Exploring the complex social*

dynamics powering factionalised conflict in nonprofit organisations [Doctoral

Dissertation, Murdoch University].

https://researchportal.murdoch.edu.au/esploro/outputs/doctoral/A-lived-experience-theory-of-schism/991005543663907891

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.

Uhl-Bien, M., Marion, R., & McKelvey, B. (2007). Complexity leadership theory: Shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *18*(4), 298–318. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.04.002

van Overbeeke, P. S., Koolen-Maas, S. A., Meijs, L. C., & Brudney, J. L. (2022). You shall (not) pass: Strategies for third-party gatekeepers to enhance volunteer inclusion. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *33*(1), 33–45. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00384-0

Volunteering Australia. (2023). *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033*. https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/get-involved/national-strategy-for-volunteering/

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, *16*(4), 409–421. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25145979

Appendix A: Overview of key volunteering literature

A search for the extant academic literature related to increasing participation in Parents' & Citizens Associations in Western Australia yielded limited material directly connected to the main research question. A widened search however—in education, volunteering, and EDI literature—identified a range of relevant themes, which are summarised here.

Parent involvement in schools

Parent involvement in schools is a term used to describe parent participation in activities at a school, including volunteering in classrooms or with student activities, volunteering on school canteens or uniform shops, school fundraising activities, contribution to school board/councils, or volunteering in parent organisations (for discussion of the continuum of parent involvement to parent engagement see Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Volunteers in schools are not only those who are part of and participate in the Parents and Citizens' Associations, but these are often the most visible form of volunteering in schools, particularly as these are separate formal entities.

Importantly, parental involvement is distinguished from parental engagement in their children's learning. Parental engagement has been shown to be positively related to learning attainment, while parental involvement may not have the same outcomes.

Parents may lead school fundraising activities, volunteer as classroom support, or contribute to school council decisions without this influencing home-based learning conversations or experiences undertaken with their children. Likewise parents can be engaged in their children's learning without needing to be physically present at school, or in the absence of schools effectively partnering with them (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022, p. 2).

Essentially, "parents do not need to come to school to be involved" (Baxter & Toe, 2024, p. 306). What is clear, however, is that parent involvement in a school changes the nature of that school, and can have a positive effect on the learning environment created in the school for their children.

Parent volunteering

Research on parent volunteering tends to look at volunteering during the different life stages, with statistical data showing that parents in their 30s and 40s are often involved in school and sport and leisure volunteering associated with their children. Referring to parental and family volunteering, Haski-Leventhal et al. (2016) highlight that parent volunteering in schools can "enrich the overall learning environment" (p. 692). There is a range of research which examines the intricacies and complexities of this and highlights, for example, inequities between schools. There is evidence of social segregation among public schools, and there are flow-on effects to the amount of money a school is able to generate via its parent community, with "the location of a school having a direct relationship with its advantage/disadvantage with rural and remote schools more likely to be disadvantaged" (Rowe & Perry, 2020, p. 49). Social segregation is also found in volunteering.

Why do people volunteer, and continue to volunteer?

Motivation to volunteer is one of the most researched topics in volunteering. The reasons people volunteer are myriad, but can be broadly summarised to include passion for a mission or cause, making a contribution to the community, having an impact, seeking personal growth, seeking social connection, career development, healthy lifestyle, family and tradition, leisure and enjoyment, spiritual and religious beliefs, and personal satisfaction. There is evidence of differences in motivations associated with life stage, generational cohort, life experience, and social and cultural background. Much of this research is centred around exploring how to get (and keep) people involved in volunteering (Chen et al., 2022; Holtrop et al., 2024; Hopkins & Dowell, 2022; Kao et al., 2023; Kulik, 2017; Nursey-Bray et al., 2022; Stefanick et al., 2020).

Recent volunteering research has identified that rather than there being a dichotomous distinction between volunteers and non-volunteers, there is also a cohort of "potential" volunteers (Lockstone-Binney et al., 2022). Lockstone-Binney and team identified that "potentials" are easier to recruit, and it makes sense for organisations to seek to, for example, invite those who are already members, who are already helping out around the place, and who have a track record of getting involved. Potential volunteers have attributes that make them distinct from other non-volunteers such as "association membership, more charitable attitudes and a greater sense of capability" (p. 790). The

researchers also posit that potential volunteers may prefer tailored opportunities, which are flexible and accessible and do not require "obligatory commitments" (p. 789).

Research has also shown that the reasons people put their hand up to volunteer are not static, they change over time, and that people's reasons to continue to volunteer may not be the same as those which prompted them to volunteer in the first place. Forster (1997) for example, identified that people stay due to their commitment to the task, the people, or the cause, sometimes in the face of difficulties.

Forner et al. (2024) have identified that meaningful roles, some autonomy, social and relational support, and opportunities for growth play a role in retaining volunteers. It is also evident that, similar to paid employment, volunteers leave organisations where they do not feel acknowledged and recognised and organisations should "provide communications that are informative, supportive and convey appreciation for volunteers' valuable contribution" (Forner et al., 2024, p. 454). Departure is also associated with dissatisfaction with roles, peers, organisers, beneficiaries, and outcomes. Volunteers also leave when their connection is no longer needed, or their services are needed elsewhere, for example when children are no longer in a school.

Barriers to volunteering

The volunteering literature tells us that "the mere fact of *being asked* [our emphasis] to volunteer greatly increases the likelihood that people start to volunteer" (Bekkers et al., 2016, p. 5). What we also know, however, is that "asking" and word-of-mouth recruiting tends to do two things— target people already in our own circles and contacts, and target people who we think are most likely to volunteer and work hard (van Overbeeke et al., 2022). In other words, "some people are more likely to be asked than others" (Musick & Wilson, 2007, p. 290).

Research has also shown that people are more likely to volunteer when their personal resources (education, health, income, occupational status, and social capital) are higher (Enjolras, 2021) and that a lack of resources presents a barrier to volunteering in formal settings (Dury et al., 2015). Further, people who are not yet involved are more likely to think that they do not possess the skills or knowledge to volunteer, perceiving that they do not have anything to offer (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019; Haski‐Leventhal et al., 2018). These perceptions are likely to be reinforced if individuals do not see themselves in the picture that is painted of the current volunteers in a particular role or organisation. What all of

this combines to mean is that there are people who are less likely to be asked directly, and that are also less likely to self-select into volunteering.

A third element in the volunteering literature is the notion of understanding volunteering itself and the lack of a universal understanding. This concept is based on a range of elements including cultural understandings of community participation. Baillie Smith et al. (2021) discussed the concept of volunteering in a development context, identifying the difficulties associated with seeking to categorise: "the values that underpin volunteering are found in all societies in some forms, even if named differently" (p. 1360). Hustinx et al. (2022) have identified a range of inequalities in volunteering research due to our understanding of volunteering, or rather community participation, lacking consideration of how those who do not volunteer in so-called mainstream organisations perceive their community participation—thus leading to classifying them as not participating (Hustinx et al 2022). Complementary to this, these non-mainstream volunteers may not see where what they do fits in the broader volunteering picture.

Barriers to parental involvement in schools

While not specifically associated with parent volunteering (and thus beyond the scope of this project), there is literature on barriers to parental involvement in schools which can contribute to our understanding of some of the barriers to parent volunteering. Some barriers identified relate to parents' own history of schools and schooling. Many families from marginalised backgrounds have negative school experiences which have left them "being apprehensive, fearful, or blatantly mistrustful of mainstream schools ….[or] alienated from school norms and expectations" (Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017, p. 58). These families, therefore, may not want to engage with schools.

A second barrier is mindsets across the community that assume some families and groups will not engage with the school or school-related activities, and these assumptions lead to limited efforts to invite collaboration (Lowe et al., 2019). A third set of barriers is comprised of limited access to information, advice, understanding, and support to understand the school systems with which parents are expected to engage (Piller et al., 2023). All of these barriers have been identified as barriers to parent involvement in schools, although in some cases such barriers have had the opposite effect where "issues of social stigmatisation or judgement seemed to have acted to galvanise their agency and persistence in terms of engagement with a school" (see for example, Graham et al., 2021, p. 1247).

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in volunteering in Australia.

Volunteering is sometimes depicted as being open and accessible to everyone. Research has shown, however, that there are inequalities within volunteering, and that social networks, socio-economic status, and levels of education along with a range of other factors influence both accessibility and participation in volunteering. In short, social inequalities are present in volunteering. Recognition of potential barriers—and efforts to ameliorate these and increase participation in volunteering across the country—has seen recent promotion of EDI initiatives across Australia, funded by the government and promoted by volunteering peak bodies. Under the new National Strategy for Volunteering, *Strategic Objective 1.2: Make volunteering inclusive and accessible* states inter alia that "barriers to volunteering need to be dismantled to be genuinely inclusive" (Volunteering Australia, 2023, p. 44).

EDI approaches seek to ensure that volunteering opportunities are accessible to all individuals, regardless of their background, and that organisations benefit from a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. One aspect of this is interpretation of what constitutes volunteering, and how community participation is framed.

Research has shown that volunteering "can become a discriminatory sphere for immigrants and other disadvantaged groups " (Greenspan & Walk, 2024, p. 23) and that there are a range of factors which can lead to members of these groups withholding their volunteering. Research across the world provides "robust evidence that dominant groups in society are more likely to volunteer" (Hustinx et al., 2022, p. 1) but at the same time, the tendency is for new research to continue to focus on those groups. Research that does not focus on dominant groups has found, for example, that often community organisations "are perceived by many as insufficiently accessible" or perceived as not having a "comfortable and accepting" climate (Peucker, 2020, p. 2376). A study focused on volunteering within a Muslim community context found, conversely, that a majority of those who volunteered in a Muslim context also volunteered in the wider community environment. Randle and Dolnicar (2012) identified that many traditional recruiting strategies may be ineffective in multicultural societies, especially where potential volunteers are treated as a homogeneous group.

Importantly, consideration of the factors which might lead to people not volunteering needs to occur—not just in research—but in organisations themselves, and at a practical level. The EDI literature offers opportunities to examine pragmatic steps which can be taken to make volunteering more

inclusive, to create more opportunities for members of different groups to join in, and to influence the evolution of volunteering as a societal concept and practice.

EDI encompasses a wide range of ideas beyond just policy and accessibility. EDI principles are important because they help create environments where everyone can bring their whole selves and contribute their best. EDI approaches lead to richer, more innovative, and supportive settings for everyone. EDI is about making sure everyone gets a fair chance (equity), celebrating and valuing our differences (diversity), and making sure everyone feels welcome and included (inclusion).

Volunteering and community participation

Our understanding of volunteering and community participation is not as simple as the Volunteering Australia (2023, p. 28) definition might feel:

> *"Time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain."*

This definition captures both formal and informal volunteering but is not universally understood. In some communities and cultures there are no equivalent terms for volunteering as the concept is embedded in other notions of community participation (Baillie Smith et al., 2021; Musick & Wilson, 2007).

Inclusion in volunteering in Australia requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach that goes beyond surface-level accessibility and diversity. It involves systemic changes, intersectional understanding, community engagement, continuous learning, adequate resource allocation, and awareness and utilisation of data and research findings. Volunteer-involving organisations have the capacity to create genuinely inclusive environments that empower people to participate fully and meaningfully. Creation of those environments involves navigating a path between investiture and divestiture, concepts which can seem to be opposites, but which can serve to change the nature of any group or organisation (Lopina & Rogelberg, 2013).

Investiture refers to the process of integrating diverse populations into the volunteer involving organisation while acknowledging and appreciating their unique cultural, social, and personal backgrounds. This approach emphasises embracing diversity and fostering a sense of belonging for all individuals involved. Elements of this approach include acknowledgement of different backgrounds, and

seeking to ensure that all volunteers feel valued and respected for their individual contributions and perspectives, regardless of their background. Embracing the diversity that people bring can lead to a more innovative and creative environment. Diverse perspectives bring new ideas and approaches to problem-solving. When volunteers from diverse backgrounds feel included, it can positively impact students' learning experiences by providing them with a richer cultural and social context. Investiture involves time and effort to understand and accommodate the various backgrounds of volunteers. In some cases, diverse populations may have values or beliefs that conflict with the organisation's existing practices, leading to potential challenges in finding common ground. Some individuals within the community may resist the inclusion of diverse perspectives, potentially leading to conflicts and divisions.

Divestiture, on the other hand, involves downplaying or ignoring the differences in diverse populations of volunteers and focusing on assimilating them into the existing cultural norms and practices of the organisation. Such an approach can promote a sense of unity and cohesion by emphasising common values and goals, potentially reducing conflicts arising from cultural or social differences. Standardising expectations and practices may streamline volunteer management and organisational processes, and may be seen as a way to preserve the tradition and identity of the organisation. Divestiture may also enable the group to follow its own rules and regulations and fit into the overarching context in which it is operating and trying to attain its goals. Divestiture, however, if employed blindly, may lead to the exclusion and marginalisation of individuals from diverse backgrounds, causing them to feel undervalued and unrepresented. By neglecting diverse perspectives, the organisation may miss out on valuable insights and innovative ideas that could benefit the organisation. Individuals or groups who feel their unique backgrounds are not appreciated or acknowledged may become disengaged and less likely to contribute actively.

Making a choice between investiture and divestiture approaches may seem like it is required. Embracing diversity through investiture can lead to a more inclusive and innovative environment, while divestiture may prioritise unity and tradition but risk excluding valuable contributions from diverse volunteers. It is possible, however, to aim for a combination of both: appreciating diversity while seeking to develop a cohesive collaborative community. Key to this balance is determining the superordinate goal sought by the whole community and articulating this. In the example of parents, the overarching goal is often associated with seeking the best outcomes for their children. It can be tricky to establish a shared purpose when there are different perceptions of what is "best." Research identifies that what one group of parents might consider to be the best outcome may not be the same as another (see for

example, Gerrard & Savage, 2022). This is beyond the scope of this project but is one area needing to be navigated.

Bringing change to increase inclusion

P&Cs that make a choice to increase diversity and inclusion can benefit from knowing that evidence shows when individuals feel their needs for information, networks, participation, decision-making, competence, relatedness, and autonomy are being met, they are more likely to volunteer. Addressing these needs, however, requires consideration of a wider perspective. Research has shown that the probability of volunteering increases when potential volunteers are provided with information about support for them to volunteer, and when the respect associated with being a volunteer in the organisation is communicated to them. Importantly, achieving this can mean making changes to the way things are currently done.

Storr (2021) researched volunteers in a cricket club setting, and identified that the attitudes of current volunteers to increasing diversity can have an impact on how well this works, or does not. Storr presented dimensions of attitudinal commitment to diversity and inclusion which may be helpful for organisations looking at how to increase participation. Storr classified the attitudes as (i) affective commitment—"I want to"—showing a desire/belief (ii) continuous commitment—"I have to"—perceiving a cost if I don't (iii) normative commitment—"I ought to"—with a sense of obligation and (iv) inconsequential commitment—"I don't have to"—perceived no consequences. This last includes resistance, and is potentially the most damaging, although it could be argued that resistance is a separate category. Storr identified that "volunteers or club members in positions of power hold a lot of influence concerning attitudes towards diversity: they set the culture of what is to be valued" (p. 100). Organisations electing to increase diversity and inclusion may want to commence with a discussion at the committee level about how welcoming their organisation is to newcomers, and what steps they need to take to make changes to increase inclusion—even when they feel their organisation is running well.

Appendix B: Planning approaches

Approaches to wicked problems in the literature

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is the act of making sense of a situation, until it can be articulated in a plausible way. It does not have to be the best or perfect explanation, just one that makes sense to people. Sensemaking is a precursor to decision-making and action. It is well-suited to complex, collaborative contexts as there is no one right answer, initiatives can be "experimental" or bite-sized, and the effect of an initiative can be considered in future actions. In this way, sensemaking is naturally iterative and ongoing, and the risk of any one act is lowered (compared to a five-year plan, for instance). For more information on sensemaking, see for example Weick et al. (2005) or Maitlis and Christianson (2014).

Scenario planning

Scenario planning is a method for imagining possible futures and adjusting processes and initiatives in such a way that they are more likely to lead to your preferred future (Schoemaker, 1995). Scenario planning is good to use when the situation is complex, uncertainty is high, you are working in a diverse team, and many initiatives and outcomes are possible. Having a shared vision or preferred future can help with deciding policy and initiatives, and making decisions as situations emerge, keeping priorities focused on the preferred future. Scenario planning can help when people disagree on what to do: as a group being committed to your destination frees people to be more flexible on the route.

Compared to sensemaking it is more work at the beginning—to consider and evaluate possible futures based on current trends—but compared to strategic planning it does not require a stable situation, resolution of uncertainty, or for everyone to agree on the details at the beginning.

Positive deviance

A positive deviance approach was used in this research project (Pascale & Sternin, 2005). Positive deviance involves learning from those in one's community who find unique and successful solutions (positive outliers) to intractable problems despite facing similar challenges and constraints as others.

Table 5 Positive deviance approach vs traditional problem solving[11]

Traditional problem solving	Positive deviance approach
What's wrong here? (deficit approach)	What's right here? (asset-based)
Begin with underlying causes of problems	Begin with understanding successful solutions
Solutions found externally	Solutions found internally, by people "like us" in a similar culture and with similar resources
Creation of new solutions	Uplifting of existing solutions that may be hidden
	Using skills like empathetic conversations, relationship building, and action, applied in a different way

Positive deviance is not the same as best practice

Positive deviance and best practice approaches both use models to illustrate successful initiatives but they are different in almost every other way (Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Sternin, 2002). Best practices rely on an external authority, not on the community itself, to design and introduce an exemplar for success. "By contrast, a design that allows a community to learn from its own hidden wisdom is, among other things, respectful" (Pascale & Sternin, 2005, p. 3).

With best practices, the first thing that happens is the organisation and its members are judged as "not as good as…" which can evoke defensiveness, the worst possible way to begin when open-mindedness and change is the goal. People can also rationalise the exemplar situation as *different* from their own, and therefore hard to replicate.

Lastly, best practices can ultimately lead to a situation where legitimacy depends on appearances (espoused practice) but functionality depends on "how things are really done here" (actual practice). It can also lead to isomorphism, where organisations start to *look* more and more alike and eventually *be* more and more alike. Diversity and authenticity not only allow organisations—and the people who run them—to make their own choices and have their own distinct identity but, as a sector, diversity promotes resilience.

---

[11] Adapted from https://dschool.stanford.edu/k12-lab-network/positive-deviance-for-educators

Strategic planning

Strategic planning combines situational analysis with visioning and an operational plan over an extended period, typically five or ten years. There are resources available specifically for nonprofit organisations, as opposed to business (see for example, Allison & Kaye, 2011). For strategic planning to be effective, however, it requires a relatively stable situation; with the regular turnover of P&C members within the five-year planning window it may not be the most effective method for P&Cs. Further, despite it being the most well-known method of planning among those interviewed, only those who had work experience of it expressed confidence in using it. In fact, many people were daunted by it, perceiving it as a skill beyond their knowledge or their reach. Training provided by WACSSO is possible, however training in a *variety* of planning methods[12] is recommended as a better option for validating planning methods that come more naturally to many people.

---

[12] Sensemaking, scenario planning, and positive deviance are still strategic methods of planning.