Perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing West Australian Catholic secondary schools within the context of tertiary entrance examinations

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Perceptions of Leaders, Teachers, Students and Parents in high performing West Australian Catholic secondary schools within the context of Tertiary Entrance Examinations.

Submitted by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO FULFIL THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

As for most of the developed world, Australia is no different in its scrupulous evaluation of school performance data. Annually much attention is given to data surrounding the performance of students, teachers and schools in high stakes Tertiary Entrance Examinations as students seek to qualify for a variety of university programs. So called ‘league tables’ are produced measuring school performance on a number of criteria which differ marginally from state to state. Such tables identify both successful and less successful schools. Notwithstanding the limitations of such comparisons and the fact that success is a relative term there is a great deal of interest in the factors that contribute to the attainment of success in the Tertiary Entrance Examination context.

This qualitative study identifies and interprets the factors attributed to the success of nine selected secondary schools in the Catholic Education System of Western Australia that have consistently outperformed other ‘like’ schools (as measured by their socio-economic index) in the context of the state Tertiary Entrance Examinations. The schools in the study differed on factors such as socio-economic status, gender composition and geographic location.

The purpose of the study was four-fold. Firstly, to identify characteristics of leaders in schools that have been identified as ‘successful’. Secondly, to identify characteristics of teaching that has resulted in high achievement in the Tertiary Entrance Examinations. Thirdly, to identify characteristics of the student contribution to their schools’ success; and finally, to identify the contribution and perceptions of parents in the selected high performing schools. Significantly, the study sought to obtain a ‘gestalt’ of effective schools by exploring whether the perceptions of each group contributed to a holistic
understanding of the factors defining a successful school, in the context of the Tertiary Entrance Examination success.

The qualitative research methodology utilized individual semi-structured interviews to gain data from principals and deputy principals in all nine schools. Semi-structured focus group interviews were employed with regard to heads of subject departments, teachers, students and parents across all nine schools. Within the qualitative epistemology, the theoretical perspective employed was an interpretative phenomenological analysis. The data collected was analysed using open coding. The use of four data sets allowed for data triangulation that provided a multi-dimensional and layered portrait of effective schools.

Schools striving to attain the epithet ‘successful’ might make use of findings as a valuable commencement point. Practical strategies for authentic whole school improvement that sustains student achievement are presented.
Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere in whole or part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committees.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the former Director of Catholic Education in WA Mr Ron Dullard for his support of this project and permission to access longitudinal data on Catholic schools’ performance in the tertiary examinations in Western Australia. To the leaders, teachers, past students and parents of the participating schools, a sincere thanks for your generosity of time and your insightful and honest reflections.

To Anne Coffey, Shane Lavery, Lou Thomson, and Jennifer Oaten who acted as research assistants in this project I am duly indebted to you for your support in the gathering of data and your insightful contributions to the early phase of the project.

To Professor Richard Berlach my supervisor, your constant support and gentle and positive encouragement will never be forgotten. I have learned so much under your experience and guidance.

Most of all I dedicate this thesis to my family. To my sons Daniel and Sean I am always amazed by your talents, strength and persistence. You have been an inspiration to me. To my wife Irene you have been my constant source of encouragement and I cannot begin to thank you for your love and patience.

Finally to my parents who made such a sacrifice to provide me with a quality education, I wish you were here to see its fruition.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate leaders’, teachers’, students’ and parents’ perceptions of successful Catholic secondary schools in the context of the tertiary entrance examinations in Western Australia. An overview of the study and an outline of its purpose, significance, context and overall structure is provided in this chapter.

1.2 Overview

Tertiary entrance examinations are significant. Each year, in most states of Australia, much attention is given to data surrounding the performance of students, teachers and schools in high stakes tertiary entrance examinations as students seek to qualify for a variety of programs in Universities. On an annual basis, so called ‘league tables’ are produced measuring schools on a number of criteria which differ marginally from state to state. Such tables place a spotlight on both successful and less successful schools. Notwithstanding the limitations of such comparisons (Rowe, 2000) and the fact that ‘success’ is a relative term, there is a great deal of interest in the factors that contribute to the attainment of success in the tertiary examination context.

In a climate of heightened accountability, Mulford and Silins (2011), show that education systems in Australia are increasingly focusing significant resources on working with schools that are not achieving as well as they might in external testing regimes such as tertiary entrance examinations and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In particular, analysts are focusing on the socio-economic background of school cohorts in an attempt to compare the performance of ‘like’ schools. The standard metric used to make such comparisons in Australia is the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) developed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA).

1.3 Purpose

This study sought to examine the factors attributed to the success of nine selected secondary schools in the Catholic education system of Western Australia (WA) who had consistently outperformed other ‘like’ schools in the context of the state tertiary entrance
examinations over a sustained period of time. The purpose of the study was fourfold: firstly, to identify characteristics of leaders in schools that had been identified as ‘successful’; secondly, to identify characteristics of teaching that had resulted in high achievement in the tertiary entrance examinations; thirdly, to identify the characteristics of the student contribution to their schools’ success and finally, to identify the contribution and perceptions of parents in the selected high performing schools.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008) report, *Improving School Leadership Vol. 1*, noted that school leadership contributes to improved student learning. Research on school leadership effects has revealed a number of leadership roles and responsibilities that are particularly conducive to student learning. These have been identified as shaping the conditions and climate in which learning occurs, supporting and developing teacher quality; defining goals and measuring progress; and engaging with external partners (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Robinson, 2007; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). This study seeks to build on this body of research examining perceptions of identified executive leaders, both principals and deputy principals.

Heads of Departments (HODS) in secondary schools play a pivotal role in the design and implementation of curriculum. HODS sit in a space between deputy principals and teachers in middle management roles and it is argued they have the capacity to be highly influential leaders in their own right (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000; Dinham, 2007; Harris, 1995, 1998, 2000; White, 2001). The current study seeks to broaden the investigation of the role of leaders by including HODS as a key focus within the definition of leadership.

The literature (Dinham 2007, 2008; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012; Marzano, 2003; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010) has definitively argued that the greatest effect on student achievement is the quality of the teacher and teaching students receive. Dinham’s study of teachers and leaders in New South Wales (NSW) secondary schools which had very strong Higher School Certificate (HSC) results in 1999, found that school culture; faculty teams; teachers’ personal knowledge and relationships with students; teachers’ engagement with professional development; and the teaching strategies they adopted, all contributed greatly to student success. The widely publicised McKinsey report, *How the World’s Best Performing Systems Came out on Top* (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2007) found that “the quality of an education
system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’ and that ‘the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction” (p. 13). The current study therefore seeks to investigate the instructional strategies of teachers in high performing schools in the context of tertiary entrance examinations. In doing so, the researcher wishes to ascertain what are the necessary foundational conditions for high performance teaching in this context.

The third element of the current study addresses the role of students in their schools’ high academic performance when measured against 'like' schools. The research seeks to clarify the perceptions of students concerning their own learning and high achievement, focusing on the influence of the peer culture, teaching strategies that students found motivating and effective and the influence of leaders in their schools. The study also investigates the perceptions of students concerning the role of their parents in relation to their academic achievement.

There is a significant body of research that has argued students are capable of insightful reflections concerning their experiences of learning in the classroom (Beresford, 2003; Flutter, 2006; Pedder and McIntyre, 2006; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Ruddock, 2006; Watts and Youens, 2007). As such, the current study seeks to give voice to student perceptions concerning the role of leaders, teachers, peers and parents in their high academic performance. The students who were generally recent graduates of their schools were in a unique position to reflect on both immediate experiences of the preceding year and experiences leading up to their final year of schooling.

The final element of the study, concerns the role and perceptions of parents in the nine schools under investigation. The literature suggests that the role of parents has a powerful influence on student academic achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Epstein, 2009, 2010; Jensen, 2011; Jeynes, 2007; Pelco and Ries, 1999; Spera, Wentzel & Matto, 2008; Stewart, 2008). Hong and Ho, (2007), and Hattie, (2009), argued that parents’ aspirations and expectations were a strong influence on students’ achievement. Jensen (2011a) also noted that parental feedback affords a very important stakeholder voice in the appraisal of schools and teachers.
Parental insights may have the capacity to better inform and nurture the partnership between home and school. Ewington and Macpherson (1998) argued that a common feature from the research on effective schools showed that when parents and staff share a sense of direction the schools’ academic performance improves. The present study will seek to ascertain whether there is evidence to support this view.

1.4 Context of the Research

1.4.1 Accountability

As systems and schools are required to respond to the call for greater accountability, reflective practice and give attention to whole school improvement (Caldwell, 1998, 2006; CEOWA, 2009; Canavan, 2003; Dinham, 2008; OECD, 2008; Timperley, 2007, 2010; Turkington, 2009), schools are increasingly seeking an evidence base from which they can develop strategies that support quality teaching and which may in turn improve student achievement.

In Australia and internationally, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, tools are consistently sought to measure quality teaching and school effectiveness. In most cases, the tools used are externally standardised tests. These instruments are the subject of constant criticism because they are inevitably narrow in their scope, often focusing only on literacy and numeracy and very often, particularly in the United States, they are designed only as multiple choice test instruments (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Such tests are also criticised because they do not encourage higher order thinking skills of synthesis and analysis and more often than not they are ‘snapshots’ of learning, a measure of performance at one particular point in time. The use of such measures creates two major problems in the eyes of their critics; they narrow the curriculum and create a ‘teach to the test’ mentality (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These tests also allow such data to be used to rank schools, sometimes unfairly, and as has been seen in the United Kingdom, so punish underperformers, (Caldwell, 2010; Cervini, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2011a).

Conversely, there are those who propose that there is some merit in the development of external measures that allow comparison of student performance between schools and that such measures should be reported publicly and transparently. When schools are underperforming, steps need to be taken by schools
and systems to analyse the data and move towards improvement. Removing external measures and the reporting of performance completely, may actually hamper students' performance, (Burgess, 2011; Hawkes, 2010; Jensen, 2011a). Burgess (2011), for example, found in a comparative study of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) outcomes between Welsh students and English students, that when the Welsh Assembly government abolished the publication of schools performance data or 'league tables' in 2001, there was a significant deterioration in the (GCSE) performance in Wales. "The effect is sizable and statistically significant. It amounts to around two GCSE grades per pupil per year – that is, achieving a grade D rather than a grade of B in one subject" (p. 1).

Further, Burgess (2011) noted the recent PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results run by the OECD, show Wales dropping further behind England since students were last tested in 2006, scoring worse in each of reading, science and mathematics. He thus argued that there is a causal effect produced by the abolition of public reporting of data, and that "public scrutiny of schools' performance discourages teachers and schools from coasting" (p. 1).

Similarly Hawkes (2010), in his commentary on the implementation of the My School website in Australia, stated that:

Very few people like the shadow of accountability falling over them, but experience shows those who shun accountability often have something to hide. Schools need to be transparent. They need to give the Government and the public an indication of how well they are using taxpayers’ money. After tomorrow, half of the school principals in Australia will be "under the hammer" because half may well be seen to be underperforming relative to "like schools". This is an uncomfortable place to be, but perhaps it is a necessary place. (p. 1)

Jensen’s (2011b) position provides a moderate perspective. He suggests that the community has a right to data but that it should be fair, accurate and comprehensive, in order to better measure student performance. He also contends that it is unlikely that we can judge performance using a single quantitative measure and that while qualitative data may not necessarily be suitable for standardisation it will complement quantitative data and help drive school performance.

The present study does not seek to analyse the advantages or disadvantages of external standardised testing. It recognises the reality of their existence and argues that some tests such as tertiary entrance examinations, PISA and TIMMS are significant in
that they purport to assess deep content knowledge and higher order thinking skills.

This study focuses on one school system in Western Australia, namely, the Catholic system and its high performing secondary schools in the tertiary examination context. The Catholic system was chosen because of the detailed comparative analysis the system conducts on the performance of ‘like’ schools in the context of tertiary exam performance. This analysis provided the researcher with detailed data that informed selection of schools for the purposive sample.

1.4.2 The System

The Catholic Education system in Western Australia provides education for more than 73,000 young people in 158 schools across the State. Over 5,500 teachers work in the sector. With a focus on the development of the whole person - intellectual, spiritual, social, physical and emotional - Catholic Education is the State’s second largest compulsory education provider, educating some 18% of all school-aged children in Western Australia, (CEOWA, 2013). Unlike any other state in Australia, Catholic schools in Western Australia are united as a system, with the four dioceses – Perth, Bunbury, Geraldton and Broome – all collaborating to provide similar curriculum approaches within West Australia, informed by national government guidelines and regulations (CEOWA, 2013). From a geographical perspective Western Australia is the largest state in the nation, covering one third of the continent and spanning 2.5 million kilometres. The state has a population of 2.5 million people (10% of the nation).

1.4.3 Measuring Successful Schools

The CEOWA has compiled longitudinal data measuring median Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores across schools in the system since 2004. The ATAR is a rank that allows the comparison of students who have completed different combinations of tertiary entrance courses across the nation in differing state jurisdictions. The ATAR is calculated solely for use by universities to rank and select school leavers for admission to tertiary courses across Australia.

Tables ranking schools have been produced in this State, as in other parts of Australia (and internationally) to rank student and school performance. Performance tables have for a considerable time been a standard measure of comparison for media commentary in Western Australia (Hiatt, 2013; Johnson, 2010). Often, crude measures of comparison are published in the media taking no account of significant contextual
factors that provide points of difference between schools that might account for variation in performance. Tomazin (2007) in a report in *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne, Victoria summed up the concerns of a number of labor premiers:

…the premiers have stopped short of adopting an earlier suggestion by federal Labor to have so-called “league tables” comparing school performance, warning that “making comparisons among schools is not straight forward…(and) can be misleading since it takes no account of differences in school circumstances or student cohort. (p. 3)

Rowe (2000) had earlier expressed similar concerns when he argued that:

Indicators should provide information that allow for fair comparisons. Indicators strongly affected by extrinsic contextual factors (such as student intake characteristics) should not be used unless adjustments are made for these characteristics. For example school rankings based solely on ‘raw examination scores’ should not be used. (p. 85)

It therefore behoves school systems to ensure that when comparisons are made in order to drive school improvement, that ‘like’ schools are compared.

In an attempt to overcome such crude comparison, the Catholic Education Office of WA (CEOWA) has created a tool identified as a ‘value added index’. All schools in Western Australia and Australia are ranked on the one common measure, the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). This measure was designed by psychometricians at the Australian Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and defined thus:

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a scale that enables meaningful comparisons to be made across schools. It has been developed specifically for the *My School* website for the purpose of identifying schools serving similar student populations. The variables used in calculating a value on the ICSEA scale include student-level data on the occupation and education level of parents/carers, and/or socio-economic characteristics of the areas where students live, whether a school is in a metropolitan, regional or remote area, proportion of students from a language background other than English, as well as the proportion of Indigenous students enrolled at the school. (ACARA, 2011)

The CEOWA examines a school’s individual ICSEA figure for a given year. From this data it then selects schools with similar ICSEA figures and derives a median ATAR for all schools with that similar socio-economic background. This median ATAR is then an expected minimum attainment a school should target. It is argued that this measure is fair and equitable.
The Western Australian measure is comprehensive because the final ATAR score is based on the study of 4 or 5 tertiary entrance examination subjects. To ensure that breadth and depth are achieved at least one subject must be a science or a mathematics subject and at least one subject must be from the social sciences. The study of English or English Literature is also compulsory to satisfy English language competence. The final mark includes a broad range of continuous assessment tasks completed during the Year 12 school year. These tasks include performance tasks, research projects, extended answers and investigations in science and mathematics. A rigorous process of school moderation overseen by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) ensures comparability of results submitted by each school. Schools submit a mark out of 100 for each student in each subject studied, reflecting the school-based assessment for the year in that subject. Students also receive a mark out of 100 for the external examination in that subject. Both marks are statistically standardised and moderated. For a detailed description of how the final combined mark is arrived at see the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) website:


For a detailed description of the scaling process used by the Tertiary Institutions Service Centre of Western Australia see www.tisc.edu.au. Figure 1.1 below (SCSA, 2013) provides a graphic of the process outlined above.

![Figure 1.1. Marks adjustment process.](image)

The other criticism, so often levelled at many measures used to rank and standardise student performance is the instrument itself. In the United States in particular as Darling-Hammond (2011a) noted, multiple choice objective tests are predominantly used to measure numeracy and literacy in state responses to the No
Child Left Behind policy. External tests for University entry like the SAT Reasoning Test, formerly the Scholastic Aptitude Test which measures critical reading, writing and mathematics are predominantly multiple choice. In comparison with these approaches Darling-Hammond (2011b) examined three high performing countries, Finland, South Korea and Singapore in order to determine what lessons one might learn from others and see what steps the United States might take to improve its International ranking on the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Darling-Hammond argued:

None of these nations was succeeding in the 1970’s, when the United States was the unquestioned leader in the world. All created productive teaching and learning systems by expanding access while investing purposely in ambitious educational goals using strategic approaches to build capacity. (2011b, p. 21)

Darling-Hammond suggested that Finland, South Korea and Singapore have now all become leading performers, while on 2009 PISA data the United States languished in comparison, 31st in Mathematics and 23rd in Science. She found that in all three countries there was an emphasis on, among other things, “national standards and a core curriculum that focused on higher order thinking, inquiry and problem solving through rigorous academic content” (Darling-Hammond, 2011b, p. 21). All three countries “use assessments that require in-depth knowledge of content and higher order skills…..All three countries have matriculation exams for admission to college…These exams have open ended questions that require deep content knowledge, critical analysis and writing” (Darling-Hammond, 2011b, p. 21).

It is useful to apply Darling-Hammond’s observations concerning university entry exams in Finland, South Korea and Singapore to the West Australian context. The West Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) exams are rigorous, predominantly a two or three hour examination, with rich open ended questions, requiring higher order thinking skills of synthesis and analysis. A majority of the examinations require short answer and essay responses. Multiple choice items are not weighted heavily if and when used. The WACE examinations are instruments that also pass the test of another of Darling-Hammond’s concerns, that is, the involvement of teachers in the preparation of the external examinations. Teacher involvement in the writing of external examinations is a highly regarded professional development experience. As Darling-Hammond indicated,
In many high performing countries, teacher involvement, as seen currently in Australia’s state assessment systems, in designing and scoring moderated assessments is one of the things that allows them to teach effectively, to understand what high quality student work is and how to produce it (Darling-Hammond, 2011a).

In WA, classroom teachers form the membership of examination panels which write the external matriculation exams. Classroom teachers also form the great majority of markers who assess student performance. As such, teachers have the opportunity to gain valuable experience constructing external assessment items and then utilising that knowledge in their own classrooms and applying their understanding of external standards in the assessment of their students’ work.

On the basis of the evidence presented, it is argued that the instrument and process used to assess school and teacher performance in this study is a valid one. The instrument is fair, comparing ‘like’ schools with ‘like’ schools. It is accurate, utilising an ATAR score which has been subjected to a high degree of statistical validity. The process is comprehensive, in that the score is derived from a combination of continuous assessment carried out in schools on varied, rich assessment types as well as an external examination, which is written by teachers, and assessed by teachers.

The nine schools that were chosen for their high ‘value-added’ performance, that is over and above the predicted median ATAR of schools with a similar ICSEA, were also schools that ranged from the lowest socio-economic background to the highest socio-economic background in the system. Selection was also determined by sustained high performance over a five year period. The schools included two boys’ schools and two girls’ schools, five co-educational schools and one regional school (co-educational) 200 kilometres outside of the metropolitan area. In total they represented 25% of the secondary schools within the system. As such, it is argued that they were broadly representative of the system.

The CEOWA uses data on school performance in the tertiary entrance examinations to identify schools that perform well, that is, gain strong ‘value added’ figures as defined by a school’s ability to achieve higher than their predicted score, as indicated earlier. The CEOWA then uses this information to acknowledge school performance, celebrating their success in public forums. In addition, schools that have underperformed, according to their predicted figure based on their ICSEA, are
supported via the provision of increased resources. Within the Catholic secondary school system of WA, there has never been a formal study of the characteristics of high performing schools in the context of the tertiary entrance examinations. As such, the present study fills this void.

This study sets out to do on a micro level what some analysts do on a macro level, when they ask what can we learn from high performing countries like Finland, South Korea and Singapore? Far too often systems spend an inordinate amount of time working with underperforming schools relying on evidence from the broader literature at the national and international level. In the worse scenarios, their performance is pathologized. Avoiding a deficit model, this study seeks to explore the characteristics of the healthiest schools in the one system, to learn from their practices and to hear the stories of their success.

It is important that school performance is measured by more than one single metric to discover the factors of their success. Affective outcomes such as relationships between staff, between teachers and students and between the school and the parent body play a key role in student and school performance, as does students’ social and emotional wellbeing (Adler, 1935; ARACY, 2013; Beatty & Brew, 2005; Dinham, 2008; Fullan, 2008; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012; Scott, 2011; Seligman, 2011). The present study seeks to ascertain the prevalence of such affective outcomes and their impact on student achievement.

1.5 Process of data collection

In order to outline the process involved in gathering the data, it is useful to detail a scope and sequence of the steps. The first step of the process entailed identifying schools that met the rigorous criteria for performance described earlier, namely, they were schools that performed above expectations based on their ICSEA background and they had performed consistently well over a number of years. Secondly, from that original group of high performing schools a purposive sample deemed to be broadly representative of the system was chosen. This included single-sex, schools, co-educational, regional and metropolitan, totalling nine schools. Thirdly, in order to inform the development of interview questions for the qualitative interpretivist research,
descriptive statistics were obtained from the administration of a Likert type scale administered to over 450 teachers across the nine schools. The responses to these items concerning favoured strategies of teaching, perceptions concerning the culture of the school and teachers’ views about the leadership within the school helped frame the interview questions for the semi-structured interviews. Fourthly, individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with principals and deputy principals in each school. Semi-structured focus group interviews were also conducted with heads of academic departments, teachers, parents and students in each school. The rationale for utilising focus groups in an interpretative phenomenological study is provided in the research methods chapter.

1.6 Research Questions

The main research question framing the study was:

*What are the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the success of their schools in the tertiary examination context?*

Four sub-questions explored the perceptions of key stakeholder groups: leaders, teachers, students and parents:

- What are the perceptions of leaders concerning their role, and the role of teachers, students and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context?

- What are the perceptions of teachers concerning their role, and the role of leaders, students and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context?

- What are the perceptions of students concerning their role, and the role of leaders, teachers and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context?
• What are the perceptions of parents concerning their role, and the role of leaders, teachers and students in the success of their child’s school in the tertiary examination context?

1.7 Potential Significance

This research is arguably significant as it will complement the work done by the CEOWA in its analysis of annual data on schools’ performance in university entrance examinations. As other Western Australian systems and sectors also do similar analytical work on their schools’ performance, the research has significance for the broader Western Australian educational community. The CEOWA has always sought to identify schools that perform well, that is, gain strong ‘value added’ figures and acknowledge their performance. In addition, schools that have underperformed according to their predicted figure based on their ICSEA are supported to help them improve. Within the Catholic secondary school system of WA there has never been a formal study of the characteristics of high performing schools in this context. This study has enabled the collection of qualitative data that will provide the CEOWA with empirical evidence about what it is that these schools do to achieve such high results. Essentially, the study portrays what is inherently evident in the teaching practice, leadership and culture of these schools that enables them to achieve results higher than their ‘predicted’ performance. The study also has the capacity to disseminate its findings so that schools that are underperforming can learn from the practice of those that have achieved extraordinarily well, building capacity for whole school and systemic improvement.

Above all else, this study provides a multidimensional perspective that connects many of the pieces in the jigsaw of high performing schools. Its capacity to portray how each of the major characters; leaders, teachers, students and parents act out their part in the drama and endeavour of high performing schools may provide unique insights. The study seeks to describe the ‘alignment’, ‘connectedness’ or ‘interconnectedness’ between effective teachers and their leadership, between effective teachers and their school’s culture and most profoundly, the connection between effective teachers and their students. Walker (2011) described the need for school leadership to be seen as “connective activity” (p. 3). In a rich metaphor likening schools to the human body and
applying an analysis based in the theory of reflexology, he described what he called three connective pathways in schools:

(1) Cultural connectors – the values, beliefs, norms and assumptions which form a shared school collective.
(2) Structural connectors – the formal, physical structures which form the school as an organization.
(3) Relational connectors – how people relate to each other personally, and work with each other – their humanity. (p. 9)

It will become evident that in a number of ways his observations about schools have much relevance to this study. The deliberate choice of a qualitative methodology allows the researcher to both see and represent these connections clearly.

1.8 Rationale for the Chosen Methodology

This study seeks to describe the ‘gestalt’ of effective schools, an organized whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts, and therefore a qualitative methodological approach has been chosen. Denzen and Lincoln (2003) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates observers in the real world. Such research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 4). A study that sets out to ‘make visible’ the practice of successful school leaders and teachers in the real world of their schools and classrooms is aptly suited to a qualitative approach. Within a qualitative epistemology there can be a number of theoretical perspectives that a qualitative researcher may employ (Crotty, 2010). Because of the researcher’s familiarity with the system of schools under study and the fact that he had held a number of roles within that system he was conscious that he might be prone to impose a particular interpretation on participants’ views and thus needed to give careful thought to the choice of a theoretical perspective.

A phenomenological theoretical perspective enables the researcher to see how the events he or she seeks to describe are perceived and experienced as well as acknowledging that reflexivity, “an explicit evaluation of the self” (Shaw, 2010, p. 234), is a necessity. As Shaw noted, reflexivity evokes an interpretivist ontology thus an interpretivist phenomenological analysis has been chosen as the preferred
methodology for the current study. A more detailed description of this method is presented in chapter three.

Having introduced the purpose, context and significance of this study and justified the efficacy of the process used to select successful schools, it is now important to outline its structure.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

Table 1.1

Overview of the Thesis Structure

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Chapter 1 introduces the topic under investigation, detailing its purpose, context, potential significance, the process of data collection, research questions and reason for the choice of methodology. It also serves to introduce the overall structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework in relation to the literature on leadership in schools, school and teacher effectiveness, influence of the student cohort on academic achievement and the influence of parents on student achievement. Specific topics explored through the literature are the role of leaders in effective and improving schools, models of leadership, characteristics of effective teachers, the
influence of students and their peers on academic achievement, student motivation, personalisation and wellbeing, the student voice, parent-school relationships, relational trust, parental involvement and student academic achievement and teachers and family-school partnerships. The areas of literature are closely aligned to the four key research questions as portrayed in Figure 2.1.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology that was employed to gather the data and address the research questions. A framework is provided detailing the interpretivist theoretical perspective and the phenomenological lens employed in the study. The methods used to collect data are outlined, specifically, a Likert-type survey which informed the construction of semi-structured interview questions employed to interview individuals and focus groups. A description of the method of sampling and interview protocols is provided.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 are each provided as combined findings and discussion chapters. Each chapter presents the findings and discussion related to one of the four specific research questions and the literature specific to that area. Chapter four addresses the findings and discussion related to the perceptions of leaders, concerning their role, and the role of teachers, students and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context. Chapter 5 addresses the findings and discussion related to the perceptions of teachers, concerning their role, and the role of leaders, students and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context. Chapter 6 addresses the findings and discussion related to the perceptions of students, concerning their role, and the role of leaders, teachers and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context. Chapter 7 addresses the findings and discussion related to the perceptions of parents, concerning their role, and the role of leaders, teachers and students in the success of their child’s school in the tertiary examination context. These chapters collectively seek to provide an answer to the major research question: What are the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the success of their schools in the tertiary examination context? In doing so, they also provide triangulation of data as each stakeholder is required to reflect on the role of each other.

Chapter 8, provides overarching conclusions and recommendations. This is an attempt to provide a summative narrative or “writing up”, as Smith and Osborne (2008) put it, “the meanings inherent in the experiences of the participants” (p. 76).
Recommendations developed from the study are provided for the profession. This chapter also acknowledges opportunities for further inquiry arising out of the research project.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to investigate the factors attributed to the success of nine selected secondary schools in the Catholic education system of Western Australia (WA) that had consistently outperformed other ‘like’ schools in the context of tertiary entrance examinations. The study sought to investigate the perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in relation to their individual role and their perceptions of the role of other key stakeholders in their school’s success. In order to situate the study within the context of existing research a literature review was undertaken. The literature review was structured around four key themes:

- The role of leaders in effective and improving schools
- The role of teachers and their influence on student academic achievement
- The role of students and peer influence on academic achievement
- The role of parents and their influence on their child’s academic achievement

These four themes are aligned to the four research questions described in chapter one. The investigation of the literature under these four headings helps position the current study within what Cresswell (2009, p. 25) referred to as “the ongoing dialogue in the literature”, as well as establishing the importance of the current study and framing the findings and discussion chapters.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

The literature review provides a background on key fields related to each of the four research questions. The key fields relevant to the study are the influence of leaders in effective schools, the role of teachers and quality teaching, the role of students and their peers and the role of parents. For each area the relevant literature will inform the research and provide a foundation for the analysis of findings. Each group of leaders, teachers, students and parents, while making a singular contribution, is interconnected to the others and it is argued their collective influences contribute to the schools’ high performance. Within these four groups, the perceptions of each, on the role of others will be investigated and will form sub-themes within the findings section. The following Conceptual Framework (Figure 2.1) illustrates the inter-connectedness of the critical areas under investigation, as
well as highlighting the notion that each area contributes to the ‘gestalt’ of effective schools at the heart of the study.

**Figure 2.1.** Conceptual Framework.

### 2.3 The Role of Leaders in Effective and Improving Schools

Educational leaders play a key role in schools. Effective educational leadership is as necessary as it is important. Research has shown that leaders have both a direct and indirect influence on school improvement and student achievement (Southworth, 2004). Recognising the role of leadership, an understanding of subtly different models of leadership can enhance approaches to improving student achievement (Mulford, 2008).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development notes that school leadership “has become a priority in education policy agendas across OECD and partner countries because it plays a key role in improving classroom practice, school policies and connections between schools and the outside world” (OECD, 2008, p. 19). Thus, wherever school systems and sectors seek to strategically target improvement in school effectiveness and student outcomes, the capacity of leaders
to indirectly influence student learning has been strongly present (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Principals face a variety of challenges in their role; many of them determined by contextual factors related to student background, school size, teacher quality, whether the school is rural or metropolitan, even historical factors (OECD, 2008). Adopting an appropriate leadership style suited to particular contexts is therefore a valid consideration when attempting to address school improvement. It is important not to fall into the comfort of a ready-made label to identify a preferred model of leadership that suggests “one type or ‘size’ of leadership fits all” (Leithwood and Riehl, cited in Mulford, 2008, p.38). There is much to be gained from a broader view of leadership that recognises the varying contextual needs of each school. In a useful approach, Mulford, (2008) narrowed the field of leadership styles to focus on four major conceptual models of leadership: instructional, transformational, distributed and sustainable leadership. As will be seen, each model has a particular relevance to this study. A study of this nature, centred as it is in faith based schools, might also be tempted to draw on other models such as moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992), or servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002), however the researcher has made a deliberate decision based on the ‘instructional’ focus of the study, to stay within the four conceptual models outlined above.

2.3.1 Instructional Leadership

The degree to which individual leaders and the leadership team focus on learning and teaching is an important avenue for exploration and ‘instructional’ leadership suits the investigation well. For the purpose of this study the leadership team is defined as the executive leadership group of the school, the principal and deputy principals.

Instructional leadership was born out of the effective schools literature of the late 70’s and early 80’s in the United States. Related studies focused on poor urban schools that had been regarded as successful in terms of their student outcomes despite student socio-economic disadvantage. In this context, instructional leadership was conceived as a means of targeting improved student outcomes and not unlike the late 90’s to now, answering the pressure of increased accountability. In a review of the literature from 1980 – 2000 (Hallinger, 2003, p. 332) offered the following conceptual summary of instructional leadership:
1. Instructional leadership focuses predominantly on the role of the school principal in coordinating, controlling, supervising and developing curriculum and instruction in the school (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

2. With its birthplace in the 'instructional effective elementary school' (Edmonds 1979), instructional leadership was generally conceived to be a unitary role of the elementary (primary) school principal (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982).

3. Similarly, the fact that studies of effective schools focused on poor urban schools in need of substantial change, it is not surprising to note that instructional leaders were subsequently conceived to be ‘strong directive leaders’ (Edmonds, 1979, Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

4. Instructional leaders lead from a combination of expertise and charisma. They are hands-on principals, ‘hip deep’ in curriculum and instruction, and unafraid of working with teachers on the improvement of teaching and learning (Cuban, 1984; Hallinger & Murphy 1986).

5. Instructional leaders are goal-oriented, focusing on the improvement of student academic outcomes. Given the dire straits in which they find their schools, these principals focus on a narrower mission than many of their peers.

6. Instructional leaders are viewed as culture builders. They seek to create an ‘academic press’ that fosters high expectations and standards for students, as well as for teachers (Mortimer, 1993; Purkey & Smith, 1984).

The present study seeks to ascertain to what degree some of these characteristics are evident in the nine secondary schools that have been chosen for investigation. In large secondary schools, it remains to be seen how much instructional influence a principal can have on student outcomes. Another important question raised by Hallinger's (2003) conceptual framework is whether schools with high academic results see their mission as being necessarily narrowed. Do they become singularly focused on academic outcomes to the detriment of other worthy goals for example equity, recognition of diversity and students' social and emotional well being?

Hallinger and Heck (1998) argued that leaders' influence on the classroom takes three forms; direct effects, mediated or indirect effects and reciprocal effects. Direct effects are derived from personal influence. Indirect effects recognise that the leader's goals are largely mediated through other people, events and organisational
factors such as teachers, classroom practices and school culture. Reciprocal effects recognise that leaders affect teachers and that teachers behaviours can affect leaders and that this interactive process combines to influence outcomes (pp. 163-169).

Southworth (in Davies, 2005) focused on the second and third form of leaders’ influence as outlined by Hallinger and Heck (1998). Southworth noted that ‘indirect’ effects are by far the largest because leaders rely on others to put their aspirations into practice: “Really effective leaders implicitly know this and work very carefully on their indirect effects. In other words: ‘effective school leaders work directly on their indirect influence” (p. 78). Southworth’s comments are a reminder that the leadership of a school must be strong in the articulation of its aspirations but at the same time, they are vulnerable in their reliance on other staff to take up the message related to instructional goals. He responds to this possible vulnerability by offering three major strategies; modelling, monitoring and dialogue. Modelling utilises the power of example, namely, the time given to teaching and learning by the ‘leadership team’ gets noticed by staff. Their involvement in meetings centred on curriculum, their ability to visit classrooms and encourage discussions about teaching and learning with colleagues, sends strong signals to those who observe them. In some ways, these behaviours indicate that leaders are still teachers.

Monitoring includes the analysis of and action on student performance data, school performance trends and surveys. Southworth (2005) noted that empirical data is not the only source of student performance, observing and encouraging students to talk about their learning experiences is also valuable (student reflections will be addressed further in the third theme of this literature review). Sharrat and Fullan (2012) take this concept further by challenging leaders and teachers to ‘put faces on the data’ arguing that “we are wired to feel things for people not for numbers” (p. 2) and personalising the data leads to powerful interventions for individuals. Monitoring ensures that both leaders and teachers remain informed and have an evidence base from which to make decisions about curriculum design. Dialogue involves the development of learning networks to foster conversations around instructional practice which arise from the processes of monitoring. In a recent examination of high performing school systems in Asia, Jensen (2012) also found that peer visitation, observation and then conversation concerning practice, was a strong contributing factor to school improvement.
The powerful role of instructional leadership has been reinforced in a meta-analysis by Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008), examining the relative impact of different types of leadership on students’ academic achievement by comparing instructional and transformational leadership. The authors defined instructional leadership as a set of practices that involve planning, evaluation, coordination and improvement of teaching and learning. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008), compared the effects of instructional versus transformational leadership on student outcomes and concluded that the effect of instructional leadership was three to four times as great as that of transformational leadership, stating:

The reason is that transformational leadership is more focused on the relationship between leaders and followers than on the educational work of school leadership, and the quality of these relationships is not predictive of student outcomes. Educational leadership involves not only building collegial teams, a loyal and cohesive staff and sharing an inspirational vision. It also involves focusing such relationships on some very specific pedagogical work, and the leadership practices involved are better captured by measures of instructional leadership than of transformational leadership (p. 665).

Frost (2009) further explored the necessity for ‘connecting leadership and learning’ by drawing on research from projects in seven different countries including Australia. The research explored what it means to lead schools that put learning at the centre of their mission. From the findings, Frost offered five key principles for practice:

- A focus of learning
- An environment for learning
- A learning dialogue
- Shared leadership
- Accountability – both internal and external.

He argued that the five principles are dynamically interrelated and a blended view of leadership is clear where an instructional focus is inseparable from a distributed or shared practice, noting:

A focus on learning and shared leadership is mediated by conditions for learning. Dialogue connects them, and all these four principles are framed by a fifth principle, accountability – to one another and to external groups and agencies that have invested faith and finance in our schools (Frost, 2009, p. 71).

Frost’s recognition of a ‘focus on learning’ indicates that schools striving for high academic outcomes must see teaching and learning as their core business. Robinson (2010) argued that “the more leaders focused their relationships, their
work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes” (p. 2). As discussed in chapter one, accountability is both an external and internal driver that can be harnessed to develop an effective and improving school. It is increasingly acknowledged that the standards agenda “and high stakes testing have generated an expectation of improved performance and increased educational achievement” (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, 2007, p. 337).

Sammons, Gu, Day and Ko (2011) three year study in the UK supported and complemented Frost’s work and focus on the ‘instructional leader’ but added an emphasis on managing some teachers learning for improved performance with a focus on a culture of research and innovation. This strongly supported Jensen (2012) in his review of high performing Asian school systems and their focus on mentoring and research.

While an instructional focus is arguably as important now as it has ever been, in order to respond to such an agenda, an appropriate environment needs to be created that privileges conversations about teaching and learning and promotes dialogue that enhances practice. There needs to be clear vision that develops a culture supportive of an instructional focus and capable of engaging and motivating individuals. School improvement frameworks such as those offered by Masters (2010) and studies examining the relationship between leadership and improved instruction (Dinham, 2008) acknowledge this. Transformational leadership offers principals and their deputies a model that helps motivate staff and creates a culture that supports the attainment of established instructional goals.

2.3.2 Transformational Leadership

Mulford (2008) saw transformational leadership developing from the pioneering work of Burns (1978) who argued for a more sophisticated style of leadership than simply a managerial or transactional approach. Burns suggested that leadership required greater engagement with others to raise intrinsic motivation. Bass (1998) took Burns work further identifying four dimensions of transformational leadership namely, charisma, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation. Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) applied earlier theories to the more specific context of schools. They identified six dimensions of transformational leadership which they felt would help support organisational conditions and improve
student engagement: “Building school vision and goals, building a culture that symbolises certain professional practices and values, developing structures to foster participation in school, providing intellectual stimulation, offering individual support and demonstrating high performance expectation” (p. 114).

Leithwood’s (2010) later work developed these concepts further but narrowed the dimensions to four headings as the model reached a new phase of refinement:

- **Setting directions**
  - Building a shared vision
  - Fostering acceptance of group goals
  - High performance expectations

- **Developing people**
  - Providing individual support and consideration
  - Intellectual stimulation
  - Providing an appropriate model
  - Redesigning the organisation

- **Building collaborative cultures**
  - Restructuring
  - Building productive relationships with families and communities
  - Connecting the school to its wider environment
  - Managing the instructional program

- **Staffing the program**
  - Providing instructional support
  - Monitoring school activity
  - Buffering staff from distractions to their work

The model above addressed deficiencies cited in Leithwood & Jantzi’s (2000) earlier work by including more transactional practices that improved “organisational stability” (p. 114). The current study seeks to investigate the prevalence of these four dimensions within the schools under investigation.

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) argued that Leithwood and his colleagues over time moved from surface, first order transactional elements of the principals’ work, to a deeper second order level, signified by “a pursuit of common goals, empowerment of people, development and maintenance of a collaborative culture as well as promoting processes of teacher development” (p. 99). Leithwood and Jantzi (2005)
argued that the critical role of transformational leadership is helping staff to develop shared understandings of the organisational goals:

...that undergird a sense of purpose and vision. People are motivated by goals which they find personally compelling, as well challenging but achievable. Having such goals helps people find meaning in their work and enables them to find a sense of identity for themselves within their work context (p. 39).

As addressed previously in the discussion of instructional leadership and here in transformational leadership, it becomes increasingly clear that leaders do not and cannot, work in isolation. Schools are organic communities, highly interrelated and interdependent and as such, a shared or distributed leadership has much to offer in the framework of leadership.

2.3.3 Distributed Leadership

In the introduction to this review it was noted that the ‘indirect’ but powerful influence of leadership on student outcomes is often mediated through other school personnel, deputy principals, assistant principals, heads of subject departments and senior teachers, in what has been termed a shared or distributed leadership model, (Caldwell & Spinks, 1998; Caldwell, 2006; Duignan 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris et al., 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane, 2009; Spillane & Healey, 2010; Silins & Mulford, 2002). Thus, while the role of the principal is important and Fullan (2001) argued that school improvement will never be achieved without a principal who is good at leading improvement; this study seeks to define leadership in its plurality and focuses on the team of leaders in effective schools. The current study seeks to investigate what leaders do collaboratively and what might be their collective influence. It is acknowledged that such a collaborative leadership model can only be established through the agency of the principal and his or her decision to abdicate some authority in the pursuit of a shared wisdom. Prevailing over all of the above is the pragmatic benefit of distributed leadership. No one individual can realistically carry the burden of turning around schools that have been underperforming. Gone are the days when the ‘heroic’ principal was required to effect change through inspirational and charismatic leadership alone, for, as Hargreaves and Fink, (2006) pointed out,

Heroic leaders who turn failing schools around stand out most in the public imagination. Transformational leaders rather than transformational leadership get the greatest attention in leadership research. Yet leadership
also exerts (or fails to exert) its influence beyond individuals across many years (p. 56).

Distributing responsibilities engages what Duignan (2006) referred to as the “contours of expertise” (p. 111) in the school community. As such contours are traversed, the present study might expect to gauge the layers of leadership in the identified schools to ascertain what binds those relationships together. Fullan (2007) observed that, it is “the primacy of personal contact” (p. 139) between leaders and teachers, between teachers and students, between teachers and parents that promotes harmonious change and improvement. Fullan’s thesis could well be tested in the present study.

Conceptually, a model of distributed leadership is a natural fit for a study that seeks to represent the perceptions of at least three layers of leadership in a group of secondary schools; the principal, deputy principal, and head of subject department (HOD). A model of distributed leadership would also seem apt when there is an expectation of finding an empowered and competent teaching staff that might be considered teacher leaders in their own right. Gronn (2000) who has done much to shape an understanding of distributed leadership explains this mutually beneficial relationship well:

In activities in which there is greater scope for discretion, examples of reciprocally expressed influence abound. In the relations between organisational heads and their immediate subordinates or between executives and their personal assistants for example, couplings form in which the extent of the conjoint agency resulting from the interdependence and mutual influence of the two parties is sufficient to render meaningless any assumptions about leadership being embodied in just one individual (p. 331).

The reciprocity and interdependence described above captures the complexity and dynamism of relationships in schools where not just two parties but often three or four are interacting, each party contributing to the whole. Spillane and Healey (2010) described the conceptual anchors of distributive leadership as involving two aspects; the “leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect” (p. 256). The leader-plus aspect recognizes that the task of leading schools involves multiple individuals and that an exclusive focus on the school principal is limiting.

This view, ‘the leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect’ supports the approach of the current study in its three layered focus on formal leadership as well as its focus on teachers and students because it seeks, as Spillane noted, to describe
how these individuals operate as a ‘collective’ and how they complement each other. The practice of ‘leadership’ is not just about the actions of individual leaders but practice is “framed as the product of the interactions among leaders, followers and aspects of their situation” (Spillane & Healy, 2010, p. 256) or as Gronn, (2000) described it above, the product of “conjoint agency” (p. 231).

Harris et al. (2007) argued that distributed leadership “is an idea that is gaining momentum in the leadership field” (p. 339). As a model, it has an innate attraction in that it appeals to a democratized view of the world, even the collective distribution of power, but the ‘field’ also raises the need for more empirical evidence to support the claims and assertions made. Harris (2008a) made the precautionary observation that:

1. Leadership needs to be distributed to those who have, or can develop the knowledge or expertise required to carry out the leadership tasks expected of them.
2. Effective distributed leadership needs to be coordinated, preferably in a planned way. (p. 52)

These observations imply that careful consideration needs to be given to the appointment of staff to leadership positions as well as the allocation of particular tasks to appropriate personnel. As a consequence, principals need to know their staff and their capabilities (and look for opportunities to develop them), in order to build capacity as well as deepen ‘bench strength’. Sergiovani (2001) noted that once greater depth has been developed, the school can reap rich rewards, such as an increase in involvement in decision making, more staff being trusted with information, being exposed to new ideas and in turn becoming involved in knowledge creation and transfer.

Elmore (2000) states the case well:

Distributed leadership does not mean that no one is responsible for the overall performance of the organization. It means, rather, that the job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result. (p.15)
This concept of productive relationships is pertinent for a study focusing on large secondary schools where the role of the deputy principal responsible for curriculum and the role of the head of subject department (HOD) will be examined closely. The deputy principal role is closely aligned with that of the principal as part of an executive leadership team. The role of the HOD, positioned as it is between the executive leadership and the wider teaching body is a unique middle management role and deserving of close analysis in the context of a distributed leadership model.

2.3.3.1 The Head of Department (HOD)

Because of their size, secondary schools have the capacity to appoint subject specialists who lead curriculum departments and teams of teachers within them. The HOD is expected to provide specialised leadership in curriculum design, assessment and pedagogical practice in their discipline. In light of the preceding discussion of leadership models, the leadership role of the HOD is highly instructional, but at the same time they are also required to employ transformational strategies in building the culture of their team, setting high expectations and creating communities of learning specifically centred on the subject discipline of their particular department. In a sense, their experience might not be far removed from the experience of those leaders above them, in that, they find themselves adopting characteristics of a variety of models. The role of the HOD has been the focus of significant study in Australia (Deece, 2003; Dinham, 2007; Dinham, S., Brennan, K., Collier, J., Deece, A. and Mulford, D. 2000; White, 2001), New Zealand, (O’Neill, 2000), the United Kingdom (Brown, Boyle & Boyle 2000; Brown, Rutherford, Boyle, 2000; Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Harris, 1995, 1998, 2000) and the United States (Siskin, 1991, 1994.). Such research has supported the view that heads of subject departments have the capacity to be highly influential leaders with a great deal to contribute in the process of whole school improvement. Harris (2000) suggested that “heads of department within UK secondary schools contribute to departmental performance in much the same way as head teachers contribute to overall school performance” (p. 81).

Brown, Rutherford, and Boyle (2000) explored the role of the HOD as middle managers and leaders in secondary schools. They argued that “strategies for school improvement are increasingly focused on teaching and learning of the subject, hence our claim that the department is the most important ‘unit of change’ rather than the whole school or even the individual classroom” (p. 238). While an ambitious
claim, it does have merit, as the department is by its nature the hub of subject specific deliberations which have the potential to make an impact on classroom practice. Huberman (as cited in Brown, Rutherford & Boyle, 2000) supports this view:

... I would rather look to the departments as the unit of collaborative planning and execution in a secondary school, or to the grade unit. This is where people have concrete things to tell one another and concrete instructional help to provide one another – where the contexts of instruction actually overlap (p. 239).

White (2001), in an Australian study of forty six heads of department in six schools in the state of Victoria, illustrated the capacity of HODs who were perceived as contributing positively to student learning outcomes. His study illustrated that HODS were capable of creating a culture of motivated and enthused teachers, leading innovation in curriculum design at the departmental level, acting as a role model and “encouraging staff to push students academically” (p. 144).

In another study of 38 high performing junior secondary schools in the NSW public school system, Dinham (2007) presented another optimistic picture of the role of the head of subject department. In the context of high performing schools, he found a number of contributing categories in their leadership:

- Personal qualities, relationships.
- Professional capacity, strategy.
- Promotion and advocacy, external relations.
- Department planning, organisation.
- Common purpose, collaboration, team building.
- Teacher learning, responsibility, trust.
- Vision, expectations and culture of success. (p. 68)

The personal qualities cited were dedication, commitment, energy and enthusiasm for teaching, a capacity to motivate others and an ability to exhibit empathy (Dinham, 2007). In both Dinham and White’s studies, there is evidence of Southworth’s (2005) key strategy for instructional leadership, namely, ‘modelling’. In respect of advocacy HOD’s were strong advocates for their departments, able to secure appropriate resources and were highly respected in their school community. They had a major influence on curriculum design and an indirect influence on teacher effectiveness.
What is found in the analysis of literature concerning the role of the HODs is recognition that when leadership is distributed, those to whom it is devolved experience many of the same challenges as those above them in the hierarchy of the school structure. Many of the understandings derived from instructional, transformational and distributed leadership are clearly required for leadership at the middle management level. The role is highly sophisticated, made even more complex by its position ‘in the middle’ of hierarchical structures. This complexity is captured by Siskin (as cited by Brown, Rutherford & Boyle, 2000) who suggests that HODs have “hermaphroditic roles” (p. 240), neither fully teacher nor fully administrator. Dinham (2007) would challenge this description arguing that HODS can be recognised as both leaders and teachers in the finest sense.

Brown & Rutherford (1999) argued that there is an urgent need for more research into the strengths and weaknesses of leadership of middle managers especially with regard to management rather than administration. The focus group interviews of well over thirty HODs, across nine schools in the present study, have the capacity to further examine the contribution of this unique group of leaders in secondary schools. Analysis of the role of HODs has the potential to increase our understanding of the role of secondary teachers because as Siskin (1994) observed, teachers locate their sense of identity, practice and community in their departments. The leadership and culture of subject departments has the potential to directly influence the quality of teacher performance.

It is clear that an overriding benefit of distributed leadership, if executed with discernment, is its potential to build capacity across the teaching staff which is also an underlying foundation of sustaining school improvement. The current study used the criterion of sustained high academic achievement over a period of five years as one method of identifying the nine schools that were selected and as such, a review of sustainable leadership as a theory has much to offer.

2.3.4 Sustainable Leadership

Having reached a targeted, measurable level of improvement and having provided the evidence of such attainment, the goal of leaders is to maintain and drive continuous improvement. This quality of leadership has been termed sustainable leadership. In educational leadership, sustainable leadership has chiefly
been applied by Fullan (2005) and Hargreaves and Fink, (2006) in arguing that sustainable leadership theory is a by-product of distributed leadership and that among a number of its qualities or even preconditions, shared leadership is one. Kotter (1996), in his seminal text, described sustainable leadership as the capacity to “anchor new approaches in the culture” (p. 21) so that they provide capacity for longer term organizational learning.

Fullan (2005, p. 14) identified sustainability as an adaptive challenge consisting of eight elements:

1. Public service with a moral purpose
2. Commitment to changing context at all levels
3. Lateral capacity building through networks
4. Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships (encompassing both accountability and capacity building)
5. Deep learning
6. Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results
7. Cyclical energising
8. The long lever of leadership

Public service with a moral purpose emphasises the notion of education for the common good, enhanced by a moral purpose whose primary aim is “raising the bar and closing the gap of student learning; treating people with demanding respect and altering the social environment” (p. 15). Commitment to changing the context is an acknowledgement that context is everything and that institutions must analyse their own unique circumstances before they are able to adapt, change and improve. Contexts are defined as the “structures and cultures within which one works” (p. 16). Recognising the contextual structures and cultures as impediments or facilitators of change is the first step in improving schools. The researcher is interested to ascertain what contextual structures and cultures, if any, challenged or sustained improving schools in this study.

Fullan argued that the remaining six elements provide practical experiences and capacities for sustainable leadership. In lateral capacity building through networks, his theory further develops the fundamental outcome of distributed leadership which builds capacity through flatter structures of dispersed leadership. He recognised vertical capacity built through networks of external trainers and consultants and more laterally through networks of colleagues in other schools. Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships focuses on the relationship between schools
and the central office. Fullan subtly noted that “too much intrusion de-motivates people; too little permits drift, or worse” (p. 20).

An obvious and perhaps workable link to enhance a flourishing and mature co-dependence is the use of both internal and external data on school performance. Mulford and Silins (2011), in a study of the impact of leadership on student outcomes in Tasmanian schools, strongly supported the use of accountability and evaluation mechanisms as having a significant direct impact on student achievement. Mulford and Silins (2011) suggested that “the higher the reports of accountability and evaluation mechanisms in a school, the higher the reports of student achievement” (p. 70). The current study seeks to explore the way in which the nine schools utilised accountability mechanisms in the guise of external data supplied by outside agencies and their central office the CEOWA.

Deep learning, the fifth element in Fullan’s model, is contextualised in a data-driven society and as a consequence, in data-driven schools. In such a context, Fullan argued, if there is to be sustained deep learning there is a need to “drive out fear; set up a system of transparent data-gathering, coupled with mechanisms for acting on the data; and make sure all levels of the system learn from their experience” (p. 22). Failure needs to be managed carefully and underperforming schools need to be managed very carefully. There should be a culture that recognises failure as an opportunity to recover and learn. Strategies that enhance capacity to act on data are crucial for deeper organizational learning. This is where the connection between leaders and teachers comes into play. Significant writers such as Hattie (2009); Marzano, Waters & McNulty (2005); and Timperley (2010) all support Fullan’s thesis. As Timperley proposes:

For teachers to use evidence to improve teaching and learning they need information about what their students know and can do, evidence about their own practice and its impact on students and knowledge from the research evidence and other sources...Teachers however cannot be expected to do all this on their own but need the support of well informed leaders who have sufficient knowledge to lead both teachers’ evidence informed inquiry and to engage in their own inquiry into their leadership practice (p. 1).

Principals and deputy principals alike also need support from the system itself, namely, district or head offices that can work with them to develop their knowledge of the system’s performance and their school’s performance within the system. In so doing, Fullan’s sixth element places a small caveat on his caution concerning fear driving short term responses. He reminds those involved in school and system improvement that there needs to be a dual commitment to short term and long term
results. Where schools are severely underperforming, immediate action is necessary and early results must be pursued. In a sense, this immediate action buys time for the longer term goals to be articulated and targeted.

Fullan’s seventh element, cyclical energising, similar in some ways to Covey’s (1989) ‘sharpening the saw’ concept, argued that sustainability is cyclical not linear. Energy directed to improvement can be diminished through overuse or underuse and therefore needs to be balanced. As Elmore (2004) expressed it, “routinized accountability” (p. 80) means schools are evaluating performance consistently and regularly but not in such a way as to burn out staff. Such a sentiment is also supported by Barber & Mourshed (2007) in the Mckinsey Report, *How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better*:

……three ways those improving school systems do this are: by establishing collaborative practices between the teachers within and across schools, by developing a mediating layer between the schools and the centre and by architecting tomorrow’s leadership. Many systems in our sample have created a pedagogy in which teachers and school leaders work together to embed routines that nurture instructional and leadership excellence (p. 27).

Cyclical energising is a tool enabling the embedding of routines at an appropriate time and place in the cycle, allowing for renewal rather than burnout. This concept requires subtle management in a school, evidenced in Fullan’s (2005) last element, the long lever of leadership.

Archimedes said, “Give me a lever long enough and I can change the world.” For sustainability that lever is leadership. If a system is to be mobilised in the direction of sustainability, leadership at all levels must be the primary engine. The main work of these leaders is to help put into place the eight elements of sustainability: all eight simultaneously feeding off each other (p. 27).

While there is much value to be gained from consideration of Fullan’s eight elements, it would be foolish to think that any one list of elements or capabilities will exclusively meet the needs of all schools. There is no single cure-all for underperforming schools and there is no single conceptual model for sustainable leadership.

Hargraves and Fink (2006) offer seven principles of sustainability arising out of a study of seven American schools over three decades. The principles that underpinned their findings were, depth, length, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness and conversation. The authors move away from Fullan’s (2005) emphasis on accountability and short as well as long term results. Their first principle of deep learning is that not all learning is measurable:
Deep Learning is often slow learning, – critical, penetrative, thoughtful, and ruminative. It is learning that engages people’s feelings and connects with their lives. It isn’t too preoccupied with performance. It cannot be hurried. Targets don’t improve it. Tests rarely take its measure. You can’t do it just because someone else says you should. (p. 53)

While there is obvious merit in this argument, it fails to recognise that there is a real danger in not responding immediately to data that alerts teachers and schools to underperformance. Fullan’s moderate position of recognising that both short and long term results equally matter, is perhaps a more responsible approach and it might be argued that in addressing both the long term and short term there can still be institutional learning that is “critical, penetrative, thoughtful and ruminative” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 53).

The second principle of Hargreaves and Fink’s (2006) model, ‘length’, is an insightful contribution to the discussion of sustainable leadership as the authors make a compelling observation that “the most central challenge for maintaining improvement in innovative schools is leadership succession” (p. 56). While not guaranteeing enduring improvement, planned succession is an integral part of allowing the smooth transition from one leader to the next. Good succession planning enables the survival of innovations that have been developed. The best way to secure succession is by distributing, stretching and spreading leadership across other people in the school. Hargreaves and Fink referred to this as their third principle ‘breadth’.

The authors’ fourth and fifth principles of justice and diversity are tightly linked. Justice challenges schools “to think beyond our own schools and ourselves” (p. 158) so that resources are shared, collaborative partnerships are encouraged and successful schools can work with struggling schools. This develops a “collective accountability” (p. 157) that focuses less on competition with others and more on working with colleagues in other schools.

The sixth principle in Hargreaves and Fink’s (2006) model is resourcefulness. Essentially this principle requires the development of a culture in schools and systems that is respectful of the fact that improvement results in the expenditure of considerable energy both in terms of material and human resources. Such a notion, suggesting prudent and thoughtful management of resources, is a requirement of a sustainable as well as an ethical model of leadership. In some respects, the concept of resourcefulness is similar to Fullan’s (2005) cyclical energising, in that it demands leaders are conscious of the fact that in the pursuit of improved performance staff
are not left beleaguered and burned out. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) present the power of renewal as a method of managing the exhaustion that can come from the relentless pursuit of improvement.

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) argued that emotion is “an indispensable source of human energy….positive emotion creates energy; negative emotion saps it” (p. 218). A leader’s capacity to appreciate the level of emotional intelligence required to lead is becoming increasingly important, where more is expected of teachers and schools in a highly accountable climate. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) cite the work of the sociologist Hochschild (1983) who coined the term ‘emotional labour’ to describe the work of those involved in the service professions and industry. Emotional labour can be very draining as leaders and teachers are often expected to mask their own emotions in the service of others but it can also be a positive and uplifting experience, or as Fineman (2000) described it, even a labour of love. The degree to which leaders sensitively relate to the emotional state of their staff and the degree to which teachers relate to the social and emotional well-being of their students may also be a factor in the success of the nine schools in this study.

Leaders and teachers’ emotional connection to their work is something that enhances the culture of the workplace and is of significant interest to the researcher. Several researchers (Everall & Paulson, 2004; Mathieu, 2007; Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011) cautioned it is important to recognise that in the caring professions such as counselling, psychiatry, nursing, and teaching there is real potential for burnout and compassion fatigue. The researcher seeks to investigate what factors might contribute to the reduction of burnout and compassion fatigue in schools where teachers might see their work as a labour of love and where a high degree of emotional energy is invested.

The final and salient principle in Hargreaves and Fink’s work is the notion of ‘conservation’ as a key element of sustainable leadership. This principle respects history and legacy. As such, it goes against the grain of the dominant discourse in leadership and change management which rarely has time for the past in its constant pursuit of reform. If we are to sustain and ensure the retention of novice teachers it is vital that they are exposed to the professional wisdom of their older more experienced peers. The result can be a reciprocal relationship where both are renewed.
2.3.5 Summary: Models of Leadership

Four dominant models of leadership; instructional, transformational, distributed and sustainable leadership have been examined. Clearly, while they all have unique attributes there is also much that connects them and indeed overlaps between them. There is also recognition in the literature that leaders need to be adaptive, sourcing approaches that suit context, requiring an integrative approach. In the current study, with nine quite different schools from varied demographic backgrounds, it is of interest to the researcher to ascertain whether there is a blended approach to leadership utilising a variety of models and whether or not any other models not already discussed come to the fore.

The literature describing the effects of leadership on student performance consistently notes that it is a significant, but indirect influence. Leaders, particularly executive leaders, such as principals and deputy principals, rely on the agency of middle managers and teachers in the classroom, to ensure their aspirations are enacted. In fact Mulford and Silins (2003) suggested that:

Reforms for schools, no matter how well conceptualised, powerfully sponsored, brilliantly structured, or closely audited are likely to fail in the face of cultural resistance from those in schools. By their actions, or inaction, students, teachers, middle managers, and head teachers help determine the fate of what happens in schools, including attempts at reform (p. 1).

Hattie (2003, 2009, 2012) and Dinham (2008) both argued that the teacher is the major in-school influence on student achievement. Hattie (2003) stated “it is what teachers know, do and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation” (p. 1-2). What teachers know, do and care about, may well provide important insights into their respective schools’ success. An analysis and synthesis of the literature on teacher effectiveness will provide a useful starting point for the discussion of teachers’ perceptions of their role in the nine schools in this study as well as the commentary of leaders, students and parents on quality teaching.

2.4 The Characteristics of Effective Teachers in High Performing and Improving Schools

2.4.1 School and Teacher Effectiveness: Introduction

Early studies on school and teacher effectiveness Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer and Wisenbaker (1979), Edmonds (1979a, 1979b) and Rutter, Maughan, Mortimer, Ousen and Smith (1979) sought to contest the deterministic claims by
Coleman et al. (1966) that home background was more influential in terms of influence on student achievement than schools and teachers. Their research focused on leadership and the influence of school culture on student achievement. Later literature suggested it is important to recognise the influence of teaching and teacher quality as a specific influence. Brophy and Good (1986) in their review of the literature on teacher behaviours that contributed to student achievement finally commented that: “the myth that teachers do not make a difference in student learning has been refuted” (p. 370). Mortimer (1991) also noted that effective schools are defined as schools in which students progress further than might be expected from consideration of their intake as a result of specific teacher practices. This observation supports the purposive sample of the current study with schools being selected on the basis of their performance over and above that which their socio-economic index would have predicted. Dutch studies, such as Scheerens (1992, 1993); and Scheerens and Bosker (1997) found an increased influence attributed to ‘between class’ and ‘between teacher’ effects. These findings prompted further studies (Creemers, 1992, 1994; Hattie, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012; Marzano, 2003, Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2005; Rowe, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004; Reynolds, 1998) which confirmed the validity of a focus on teacher quality and instructional effectiveness that Levine and Lezotte (1990) had earlier suggested was warranted. As Rowe (2004) argued:

What matters most? Certainly NOT the ‘pimple’ of student ‘compositional’ characteristics such as gender, socio-economic differences, nor school structural arrangements of interest to ‘school effectiveness’ researchers but the ‘pumpkin’ of quality teaching and learning provision, supported by strategic teaching standards and ongoing professional development (p. 19-20 emphasis in original).

The current study seeks to examine the perceptions of teachers and elicit ‘what matters most’ to them concerning their practice in the context of high achieving secondary schools. The researcher now seeks to situate the present study within the context of existing research on teacher effectiveness through a review of the literature. The researcher, supporting Rowe (2004), who recognised the need to approach the literature of teacher effectiveness in a singular fashion, will however, at a later date in the study, endeavour to place this discussion within the ‘gestalt’ of effective schools, as one part of the whole under investigation. In doing so, it is argued that the balance between structural arrangements and the function of schools might be more properly addressed as Rowe (2004) noted:
The ‘myth’ of ‘school effectiveness’ (or ‘making schools better’) is grounded in a widespread failure to understand the fundamental distinction between structure and function in school education. Whereas a key function of schools is the provision of quality teaching and learning experiences that meet the developmental and psycho-social needs of students is dependent on organizational structures that support this function, the danger is a typical proclivity on the part of educational policy makers and administrators to stress structure at the expense of function (p. 19).

In seeking to address that balance it now behoves the researcher to provide a review of the literature on teacher effectiveness.

2.4.2 Teacher Effectiveness

Initially, a number of seminal studies from the 80’s and 90’s will be presented and a synthesis provided, followed by an analysis of more recent studies. The review by Levine and Lezotte, (1990), summarized American research on ‘unusually effective schools’ and their emphasis on effective instruction. In addition to factors concerning school climate and culture, the authors found that the following elements of instructional effectiveness influenced student achievement:

- A focus on student acquisition of central learning skills;
- Maximum availability and use of time for learning, particularly literacy and numeracy;
- Availability of instructional support personnel;
- Appropriate monitoring of student progress;
- Practice oriented staff development at the school site;
- Learning enrichment;
- Emphasis on higher order learning in assessment (Adapted from Levine & Lezotte, 1990).

Across the Atlantic at a roughly similar time the early major study of teacher effectiveness was the Junior School Project (JSP) carried out by Mortimer, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob (1988). The JSP project found the following factors attributed to teachers had a positive influence on student achievement: Structured lessons, intellectually challenging teaching, a focused work centred environment, maximum communication between teacher and student about the content of their work and monitoring student progress as an aspect of planning and assessment.

Several years later, Sammons, Hillman and Mortimer (1995) in another UK review of school effectiveness literature found the following elements related to teacher effectiveness:
• High quality teaching and learning;
• High expectations of children’s possible achievements;
• Teacher mastery of academic content;
• Use of positive reinforcement and rewards;
• Careful monitoring of children’s progress;
• Purposeful teaching with maximisation of teaching time;
• High quality staff development. (Adapted from Sammons, Hill & Mortimer, 1995)

Purposeful teaching is a term that rewards deeper elaboration. Sammons, Hill and Mortimer (1995) defined the term as having a number of elements: efficient organisation, clarity of purpose, structured lessons and adaptive practice. Effective organisation develops an internal locus of control for the teacher and enables clarity of purpose. Clarity of purpose provides a sense of direction for students. Structured teaching involved balanced lessons that utilised strong whole class open ended questioning skills and interrogation of student answers with constructive feedback. Structured teaching was complemented with opportunities for a degree of pupil independence and responsibility for managing their own work. An earlier study in the UK by Galton, Simon & Croll (1980) entitled the ORACLE project strongly supported the concept of ‘purposeful teaching’ and found that the group of teachers who utilised a high proportion of whole-class teaching were more effective in producing gains in mathematics and language. Scheerens (1992) Dutch study, strongly supported ‘structured teaching’ where teachers made clear what was to be learnt, organised teaching into manageable units, used material in which students make use of ‘hunches and prompts’ and regular testing of progress. The researcher is interested to investigate what elements of ‘purposeful teaching’ described above are evident in the practices of teachers in the current study.

Reynolds, (1998) in his international review of research on teacher effectiveness in the context of literacy, noted a number of factors that influenced student achievement. For Reynolds opportunity to learn which relates to effective time on task in the subject to be assessed and the teacher’s ‘academic orientation’ where instruction and learning are the main classroom goal were key influences. Other important factors were, strong classroom management skills, high expectations for all students, and an emphasis on teacher led classroom discussion where the teacher ‘carries the content personally to the student’ (pp. 148 – 150). Reynolds argued that the emphasis on teacher led classroom discussion was not to be
confused with ‘chalk and talk’ teaching, but was rather characterised by active teaching, with high questioning skills which facilitated monitoring for understanding.

The researcher in the present study notes that these reviews cannot by any means exhaust the literature but because they are ‘reviews’ they present a fair coverage of the research from the 80’s through to the 90’s on teacher effectiveness. In the context of the present study concerning teachers in high performing secondary schools the researcher is particularly interested in investigating the prevalence of particular findings from a synthesis of the literature above, namely:

- A focus on student acquisition of central learning skills;
- Maximum availability and use of time for learning;
- Structured lessons;
- High expectations and intellectually challenging teaching;
- Emphasis on higher order learning in assessment;
- Monitoring of student progress;
- Purposeful, teacher led whole-class discussion;
- Teachers ‘academic orientation’ and ability to ‘carry the content to the student’ (Reynolds 1998);
- Teacher engagement in professional development.

While the researcher has synthesised the key elements above to frame future discussion of findings within the present study, he notes Sammons, Hillman and Mortimer’s (1995) comments when they argued that no one particular teaching style should be seen as more effective than others: “Indeed in our view debates about the virtues of one particular teaching style over another are too simplistic and have become sterile. Efficient organisation, fitness for purpose, flexibility of approach and intellectual challenge are of greater relevance” (p. 54-55). Reviews of the literature provide a platform for common sense application of strategies that are indeed fit for purpose, not literal checklists that become overly prescriptive and deny flexibility and adaptability. With that in mind it is useful to examine more recent literature on teacher effectiveness in order to expand this overview and broaden perspectives.

2.4.3 Recent Studies

More recent studies have both added to the field of teacher effectiveness and confirmed many earlier findings (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Day, 2007;

Marzano (2003), argued that applying the research on teacher effectiveness is an idea whose time has come. Marzano (2003) highlighted three key factors affecting student achievement in his review of the literature over the previous thirty five years. These are presented in Table 2.1 overleaf:

Table 2.1

Factors Affecting Student Achievement (Marzano, 2003, P. 10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>• Guaranteed and viable curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Challenging goals and effective feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parent and community involvement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Safe and orderly environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collegiality and professionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>• Instructional strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom curriculum design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>• Home atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Learned intelligence and background knowledge</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analysis of Table 2.1, shows that a number of the ‘school factors’ clearly overlap with the ‘teacher factors’. They rely heavily on the agency of teachers for their implementation but equally they must also be driven by the leadership of any school. It is useful to interrogate Marzano’s examples further, as they have the potential to contribute a great deal to the current study of nine successful schools and the work of leaders and teachers within them. Marzano elaborated on his concept of a “guaranteed and viable curriculum” which he ranked as highest in its influence on student achievement. This was again confirmed in a later study by Dufour & Marzano (2011) in which leaders were reminded that a guaranteed and viable curriculum is the basic tenet for a strong professional learning community. For
Marzano (2003) a viable curriculum is the combination of an “opportunity to learn” and “time” (p. 22). Opportunity to learn was first introduced as a term some thirty years ago “when it became a component of the first and then the Second International Mathematics Study (FIMS and SIMS respectively) now Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). It was found that some students had not had an equal opportunity to learn because they did not share the same ‘strategic experience’. A FIMS technical report noted:

One of the factors which may influence scores on an achievement examination is whether or not students have had an opportunity to study a particular topic or learn how to solve a particular type of problem presented by the test. (as cited in Marzano, 2003, p. 22)

Opportunity to learn while arguably self-evident has become a major issue in debates concerning teaching and learning. With the increased prevalence of external standardised testing and in high stakes testing such as tertiary entrance exams there is concern that ‘teaching to the test’ rather than an approach that fosters deep learning and a breadth of knowledge might impose limitations on teachers and students. This concern will be investigated in the current study particularly the hypothesis that opportunities to solve particular tasks present in tests may not necessarily imply prescriptive ‘teach to the test’ approaches.

Marzano (2003) argued that teachers must protect instructional time, ensure essential content is addressed and sequence and organise essential content (p. 25–31). The two elements of Marzano’s key school level factor, ‘a guaranteed and viable curriculum’, are of major interest to the current study. Of particular interest to the researcher will be the way the nine identified academically successful schools grapple with the tensions of a curriculum that is extensive, prescriptive, and time intensive. Marzano’s (2003) second school level factor, providing challenging goals and effective feedback, is evident in earlier studies. Citing the school effectiveness literature, he argued that setting challenging goals has strong support as an important factor in effective schools, particularly in low socio-economic schools. He observes that without adequate feedback, there is no way of knowing whether goals have been achieved. He also points out that feedback must be specific to the content being learned and as a consequence, the design of assessment tasks must closely parallel the curriculum being taught. Marzano also adds that feedback must be timely and regular. He is a strong advocate for regular formative assessment which he argued in the United States often takes second place to state and national standardised testing. Of interest in the current study of nine schools will be the
emphasis placed on assessment policy, assessment design and whether there is evidence of timely feedback linked to clear expectations and goals.

Marzano (2003) argued that a safe and orderly environment is fundamental to high student achievement. It is a factor that pertains to whole school culture as well as the efficient operation of the classroom. The researcher seeks to explore the degree to which schools in the current study place an emphasis on the maintenance of a supportive environment for learning, or if in turning around a school, the development of an orderly environment has been a high priority.

Marzano (2003) offered a final school level factor that is of considerable relevance to the current study, namely, collegiality and professionalism. Marzano identifies collegiality and professionalism arising from a number of studies which attribute organisational climate as having an influence on student achievement. Collegiality is defined as the manner in which teachers interact with one another. Collegiality is demonstrated by supportive behaviours, honest professional interactions and courteous and respectful relationships. It should also be noted that collegiality should not be confused with the disposition of friendliness or congeniality; collegiality demands a great deal more of the teacher. Sergiovanni (2005) signals a cautious note when he distinguishes between collegiality and congeniality: “Though congeniality is pleasant and often desirable, it is not independently linked to better performance and quality schooling” (p. 12). Sergiovanni describes three layers of professional relationships: congeniality is the first layer, building to collegiality and finally a community of practice. Communities of practice work to bring teachers together, build capacity and improve their effectiveness through increased professional knowledge they are often found where transformative and distributed leadership practices are evident.

In the development of professionalism, Marzano (2003) suggested that a sense of efficacy on the part of teachers was required to confirm to teachers that they are valued and can effect change. Experience and professional qualifications also build efficacy. Arguably the most important aspect attributed to professionalism in teachers was their capacity to access and participate in quality professional development. In a study of 7,500 eighth grade teachers, Weglinskly (2000), found that professional development for mathematics and science teachers had as much influence on student achievement as did student background.

Having discussed Marzano’s school level factors it is important to address his ‘teacher level factors later fully developed in Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2005).
Marzano argued that his studies were based on achievement in assessment that was specific to the content being taught at a given time, as opposed to more broad standardised tests. He also produced effect size data for each of these instructional strategies. Effect size data will be referred to in other following studies and it therefore requires a definition here. Hattie (2009) suggested that an effect size:

provides a common expression of the magnitude of study outcomes for many types of outcome variables, such as school achievement. An effect size of $d = 1.0$ indicates an increase of one standard deviation on the outcome – in this case the outcome is improving school achievement. A one standard deviation is increase typically associated with advancing childrens’ achievement by two to three years improving the rate of learning by 50% (p. 7).

Utilising such a metric Cohen (1988) proposed that an effect size of $d = 0.2$ was small, $d = 0.5$ was medium and $d = 0.8$ was large. Hattie (2009) in his studies suggested that $d = 0.2$ was small, $d = 0.4$ was medium and $d = 0.6$ is large when judging educational outcomes. Marzano argued that due to the “curriculum sensitive” nature of the assessments the effect sizes were relatively high but his rank order was a valuable table of effective strategies. His list appears in Table 2.2 below.

Table 2.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Average effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying similarities and differences</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarising and note taking</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcing effort and providing recognition</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework and practice</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-linguistic representations</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative learning</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting objectives and providing feedback</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating and testing hypotheses</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions cues and advanced organisers</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identifying similarities and differences is not a strategy that appears in many other studies as a discrete item, yet its very high effect size ($d = 1.61$) warrants some attention. Marzano describes this strategy as the utilisation of tasks that involve comparison and classification and teaching that uses metaphors and analogies. Summarising and note-taking is a category with a very high effect size in Marzano’s study ($d = 1.00$). Hattie (2009) places it within a suite of meta-cognitive strategies he describes generally as study skills with an overall effect size of $d = 0.59$. While there is some variation between the effect sizes found in the various studies it is clear that note-taking and study skills should be accorded serious attention as an instructional strategy. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition was a key influence in Bennet (1986) and again appears here in Marzano’s study ($d = 0.80$). Homework and practice ($d = 0.77$) is accorded a high effect size by Marzano. Marzano found cooperative learning to have an effect size of $d = 0.73$ and while this factor is not rated highly in previous studies, it warrants recognition and use as a strategy. Marzano’s study supports the use of setting objectives and providing feedback ($d = 0.61$) and it is a strategy found in all the studies examined here. Questioning, cues and advance organisers have also been evident in the previous studies.

Generating and testing hypotheses ($d = 0.61$) is a significant strategy in Marzano’s study supporting Bennet (1986). Marzano claims that student projects that involve experimental inquiry, problem solving and the development of hypotheses have a significant effect on student achievement. Applying research-based findings about effective instructional strategies should be done sensibly and moderately. Teachers, particularly novices, should not feel compelled to incorporate as many of the strategies they can in every lesson. Strategies should be used in a balanced manner over time and it must be noted that some strategies are particularly suited to certain subjects, certain age groups and even certain individuals. Just as in theories about leadership, there is no one size fits all approach to effective instruction. Marzano (2009) in commenting on the impact of his own research argued “that perhaps the most pervasive mistake is focusing on a narrow range of strategies” (p. 31) He later also stated “categories of strategies are only part of a comprehensive view of teaching” (p. 31). This cautionary note on applying particular strategies exclusively is borne out in the analyses of various categories across different researchers in this review. As such, any absolute view of what works is a very dangerous position to take. What the research shows is that while there is agreement in a number of very important key instructional areas it is
the diversity of the findings that should also make teachers pause and reflect. The current study will have a clear focus on instructional strategies seeking to confirm findings in the literature and ascertain what might be the dominant strategies that appear in the nine successful secondary schools in the study, bearing in mind that the classroom focus is predominantly on upper secondary teaching.

Supporting Scheerens and Bosker (1997) who found an increased influence attributed to between-class and between-teacher effects, Hattie (2003) argued that researchers need to ask where the “major source of variance in student's achievement lie”, so that practitioners can “concentrate on enhancing these sources of variance to truly make the difference” (p. 1). He found that the major sources of variance were sixfold:

1. Students account for 50% of the variance of achievement. It is what students bring to the table that predicts achievement more than any other variable.
2. Home accounts for 5-10% of the variance – considering that the major effects of the home are already accounted for by the attributes of the student.
3. Schools account for 5-10% of the variance: finances, school size, class size, buildings etc are important but have a relatively small effect on student achievement.
4. Principals are accounted for in the variance attributed to schools and mainly because of their influence on the climate of the school.
5. Peer effects contribute about 5-10% of the variance. Hattie argued that the influence of peers is relatively small.
6. Teachers account for 30% of the variance. It is what teachers know, do and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation. (p. 1-2)

Given such a profile, Hattie (2003) argued that the attention of researchers should be focused on “the person who gently closes the classroom door and performs the teaching act – the person who puts into place the end effects of so many policies, who interprets these policies, and who is alone with students during their 15,000 hours of schooling” (p. 1). In so doing, he found in a meta-analysis that many strategies teachers employ have a positive effect on student achievement, however, he sought to find what it was that had a “marked or meaningful effect” (p. 4). Hattie’s findings are represented in Table 2.3 overleaf.
Table 2.3  
*Effect Size of Influences on Student Achievement (Hattie, 2003)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFLUENCE</th>
<th>EFFECT SIZE</th>
<th>SOURCE OF INFLUENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s prior cognitive ability</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional quality</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct instruction</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remediation / feedback</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students disposition to learn</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class environment</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge of goals</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer tutoring</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery learning</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher style</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer effects</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>Peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings were elaborated as Hattie explored the difference between expert and experienced teachers across five major dimensions. The first was the ability of expert teachers to identify the essential representations of their subject. He found that expert and experienced teachers do not necessarily differ in their content knowledge but the difference lay in how they organised and used content knowledge. In particular, experts use knowledge in a more integrated fashion
combining new subject matter with prior knowledge and with other subjects in the curriculum, as well as “changing, combining and adding” (p. 5) to lessons, according to students’ needs. Because of these deeper representations expert teachers:

- Can spontaneously relate what is happening to these deeper sets of principles;
- Can quickly recognise sequences of events occurring in the classroom which affect the learning of the topic;
- Can detect and concentrate on information that has instructional significance;
- Can make better predictions based on their representations about the classroom;
- Can identify a greater store of algorithms that students might use to solve a problem;
- Can be much more responsive to students (p. 5).

In terms of the first dimension, deeper representation of their subject, Hattie (2003) found that expert teachers consistently sought further information over and above local data or resources. They were adept at anticipating problems and not afraid to improvise. They “seek and use feedback information about their teaching” (p. 6). Timperley (2010) concurred with this finding, challenging a dominant notion that evidence about student learning is far too often used to make judgments about students’ abilities rather than be used to guide effective teaching and help in decisions about what to change in terms of pedagogical approaches. Hattie’s second dimension, guiding learning through classroom interactions, involves the creation of an optimal classroom climate for learning. In particular this means increasing the “probability of feedback…. where error is welcomed, where student questioning is high and where engagement is the norm” (p. 7). Experts are also more effective scanners of the room constantly making references to the language of instruction and learning. Experts were very context oriented “they needed to know about the ability, experience, and background of the students” (p. 7).

Hattie’s (2003) third dimension, focuses on the importance of monitoring learning and providing feedback, the influence with the highest effect size (1.13) on student achievement. Expert teachers seek and provide more and higher quality feedback than do experienced teachers. Experts use feedback to develop hypotheses about their student’s learning and they also develop a higher degree of automaticity in their responses to complex circumstances in the classroom. The fourth dimension of
expert teachers is their capacity to attend to affective attributes, that is, they have a high respect for students. Hattie argued that too often the difference between experienced and expert teachers was the physical and psychological distance between the teachers and their students. Expert teachers were able to respect students as learners and as people, demonstrating both care and commitment in their relationship with students. Expert teachers displayed a degree of passion about their work, they had a sense of responsibility and as Berliner (1988) claimed, they showed more emotion about their successes and failures. Day (2007) defined a passion for teaching as the "combination of the emotional and the intellectual … it creates energy, determination conviction and commitment" (p. 2).

The fifth and final dimension that Hattie (2003) argued was evident in the work of expert teachers was their capacity to influence student outcomes:

Expert teachers aim for more than achievement goals. They aim to motivate their students to master rather than perform, they enhance students’ self-concept and self-efficacy about learning, they set appropriate and challenging tasks and they aim for both surface and deep learning (p. 9).

The distinction between surface and deep learning, built as it is on the work of Saljo (1975), and Ramsden, Martin & Bowden (1989), is described by Hattie as knowing the content to gain a passing grade as opposed to a deeper understanding which gave students the capacity to relate and extend ideas connecting existing knowledge with knowledge from other areas. For Hattie expert teachers are more successful than experienced teachers at both types of learning.

In all, for each of the five dimensions discussed above, there was a total of sixteen attributes related to teaching. Out of those sixteen attributes, using regression analysis, Hattie claimed that three attributes most effectively separated expert from experienced teachers: setting challenging tasks, deep representation and monitoring with feedback.

Citing “several years of research into teacher expectation effects” (Rubie-Davies, Hattie & Hamilton, 2006, p. 429) argued that expectations can positively or negatively influence student performance and achievement. This confirmed Rosenthal and Jacobson’s seminal study (1968) identifying the “Pygmalion Effect” further explicated by Schunk and Meece (2012). Setting appropriate yet challenging tasks enables high expectations. This researcher seeks to investigate the degree to which teachers in the current study provide evidence for this practice.
In an interview in the North American Journal of Psychology, Hattie (2008) noted that “the higher the challenge, the higher the probability that one seeks and needs feedback, but the more important it is that there is a teacher to ensure that the learner is on the right path to successfully meet the challenge” (p. 240). This proposition about the relationship between feedback and challenge effectively illustrates a key argument in Hattie’s earlier paper that the dimensions and attributes discussed are connected and overlapping. Of particular interest to the researcher is the connection between teachers setting challenging and appropriate tasks and the teachers’ capacity to provide appropriate teaching through deep representation of the subject matter that develops a platform for the learner to find the ‘right path to meet the challenge’. It is hoped the current study might document what such teaching looks like, through the perceptions of teachers themselves and even more significantly their students and whether these perceptions accord with Hattie’s (2003) findings. Just as importantly, Rubie-Davies, Hattie and Hamilton (2006) argued that expectations “may be exemplified in the learning opportunities provided, in the affective climate created and in the interactional content and context of the classroom” (p. 430). The researcher is interested to investigate whether there is a connection between the pedagogical skills of the teacher and his or her capacity to also make a pastoral connection with the student in opportunities that present themselves through feedback.

In later studies, Hattie (2007, 2009) further refined his earlier work, each time presenting more fine-grained analysis that produced slight variations in the rank order by effect size of the influences on student achievement. His 2007 meta-analysis included over 750 meta-analyses based on 50,000 studies representing over 2 million students. This study showed the increasing influence of classroom behavioural strategies on student achievement and the need to address disruptive students, perhaps a mirror of the changing social phenomena currently witnessed in relation to disengaged and disruptive students in schools (Cornelius-White, 2007; Marzano, 2003; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2005; McDonald, 2010; Seligman, 2011). Table 2.4 overleaf provides a ranked order of influences on student achievement according to effect size.
Table 2.4

*Effect Size of Influences on Student Achievement. Adapted from (Hattie, 2007).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>INFLUENCE</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Self-report grades</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Absence of disruptive students</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Classroom behavioural strategies</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Quality teaching</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Reciprocal teaching</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Prior achievement</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher-student relationships</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Formative evaluation</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Creativity programs</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quality of teaching, teacher student relationships and feedback still remained extremely high in the ranking that ordered one hundred items in terms of effect size on student achievement. Of the top ten influences above, eight are attributed directly to the teacher and to his or her teaching. While a useful strategy to employ with students, self-reported grading is typically seen as another form of prior achievement in that students (particularly secondary students) have a very good understanding of their achievement and thus in terms of expectation may not challenge themselves enough. This raises the question of the role of the teacher in motivating students and setting the bar higher than the expectations imposed by students themselves. As Vygotsky (1978) noted, students may be able to do tasks at a higher level if they are ‘scaffolded’ to move beyond the zone of proximal development and have their own expectations exceeded by the challenging tasks Hattie had already alluded to in his earlier study.
Presented as a standardised measure, reciprocal teaching \((d = 0.74)\) is another influence that did not directly appear in the 2003 study although it might be argued that it could be found under peer tutoring \((d = 0.50)\). Hattie (2009) described reciprocal teaching as a strategy where students take turns to be the teacher, using “cognitive strategies such as summarising, questioning, clarifying and predicting” (p. 210). The effects were highest when there was explicit teaching of the cognitive strategies before beginning the reciprocal teaching dialogue. Another feature of Figure 2.4 is the appearance of the influence of formative evaluation of teachers. The effect size \((d = 0.70)\) is clearly large and sends a signal to schools and teachers that peer mentoring is a strategy worthy of examination. Hattie (2009), in a further iteration of his work, noted that the effect size of providing formative evaluation had increased \((d = 0.90)\), noting that “it is these attributes of seeking formative evaluation of the effects (intended and unintended) of their programs that makes for excellence in teaching” (p. 181). In recent studies of high performing school systems at the international level, Jensen (2011, 2012) strongly supported Hattie’s findings in that peer mentoring was a strong feature of the best performing systems in the world.

By 2009, Hattie had increased the size of his meta-analysis to a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses (Hattie, 2009). While an analysis of Hattie’s work (2003, 2007 & 2009) shows some changes in the rank order of influences over time, the review of his studies reinforces the key role of the teacher and teaching strategies in terms of impact on student achievement. Table 2.5 overleaf provides a further ranked order of influences on student achievement according to effect size.
Table 2.5

*Effect Size of Teacher Influences on Student Achievement* (adapted from Hattie, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Formative evaluation of teachers</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Micro teaching</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Interventions for disabled students</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Reciprocal teaching</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher-student relationships</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Spaced vs mass practice</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Meta-cognitive strategies</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Self verbalisation / self questioning</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Problem-solving teaching</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 138 factors identified by Hattie, 12 from the first twenty, in rank order of effect size, directly relate to the teacher and teaching. Three (not represented) relate to curriculum where the teacher makes deliberate decisions in terms of choice and approaches. Classroom behavioural influences, while assigned as a school influence by Hattie, could also arguably be reliant on the role of the teacher. Thus sixteen out of twenty influences are strongly centred around the teacher and his or her teaching. The current study does not seek to search for evidence of each one of these influences in the approaches of teachers in the nine schools in a check list fashion. Rather, the researcher seeks to allow teachers to speak to their strengths
and determine some points of commonality and difference with the findings in the literature.

Having examined the work of Marzano (2000, 2003, 2005, 2009) in some depth based on his international and predominantly American studies and illustrating the relationship between his research and the research of Hattie (2003, 2007, 2009) whose meta-analyses were predominantly international studies, it is now useful to address the work of Dinham (2008). Dinham’s work parallels and draws on both of the previous authors as well as the research of Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000). Dinham’s study brings a particular Australian perspective to the literature review on the work of effective teachers. The original research carried out by Ayres, Dinham and Sawyer (2000) and reported in Dinham (2008) focused on performance data from 1991-1996 for government schools in the tertiary entrance exams Higher School Certificate (HSC) in New South Wales (NSW). Teachers were selected by identifying a number of subject departments that had gained significant success in the HSC. Success was defined as having students in the top 1% of the candidates for HSC courses over a significant period of time (at least five years). Thirty two schools were selected, eighteen metropolitan and fourteen non-metropolitan. In total twenty five teachers took part in the study. The sample size of teachers in the Dinham (2008) report was small which could suggest that the study might draw criticism. Nevertheless, its focus on HSC results in the New South Wales context make it relevant to the present project with its focus on TEE results in Western Australia. The study also verified the researcher’s 26 years of ‘lived experiences’ in secondary schools.

Dinham (2008) cited seven broad factors as contributing to HSC teaching success:

- School background
- Subject faculty
- Teachers’ personal qualities
- Teachers’ relationships with students
- Teachers’ professional development
- Teaching – resources, planning
- Teaching strategies (p. 25)

Dinham (2008) argued that “school level factors were reported by those involved in the HSC to be influential, but of minor importance overall in the success of individual
A healthy school culture was indeed reported with students regarded very positively by staff and that high regard reciprocated by students. Staff also spoke of support from the leadership for their subject faculty.

Individual teachers spoke of the importance of subject faculties in contributing to their success. This was evidenced by: the faculty acting as a team, high expectations of each other, whole faculty approaches to programming, faculty having achieved a certain profile within the school, faculty success breeding success and faculty rapport with students (p. 26). Faculty based influences had a strong impact on teacher effectiveness and consequently student achievement however Dinham (2008) argued that while significant, these influences were still less than the impact of the individual teacher.

Teachers’ personal qualities were significant in contributing to student achievement. Dinham argued that the teacher’s “orientation to the subject” (2008, p. 28) that is, their strong subject content knowledge, was evident in classroom visits. Another element of their orientation to the subject was their obvious passion and love for the subject matter, which supports Day (2007) as discussed earlier. A second personal quality cited by Dinham (2008) was teachers’ “orientation to the students” (p. 28). This behaviour was captured in teachers’ approachability inside and outside of the classroom. Finally, a third element in teachers’ personal qualities was their “orientation to their work” (p. 28). Teachers involved in the study were hard working, committed and organised.

In a similar vein, teachers’ relationships with their students played a significant role in their capacity to influence student achievement. Dinham (2008) found several aspects of student teacher relationships particularly useful in promoting student achievement. It was important for teachers to “be themselves” (p. 28), relaxed and not remote authority figures. Teachers who were able to “relate to students as people” (p. 28), taking a personal interest in the lives of their students but still maintaining an appropriate personal and professional distance, were able to engage and motivate students.

Teachers’ professional development was another contributing factor to the high achievement of students in the Dinham (2008) study. A number of the teachers in the study were regularly sought out by teachers in other schools to provide advice and offer professional development but equally they themselves recognised the importance of renewing their own professional knowledge. For these teachers, professional development was accessed in four ways. The first form of professional
development was through networking. Most of the teachers in the study were active networkers in professional associations. Of interest to Dinham was the observation that many teachers sought out experiences in their “host discipline”, that is, music teachers with musicians, legal studies teachers with lawyers, art teachers with artists. The second form of professional development was “In-school professional development” (p. 29). When teachers had been involved in outside professional experiences they gave presentations to the faculty. The larger the faculty the more often this occurred. Smaller faculties tended to source external professional support. “Out of school professional development” (p. 30) was cited as the other major source of support. Two thirds of these teachers, spoke of courses that were ‘subject content specific’ as being the most beneficial, the other third cited courses that focused on teaching strategies as most beneficial.

Finally, “development through experience” was commented on by a number of teachers. They spoke about accruing knowledge and expertise over time but were careful to note that time alone does not enrich experience; it is engagement with colleagues and developmental experiences over time which contributes to the furthering of knowledge. “Resources and planning” (p. 30) were identified as a key aspect contributing to effective teaching. These teachers used a variety of resources on top of traditional textbooks to ensure they had current and relevant resources that were both challenging and motivating.

Dinham (2008) noted that the central aim of the study was to ascertain the dominant teaching strategies leading to HSC success. Even though the teachers in the study ranged across a number of subject areas “they had far more in common than not” (p. 30). It was found that certain strategies made up the common ground shared between them. Teachers’ capacity to create a certain “classroom climate” (p. 31) was an integral part of their success. There was an expectation, usually unspoken, for students to demonstrate on task behaviours. Teaching time in class was seen as a valued commodity. Group learning was more common than expected. Teachers affirmed students, giving feedback and recognising achievement. There was evidence of routine and repetition as important in the provision of structured learning. There was an ethos of student cooperation despite the relatively competitive environment of the HSC. There was a strong “HSC focus” (p. 31) in that the HSC or its requirements were addressed specifically in half the lessons observed. Half the teachers felt that regular practice on HSC exam components was important. Half the teachers felt their HSC exam marking experience was vital in their success. “Knowing marking standards and what
markers looked for” (p. 32) was most beneficial and very good professional development.

The third instructional strategy that led to HSC success was “building understanding” (p. 32), which was typified by an awareness of the interrelatedness of the subject which saw teachers “linking different areas and topics of the subject and previous lessons to develop a big picture” (p. 32). There was a strong emphasis on interpretation rather than reproduction of knowledge.

“Note-making” (p. 32) was seen as a valuable instructional strategy. “Building notes through teacher facilitation” (p. 32) and records of student discussions and presentations was seen as a useful way to fill in gaps in knowledge. Teachers did not give out notes, they encouraged “independent note making” (p. 32) requiring students to use their own words that helped develop analysis and synthesis.

Writing essays and organising information was seen as a key instructional strategy. Projects or extended essays were not seen as valuable, rather writing essays that replicated questions and time scales found in the exam were far more beneficial. This finding supported Marzano’s notion of curriculum sensitive assessment. Students were expected to “answer problems” (Dinham, 2008, p. 33) not relying on ready-made solutions offered by the teacher but challenged to find solutions to problems that stretched them.

The sixth instructional strategy cited by Dinham (2008) was “questioning”. Dinham found that while teachers are generally encouraged not to use closed questions and instead opt for richer open ended questioning techniques, there was evidence of many examples of both types. Open questions were generally used to “explore, interpret and predict” (p. 33). In whole class discussion closed questions were used for assessment, review, linking and building of concepts.

The use of whole class discussion supported earlier findings in the literature (Galton, Simon & Croll, 1980; Joyce & Showers, 1988; Sammons, Hill and Mortimer, 1995; Scheerens, 1992). Dinham (2008) found that in whole class discussion there was a “climate of open debate” (p. 33). However, whole class discussion, group work and independent student activities were used in equal measure as organisational structures. Group work was a favoured strategy where students were asked to make deductions from source materials, learn from each other and solve problems collaboratively, less evident in earlier studies and not a strong influence in Hattie’s research.
Assessment was the final dominant instructional strategy cited by Dinham (2008). “Two things that characterised the teaching of these successful teachers were frequent, varied assessment and frequent, constructive feedback …. Designed to help students know what they can and cannot do” (p. 34). The concluding commentary suggested these teachers were not exam-crammers or teachers who taught to the test. Rather than teaching to the HSC, they saw their role as teaching beyond it and stretching their students.

More than any other study reviewed, Dinham’s (2008) research had many similarities to the present study, operating in a similar tertiary exam context. Dinham’s analysis of leaders and teachers in NSW secondary schools found that school culture, faculty teams, teachers personal knowledge and relationships with students, their engagement with professional development and the teaching strategies they adopted, all contributed greatly to student success. The current study also focused on similar features of leaders and teachers work in the context of Western Australian Catholic secondary schools, twelve years on from Dinham’s project.

Another Australian study, Zbar, Kimber and Marshall (2009) undertook a review of eight high performing disadvantaged schools; two secondary and six primary in the state of Victoria. They sought to ascertain characteristics of the leadership of these schools, teaching practices and common cultural features. They argued, echoing the language of Marzano et, al., that “good, strong, stable leadership, which does the right things, is the pre-condition for improving teaching.” (p. 6). The findings of Zbar, Kimber and Marshall (2009) highlight the importance of shared leadership, high levels of expectation and teacher efficacy, an orderly learning environment, a focus on what matters most (in this case literacy and numeracy) and attention to sustaining improvement over time. While the students in this study came from disadvantaged backgrounds, the authors quoted the then Prime Minister of Australia Julia Gillard as they argued that “disadvantage is not destiny” (p. 5) and cannot be used as an excuse for poor outcomes. Having high expectations raised both student achievement and teacher efficacy.

There is a consistent message in almost every study cited in this chapter, clear goals and high expectations have a strong influence on student outcomes. Research on expectancy theory over many years indicates that teacher expectations can have either a positive or negative effect on student achievement.
(Good, 1987; Good & Brophy, 2003; Good & Weinstein 1986; Raudenbush, 1984; Warren, 2002; Weinstein, 2002). Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000) noted that lowered expectations, particularly for minority groups were a major factor in their poor academic achievement. Rubie-Davies, Hattie and Hamilton (2006), also made a salient point when they argued that “expectations may be exemplified in the learning opportunities provided, in the affective climate created and in the interactional content and context of the classroom” (p. 430).

Zbar, Kimber and Marshall (2009) strongly supported the contention of Rubie-Davies et al. (2006) when they argued that a safe and orderly environment is a prerequisite for strong student achievement, stating that it was “a fundamental precondition for improved teaching and learning to occur” (p. 5). In the schools in their study they found a commitment to structured and explicit teaching approaches complemented by “assessments that ensure the students are well known, that their needs have been identified and that programs are put in place to meet them” (p. 9). All of the schools in the Zbar, Kimber and Marshall (2009) study used data from assessments to drive improvement. These approaches were complemented by “comprehensive wellbeing arrangements which ensure that all students are connected to at least one teacher, particularly in the secondary schools” (p. 9). The authors referred to a study of nine urban high schools in the United States that Shields and Miles (2008), described as “leading edge” (p. 9) where researchers found an emphasis on a rigorous academic program, relevant curriculum and personalisation, where students were known by at least one significant teacher.

In another remarkably similar study, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED, 2009) examined 20 outstanding primary schools in the United Kingdom and found that the following key features were common across the 20 schools:

- They provide affection, stability and purposeful structured experiences
- They build and rebuild children’s belief in themselves
- They teach what matters and how to learn for themselves
- They listen to their pupils, value their views and act on them
- They build bridges with parents and communities
- They have high aspirations and expectations (OFSTED, 2009, p. 6).

Thus, as noted in OFSTED, (2009), the capacity of schools to ‘build bridges’ with their school communities is significant in the development of high performing and improving schools. Equally important is the ‘primacy of personal contact’, as Fullan
(2007) noted. Accordingly the present study endeavours to make the key stakeholders, students and parents, in that intangible concept the school community, a major focus. The next two themes in the review of the literature will focus on those two stakeholders, students and parents respectively.

2.5 The Influence of Students and their Peers on Academic Achievement

2.5.1 Introduction

Gentilucci (2004) said that “what you see depends on where you stand” (p. 133). The current study having examined the literature on leaders’ and teachers’ influence on student achievement seeks to stand in the place of students to attempt to see what they see. This theme recognises that student perceptions of their own learning are complex and significant and must be understood in any analysis of student achievement in high performing schools. Therefore, an understanding of student motivation, students’ perceptions of the affective climate of the school and the classroom, an appreciation of the influence of peers and a willingness to listen to the student voice, enriches an analysis of student achievement. Through focus group interviews with students across the nine schools, the current study seeks to give students a voice in the description of key influences on their academic achievement. The researcher now seeks to situate the present study within the context of existing research on student motivation, the influence of the affective climate of the school and the classroom, peer influences and the power of the student voice, through a review of the literature.

2.5.2 Motivation

Motivation is generally described as the driving force by which students achieve their goals. “Motivation is a need or desire that energizes behaviour and directs it toward a goal” (Myers, 2009, p. 339). Researchers have found a strong positive correlation between motivation and achievement (Geisler-Bernstein & Schmeck, 1996; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Schunk & Mullen, 2013; Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008; Stipek, 2002; Willingham, Pollack & Lewis, 2002). An appreciation of this relationship demands that researchers attempt to understand why students are driven to learn and achieve.
2.5.3 Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation

It has long been recognised that there are two broad categories of motivation, extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation directs students to engage in activities as a means to an end whereas intrinsic motivation engages students in an activity for its own sake. Students can be engaged in an activity because the experience is worthwhile and in addition they may also wish to attain a high grade or score on the test that assesses their learning, (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Eggen and Kauchak (2010) argued that intrinsic motivation is preferable because of its primary focus on learning and understanding that learners are more intrinsically motivated by activities or experiences that:

- **Present a challenge.** Challenge occurs when goals are moderately difficult.
- **Provide the learner with feelings of autonomy.** Learners are more motivated when they feel they have command over their own learning.
- **Evoke curiosity.** Interesting, novel and surprising experiences create intrinsic motivation.
- **Involve creativity and fantasy.** Such experiences allow learners to personalise content by using their imaginations (p. 285, italics in original).

The current study acknowledges that the context of university entrance examinations provide extrinsic motivation for many students as they aspire to gain a place in a course that meets their vocational interest. The current study also seeks to gauge what other factors similar to those outlined by Eggan and Kauchak (2010) above, intrinsically motivate students in this high stakes context to enable them to perform at their optimal level. In particular, as Schunk & Mullen (2013) argued, “it is helpful to show students how learning will help them perform better. Learners can be taught to attribute learning difficulties to causes they can control, such as low effort or poor use of strategies” (p. 68). The current study seeks to ascertain student perceptions concerning strategies they believed enhanced their learning. Exploring key motivational theories in the literature will help situate the findings and discussion of student perceptions concerning academic motivation.

2.5.4 Theories of Motivation

Eggen and Kauchak (2010) argued that there are three major theoretical views of motivation: behavioural theories, humanistic theories and social cognitive theory.
2.5.5 Behavioural Theories of Motivation

Behavioural theories of motivation are more closely linked to extrinsic drivers as they focus on rewards that change and reinforce behaviour. In secondary school settings, high test scores, grades and constructive feedback, both verbal and written, are viewed as rewards. While positive grades, test results and feedback, can be viewed as rewards and motivators, this should not infer that they play a superficial role in the learning process. Grades and test results serve as a measure of performance and aligned with feedback play an integral part in the instructional process. Using rewards to recognise increasing competence rather than simply participation is a valid exercise (Covington, 2000). Teachers who use feedback adeptly and sensitively can also enhance the teacher-student relationship and build self-efficacy in students. The current study seeks to ascertain the degree to which students view feedback and test scores as key motivators in their learning and achievement.

2.5.6 Humanistic Theories of Motivation

Humanistic psychology portrays motivation as people’s attempt to fulfill their potential as human beings (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). The humanistic movement places an emphasis on the whole person and is perhaps best portrayed in the work of Maslow (1968, 1970), who argued that human beings are motivated by a hierarchy of needs; namely, deficiency needs and growth needs. Maslow (1970) argued that people, will not move to higher needs such as intellectual achievement, aesthetic appreciation and self-actualisation until the deficiency needs of survival, safety, belonging and self-esteem are met. Survival needs such as shelter, warmth and food are generally taken for granted in most advanced economies and in the schools within the current study. However, in some schools catering to disadvantaged students, even these needs are sometimes not met and in extraordinary cases, schools become involved in their provision through the access of social services such as child protection agencies and onsite services such as school breakfast clubs (Red Cross, 2013). Having met what might be considered basic needs, Maslow (1970) suggested that safety from physical and emotional threat, belonging that is derived from love, acceptance from family and friends, and self-esteem which is attained through recognition and approval, is a pre-condition for intellectual achievement. Of particular interest in the current study is the degree to which students attest to teachers’ and schools’ awareness of and ability to meet
student needs in regard to safety, belonging and self-esteem. The research also seeks to investigate students’ perceptions of the impact this provision or lack thereof has on their achievement.

While recognising the contribution of Maslow’s theories it should also be noted that the earlier work of Adler (1935, 1937) and the school of individual psychology was a foundation for much of Maslow’s ideas, particularly the development of the powerful motivation of the need to belong. For Adler, the need to belong and bond with others is a fundamental human motivation which he described as the “urge to community” (Adler, 1937, p. 114). Once human beings feel they belong in community, Adler argued, “they develop a desire to contribute to that community through “Gemeinschaftsgefühl” or social interest, also sometimes translated as social feeling” (Ferguson, 1989, p. 359). For Adler, belonging and a heightened sense of social interest enables contribution and encourages cooperation. Goodenow (1991), in a study of 600 early adolescent students, found that a sense of belonging in the classroom was strongly correlated with students’ expectations of academic success, students’ intrinsic interest and teachers’ rating of student effort. Rosenberg, Mckeon and Dinero (1999) found that children who feel a sense of belonging are considered mentally healthy and “are more apt to perform proficiently, competently and responsibly” (p. 23). Schaps and Lewis (1999) argued that a sense of belonging or community was,

causally linked to students’ later development of intrinsic academic motivation, concern for others,...altruistic behaviour, intrinsic pro-social motivation, enjoyment of helping others learn, inclusive attitudes toward out groups and positive interpersonal behaviour in class (p. 216).

In the current study of nine high performing secondary schools, the researcher is interested to ascertain whether there is evidence to support claims that a sense of belonging and community can contribute to increased academic achievement and whether in a naturally competitive environment of selection for university placement, altruistic and pro-social motivations can co-exist in schools that build a sense of community.

Edwards and Mullis (2001) suggested that an Adlerian view of schooling places great emphasis on developing increased belonging in schools through what has been termed a ‘three C’s’ approach by enhancing connection, capability, and the capacity to contribute. Providing students with opportunities to “connect with teachers and other students is critical to feeling a sense of belonging” (p. 200). Finding ways to enhance students’ feelings of capability so that students feel
confident in facing challenges also increases their sense of belonging. Edwards and Mullis (2001) advocated finding opportunities for students to display individual strengths and talents, thus finding a personal niche. Rather than doing things for students, providing students with opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways to their school community enhances connection with others and builds capability (Edwards & Mullis, 2001). Activities that foster contribution are programs of community service, peer tutoring, peer support and charitable programs. The current study seeks to find evidence for the argument that a sense of connection, capability and contribution enhance belonging and academic achievement. More recent research (Shields & Miles, 2008; Ofsted, 2009; Darling–Hammond, 2010) has designated practical approaches to create a sense of belonging as the “personalisation” (Shields and Miles, 2008, p. 7) of the school experience.

2.5.7 Personalisation

Shields and Miles (2008) found personalisation occurred when “personal relationships between adults and students are fostered to ensure all students are known well by at least one adult” (p. 7). Personalisation was also confirmed as a key influence by Darling-Hammond (2010) in studies of disadvantaged and minority students in schools in New York and California. As previously mentioned the OFSTED (2009) study in the UK also supported this proposition.

Shields and Miles (2008) conducted a USA study of nine disadvantaged small urban high schools, dubbed Leading Edge Schools, in the states of California, Massachusetts and Illinois. They found a number of common features in their instructional approaches that enabled them to outperform similar schools in their districts: an emphasis on core academics, relevance in the curriculum and a focus on personalisation. Personalisation was described as the school’s capacity to “weave into school designs, multiple ways of fostering relationships between teachers and students, rather than relying solely on advisory structures” (p. 8). Such structural supports included an endeavour to maintain smaller than usual class sizes, individual academic support and pastoral groupings where students stayed with a teacher for two years or more to help create a greater sense of community.

Shields and Miles (2008) noted that small class size alone “does not guarantee deep understanding of student needs or effective response” (p. 52). In order to promote individual attention the Leading Edge Schools used multiple data sources
to assess students’ needs at entry and as they progressed through to graduation. In essence, such schools were doing what Timperley (2010) had advocated when she suggested that monitoring data on student progress was crucial to supporting motivation. In particular, most of the schools in the study focused on tests in mathematics and literacy on entry and consistent monitoring of progress through a variety of data sources thereafter:

What distinguishes Leading Edge Schools from other schools is the deliberate and active use of multiple data sources to inform school-based academic support, family and external support, and student self-monitoring…. Collaboration opportunities allowed teachers to continually monitor student progress against content benchmarks… and to differentiate academic support based on student needs. They typically do this through individual and small-group support outside the standard academic courses (p. 56)

Small class sizes of approximately 20 students and smaller teaching loads than other comparable schools enabled the offering of targeted support outside standard courses but within academic hours. These schools had extended school hours in order to facilitate these programs. It was the personalised individual attention to students needs through academic and social emotional support structures that characterised the majority of the schools in the study. Figure 2.1 overleaf represents various support structures (Shields and Miles, 2008, p. 45).
Figure 2.1 indicates the strong attention devoted to core academic subjects and the significant amount of time in six out of the nine schools devoted to academic support in scheduled class time. The academic support was facilitated by classroom teachers as opposed to outside tutors. This enabled support time to be aligned with classroom instruction as teachers providing support already knew the individual students and the curriculum. This supports Sharratt & Fullan’s (2012) call to ‘put faces on the data’ and individualise student support. The three schools in the study that do not appear to provide academic support; Perspectives, High Tech. High and Noble Street all offered support programs before and after school hours and during summer vacation. A typical day’s timetable is illustrated by Figure 2.3 overleaf which shows the Year 9 timetable at Tech Boston. The light blue shading illustrates the time where students receive pastoral and academic support in home room, project room, or MCAS prep.

* Indicates charter or pilot school with flexibility over length of day and year.
Note: “Maintenance” covers typical activities taken as a given in most urban high schools, such as homeroom, passing periods, and lunch.

Figure 2.2. Percentage of student year by use of time
Figure 2.3 Sample student timetable at TechBoston High School (Shields & Miles, 2008, p. 44).

Project room is typical of the number of academic support programs in the schools; it is fluid and based on student need. While most students are required to attend at least one project room a number of students who have greater need would be required to attend two or three. The above timetable is illustrative of the effective use of time as a resource and a school’s capacity to set timetabling priorities that can deliver greater personal attention for students as the need is required.

In addition to the strategies discussed above, Shields and Miles (2008) cite three other common factors across the nine schools: Individual practices that emphasize knowing students more deeply through individual relationships, community practices in which relationships are developed through belonging to an established group that shares norms and time and multi-year practices that group students and teachers that extend relationships across the grades (p. 62).

Most of the schools in the Shields and Miles study used advisory programs to foster personalisation through individualized advisory programs. Such programs typically provide academic and emotional support to facilitate academic success, focus on transition programs from primary school to junior high to senior high.
school, help set goals and teach appropriate study skills, provide career counselling and advise on preparation for university applications.

Community practices in the Leading Edge Schools focused on the creation of small or strategic groupings in which “students and teachers get to know each other and share interests norms and values” (Shields & Miles, 2008, p. 63). For larger schools the creation of smaller schools eg. middle schools and / or “houses” was a useful strategy to create a sense of belonging. Older students were expected to be involved in the orientation of younger students into the school community. Regular school wide meetings and house meetings also helped promote responsibility and attention to school culture.

Darling-Hammond (2010) also noted personalisation as a contributing factor in the high achieving schools that she and her colleagues studied in California and New York. These studies of large urban high schools that have been re-designed to become several smaller high schools have achieved much higher graduation rates and university entry for minority groups. One network of small schools in New York, the Internationals network, that accepted “only recent immigrant students who score in the bottom quartile on the English language proficiency test, in 2005 graduated 89% of the cohort that commenced in 1998. This compared to “only 31% for the same cohort of English language learners citywide” (p. 244).

Another large high school supporting over 3000 students, Julia Richman High School in Manhattan was redesigned into a number of smaller high schools under a project named the Coalition Campus Schools. When it was closed down in 1992, Julia Richman had a graduation rate of 36.9%, four years later as a re-established coalition of smaller schools, the graduation rate had climbed to 73% with 91% of those students college bound, well above city averages. Darling-Hammond (2010) noted that the Julia Richman model of smaller schools with an emphasis on a safe vibrant community with strong supportive social services has now become a model that has been “used to replace most of the neighbourhood zoned high schools in New York. By 2009, there were more than 300 new small schools, in New York City” (p. 244).

In the Californian study of five smaller high schools, New Tech High another low income, large minority population school, “had a graduation rate of 96% with 100% of the predominantly minority low-income students going on to 2- or 4 year college,
more than twice the rate of the state as a whole" (p. 245). Darling-Hammond (2010) noted the shared features of these five schools in California and five schools in New York, included:

1. Small size for the school or learning communities within the school
2. Structures that allow for personalisation
3. Intellectually challenging and relevant instruction
4. Performance-based assessment
5. Highly competent teachers who collaborate in planning and problem solving. (p. 244)

There are strong common elements between the work of schools in Darling-Hammond’s studies and the study by Shields and Miles (2008). A personalised environment, as opposed to a de-personalised environment, facilitated by smaller school size or the creation of smaller communities within a school was one key common feature. Another strong feature was the greater emphasis on teacher-student relationships which led to a parent commenting that “there is a lot more opportunity for the kids to be seen, be heard, and be noticed, to participate in just about anything they want” (p. 245). The final common feature was the creation of environments where students felt safe and where they were known. Darling-Hammond (2010) argued that such commentary emphasizes that schools focusing on the personalised experience “are associated with greater safety, more positive attitudes to schooling, higher levels of student participation and attendance, much lower drop-out rates and, depending on other design features, higher achievement” (p. 245). The current study will seek to find whether elements of the schools in the Californian and New York studies are also evident in the nine West Australian schools.

2.5.8 Social Cognition: Attribution theory

Attribution theory seeks to describe students’ explanations for their successes and failures and the way in which this influences their motivation. Weiner (1992, 2000) argued that attributions occur on three dimensions. The first is the locus or location of the cause; usually defined as internal or external in relation to the student. As an example, ability and effort are classified as internal whereas luck or task difficulty is classified as external. The second is stability, whether the cause is likely to change
or not. Ability and effort are considered quite stable and arguably controllable causes, whereas luck and task difficulty is unstable and less manageable. The third dimension is control, the extent to which students accept responsibility for their success or failure and feel they are in control of their learning. As a consequence, the way in which students respond to success or failure and attribute cause can influence their reactions to success or failure, their future success and effort and ultimately their achievement (Forsyth, Story, Kelley, & McMillan, 2009).

Brophy (2010) argued that “effort and persistence are greater when we attribute our performance to internal and controllable causes” (p. 50). Such attributions related to effort and ability give students greater belief that they can continue to achieve on similar tasks. Even when students experience poor performance, if it is attributable to insufficient knowledge or effort, these attributes are controllable and can be remedied in the future. If, for example, a student or a teacher attributed performance to low ability sense of hopelessness is possible. It is clear that attributions can affect emotional responses. Strong achievement attributed to internal causes can result in increased self-esteem and efficacy. Failure attributed to internal causes can cause guilt if related to lack of effort or shame if related to lack of ability. Conversely, success attributed to external causes such as support and care provided by a teacher can generate gratitude which can in turn be a powerful motivator. Failure attributed to an external cause such as a teacher perceived as incompetent or unable to care for a student can generate blame.

The implications for teaching are relatively self-evident, but most importantly, teachers need to appreciate how powerful attributions are and use them to either sustain student performance or turn it around. As an example, a belief in the power of effort can help students develop a positive outlook under most circumstances and avoid a learned helplessness that could arise from the perception that a lack of success was due to a lack of ability. Subtle careful feedback that builds understanding about the task and information related to the performance should be combined with expressions of appreciation of effort which reinforces confidence in ability. Effort also allows students to reject what Seligman (2011) refers to as ‘learned helplessness’ which can influence students affectively in terms of the development of anxiety and depression. Cognitively such students run the risk of developing a learned behaviour in that they expect to fail. Seligman suggested that students should be moved towards a more success oriented learning approach, namely ‘learned optimism’. His theory is best understood in the context of positive psychology where he and others (Nobel & McGrath, 2013; Seligman &
Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti 2011; Waters, 2013) have advocated for the use of positive psychology to foster character strengths and wellbeing in students.

2.5.9 Positive Psychology and Well Being

Our capacity to control our emotions to a point where fear of failure for example does not develop into anxiety can have a significant effect on achievement. Supporting this argument and taking it further, Seligman (2011) said “optimal performance is tied to good well-being; the higher the positive morale, the better the performance” (p. 147). Seligman defined well-being as consisting of five elements:

- Positive emotion
- Engagement
- Meaning
- Accomplishment
- Positive relationships (p. 16-21)

Positive emotions are characterised by a happiness derived from self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism. Engagement comes when we are so immersed in something that time almost stands still, as individuals are completely absorbed in the task. Meaning in our lives is defined by Seligman (2011) as “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self … connections to other people and relationships are what give meaning and purpose to life” (p. 17). Possibly the most contentious of Seligman’s claims is that accomplishment (or achievement), “the achieving life”, pursued for its own sake, is an integral part of well-being. There is a natural tendency to be cautious around such a claim because it might be argued that not everyone can achieve and be accomplished. In a similar observation of the earlier analysis of motivation, where de-motivation is even more influential than motivation, a life without any achievement and sense of accomplishment has the potential to be a life devoid of well-being. The current study seeks to ascertain the perceptions of students about the degree to which their teachers were able to foster a sense of accomplishment and achievement in their pupils that was authentic and which contributed to their personal well-being.

A positive relationship is the fifth element of Seligman’s definition of well-being. Seligman (2011) noted that “when asked what, in two words or fewer, positive
psychology is about, Christopher Peterson, one of its founders, replied, ‘other people’ ” (p. 20). Seligman made a very good case when he said:

Very little that is positive is solitary. When was the last time you laughed uproariously? The last time you felt indescribable joy? The last time you sensed profound meaning and purpose? The last time you felt enormously proud of an accomplishment. Even without knowing the particulars of these high points of your life, I know their form: all of them took place around other people (p. 20).

In many ways, this last element of Seligman’s construct of well-being and his commentary above, validates the earlier discussion of the important place that has been accorded to the teacher-student relationship (and that of accomplishment within it). Learning is not generally a solitary pursuit; we learn in relationship with others, even in community with others. Noble and McGrath (2013) also attest that a range of relationships including the parent-child relationship, relationships with a caring adult, positive teacher-student relationships and peer relationships are a foundation for resiliency (pp. 21-26). Miller and Rollnick (2002) noted that “motivation in many ways is an interpersonal process… it arises from an interpersonal context… and is itself a proper task even the most important and necessary task in helping relationships such as health, care and education” (p. 22).

The interpersonal relationship is particularly important in the context of the peer cohort. Having addressed a number of theoretical positions concerning the role of motivation and its influence on student achievement and recognising its complex and powerful interpersonal context it is useful to analyse the influence of peer association on academic achievement of students as another key interpersonal context.

2.5.10 Peer Association

There is a strong body of evidence that peer relationships play a significant role in academic achievement and motivation (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Nichols & White, 2001; Rosenberg, McKeon & Dinero, 1999; Ryan, 2011; Stewart, 2008; Wentzel, 2009; Wilkinson & Fung, 2002). Hattie (2009) stated that “peers can influence learning in a myriad of ways such as helping, tutoring, providing friendship, giving feedback and making class/school a place students want to come to each day” (p. 105). Peers ability to provide emotional support and social facilitation is cited by Hattie (2009) as contributing positively in the development of a school and classroom environment. Hattie (2009) found that peer influences on student
achievement can be considerable \( (d = 0.53) \) and in particular, peer tutoring had a significant effect size \( (d = 0.55) \). Conversely, Buhs, Ladd and Herald (2006) showed the link between low classroom peer acceptance and student disengagement with negative influences on academic achievement.

The study by Stewart (2008) of nearly 12,000 students from 715 American high schools, showed “that individual-level predictors, such as student effort, parent–child discussion, and associations with positive peers, played a substantial role in increasing students’ achievement” (p. 179). Student effort is characterized by the level of school attachment, involvement, and commitment displayed by students. Peer association is cited by Stewart (2008) as a significant influence on achievement:

Peer groups have been cited as important to adolescent development (Nichols & White, 2001). In fact, as Nichols and White pointed out, there is a recognized need to account for peer group context as an important factor in adolescent socialization, motivation, and achievement (p. 181).

Stewart (2008) found that in addition to the need for a strong relationship with an adult teacher, students also require a connection with their peers and benefit from the supportive influence of their parents. Stewart (2008) noted that peer relationships serve varied functions and could potentially be either positive or negative, but students who had relationships with positive peers who support academic achievement had significantly higher academic attainment: “As adolescents associate with friends who value education and are committed to academic pursuits, they create attachments to school and conform to the ideals associated with it” (p. 197).

Nichols and White (2001), in a study of adolescent high school students, argued that student peer groups had a strong positive influence on achievement and that when achievement occurred, it also became a “significant clustering factor for clique group formation”, and where that formation occurred there was evidence of further academic achievement. When peer groups are closely linked as friends and acquaintances they tend to yield more influence (Goldsmith, 2004). Significantly, students who were identified as lying on the periphery of the larger student body described as “floaters, loaners or invisible and overlooked” (Nichols & White, p. 268) had lower mean scores on achievement. This was particularly true of students identified as loners or overlooked, who had mean scores less than the peripherals.
and less than the those identified as belonging to the larger body of clique groups. The authors suggested that teachers and schools would do well to first recognise the powerful influence of peer networks, and if possible, to enhance student opportunities to find a niche group to belong to by creating classroom opportunities for cooperative learning activities that not only serve an instructional purpose but a social one. Rosenberg, McKeon and Dinero (1999) strongly supported this view by advocating the use of specially designed programs that create and support positive peer groups. In such programs, students are given opportunities to learn responsibility and are asked to contribute to their school community through service activities. In many ways the program reflects the earlier notion of Adler’s “Gemeinschaftsgefühl”, or social interest, and also lends itself to the earlier observations of programs that attempt to foster personalisation of the school environment.

In the current study of academically high performing schools, the researcher seeks to ascertain the influence of peers on attitudes to academic achievement. Specifically, whether within a year 12 cohort, there can be a dominant collective peer disposition to achieve that reinforces a pro-school culture and strengthens performance. Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) argued that “the predictive power of attitudinal similarity on friendship is recognised by early social psychologists” (p. 3). In essence a “selection effect” comes into play and students with similar attitudes congregate together and over time similar dispositions intensify. While it must be recognised that this is just as true of peer relationships that are based on delinquent or negative dispositions, the current study which focuses on high performing cohorts seeks to investigate whether a critical mass of students with pro-academic dispositions might be an influence on the cohort as a whole and more particularly whether students themselves recognise this. The current study also seeks to examine whether teachers and the school leadership can enhance the creation of such a culture without their efforts appearing artificial and if so, determine what students observe as positive interventions?

Stewart (2008) and Nichols and White’s (2001) findings are supported by Seligman (2011) when he noted that positive relationships are a crucial element of personal well-being and it might be argued that positive peer relationships may even heighten that sense of well-being. Such relationships, argued Seligman, provide connections to others that give a purpose and meaning to life. Cooperative, collaborative experiences between peers in supportive relationships and community
has the potential to influence learning in a significant manner (Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti, 2011).

In the specific context of high achieving schools where it might be argued competition could potentially negate collaboration, cooperation and positive peer relationships; the researcher is particularly interested to ascertain the degree to which both competition and cooperation can co-exist. In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to privilege the student voice and align the findings from student perspectives with leaders, teachers and parents. The literature concerning the role of student voice has argued that students must be heard, their participation in the conversation concerning what makes an effective school and what are the characteristics of effective teachers cannot thus be ignored.

2.6 The Student Voice: Introduction

Ruddock (2006) looked at the concept of student voice literature from the 1970’s onwards and made the telling observation that early researchers in the field were told that “children were not competent to judge these (effective teaching) matters” and Meighan (as cited in Ruddock, 2006) noted that at the time “there were only a few studies of schooling from the point of view of the learners” (p. 131). However, Ruddock made the further observation that now there is an almost ‘zeitgeist commitment' to student voice.

Including student perceptions in this study has the capacity to both enhance and validate data gained from leaders and teachers. If leaders and teachers are making claims about their practice, it will be important to see to what degree those claims are confirmed by students and to what degree the views of students around leadership and teaching practice enhance an understanding of their impact on student motivation and achievement. There is a large body of literature (Dinham, 2008; Frost, 2009; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012, 2014, Leithwood, 2010; Marzano, 2003; Masters, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008) on leaders’ and teachers’ perceptions on effective teaching and schools, however there is relatively little on student perceptions of effective teachers and leaders. Given the enormous resources and energy directed at improving student achievement, there is a significant body of research that has argued students are capable of insightful reflections concerning their experiences of learning in the classroom (Beresford, 2003; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004; Pedder and McIntyre, 2006; Robinson and Taylor,
2007; Ruddock, 2006; Watts and Youens, 2007). More recently, there is an increasing call to put structures in place that formally facilitate student feedback on teaching performance (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013; Jensen and Reichl, 2011b; Nous Group, National Institute of labour Studies & Melbourne Graduate School of Education, 2011).

2.6.1 The role of the student voice

In the earlier reference to the role of leadership on student achievement, the "indirect" or mediated influence on student achievement by leaders was noted. Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003), in a meta-analysis of 70 studies on principal leadership, found certain 'direct' leadership practices such as classroom visitation, frequently interacting with students, publicly celebrating accomplishments and maintaining visibility around the school as correlated with improved student achievement. Gentiluci and Muto (2007) argued that research identifying relationships between leadership and student achievement is problematic unless it considers the perspectives of the ‘consumer’ (i.e., the students). They noted the earlier commentary of (Foster, 1997; & Gentilucci, 2004) which expressed concerns that schools do not routinely ask their students what they think about their experiences, instead they rely on evidence provided by adults who are “outside” of the student perspective. Gentiluci and Muto (2007) refer to the sociologists Hammersley and Woods (1984) who stated that:

There can be little doubt that pupils' own interpretations of school processes represent a crucial link in the educational chain. Unless we understand how pupils respond to different forms of pedagogy and school organization and why they respond in the ways that they do, our efforts to increase the effectiveness, or to change the impact of schooling will stand little chance of success (p. 3).

In their study of 39 eighth graders in three USA middle schools, Gentiluci and Muto (2007) noted that students identified direct and highly influential instructional leadership behaviours, impacting on student achievement. Among these were principal approachability, interactive classroom observation and/or visitation, and instructional leadership behaviours that firmly establish administrators as the “principal teachers” (p. 219). A significant finding was the observation of students that “distinguished between principals who acted merely as watchful ‘sentries’ around campus and those who cultivated an approachable persona by consistently engaging with students” (p. 228).
Birkett (2001) in the Guardian newspaper’s survey of 15,000 students entitled *The School We’d Like* identified nine key concerns summarised as “schools we’d like”:

- A beautiful school
- A comfortable school
- A safe school
- A listening school
- A flexible school
- A respectful school
- A school without walls
- A school for everybody from all backgrounds (p.1)

Birkett noted that at the heart of every entry was the common plea of being heard. But there is more to being heard as Furman (2004) observed. Being heard must be complemented by deep or intentional listening which is an invitation for others “to tell their stories of who they are and what their lives are like” (Furman, 2004, p. 224) and in doing so, she suggested community and connectedness will be developed. She reminds her readers that in order for this to occur, deep listening “involves suspending one’s own assumptions, judgments and emotional reaction” (Furman, 2004, p. 224). This is precisely why an interpretative phenomenological analysis which utilises bracketing as a tool has been chosen as the methodological approach for the current study. Isaacs (1999) made an astute point when he said “often when we listen to others we may discover that we are *listening from disturbance*, in other words, we are listening from an emotional memory rather than from the present moment” (p. 98). This is an apt reminder for the researcher intent on capturing the authentic voice of students in the dialogue of semi structured interviews.

Ruddock (2006) argued that students are analytical and observant and should not be viewed as passive objects but as active players in any effort to gather data on effective schools and effective teaching. A major aim of this study is to hear students’ views not only about the leadership in their school but most importantly about the elements of effective teaching they have experienced. The current research seeks to investigate what students claim is effective for them and to amplify the student voice from a whisper on the periphery of the school improvement research to confident commentary about the intimate phenomenon described as the teacher-student relationship.
Hattie (2009) noted that while teachers have the capacity to make a real
difference in student achievement they are also the single greatest cause of
variance within schools. His work interrogates what specific practices separate
“expert” teachers from “experienced” teachers. He speaks of the concept that
teaching and learning are highly visible.

What is most important is that teaching and learning is visible to the student,
and that the learning is visible to the teacher. The more the student becomes
the teacher and the more the teacher becomes the learner, then the more
successful the outcomes (p. 25).

If this is so, it strengthens the case that the closest observers of visible teaching and
learning are the students; therefore researchers should be examining what is visible
to them. Hattie argued that the quality of teaching ‘as perceived by students’ is a
critical factor in teachers’ influence on student achievement. It can be argued
therefore that students’ perceptions will be a valid data source.

the concern with young people’s perspectives replicated in an increased body of
literature devoted to listening to the views of students. The UK government green
paper was a response to an increased incidence of children in the United Kingdom
suffering from neglect and in a number of extreme cases dying at the hands of
violent parents or carers. In its consultation with children, the report concluded that
there were five immediate outcomes that needed to be achieved and which
mattered most to children and young people:

- Being healthy: enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy
  lifestyle;
- Staying safe: being protected from harm and neglect;
- Enjoying and achieving: getting the most out of life and developing the skills
  for adulthood;
- Making a positive contribution: Being involved with the community and
  society and not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour;
- Economic well-being: not being prevented by economic disadvantage from
  achieving their full potential in life (p. 6).

While the report was responding to broad social welfare issues and in particular,
services related to child protection, it had much to offer the educational community
as well and touched on a number of concepts visited in the earlier discussion of
Adler (1937), Maslow (1968, 1970) and Seligman (2011). The most striking feature
of the report is the immediacy of the children’s voices and their emphasis on social and emotional wellbeing, opportunities for achievement, the need to feel safe and the desire to be connected to a community. Needless to say, the importance of being asked ‘what mattered’ to them is the other salient element of such a report.

Frost and Holden (2008) explored the concept of student voice in a broader fashion emphasizing the importance of consultation with students in the search for school improvement and noting that the process has the capacity to gain insights into academic achievement and social and emotional wellbeing. They suggest that this has enormous potential for seeing students as partners in making decisions about their schools and their own future. Frost and Holden (2008) reviewed research over fifteen years and suggested schools should explore ways to involve students more in future oriented work such as school improvement. This study hopes to do just that and in doing so, may help inform the work of a number of individual schools as well as the collective work of the Catholic school system in Western Australia. Without the student voice there is a risk of not seeing what is so clearly visible to those who matter most, our students, as this quote from Beresford (2003) so lucidly illustrates:

A Dutch student, following on from a Finnish head who had claimed to know everything about his own school, suggested to the audience of an international education conference that I see things you could never see (p. 122).

It is hoped this study might bring those ‘things’ to light. Pedder and McIntyre (2006), confirming the sentiment of the Dutch student above, argued that such a process of consultation has the potential to unearth valuable “social capital” (p. 145). Social capital as defined by Bourdieu (1992), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) implies that benefits accrue from membership of social groups but unless we realise that potential, such benefits may be lost. Social capital is embodied in groups that develop relationships of trust and mutual respect, regarding each other as a resource. Pedder and McIntyre (2006) argued that pupils and teachers make claims on each other. Pupils make claims on the professional expertise of their teachers while teachers make claims on the insights of their students’ experiences of teaching and learning. Notwithstanding the criticism of the use of the term ‘social capital’ by researchers such as Fine (2002), Fischer (2005), Haynes (2009) and Woolcock (1999) who contest the colonisation of an economic term ‘capital’ by sociologists such as Bourdieu (1992), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000); the researcher sees value in the way Pedder and McIntyre (2006) and later Mulford
(2007) use the term in an educational setting. This is particularly evident in the term’s capacity to describe bonding and bridging relationships between teachers and students, between leaders and teachers, in professional learning communities of teachers and between schools and external partners where relationships accrue trust and trust creates attachment and belonging.

Thus, Pedder and McIntyre (2006) regard consultation with students as a valuable ‘social capital’ resource. In a study of three secondary schools in the United Kingdom, the authors sought the views of year 8 students about the quality of teaching in their English, Mathematics and Science classes. Student perceptions were investigated concerning what they did, or did not, find helpful in their teachers’ teaching. The year 8 pupils in the study revealed: Awareness of how they prefer to learn and what motivates them, awareness of how their peers prefer to learn and what motivates them and awareness of the perspectives that shape the practice of their teachers (p. 149). This commentary not only reflects an impressive ‘meta-cognitive’ grasp of their learning, but also of the wider classroom context of their peers’ learning and decisions taken by their teachers to support such learning.

2.6.2 Summary: The role of the student voice.

The case for the inclusion of the student voice in the current study has been shown to be compelling. The literature has argued that students are credible observers of leaders and teachers and as Watts and Youen (2007) stated, we should “harness the potential” (p. 18) of student perceptions. Student perceptions concerning what they have seen and experienced should be heard, and indeed, without their voice, schools and teachers may not be capable of developing targeted responses to identified needs. In a similar fashion, the voice of parents must be respected and the current study seeks to exploit parental observations of their children’s learning, their children’s connection to teachers and the school, as well as the role that they themselves play as an influence on their children’s achievement.

2.7 The role of parents and their influence on student academic achievement: Introduction

Having established the importance of the place of the teacher-student relationship, the student-peer relationship, and the need to be cognisant of the
student voice, it is clear that relational factors play a key role in the day-to-day life of the school community. Last but not least in the themes of this literature review, is the role of parents as partners in the education of their children and the fundamental importance of the parent-child relationship, the teacher-parent relationship and the broader parent-school relationship. The literature confirms the presence of parents in the social relationships of the school and importantly for this study, their potential to influence academic achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993; Epstein, 2009, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Spera, Wentzel and Matto, 2009; Simon, 2009; Stewart, 2008).

The researcher seeks to situate the present study within the literature examining the effect of parents’ relationships with teachers, schools and their children. Fullan (2005) stated that “in all of our work with schools and districts, the question of how best to relate to parents and the community is right up there with changing school cultures on the scale of difficulty” (p. 60). It is pertinent that Fullan uses the verb “to relate” as it is indeed the relationship that parents have with teachers and the school that can be a powerful force for good, or a benign force that can promote indifference at best and subversion at worst.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) argued that the “social relationships at work in school communities comprise a fundamental feature of their operations” (p. 5). In response and in recognition of Fullan’s claim that the relationship with parents can be difficult, Bryk and Schneider (2002) offer the notion of relational trust as a key resource for school improvement and academic achievement.

2.7.1 Relational trust.

For Bryk and Schneider (2002), relational trust is comprised of “the distinctive qualities of interpersonal social exchanges in school communities” (p. 12). The authors cited the following qualities as integral features of relational trust: respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity. Bryk and Schneider (2002) stated that respect in the context of schooling, “involves recognition of the important role each person plays in a child’s education and the mutual dependencies that exist among various parties in this activity. Key in this regard is how conversation takes place within a school community” (p. 23). It must be noted that ‘conversation’ can be both formal and informal. There are obvious formal avenues of communication such as parent teacher evenings and student reports that can promote opportunities for
conversation. However, opportunities for informal conversation between parents and teachers need to be encouraged in schools and in order for this to happen, schools need to be inviting places where parents are made to feel welcomed as valued partners. Parents desire and deserve communication about their children’s progress. Conversely, teachers and schools in general need to be affirmed for the valuable work that they do. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argued that:

...good teaching touches the soul of those who practice it...Thus, for instrumental reasons regarding effective instruction and for teachers to derive psychic rewards from their personal interactions with students, teachers remain quite dependent on parental support to feel good about their work. (p. 27-28).

This observation captures the interdependent nature of human relationships that drive social relationships and builds what the authors refer to as social capital. Bryk and Schneider (2002) drawing on the work of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) argued “that civic engagement depends on the nature of social ties among community members, in particular their levels of interpersonal trust” (p. 13). In turn, these social ties create what Coleman (1988) defined as social capital, a concept referred to in the earlier theme which addressed the value of the student voice. Coleman argued that social capital is evidenced by high levels of interconnectedness and as a consequence, greater levels of communication, understanding and appreciation of mutual obligation, which produces trustworthiness.

Applied to schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) posited that this theory of interconnectedness allows individuals “to define themselves as connected to that person or organisation (for example, these are my friends, my school, my community) and undertake subsequent actions because this identification is meaningful to them” (p. 15). Putnam’s work in the context of American society has challenged all involved in social organisations to reflect on the decline of connectedness or social capital. Putnam (2004) cited declines in “ties to family, friends, civic associations, political parties, labour unions, religious groups and so on.... many people in other countries feel that a similar decay in community and family bonds has occurred there too” (p. 15). Reflecting on this proposition, it might be argued that schools as Bryk and Schneider (2002) noted above, have the capacity to address the deficit of connectedness precisely because they are an “intrinsically social enterprise” (p. 19), but if they are to do so, they must be inclusive and draw on the potential of the parent body as an equally valid vein of social capital.
The second integral feature of Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) concept of interpersonal trust is competence, an aspect of an individual’s formal role responsibility. As an example, parents have the right to expect that teachers are capable of managing a class and providing adequate instruction. They also have the right to expect that a principal is capable of providing administrative and instructional leadership so that the school is well maintained, orderly and meeting educational standards. In return the school has the right to expect that parents are supportive of the school’s mission, get their children to school regularly and on time. Incompetence on the side of either party, damages trust and the relationship is likely to falter.

Personal regard for others is the third key ingredient in relational trust. Bryk and Schneider (2002) define personal regard as “any actions taken by a member of a role set to reduce others’ sense of vulnerability....such actions are typically interpreted as an expression of benevolent intentions” (p. 25). It could be argued that parents are often one of the most vulnerable groups in school communities, sitting as they do in the grandstand of the everyday enactment of schooling; they are rarely invited onto the field of play. More often than not, they are not even at the stadium, relying on a wide variety of reports from their children and living their child’s experience vicariously. The most vulnerable of parents are often those with the least confidence to enter into a relationship because of prior lack of education themselves, migrants with language impediments, or a self-consciousness based on socio-economic difference.

Attempts to reduce this vulnerability translates as an expression of care; principals caring for teachers, teachers caring for students and teachers willing to meet with parents outside of school hours and in wider local community events. Such actions invite reciprocation and intensify relationships, and as a consequence, Putnam’s perceived deficit of social capital is addressed and members of the community may begin to experience a high degree of social affiliation. In an earlier study of Catholic urban high schools, Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) in a 10 year study of Catholic schools argued the level of care provided by the schools significantly enhanced relational connections. The researcher in the current study seeks to investigate whether there is evidence of a significant level of care in the nine identified Catholic secondary schools.

The fourth and final feature of interpersonal trust is the concept of integrity. The authors defined integrity as consistency in what people say and do. In an
institutional sense, this would be evidenced in the way a school lives its mission and attempts to meet the competing needs of its constituents, particularly evidenced by its capability to authentically recognise parents as partners in their children’s education. In relation to this concept of integrity, the Catholic school system in Western Australia is mandated by the Bishops of Western Australia to be true to an articulated ethos and purpose, stressing its responsibilities to students and parents, CECWA, 2009. In a welcome to parents and carers the Bishop’s Mandate noted the following:

As parents we acknowledge that you…

- are the first educators of your child
- support your child’s faith journey
- value the Catholic school’s identity and ethos
- seek educational excellence
- support the educational process
- expect what is best for your child
- expect your child's educational needs to be met
- expect your child's gifts to be celebrated
- hope your child makes a valuable contribution to Australian society
- endorse pastoral care as a priority
- work at building constructive relationships with the school
- support the partnership between parish and school
- are aware that financial grounds should not prevent your child from experiencing a Catholic education (CECWA, 2009 p. 1)

The Mandate emphasises the important role that parents play in the education of their children but equally and very subtly, notes that there is a reciprocal responsibility in the school-parent relationship. This ‘mandate’ reminds the schools in the system that if they are to have the integrity that Bryk and Schneider (2002) refer to, they must live such a mission in their everyday interaction with parents and conversely, parents are invited to work with and support the schools in this endeavour. The current study seeks to ascertain to what degree the nine identified schools in the Catholic system exhibit the qualities that build interpersonal trust; respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity that Bryk & Schneider have argued for. Perhaps even more importantly the current study may be able to
measure the extent to which the identified schools live out the expectations of the above mandate, a challenge in itself.

2.7.2 Parental involvement and academic achievement.

Having established the importance of relational trust in schools and specifically, trusting relationships between parents and teachers and parents and the school itself, it is important to address the literature that explores how increased parental involvement can influence academic achievement. Jeynes (2007) conducted a meta analysis of 52 studies with well over 300,000 subjects involving urban secondary schools in the United States. Jeynes’ study found that influence of parental involvement significantly affected academic achievement for secondary school students. Parental involvement affected all the academic variables under study, namely, “academic achievement, combined grades, standardised tests, and other measures that generally included teacher rating scales and indices of academic attitudes and behaviours” (p. 82). Parental involvement as a whole had an effect size of \( d = 0.55 \), with the positive effect holding for both white and minority groups. In an earlier study, Jeynes (2005a) found that for primary school children the effect size was even larger, up to \( d = 0.75 \), which may be explained by the greater amount of time and involvement of parents in the earlier years of children’s education.

In the Jeynes (2007) study, specific variables of parental involvement were measured. These included parental expectations, attendance and participation in school functions, communication between parents and students about school activities and the extent to which they reported a high level of communication overall, involvement with homework and parental style. Most of these terms are self explanatory, however, “parental style” (p. 89) requires some elaboration. Jeynes (2007) described parental style, as the “extent to which a parent demonstrated a supportive and helpful parenting approach.... this most frequently referred to a simultaneous ability to be loving and supportive and yet maintain an adequate level of discipline in the household” (p. 89). Of the variables mentioned above, parental expectations and parental style had the greatest influence. Parental expectations had an effect size of \( d = 0.80 \) and parental style had an effect size of \( d = 0.40 \), all other variables were statistically significant but not as large as these two variables. The current study of high performing academic schools seeks to ascertain the influence of parental expectations and parental style on student achievement.
In a study where 13,500 middle and high school parents in the United States from one large public school system were surveyed, Spera, Wentzel and Matto (2009), examined parental aspirations for their children in relation to ethnicity, parental education, children’s academic performance and parental perceptions of school climate. Their study indicated that all parents, regardless of ethnicity (African American, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic), had relatively high aspirations for their children and the literature argued that parental aspirations are “significantly and positively related to their children’s setting of goals, persistence in school and intellectual accomplishments” (p. 1140). Many of the minority parents also confirmed education as a vehicle for upward mobility, but interestingly, the authors noted this did not translate to ongoing university enrolments after high school. Spera, Wentzel and Matto (2009) suggested that such a finding may be due to the fact that with little educational background of their own, ethnic parents “may not be able to easily translate their educational aspirations into parental involvement in schoolwork and fostering of educational activities” (p. 1149).

Spera, Wentzel and Matto’s (2009) findings raises the question of what schools and teachers do to overcome this vulnerability, a term which was alluded to in the study by Bryk and Schneider (2002). It may also be argued that there could be a significant number of non-ethnic parents in many schools who also experience a similar frustration based on socio-economic disadvantage and poor educational attainment. The current study seeks to observe what actions schools have taken to minimise parental vulnerability where it may occur, in high performing schools, admittedly in slightly different socio-cultural contexts. Notwithstanding the Australian context and the variation in cultural and socio-economic background across the nine schools, parental vulnerability can manifest itself for many reasons, for example, parents who are time poor due to work commitments, a lack of encouragement from schools to become involved in the school community, few volunteering opportunities and poor communication between school and home.

The study by Spera, Wentzel and Matto (2009) also found that there was a “bi-directional” (p. 1150) relationship between children’s academic performance and parental aspirations. Children who performed well in school had parents with high aspirations and they argued that these parents influenced students’ performance “perhaps by influencing children’s’ own expectations about their academic attainment” (p. 1149). Such findings suggest that schools should take advantage of this knowledge in order to disseminate the importance of ‘high aspirations’ and help build and intensify the reciprocal relationship described here. The researcher will be
interested to examine whether any of the schools in the current study communicate concepts concerning high expectations to parents in formal or informal avenues.

In a national sample of 715 high schools in the United States, Stewart (2008) used data to examine, among other variables, parental involvement and its relationship to student achievement. Stewart argued that a growing body of research (Epstein, 1991; Feuerstein, 2000; Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005), has shown that “students perform better academically when their parents are involved with their child’s schooling… overall the research has shown that parents are instrumental to their children’s academic success” (p. 182). It was also suggested by Stewart (2008) that parental involvement may have an indirect influence on their child’s in-school activities and academic success through involvement with school and academic policies. Students in the Stewart (2008) study (some 12,000) were surveyed on a number of items that related to how they viewed their parents involvement in school activities, meeting and volunteer programs, with a view to creating an index of parental involvement. Students were also asked to indicate the degree to which they engaged in discussion with their parents concerning “selection of courses, school activities, and things studied in class (p. 189)”.

Parent-child discussion was found by Stewart (2008), to be significantly associated with academic achievement which the author argued could be utilised as an effective tool to raise student achievement. Parental involvement in school activities was not found to be a significant influence on academic achievement. Stewart argued that this did not mean parental involvement in formal activities in school was not desirable; merely that academically relevant discussion about school at home was more influential. Thus it might be reasonable to assume that parents who initiate conversation about school, show an interest in their child’s study and homework, send positive signals about school and are generally supportive, can have an influence on their child’s achievement. A similar study by Simon (2009), of well over 11,000 parents of high school seniors also found that family partnerships positively influenced academic achievement in the final years of schooling and that schools who reached out to parents facilitated this influence. The current study seeks to ascertain whether this is also evident in the perceptions of parents in the nine identified schools in Western Australia.

The recognition of the social capital that parents bring to the educational endeavour is documented in the context of Singapore. Khong and Ng (2005) made
the case that while Singapore achieves outcomes in both educational and economic terms disproportionate to its size, with the country consistently being one of the top five countries in the world on Trends in International Mathematics and Science (TIMMSS) data, (in fact it was first in mathematics and science in 1995, 1999, 2003 and more recently in 2011); its education system seeks to examine ways it can further improve. Policy levers such as Community and Parents in Support of Schools (COMPASS, 1998), that produced greater collaboration with parents in a partnership in the educational process, are seen as one way of improving student achievement further. Epstein’s (2010) model of school-home-community partnership has been adapted and implemented in the Singaporean context. Epstein’s six types of involvement interactions operate within a theory of overlapping spheres and act as a framework for school personnel, family and community members to collaborate in the interests of increasing parental involvement and student achievement. The six types of involvement are defined as:

- **Type 1 - Parenting** – helping all families establish home environments to support children as students
- **Type 2 - Communicating** – design effective forms of school to home and home to school communications about school programs and student’s progress
- **Type 3 - Volunteering** - recruit and organise parent help and support
- **Type 4 - Learning at home** – provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum related activities, decisions, and planning
- **Type 5 - Decision making** – Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives
- **Type 6 - Collaborating with the community** – identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development (p. 704).

Epstein also argued that if schools can put the six types of family and community involvement in schools into practice, that a number of “caring” behaviours emerge:

Synonyms for "caring" match the six types of involvement: Type 1, parenting: supporting, nurturing, and rearing; Type 2, communicating: relating, reviewing, and overseeing; Type 3, volunteering: supervising and fostering; Type 4, learning at home: managing, recognizing, and rewarding; Type 5, decision making: contributing, considering, and judging; and Type 6, collaborating with the community: sharing and giving. (p. 710)
Epstein’s (2010) model supports the claim that behaviours that build relational trust are in essence caring behaviours and while schools have a pastoral responsibility to care for students, there is an argument that suggests such care should also be extended to parents.

Setting up Parent-Teacher Associations and Parent Support Groups throughout the public school system in Singapore was the first step in the process of facilitating the six types of school-home-community involvement. Such an endeavour was undertaken, not just with the aim of enabling student achievement, but to also have a pro-social influence in supporting parents who face greater social challenges such as single parenting due to higher divorce rates, dual income parents who are time poor, parents who work overseas for long periods of time and challenges to traditional value systems by influential media (Khong & Ng, 2005).

Relevant literature certainly supports the proposition that parental involvement in the educational lives of their children can enhance achievement. In addition, a Flemish study by Vyerman and Vettenburg (2009) of 250, ten year old students, found that students themselves “on average ‘rather liked’ parent participation” (p. 112) in their school life and that children from lower socio-economic schools appreciated parental involvement the most. The degree to which Vyerman and Vettenburg’s study translates to the current study of older, late adolescent students is debateable, but it raises a worthwhile observation, that it is appropriate to ask students whether they see value in their parents participation in their school life and if so, what type of participation do they report and prefer. Such perceptions may be ascertained through the semi-structured interviews of students across the nine schools in the current study.

In an Australian study, Ewington and McPherson (1998) examined parents’ perceptions of the effectiveness of schools in the state of Tasmania. A key finding from this study was that parents want to have a voice in both how their schools operate and in being provided with opportunities to express their views. The study found that only 2-5% of Tasmanian parents were involved in school governance. Lower socio-economic, single parents, ethnic minorities and those working shift hours were rarely involved in school governance. In the light of increasingly complex family structures often with both parents working, there is a need for more flexible modes of communication with parents and more flexible opportunities to participate. Ewington and McPherson stated that “In essence they will have to have their say at a time that is convenient to them and in ways they find congenial”. Parents also
observed that a common language of communication with them is preferable to the “specialised language professionals use” (p. 39). The difficulty that parents have with specialised educational jargon was also borne out in a New Zealand study by Clinton, Hattie and Dixon (2007) which noted that specialised educational jargon can be an impediment to the realisation of parents’ expectations of their children. Parent’s perceptions on the accessibility and clarity of school communication will be investigated in the current study.

2.7.3 Parent constructive behaviour and adolescent affiliation.

Highlighting the complex nature of parental influence on student achievement Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) investigated “direct and indirect pathways through which parental constructive behaviour may influence adolescent’s affiliation with achievement-oriented peers” (p. 837). In a longitudinal study of parents and Year 9 – 12 students from nine Californian high schools, the authors sought to test both direct and indirect effects of parental influence on student peer association. Indirect pathways are described by the authors as aspects of family life “such as parenting styles that are not explicitly designed to affect peer relationships, whereas the direct pathway includes parental strategies that aim at controlling or enhancing children’s experiences with peers” (p. 838). In all, the authors surveyed well over 5,000 students. Findings revealed that parents may have an influence on adolescent peer associations through facilitation, approval or disapproval, conversations about friends and meeting other parents (Dornbusch & Liu, 2007). They also found that while there is the expectation that parental influence on peer associations in adolescence is expected to decrease, some studies have found that this is not so.

In the earlier discussion of peer association in the third theme of this literature review, it was noted that adolescents who endorse academic achievement could be expected to develop relationships with other students who hold similar attitudes. Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) noted the predictive power of attitudinal similarity. However, they attempted to observe indirect processes of the peer selection effect and parental socialisation in friendship formation, through the provision of a “supportive milieu” (p. 839). The authors also expected to find a direct effect of parental constructive behaviour on adolescents’ association with achievement-oriented friends due to the literature that had observed this influence in studies of younger children. Rubin and Sloman (1984) argued that parents have the power of influencing children’s pool of friends through selection of residential areas and
schools, arranging playmates visits, providing rides and enrolling their children into specific programs. Parke et al. (1989) noted that parents serve as gatekeepers in the management of children’s relationships because they often initiate, facilitate and monitor friendship groups.

Of interest to the researcher in the current study, is that Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) found that:

“the perceived achievement orientation of friends at 11th and 12th grades remain comparable to, and sometimes stronger than, the within wave correlations in the 9th and 10th grades....concurrent parental constructive behaviour has a direct association with the adolescent perception of friends’ achievement orientation above and beyond the stability effect of the prior perceived achievement orientation of friends” (p. 852).

The authors also found that direct effects of “parental behaviour on adolescents’ peer affiliation remain” (p. 852). A by-product of the study was that adolescent girls had a higher affiliation with achievement-oriented peers than adolescent boys, suggesting that parental support for boys is possibly more crucial. This study by Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) recognised that attentive and supportive parents not only have the potential to influence their child’s academic achievement on an individual level, through their involvement in their child’s academic pursuits at home, but they may have the capacity to compound their influence on student academic achievement by indirect and direct behaviours that affect their sons’ and daughters’ peer associations, confirming that parental influence on student academic achievement is indeed a multi-dimensional construct.

Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) recognised that a limiting feature of their study was an exclusive reliance on student perceptions of parental behaviours. The current study, while not employing a comprehensive survey of students, does seek to interview both students and parents, concerning perceptions about student achievement and parental behaviours, as well as behaviours that may support such achievement and influence affiliations with achievement oriented peers. The latter influence of affiliations with achievement oriented peers may be more conspicuous in the context of the current study, given that its focus is on high performing schools.

A study that did utilise data from both parents and young adolescents in the context of the transition to high school was that undertaken by Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001). The authors sought to find what types of parental involvement were effective in facilitating the transition of students from elementary school into high school. The success of the transition was defined by student academic performance
as determined by final grades and their school attendance. The authors conducted in-home interviews with 26 students as well as their parents. They concluded that there were five major contributing behaviours of parents that enabled a successful transition to high school:

- Monitoring the teens academic and social life
- Evaluating the information obtained about the teen
- Helping the teen with school work
- Creating positive peer networks for the teen
- And participating directly in the school (p. 511)

Of interest to the researcher was the inter-relatedness of some of these factors because it is apparent that one behaviour might be a medium for another type of interaction with a son/daughter. For example, parents who assiduously monitored their teens' academic and social life, were in a much better position to gain information and evaluate it in order to offer support. This was particularly true for interventions such as helping with homework which was also not simply an academic exercise. More often than not, the authors noted that helping with homework became an occasion when empathy and support were required as conversations turned to broader interpersonal student concerns. Attachment to parents and peers can provide students with the capacity to adapt to the academic and social challenges of school.

2.7.4 Influence of parental and peer attachment.

Having noted the multi-dimensional nature of parental influence on student achievement, it is useful to refer to Fass and Taubman’s (2002) study of the influence of parental and peer attachment on university students’ achievement, in the context of another transition, from school to university. The study of 357 multi-ethnic university students sought to examine relationships between attachment to parents and peers, cognitive ability, psychosocial functioning and academic achievement. Their study was particularly relevant as the cohort was a late adolescent group not much older than the students in the current study who were also making a similar transition from high school to university.

Fass and Tubman (2002) found that:
“perceived attachment to both parents and peers is a component of wider patterns of social competence and adjustment, that may function as protective or compensatory factors during key transitions in young adulthood such as participation in college and its attendant demands for academic achievement” (p. 561).

The study found a relationship between attachment to parents or peers and academic performance, and concluded that “attachment quality may be a significant compensatory factor in social transitions in the college years” (p.569). Students with the highest attachment to parents and to peers were significantly better functioning than all groups in the study.

Fass and Tubman (2002) argued that psycho-social turning points or stressful transitions are often significant opportunities to observe how protective factors operate within broader systems (such as schools), to direct, in this case young adults, into adaptive pathways. In the context of the current study, this observation is particularly useful, as the researcher is inquisitive to see what schools, teachers and of course parents, might be able to offer as protective or compensatory interventions to reduce stress and anxiety. The minimisation of stress and anxiety may possibly enhance performance at this critical transition, enabling the experience to become a turning point rather than a tipping point. Further, the current study may have the capacity to make an observation about whether the “joint effects of parental and peer attachment” (p. 561) described by Fass and Tubman (2002) exist in the lives of the students interviewed in the nine schools under investigation.

2.7.5 Teachers and family-school partnerships.

In this review of the literature, it has been established that parents do have the capacity to influence the achievement of their sons and daughters through a variety of behaviours, and as a group, they generally do desire to have a say and be involved in the school. If parents are to play a constructive part in their child’s education they require the support of the school but most importantly a willing reception from teachers. Pelco and Ries (1999) examined the attitudes and behaviours of teachers towards family-school partnerships by surveying over 400 public school teachers from the American state of Virginia, who taught children from the ages of 4-18. The survey asked teachers to reflect on the importance of family involvement in schools, how often they used strategies to contact families, the percentage of their student’s families who participated in school activities, the quality of strategies employed by their schools to engage parents, the importance of
teacher-family initiated activities and the level of support they perceive for family school collaboration from parents, colleagues and administrators. The authors found that across all groups, teachers reported an “overwhelming level of support for family involvement in schools…. (99%) agreed or strongly agreed that parental involvement is important for a good school” (p. 269). However, when teachers were asked to assess their individual support of parental involvement, lower school teachers reported slightly higher levels of involvement with parents than their middle or upper school counterparts.

On the topic of teacher initiated contact, middle and upper school teachers were more likely to contact parents when their child was in trouble or having problems. Teachers from all levels disagreed with the proposition that teachers did not have the time to contact parents. Teachers across all levels agreed that “teachers need in-service education to implement effective parent involvement practices” (Pelco & Ries, 1999, p. 270) in fact 77% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this proposition.

Pelco and Ries (1999) found that the majority of teachers did have high expectations of parents supporting the education of their children, but in reality, teachers across all levels said that there was only weak support from parents for family-school collaboration. Such a finding was not evident in earlier studies discussed in this review (e.g., Epstein, 1995; Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Moreover, the majority of upper school teachers believed that parents “do not want to be involved more than they are” (p. 270). This perception may not be a negative finding, as it might be argued that students at this age need to develop independence and resilience and it is only normal for parents to be a little less involved with their children’s schooling in the upper secondary context. Slightly less involvement does not mean they are less supportive, rather their support may come from more indirect and less public involvement such as emotional support at home, “as family involvement is a multi-dimensional construct” (p. 272).

These findings are important for the current study, given that far too often the researcher would suggest that teachers and schools assume that parents of older students are less inclined to be involved in their children’s education. The literature has recognised this desire for involvement and also argued that teachers in the upper years do participate in that relationship in a significant manner. The researcher is interested in seeing the degree to which teachers in the nine identified schools share similar values to those expressed in the Pelco and Ries (1999) study.
noting that the teaching cohort interviewed, teach predominantly in the upper years, an area that the authors argued needed more research.

2.7.6 School choice: What parents value.

Given that there have been relatively few studies in Australia that have deliberately engaged the parent voice concerning perceptions of their child’s secondary school experience, it is perhaps useful to examine the school choice debate as it has enabled discussion concerning what parents value in schools. In Australia, the capacity for parents to provide insights into what they, as a group, valued in schooling was borne out by Beavis (2004). While contextualized in the public versus private schools debate, parental commentary nevertheless raised a concern that “to date there has been little real evidence to show what really does influence parents when choosing a school” (p. 2). The report examined what perceptions of schools parents have, which may shape their selection of private or public schools. A brief glimpse into parent perceptions is provided in the following quotation from the report:

Parents selecting private schools spoke about their provision of traditional values as being important, the emblematic school uniform and the cultural traditions of the school. Parents choosing Catholic schools spoke of the provision of sound discipline, religious values and, like their other private counterparts, the school uniform. Parents selecting government schools spoke of the academic and social and cultural security. The range of subjects available and the location of the school were also important (p. 4).

The current study seeks to explore the degree to which parents in the nine Catholic schools being investigated attach similar importance to discipline, religious values and uniform or whether other values come to the fore.

A more recent (2011) study by Independent Schools Queensland, entitled ‘What Parents Want’ found that academic performance of a school, while important, is not the most important reason for sending children to private schools. The single most important factor cited by parents was ‘preparation for the student to fulfil potential in later life’ (20.3%) followed by the school’s capacity to ‘meet the individual needs of their child’ (9.4%). The third highest ranking factor was ‘strong academic reputation’ (8.8% of responses) (p. 24).

The current study seeks to ascertain what factors parents describe as influential in their choice of Catholic schools and whether the description of the relationship...
between parents and schools, described by the National Catholic Education Commission of Australia (NCEC, 2011) below is evident in the nine schools in the current study.

Catholic school parents have an expectation that their children’s education is focused on the growth of the child both cognitively, physically, socially and spiritually. NCEC believes that, as a school’s primary function is the development of the whole person, schools must necessarily work in close connection with families and communities. Catholic schools embrace the parent-school partnership and endeavour to offer formal and informal environments where parents’ involvement and engagement are encouraged and welcomed through high quality parent-teacher relationships, parent associations and school boards (p.14).

The NCEC argued such emphases are prime examples of the residual ‘value add’ for Catholic schools, apparent after all student-level and school-level influences on performance (that are more readily subject to quantitative analysis) are considered. Marks’ (2009) study, which examined university admission scores across different school sectors, reinforced this view. He noted that higher levels of academic school performance, despite similar socio-economic backgrounds to government school students, may be attributed to higher levels of parental and community involvement and the academic environment within Catholic schools. More specifically, “the academic environment (as indexed by average PISA test scores) is the major school-level contributor to sector differences in tertiary entrance performance” (p. 34). The current study, while not comparing Catholic school performance with government school performance, seeks to ascertain whether parent involvement, standards of discipline and an emphasis on academic performance are evident in the high performing schools in this study.

2.7.7 Parent feedback

Of further interest to this study are parents’ perceptions about the attributes of school leaders and teachers in high achieving schools because their insights may contribute to further school improvement and feedback to both groups. Jensen (2011a) in a report by the Grattan Institute put forward an argument for greater parental involvement in the provision of feedback to schools on teacher performance, stating that:

Parent feedback broadens the view of teacher performance and provides the perspective of a distinct and important party in education. Parent feedback allows teachers to reflect on how they relate to both students and parents. It
strengthens collaboration between parents and teachers. Parents’ unique knowledge about their child’s education can be used to inform appraisals and contribute to teacher improvement (p. 22).

Jensen refers to the work of Dwyer (1995), Stronge and Ostrander (1997) and Peterson et al. (2003) who suggest that parent surveys are best used in conjunction with other data sources such as student surveys, teacher tests, pupil achievement data and documentation of professional activity conceptually linked to school improvement. The present study seeks to do just that, recognising that a multidimensional approach to the gathering of data that links a variety of sources and correlates the findings, will provide a richer picture of schools that work well.

In summarising the literature on parental influence on student achievement, Hargraves and Fink (2006) emphasise that sustainable leadership in improving schools focuses as a matter of priority, on involving parents in their child’s learning. As Ewington and Macpherson (1998) argued, the “enduring lesson from all the research on effective schools is that better schools are more tightly linked structurally, symbolically and culturally than less effective ones. Staff, parents and students share a sense of direction” (p. 32). This study will seek to ascertain whether the identified schools provide evidence for such an assertion.

Jeynes (2011) suggested that having recognised the powerful influence of parental involvement on student achievement, “schools need to identify what creative actions are most likely to attract parents to become involved” (p. 172). The current study, in its examination of high performing Catholic secondary schools, seeks to confirm whether parents have had a significant influence on achievement and if so, how the nine identified schools provided opportunities for parental participation. The current study also seeks to ascertain whether there are any unique cultural features of the identified schools that enhanced parental participation.

2.8 Chapter Summary

The literature review has been structured around four key themes:

- The role of leaders in effective and improving schools
- The role of teachers and their influence on academic achievement
- The role of students and their peers on academic achievement
- The role of parents and their influence on student academic achievement
These four themes are aligned to the four research questions outlined in chapter one. They have highlighted the role of key agents in high performing schools: leaders, teachers, students and parents. It is clear from the literature that they do not operate in isolation from each other and indeed there is inter-connectedness between them all. In relation to their study Mulford et al. (2007, p. 228) argue that:

In examining who should provide the evidence for successful school leadership the need for triangulation, that is multiple sources of evidence, became clear. Research employing only principal perceptions of success, especially on the importance in student outcomes, should be examined much more critically than has occurred in the past.

The current study in its focus on four separate data sources goes some way to answering the challenge of Mulford et al.

Having situated the study within an extensive body of literature, it is important to outline the methodological procedure that might best suit an investigation that seeks to describe the ‘gestalt’ of these four roles and their influence on academic achievement in schools. As noted in Chapter 1, Walker (2011) described effective leadership as “connective activity” (p. 3). He argued that this activity utilises three connective pathways: ‘cultural connectors’ of beliefs and values of the school collective, ‘structural connectors’ or formal physical structures and ‘relational connectors’ how people relate to each other personally (p. 9). It is argued that the review of the literature confirms his claim. Further, as Denzen and Lincoln (2003) noted, a methodology consisting “of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 4), is required to best represent the world of the nine schools under investigation in the current study. The qualitative methodological approach is outlined in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction: Theoretical framework

Crotty (2009) argued that in the research process there are four key elements centered on the following four questions:

- What methods do we propose to use?
- What methodology governs our choice and use of methods?
- What theoretical perspective lies behind the methodology in question?
- What epistemology informs this theoretical perspective? (p. 2)

Crotty’s questions serve as a template for an overview of the research plan, albeit they will be addressed in reverse order. It seems more appropriate to first describe the epistemology underlying the research design which has informed the choice of the theoretical perspective, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and in turn consider how that theoretical perspective has shaped the methodology and methods used. Table 3.1 describes some of the possibilities open to the researcher based on the four elements of Crotty’s questions (Crotty, 2009, p. 4). The researcher has highlighted aspects of each element in ‘bold’ type pertinent to the current study. Following this table, the researcher provides an explanation for the choice of an epistemological position, the theoretical perspective, the particular methodology and the various methods employed in the current study.

Table 3.1

Crotty’s four elements of the research process.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Theoretical perspective</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Methods</th>
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<tr>
<td>Objectivism</td>
<td>Positivism (and post-positivism)</td>
<td>Experimental research</td>
<td>Sampling</td>
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<td>Constructionism</td>
<td>Interpretivism</td>
<td>Survey research</td>
<td>Measurement and scaling</td>
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<td>Subjectivism</td>
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<td>Phenomenological research</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
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<td>(and their variants)</td>
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<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>Observation</td>
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<td>Critical inquiry</td>
<td>Heuristic inquiry</td>
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<td>Feminism</td>
<td>Action research</td>
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<td>Postmodernism</td>
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Table 3.2

Crotty’s four elements of the research process.

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<th>Sampling</th>
<th>Measurement and scaling</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Observation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Heuristic inquiry</td>
<td>Participant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Life history</td>
<td>Action research</td>
<td>Non-participant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme identification</td>
<td>Statistical analysis</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
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<td>Data reduction</td>
<td>etc.</td>
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Table 3.3

Crotty’s four elements of the research process.
3.2 Epistemology: Qualitative research

The current study seeks to represent the perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing schools. In effect, it seeks to describe the ‘gestalt’ of effective schools, an organized whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts. As such, a qualitative methodological approach has been chosen. Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen (2002) stated that “qualitative researchers seek to understand a phenomenon by focusing on the total picture rather than breaking it down…the goal is a holistic picture” (p. 25). Denzen and Lincoln (2003) described the qualitative researcher as a *bricoleur* or maker of quilts. Both descriptions are relevant to a research project that seeks to stitch together the perceptions of leaders, teachers, parents and students to create a quilt of views on effective schools, which provides an image of key stakeholders’ interactions and the individual part they play in the collective achievement of the high performing schools to which they belong.

Precisely because this current study seeks to observe the interactions and behaviours of human beings in an educational setting or situation, it is argued that a qualitative approach that respects context is an appropriate methodological choice, given that most human behaviour is “context-bound” (Ary et al. 2002, p. 424). The current study is ‘situated’ in the relatively homogenous context of high performing academic schools. Denzen and Lincoln (2003) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates observers in the real world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 4). The purpose of the current study is captured by Denzen and Lincoln’s observation and is indeed an attempt to make the world of high performing schools visible to others. The researcher in a qualitative study seeks to gain an insider’s perspective and portray and interpret the actions and interactions of the participants in the study; namely, school leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing schools.

In a qualitative study, the gathering, analysis, and presentation of the data are largely done in a narrative form (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2009). Because of the narrative nature of their work, qualitative researchers tend to hold what has been called a constructivist view of the world (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such a view of the world requires the researcher to construct meaning from the gathered data and, in turn, to tell the story of the lived experiences of the participants in the study.
Creswell (2009), in his discussion of a social constructivist world-view, argued that all individuals “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (p. 8). As these meanings are varied and, by their very nature broad, the researcher seeks to represent their complexity, rather than narrowing meaning to a limited number of categories. Questions of inquiry are therefore general and often open-ended; designed to help participants reflect on their experience and talk about them. In a sense, the openness of the study does justice to its complexity and the objects of inquiry are not reduced to any single variable. This social constructivist epistemological approach is relevant to the current study which seeks to gain the perspectives of four different groups concerning the same phenomenon; namely, high achieving secondary schools. The semi-structured interview is therefore a useful tool for generating such conversations and observations; and, whether applied with individuals, or with focus groups, it enables participants to articulate meaning through a discussion with the interviewer or the larger focus group.

In semi-structured interviews, researchers must be conscious of their own context and experiences, employing strategies to ensure they do not impose their own interpretation on the participants' views. Flick (2002), refers to this practice as the notion of reflexivity. Qualitative methods necessarily include the researchers’ interactions in the field with participants. Flick (2002), noted “researchers' reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings and so on become data in their own right” (p. 6). In a sense, this notion of reflexivity is a reflection of human fallibility and an acknowledgement that in qualitative research the human investigator is the primary instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As fallible as humans are, Lincoln and Guba argued that because they are investigating human experience, they are the ideal instrument for the task.

Qualitative researchers, unlike quantitative researchers, do not start with a theory. Instead, qualitative researchers set out to inductively find a pattern or themes of meaning. This is an ongoing process from the beginning of the first interview, gradually linking reflections about what has been seen and heard, from one interview to the next. The qualitative researcher builds or constructs a hypothesis from ongoing data collection to a final point where a theory may be developed. Due to the nature of the current study, as described above, the researcher has chosen an interpretivist theoretical perspective.
3.3 An interpretivist theoretical perspective

Interpretivism has its roots in the work of Max Weber (1947, 1949, 1962). The central tenet of Weber’s work is that the social sciences are focused on what he called Verstehen (understanding), in contrast to the natural sciences and their emphasis on Erklären (explaining) or causality. Weber’s sociological analysis, which utilizes the concept of Verstehen, examines society “in the context of human beings acting and interacting” (Crotty, 2009, p. 68). The current study strongly focuses on the ‘roles’ of groups in high performing schools, namely, principals, deputy principals, heads of departments, teachers, students and parents. The study seeks to ascertain how the interactions of the various parties contribute to the attainment of high academic achievement. It is argued, therefore, that an interpretivist theoretical perspective is ideally suited to such a study. Such an approach should help the researcher to come to an understanding of the contributions of different role sets, by first seeking to understand the individuals themselves, situating them within their role and their group. Cohen (2006) argued that Verstehen is also an effort to grasp the relevant meaningful, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and motivational qualities of the minds of individuals as well. The preceding literature review has shown that in any analysis of effective schools, researchers are certainly drawn to the cognitive, emotional and motivational interactions of individuals. It is also an understanding of individuals, and their interactions within groups and roles that has been a focus of the literature review of leaders, teachers, students and parents. This raises a challenge for an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology which has more often than not, been idiographic in its orientation. A resolution to that challenge is proposed in the discussion about data collection at a later point in this chapter.

Weber (1947) conceived of sociology as a science devoted to “the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects” (p. 8). The emphasis on social action is an important distinction for the current study because the action of participants is situated in the social institution of schools. The preceding literature review has shown that there is a dominant theme pervading much of the studies on effective schools; the primacy and power of relationships in the context of schools as social institutions. Tucker (1965), in an explanation of Weber’s theory of Verstehen, argued that “although the individual act is the basic unit of analysis, it cannot be analyzed sociologically without consideration of the nature of the social relationship in which it was perpetrated” (p. 159). Such an observation reinforces another dominant theme in the
literature on effective schools, the importance of the development of community and the unique features of community social relationships that support effective schooling. The current study seeks to explore similar contributions and therefore its interpretivist perspective may help illuminate the social relationships within the communities of the nine schools studied. Weber's notion that interpretive understanding is derived from social action again confirms the suitability of the interpretivist perspective. Weber's concept of social action informs the current study because as the researcher lays claim to understanding the actors in a social context he/she is charged with the requirement to offer an explanation for that action and to develop a theory based upon it.

It needs to be pointed out that an explanation based on the understanding of an actor’s social context, is not the type of explanation that is derived from positivist approaches based as they are on measurable and quantifiable procedures; rather, it is based on subjective understandings of human interaction. It should not be implied that because these understandings are subjective that they are lacking in veracity. Weber (1949) argued that understandings must be substantiated by empirical evidence which accords with the researcher's efforts in the current study to gather data from the field of the classroom and the school as perceived by key actors.

In collecting empirical evidence, Weber (1949) argued that the researcher must subject the object of his or her inquiry to an ideal type, which is a conceptual construct largely imaginary, in which the real is compared to the ideal, assessing the degree of difference between both. Weber cautioned that using such a heuristic device is only appropriate where researchers are attempting to describe goal-oriented conduct. The current study of high performing secondary schools acting with purpose and common motivation to attain particular academic goals seems well suited to Weber's ideal type. In the forthcoming analysis of findings, the researcher will endeavour to make comparisons between the schools in the study and the ideal type, that is, effective schools, constructed from the earlier literature review. As this process unfolds, such an understanding will be largely derived from the field notes and transcripts of interviews that have been recorded. Meaning will primarily be constructed from these ‘texts’ and therefore a brief discussion of that hermeneutic process central to the interpretivist perspective is appropriate.
3.4 Hermeneutic understanding

Any understanding of the spoken and written word is furthered by an appreciation of hermeneutics. Patton (1990) noted that hermeneutics “asks what are the conditions under which a human act took place or a product was produced, that makes it possible to interpret its meanings?” (p. 84). The variation of texts is possible because at the heart of all human existence is language, it describes action, cognition, it helps make sense of our lives (Crotty, 2009; Gadamer, 1989).

Eichelberger (1989) argued that an appreciation of hermeneutic theory implies that interpretivist researchers:

are much clearer about the fact that they are constructing “reality” on the basis of their interpretations of data with the help of the participants who provided the data in the study,... if other researchers had different backgrounds, used different methods, or had different purposes, they would likely develop different types of reactions and focus on different scenarios. (p. 9)

Eichelberger's caution is valid and in fact subtly foregrounds what Smith (2004) argued when he said:

For interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), one can say human research involves a double hermeneutic. The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world. (p. 40)

Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) argued that this complex notion of the double hermeneutic provides a necessary reminder that the researcher is required to “put the experiencing subject at the centre of the endeavour” (p. 220). Myers (2011) noted that “wherever we go we take ourselves along” (Appendix B-4) and thus, an appreciation of the phenomenological perspective can complement a hermeneutic understanding because it demands the researcher questions what is brought into any situation. Phenomenology attempts to provide a solution that can help free researchers from the constrictions that they carry with them.

3.5 Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl (1900, 1913) is widely recognised as the founding father of phenomenology. Holstein and Gubrium (2005) stated:
Husserl argued that the relation between perception and its objects is not passive. Rather, human consciousness actively constitutes objects of experience. Consciousness in other words is always consciousness-of-something. It does not stand alone, over and above experience, more or less immaculately perceiving and conceiving objects and events, but instead, exists always, already from the start-as a constitutive part of what it is conscious of (pp. 484 - 485).

This statement indicates that a qualitative study must place the subjective experience at the centre of inquiry. Husserl described this concept as ‘intentionality’ and argued that it is at the core of phenomenology. Thus the current study seeks to ascertain the essence of the experience of high performing secondary schools ‘as experienced’ by the participants: leaders, teachers, students and parents. What does such a school mean to the participants and how, through their experience does it appear to them? Moustakas (1994) captures this principle well:

Phenomenology focuses on the appearance of things, a return to things as they are given, removed from everyday routines and biases, from what we are told is true in nature and in the natural world of everyday living. (p. 58)

In effect, as was discussed in the preceding literature review, such a methodological inquiry attempts to give voice to those participants as they share their thoughts and feelings, and the researcher strives to be respectful to the participants’ expressions of their experience, as Moustakas (1994) said, to establish “the truth of things” (p. 57).

Crotty (2009) sees an almost evolutionary development of hermeneutic theory into phenomenological theory at the hands of Husserl and his student Heidegger. This evolution is very much a response to the cautionary comments expressed by Eichelberger (1989) in the previous discussion of hermeneutics above. As Crotty (2009) states, “For Heidegger, hermeneutics is the revelatory aspect of ‘phenomenological seeing’ whereby existential structures and then Being itself come into view” (p. 96). What this means for the researcher, in Crotty’s view, is the reminder that culture provides a ready-made understanding of every day experiences. In the current study, the researcher has spent twenty-six years in the classroom and school, as a teacher and leader. Due to this experience, he might approach his data with a set of readymade assumptions based on his own lived experience of the roles of leaders, teachers, students and parents. Such assumptions must be put aside and the researcher must not rush into an immediate interpretation. Heidegger (1962) argued that:
The achieving of phenomenological access to the entities which we encounter, consists rather in thrusting aside our interpretative tendencies, which keep thrusting themselves upon us and running along with us, and which conceal not only the phenomenon of such concern, but even more, those entities themselves as encountered of their own accord in our concern with them. (p. 96)

The challenge that is presented to the researcher by Heidegger, to thrust aside immediate interpretative tendencies, involves a difficult process of suspending immediate suppositions. Husserl (1913) originally described the attempt at freedom from such suppositions, *Epoche*, a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain. In a sense, a reminder is issued to stay away from everyday habits of seeing things in a particular way. Husserl developed a phenomenological method to achieve the *phenomenological attitude*. He argued that the researcher needs to ‘bracket’ or put aside ways of living taken for granted. Epoche and bracketing are quite interchangeable terms and for the purpose of the current study, the researcher will refer to this process as bracketing for the remainder of the project. The phenomenological method of bracketing is achieved through what Husserl described as a series of reductions. Flowers, Smith and Larkin (2009) portrayed the method as follows:

Each reduction offers a different lens or prism, a different way of thinking and reasoning about the phenomenon at hand. Together, the sequence of reductions is intended to lead the inquirer away from distraction and misdirection of their own assumptions and preconceptions, and back towards the essence of the experience of a given phenomenon (p. 14).

This process of reduction described by the authors implies a very deliberate, reflexive, step-by-step approach.

Utilising Husserl’s theory, Moustakas (1994) argued for the following process of reduction:

- The first step is to place the focus of research in brackets, focusing entirely on the topic and research question;
- Secondly, every statement is initially treated as having equal value;
- Thirdly, statements irrelevant to the topic and question are deleted, leaving only (the textural meanings and constituents of the phenomenon);
- Fourthly, the textural meanings and constituents of the phenomenon are clustered into themes and
- Finally the themes are organised into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon. (Adapted from p. 97).
Using Moustakas’ description the researcher is, in effect, through a process of reduction, applying a ‘cognitive filter’, to capture the essence of experience.

Moustakas (1994) provided insights into how researchers might take what is clearly a complex philosophical process and apply it in a pragmatic fashion. However, it is the more recent work of Jonathon Smith (2004, 2008) and his colleagues Biggerstaff and Thompson, (2008), Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009), and Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, and Grainne Fadden (2010), whose work in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) that has provided the clearest application of an interpretive epistemology, utilizing the theoretical perspectives of hermeneutics and phenomenology.

3.6 Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Although Smith (2004) recognised that he did not invent the three terms that constitute IPA, each having its own long standing tradition, he points out that he was the first to put them together in this configuration. Smith (2004) argued that IPA “… can be described as having three broad elements. It represents an epistemological position, offers a set of guidelines for conducting research and describes a corpus of empirical research” (p. 40). It is phenomenological in its endeavour to portray participants’ perceptions of objects or events (phenomena) but it also recognises the key role of the analyst (the researcher) and is thus strongly connected to the interpretative or hermeneutic tradition (Smith, 2004).

A strength of IPA is that it endeavours to offer practical guidelines on ‘doing’ phenomenological research (Smith & Osborne, 2008), recognising that phenomenological theory has been regarded by some as slightly inaccessible and therefore difficult to apply. For the current study of the phenomenon of high performing secondary schools analysing the perceptions of leaders, teachers, parents and students, an IPA approach is deemed highly suitable and may in a modest fashion help to broaden its applicability.

Smith (2004) argued that IPA has three characteristic features. It is idiographic, inductive and interrogative, a neat alliterative model. It is idiographic in that it starts with a focus on one case, moving to the next case and so on. Only when that process has been concluded is there an attempt to do a cross-case analysis. Each individual case is interrogated for convergence or divergence with others:
IPA concurs with Heidegger that phenomenological inquiry is from the outset an interpretative process. IPA also pursues an idiographic commitment, situating participants in their particular contexts, exploring personal perspectives, and starting with a detailed examination of each case before moving on to more general claims. (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 32)

Secondly, consistent with most qualitative research, IPA utilises techniques that result in a flexibility which can produce data that may not have been foreseen at the outset of the study. Open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews can produce unanticipated results which should not be dismissed, rather, they may be even more authentic, precisely because participants provided the data of their own volition, “... for IPA the inductive stance is foregrounded” (Smith, 2004, p. 43).

The third of Smith’s characteristic features of IPA, is his insistence that it is an interrogative endeavour. Its integrity lies in its capacity to take the analysis of the case study and discuss it in relation to the extant literature, bearing in mind that the phenomenological process employed has by its very nature already subjected the data to a high level of scrutiny. Larkin, Eatough and Osborn’s (2011) study provided a useful example of how IPA “can illuminate the importance of situating embodied personal experience in the context of meaning, relationships and the lived world” (p. 319) and, in doing so, reminded the researcher of Husserl’s (1913/1982) urging to employ phenomenological reduction, “reduction here is not reducing down, but a leading back-to the phenomena” (p. 322). The researcher’s attempt to heed Husserl’s request to “get back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1913/1982, p. 35) by freeing oneself of prior supposition and assumption is, in many ways, the first step in the interrogative process. Before interrogating the data and the literature, the researcher must interrogate oneself.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) noted that to establish truth in the phenomena to be studied, Husserl’s advice ought to be sought:

stepping out of our natural attitude as he called it, in order to be able to examine that every day experience. Instead, adopting a phenomenological attitude involves and requires a reflexive move, as we turn our gaze from, for example, objects in the world, and direct it inward, towards our perceptions of those objects. (p. 12)

How the researcher might adopt a phenomenological attitude in an IPA study will be the focus of the discussion of the research methods employed in the current study, and particularly the process of data analysis outlined in Table 3.2.
3.7 Research Methods

The current study used a number of qualitative methods of data collection, semi-structured individual interviews, semi-structured focus group interviews, researcher field notes and reflective journaling. In addition, the decision was made to survey teachers in the nine schools. A Likert-type scale of 21 items was administered to teachers in each of the nine schools that enabled the use of descriptive statistics to inform the construction of semi-structured interview questions. The responses to these items concerning favoured strategies of teaching, perceptions about the culture of the school, and teachers’ views regarding the leadership within the school, helped frame the interview questions for the semi-structured interviews. Teachers were chosen as they had the potential to provide a significant number of responses, in all 450 teachers replied to the survey. Results from the survey data helped complement qualitative findings in the discussion chapters.

3.7.1 Data Collection / Data Sample

Punch (2005) argued that qualitative research always uses some form of deliberate sampling commonly referred to as purposive sampling. With such sampling, a specific purpose or focus is kept in mind. The specific purpose of this study revolves around the four research questions presented earlier. Miles and Huberman (1994, in Punch 2005) present the researcher with a very clear guide “to check a qualitative sample” (p.188); namely, does the sample fit the conceptual frame, enhance transferability and produce believable descriptions?

With regard to fitting the conceptual frame, the purposive sample in this study included a broad range of Catholic secondary schools. In total, nine schools were included; five coeducational schools, two boys schools and two girls schools out of a total of forty eight in the Catholic secondary school system in WA (CEOWA, 2012). Eight of the nine schools were located in the metropolitan region and one school in the sample was a rural school.

The ICSEA score of the nine schools ranged from one of the lowest ICSEA schools in the Catholic system to one of the highest. The total student population of the nine schools was 7,712. Thus the selection based on number, demographic location, gender and ICSEA value arguably enhanced transferability.
In terms of producing believable descriptions, the following criteria were applied. Schools were identified in relation to their scores on tables produced by the Catholic Education Office of WA, which contained school median ATAR scores. Schools were identified on their consistency of achievement on this measure over the period of 2005 – 2010 and their capacity to achieve scores higher than their ICSEA measure would have predicted. Thus ‘success’ or ‘effectiveness’ was measured by a significant metric (the ATAR) described in chapter one, by schools’ capacity to sustain performance over time and most importantly, to achieve higher than their socio-economic peers. Effectiveness, as it pertains to this study, is thus defined in terms of the above criteria.

A purposive sample of leaders, teachers, parents and students was acquired for each participating school. The principal of every school was selected for an individual interview. The deputy principal with responsibility for curriculum was also interviewed in each school. Each school was asked to select five to six heads of subject departments (HODS) that had performed strongly in the TEE context. This selection covered a range of subjects. The principal was asked to select a representative sample of five to six teachers in their school for focus group interviews. The criteria for the representative sample was based a range of experience, a range of departments and reputation for effectiveness. The principal, in conjunction with the deputy principal, also selected a focus group of parents, some active in the school community, some less so. Immediate past students were invited to participate in the study via invitation by the school. These students were chosen because they could reflect on the journey of their learning which was now complete, particularly their last two years (Year 11 and Year 12). Schools were asked to select approximately five to six participants in each category for each focus group. In some cases for a variety of reasons this was not always achievable. Table 3.2 presents the data set used in this study.
3.7.2 Interviewing from within an IPA worldview

If, as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) have said, qualitative research makes the world visible, then the phenomenological lens gives that visibility clarity. In the present study the phenomenon is effective schools and the research participants are the leaders, teachers, parents and students within the schools identified in the study. In trying to attain the clarity alluded to above, this study has chosen semi-structured interviews with individuals and focus groups in order to gain a high definition picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Punch (2005) noted that “the interview is one of the main data collection tools in qualitative research…. It is also one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others.” (p. 168). This observation is particularly apt given that the present study seeks to capture the lived experience of its participants. However, Neuman (2000) argued that “the role of interviewers is difficult. They obtain cooperation and build rapport, yet must remain neutral and objective” (p. 276). Training of the interviewers and a concerted effort to reduce interviewer bias is thus paramount.

The paradox for the researcher is that while the interview is the ideal method for gathering the specified data of the current study, by its very nature it does not readily lend itself to the development of neutrality. Fontana and Frey (2005) supported Neuman’s observations when they noted that: “interviewing is not merely
the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers. Two (or more people) are involved in this process, and their exchanges lead to the creation of a collaborative effort called the interview” (p. 696). In an interpretative phenomenological study such as this, when adopting a semi–structured approach, the interviewer must be even more conscious of attempting to ‘bracket’ his or her own preconceived views during the interview.

3.7.3 Individual Semi–Structured Interviews

As previously mentioned, the current study used semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the principal of each of the nine schools in the study and the deputy principal who managed teaching and learning in each school. Electing to conduct face-to-face interviews is by its nature time consuming. Because of the busy schedules of both groups it was not always possible to interview the principal and deputy principal on the same day, which meant that a number of visits were often required to the school sites. However, the key leadership roles of principal and deputy principal (teaching and learning) justified such a commitment. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) said that in IPA, “we are aiming to design data collection events which elicit detailed stories, thoughts and feelings from the participant. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews have tended to be the preferred means for collecting such data” (p. 57).

The researcher felt that focus group interviews with principals and also deputy principals across the nine schools would not have garnered the rich and often more intimate conversation that individual interviews would afford the study. It was also felt that focus group interviews may have inhibited the degree to which individuals might freely express the personal beliefs they held in front of colleagues from other schools. Focus group interviews that brought together principals of high achieving schools might also have engendered a polite humility, not wishing to overstate achievements in case the participants appeared overly competitive or perhaps having an inflated sense of hubris. As it turned out, the face-to-face interviews did allow both principals and deputy principals to speak very candidly about their role and the teachers in their schools as will be evidenced in the findings and analysis chapters of this study. The researcher could have chosen to interview the executive leaders (principal and deputy principal) in each school together, but that may also have negated honest responses as the researcher sought to ascertain the views of
Each individual about the importance of the role that their colleague played, in the achievements of their school.

The semi-structured interview which Smith (2008) described as the exemplary method for IPA research, suited the study on two levels. Firstly, because of the desire to utilise an interpretivist phenomenological perspective the semi-structured interview allowed the interviewers in the field, the flexibility to move ‘off script’ if they felt the participants’ responses merited digression. The research assistants engaged in the study were instructed by the research leader to move ‘off script’, in order to follow what might be a rich vein in the response data. While such an instruction is an important part of the training of the interviewers it is a highly developed skill, relying on intuition and discernment, born out of a great degree of knowledge about the subject matter.

Interviewers are also required to be as overtly neutral as possible, particularly in an IPA study, in order to capture the authentic lived experience of the participants, and ‘bracket’ their own views. However, Fontana and Frey (2005) championing a greater empathic emphasis argued that “an increasing number of social scientists have realized that they need to interact as persons with the interviewees and acknowledge that they are doing so” (p. 696). Walking the fine line between pursuing what might be ‘the truth of things’ and the endeavour to stay relatively neutral is an enormous challenge. The choices that are made in such a process become, in a sense, editorial decisions on the run. In the current study, the interviewers all had significant experience as teachers and leaders in secondary schools and all had previous experience in qualitative research projects. Even so, variance in style of interviewing is possible when there is more than one interviewer in a study.

Golafshani (2003) argued that credibility in qualitative research “depends on the ability and effort of the researcher” (p. 600). As such, training of interviewers for ‘inter-rata’ consistency was paramount. Recognizing Patton’s (2001) injunction that the ‘researcher is the instrument’ it was necessary to ensure that all researchers were working from a common understanding about the purpose of the study and a common understanding of the semi-structured research questions when interviewing individuals. It was also important to discuss the need to adhere to a phenomenological attitude. Interviewers met with the researcher on three occasions to engage in discussions concerning the purpose of the study, research questions
and analysis of pilot data before engaging with their own interviews. Thereafter, interviewers met with the researcher regularly to reflect on interview experiences, participants’ responses to particular questions and emerging themes. Golafshani (2003) noted that “to improve the analysis and understanding of construction of others, triangulation is a step taken by researchers to involve several investigators or peer researchers’ interpretation of data” (p. 604). Such triangulation is defined by Creswell and Miller (2000) as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories of study” (p.126).

The second feature of the semi-structured interview that suited the current study was the development of interview questions for each group that were followed carefully by all interviewers. This allowed for a common approach to be taken across the eighteen individuals, nine principals and nine deputy principals in the study. Common interview questions meant that while the interviewers had the luxury of flexibility to pursue a tangent if they felt it useful, all participants had a script of questions they were instructed to complete which ensured comparability across all nine sites.

One of the difficulties of the face-to-face interview in a research study is that it has an intimate and quite private, almost confessional quality about it. Intimate contexts like this, might allow interviewees to either embellish responses, or perhaps to withhold particular aspects of responses, because of issues related to self-image and the fact that there is no other audience to challenge the presented observations. While there is potential for embellishment or withholding of information, the responses of principals and deputy principals would be triangulated, together with responses from heads of departments, teachers, students and parents.

It was felt by the researcher that the more in-depth nature of the face-to-face interview, particularly with principals and deputy principals and the potential richness of the responses far outweighed the negative possibilities of embellishment and withholding of information. Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2002), also observed that the individual interview allows the interviewer to completely give the interviewee and the situation his/her total attention, and because there is only one participant, the interviewer can afford to be a little more flexible than might otherwise be the case.
While Smith (2004) presented a strong case for the use of individual semi-structured interviews in an IPA study, he also recognized that the semi-structured focus group interview “is another area ripe for exploration” (p. 50). Contingent in making the choice to use focus groups is the topic being examined, the skill of the facilitator and characteristics of participants (Smith, 2004). Wilkinson (2008), Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) and Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010) make a compelling case for the use of focus groups in IPA studies.

3.7.4 Semi-structured focus group interviews

Because of the breadth of the study and the variety of stakeholders, it was deemed appropriate to utilize semi-structured focus group interviews with heads of departments, teachers, students and parents in each of the nine schools. In the context of the earlier reference to Weber’s (1947) concept of social action, it seemed only natural to interview heads of departments and teachers in focus groups, as their work is, by its nature, team oriented in faculty groups in schools. Students were identified as belonging to a particular high achieving cohort, so the dynamics of that cohort also suited a focus group interview. Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010), argued that the contextual emphasis of IPA “is an integral part of hermeneutic phenomenology. In these terms, person and world are not separate but instead co-constituting and mutually disclosing” (p. 99). As such, the world of the team that people belong to in schools is appropriately analysed in the subset of a focus group. It was felt that parents would feel more comfortable and perhaps confident being interviewed together rather than alone, which might have been an intimidating experience. In such a group their shared experience of parenthood and the naturally occurring ‘family’ group might come to the fore as they realised they were not so alone or different to others. What may have been lost by not interviewing individual representatives of each group was made up for, by a broader number of participants in each category and the opportunity to interact and sometimes ‘bounce off’ each other’s responses, co-constructing meaning. Examples of the co-construction of meaning are found in the discussion and findings chapters for each stakeholder group.

Wilkinson (2008) argued the case for the use of focus groups in IPA studies refuting suggestions that groups may inhibit participants and arguing that focus groups may actually facilitate disclosure because they are naturalistic. He wrote,
Compared with interviews, focus groups are more naturalistic (that is closer to everyday conversation), in that they typically include a range of communication processes – such as storytelling, joking, arguing, boasting, teasing persuasion, challenge and disagreement. (p. 187)

The focus group has the capacity to animate individuals in what may be at times robust debate or empathic affirmation and confirmation with others. Participants may also find that memories are triggered by the responses of others.

It has been argued that in semi-structured group interviews, interviewer bias is lessened, because the interviewer becomes more of a facilitator, moderator and less of an interviewer (Punch, 2005). The ‘group’ interaction can be highly stimulating and result in rich data for the researcher but he or she needs to be careful about the group culture or dynamic and ensure all participants engage with the questions in an equitable manner. This advice also needs to be applied to the interviewer who, in such an environment, might be tempted to participate more freely in the discussion. The interviewer must moderate those who are verbose, encourage those who are relatively reluctant to participate and gain a broad group perspective. However, where the purpose is phenomenological, to establish a wide range of meaning, the interviewer will be generally non-directive letting the responses to open ended questions develop into conversations between participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

For, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) pointed out, “a qualitative research interview is often described as a conversation with a purpose” (p. 57).

Moustakas (1994) described such interactions referred to above in focus group interviews as interactions that produce intersubjective knowledge. Referring to Husserl’s phenomenological view of the world, Moustakas noted:

For Husserl, the world is a community of persons. Each can experience and know the other, not exactly as one experiences and knows oneself but in the sense of empathy and co-presence. In such a process in which I present myself to you and you present yourself to me there is an interchange of perceptions, feelings, ideas, and judgments regarding the nature of reality. A continuing alteration of validity occurs as people articulate and describe their experiences. (p. 57)

This is an elegant phenomenological description of the dynamics of the focus group interview, as well as the complexity of ‘how’ the group presents to the interviewer and ‘what’ they present. It also highlights the extraordinary potential richness of such interchanges. In the current study, the use of digital recorders for all interviews provided the interviewers with a helpful technical tool as it was very difficult to
accurately capture complexity with handwritten notes when so many people are talking and responding.

As noted earlier, another advantage of intersubjective knowledge is that individual claims have been subjected to the scrutiny of the group. As Flick (2002) observed, “corrections by the group concerning views that are not correct, not socially shared or extreme, are available as means for validating statements and views” (p. 114). Another valuable attribute of the focus group interview is that opinions are expressed in discussions that correspond to the everyday life of the participants (Flick, 2002). This allows the phenomenological researcher to get as close to the lived experience of the participants as possible in the present study, especially as most of the interviews were conducted during school hours, on school sites, almost immediately as participants walked out of their classrooms.

For all its advantages, the focus group does need to be approached with some caution. Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grain Fadden (2010) noted that if focus groups are to be used in IPA research “the presence of multiple voices, the complexity of their individual and shared contexts and the interactional complexity of the discussion itself make it more difficult to infer and develop personal, phenomenological accounts” (p. 101). The researcher must be acutely aware of these dynamics and as Smith (2004) argued, it is important to approach the data with a two-fold analysis "once for group patterns and dynamics and subsequently, for idiographic accounts" (p. 50).

In summary, both semi-structured individual interviews and semi-structured focus group interviews, are each, in their own way, suited to the current study which seeks to explore the phenomenon of high performing schools. In order to utilize both approaches well in the context of an IPA study, specific use of field notes and journals, as well as clear procedures for data analysis, will now be outlined.

3.7.5 Field Notes and Journals

During the interview process the four interviewers were asked to keep field notes and a journal for later discussion at group meetings. The field notes and journal were kept in order to act as an ‘aid de memoire’ for ongoing research team meetings during the six month period when data were collected from the nine sites. The meetings provided all interviewers with the opportunity to share their experiences of
the interviews they had conducted and discuss any problems that might have been encountered with the focus group questions, or dynamics within a particular focus group. In addition, it gave interviewers a chance to talk about key themes that were starting to emerge in the interviews. Often the discussion centred around pragmatic issues such as school organisation of appropriate meeting rooms, difficulties with time to get all members of the particular focus group together in the school, and organizational support from the school hierarchy.

In advance of the first meeting, the researcher having trialled the interview questions, shared his digital recordings of his initial interviews with the other interviewers. The intention of this exercise was to share his reflections about the way the interview had been facilitated and invite observations from others. It also led to clarification of interview questions and discussion about the role of the interviewer as a facilitator. The researcher’s field notes and journal reflections helped as an ‘aid de memoire’ to share his initial experiences with the interviewer group.

Due to the reliance on semi-structured interviews as the preferential data collection method, field notes were not as extensive as they might ordinarily be in an observational study. The interview requires the interviewer to be seen by the interviewee, to be an attentive listener. This accords with Neuman (2006) who commented that interviewers who engaged in extensive note taking during interviews run the risk of appearing disengaged from the interviewee or the group. Thus interviewers in the present study were not required to write extensive field notes. Attentiveness to the individual or the focus group was the primary concern of the interviewers in the field.

Much of the note taking and journalling was done after the interviewers returned from the site and again listened to the digital recording of the interview. In effect, the digital recording became the central set of field notes (Ary et al. 2002). Any notes the interviewers took were more in the nature of ‘jottings’ as opposed to detailed or verbatim records. Neuman (2005) argued that jotted notes “are short temporary memory triggers such as words, phrases or drawings taken inconspicuously” (p. 400), that the interviewer can refer to at a later date. In conjunction with a second hearing of the digital recording, some jotted notes take on a whole new inferential meaning, but the interviewer must avoid this in the field (Neuman, 2005). This is particularly true of an interpretivist phenomenological study where the researcher is intent on limiting personal bias.
One of the tools the researcher found particularly useful was the keeping of a journal that allowed for more analytic memos and personal notes to be recorded. Analysis does not begin once all the data has been collected, it is an embryonic process, it grows and emerges out of the earliest notes taken in the study. As Creswell (2009) argued with reference to analysis, “It is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos throughout the study…that may ultimately be included as a narrative in the final report” (p. 184). What appears as a small jotted note early in the collection phase can over time, almost through a period of gestation, or through serendipity, become a central finding in the research. Meetings between the researcher and assistants who shared their notes from the field nurtured this gestation and facilitated conversations that allowed central findings to come to the fore.

For the phenomenological researcher, it is also vital to use the journal to record personal feelings, frustrations, anxiety and even perhaps the formation of personal attachment to individuals, groups, or in this case, even privileging one school over another in personal bias. The journal must also be used to question the self. Why did I record that response? Is it because it concurs with my own view on the subject? If so, in an IPA study, the researcher must consider suspending judgment about such a response. Why did I ask that respondent to elaborate and provide him or her with more time to speak than others? As Miles and Huberman (1984) said:

Fieldwork is so fascinating and coding usually so energy-absorbing, that you can get preoccupied and overwhelmed with the flood of particulars - the poignant quote, the appealing personality of a key informant. You forget to think, to make deeper and more general sense of what is happening, to begin to explain it in a conceptually coherent way. (p. 69)

To take this observation about forgetting to think further, Neuman (2005) actually argued that field notes, jottings, analytic memos and personal notes are evidence of the researcher “thinking out loud” (p. 401).

This vigilant attention to reflexive thinking is crucial to the IPA approach to the interview. The documented notes and journalling ultimately lead to a clearer distillation of the essence of the participants’ experience and will further assist the ‘reductive analysis’ at a later date in the project. In summary, in an IPA study the researcher must do everything in his or her power to manage the interview to the
best of his/her ability, and to create an empathic environment which will encourage participants to share their lived experience. If done well, the interview has the potential to produce text that is rich and as Smith (2008) has observed, in an IPA analysis, this will allow the analyst to learn “something about the respondents’ psychological world” (p. 66). In that endeavour a specific pragmatic IPA approach to data analysis is required and will now be outlined for both the individual interviews as well as focus group interviews.

3.7.6 Data analysis of individual semi-structured interviews using an IPA approach

Smith and Osborne (2008) describe a step-by-step approach to implementing an IPA analysis of data from individual semi-structured interviews. The intent of the process is to establish an “interpretative relationship with the transcript” (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 66). The authors also point out that any step-by-step approach is not meant to be highly prescriptive but acts as a guide for researchers undertaking IPA data analysis. An outline of the stages of data analysis which were employed in this study utilising a range of authors are illustrated overleaf (Bednall, 2006; Langdridge, 2007; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2008; and Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) approaches to data analysis.
Table 3.3 Stages of IPA analysis

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<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Iterative reading and listening</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Interview transcripts were read repeatedly. Recorded interviews were listened to repeatedly to ascertain nuance, emphasis and tone in the voices of participants. Stage one is an attempt to identify ‘emerging’ themes.</td>
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| Stage 2 | During this stage the researcher attempted to ‘connect emerging themes’ across participants and into clusters. |

| Stage 3 | The analysis is continued again revisiting transcripts. Superordinate themes are identified. At this stage ‘bracketing’ needs to be employed to ensure bias is removed from the identification of superordinate themes. |

| Stage 4 | In stage 4 the researcher followed Smith and Osborne (2008)’s process of analyzing superordinate themes across cases. In this study this meant identifying superordinate themes across the nine schools and presenting them in a table at the end of each findings and discussion chapter. |

| Stage 5 | Stage five involved revisiting field notes and the reflective journal of the researcher to apply another layer of bracketing and assess the degree to which the ‘discussion and analysis’ of data reflected a degree of reflexivity, “effectively an attempt (and it will be just that-an imperfect attempt) to delineate the horizons of your world with regard to the topic at hand” (Langdridge 2007, p. 135). This involved revisiting transcripts and digital interviews yet again. |

| Stage 6 | Finally, in order to avoid the limitations of a ‘descriptive’ summary of themes in a table form the final stage incorporates an attempt to bring the parts into a whole through the summary and recommendations chapter. This is an attempt to provide a summative narrative or “writing up” as Smith and Osborne (2008) put it “the meanings inherent in the experiences of the participants” (p. 76). |

The approach to data analysis of interviews outlined above (Table 3.2) provided the researcher with a useful process on how to conduct an IPA analysis. It is important to provide a short elaboration of protocols that also came into play in the specific analysis of ‘focus group’ interviews in an IPA setting.
3.7.7 Data Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews with Focus Groups: Using an IPA Approach

While not dissimilar in approach to data analysis in individual interviews, Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010) offer a protocol that allows IPA researchers to deal with “some of the synergistic effects of working with groups and to permit both the experiential and interactional elements of focus group data to be explored side by side” (p. 101). The distinguishing feature of this protocol was the provision of questions that guide researchers in the analysis of transcripts with multiple participants:

How or why is language used? To emphasize, shock, disagree/agree, back up a point, amuse/lighten tone? What experiences are being shared? What are individuals doing by sharing experiences? How are they making those things meaningful to one another? What are they doing as a group? What are the consensus issues? (pp. 104-105)

The authors point out that this model emerged from a particular set of data from their own study and that it should be merely used as a series of prompts for other researchers utilizing focus groups in an IPA study. Its emphasis on roles and relationships between participants in the focus group made it a useful protocol for the current study although it was not followed prescriptively.

In terms of the presentation of findings, it will be appropriate to present the narrative of principals and deputy principals together as executive leaders. Heads of subject departments would be the next group of findings under a middle management heading. Then the separate narratives of teachers, parents and students will be presented with appropriate references to the literature pertinent to each group. The second step will be the presentation of a “findings and discussion” section where the ‘bricoleur’ takes the individual narratives and pieces together the quilted characteristics of highly effective schools.

3.7.8 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the term used to describe the veracity of the qualitative process where matters such as credibility, objectivity and dependability are concerned. Golafshani (2000) argued that “reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in a qualitative paradigm” (p. 6004). Ary et al.
(2006) stated that “the integrity of qualitative research depends on attending to the issue of validity. The term most frequently used by qualitative researchers to refer to this characteristic is credibility” (p. 504). To ascertain whether the researcher’s observations, interpretations and conclusions are believable, Ary et al. (2006) also discuss five types of methods to enhance credibility: evidence based on structural corroboration, consensus, interpretive adequacy, theoretical adequacy and researcher bias.

This study sought to enhance structural corroboration by ensuring multiple types of data were provided through the four groups: leaders, teachers, parents and students which provide triangulation. Using multiple investigators (research assistants) also ensured investigator triangulation and ‘peer debriefing’ sessions with all research assistants took place, thus ensuring consensus. In order to enhance interpretative adequacy, participants were asked to review and critique a pilot report of findings to verify their responses. Theoretical adequacy was enhanced by the researcher’s ability to observe a full range of participants over an extended period of time in each school. The researcher employed ‘bracketing’ to limit research bias as mentioned previously in the discussion of the design. The researcher also kept a journal to aid reflexivity, the use of self-reflection to recognize one’s own bias. This helped secure objectivity.

Both the Likert-type scale and the semi structured research questions were trialed in a pilot before final administration. An initial trial of the Likert-type scale indicated a Chronbach alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .71$, an acceptable level of internal reliability across the survey items. The semi structured research questions were trialed in a pilot before final administration. To enhance dependability a clear audit trail was produced with raw data of digitally recorded interviews kept in an electronic filing system. Transcripts of interviews and notes from field journals were kept separately in an electronic filing system and hard copies were also kept for review. A code–re-code strategy was employed. The researcher codes the data and then revisits the data after some time before re-coding again. This was done in an iterative process outlined in Table 3.2.

Research assistants were trained to achieve as much comparability as possible in respect to their understanding of the questions used in the semi structured interviews. The discussion of the ‘trial’ interviews was particularly useful in this process. All interviews followed the same core set of questions. Research assistants
were also reminded of their role as facilitators as mentioned earlier and to pay close
attention to the dynamics of the group ensuring, wherever possible, equitable
contributions of all members (Punch, 2005).

3.7.9 Instruments

A Likert-type scale of 21 items Appendix (1) was administered to all teachers in
each of the nine schools. The items surveyed teachers’ perceptions about their own
practice, pedagogical preferences, assessment, the affective domain of their
teaching, their observations of leadership, and the culture of the school. As noted
earlier, this data was used as descriptive statistics to inform the construction of
semi-structured interview questions.

A set of questions was developed (Appendix 2) for individual semi-structured
interviews with principals and deputy principals and focus group interviews with
heads of departments, teachers, parents and students to stimulate observations and
discussion concerning the role that these stakeholders have in their contribution to
the culture of the school and the school’s high achievement in the tertiary exam
context. The interviewers used the same set of questions designed for each group
across all of the nine schools. As previously discussed, field notes and journals were
kept by interviewers in the field. They also aided the identification of data-rich
responses and the coding of central themes.

3.8 Procedure

Schools were contacted by letter and then by phone to invite them to participate
in the study. The principal was the initial point of contact. Once the principal
confirmed his or her willingness for the school to participate, a follow up letter
outlining the study was sent to the school.

Schools were asked in advance to organize times within the day for researchers
to visit the schools and interview the principal, deputy principal and focus groups of
heads of subject departments and teachers. Schools were asked to allocate a 60
minute time slot for these interviews. Interviews with parents and past students took
place after school hours to avoid work and university study commitments. A senior
administrative assistant within each school coordinated these appointments. Schools
were asked to provide a comfortable and preferably quiet space for
interviews to take place. The provision of this space put participants at ease and facilitated clear digital audio recording.

3.9 Limitations and Safeguards

Woods (1992) recognized that the researcher, while intrinsic to the study, must balance involvement, immersion and empathy on the one hand with objectivity on the other. Thus the process of ‘bracketing’ was important in limiting the possibility of an imbalance brought about by the researcher’s natural human inclination to become either too immersed in the subject matter being addressed or as Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009) described it, unable to step outside of his/her ‘natural attitude’. Safeguards were established to address this concern through the employment of an IPA methodology.

Due to the scale of the study, research assistants were used in some schools. As such, regular meetings were held with all research assistants to validate the interview procedure and to gauge feedback in the early stages of the research. A common set of questions was used in all interviews with each focus group in every school. As much as the researcher endeavoured to ensure a degree of comparability between interviewers, it is self-evident that differences may have existed due to the ‘semi-structured’ nature of the interviews and the unique personal response that one interviewer may take compared to another. Human individuality can never be completely controlled for.

Triangulation was invoked to help minimize issues related to inter-rater dependability. The researcher had a relationship with one school where he previously held a senior administrative role. To remove any question of bias, all the interviews in that school were undertaken by a research assistant who had no prior involvement in that school.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

All participants were provided with an information letter and informed consent agreement based on the The University of Notre Dame Australia’s ethics approval guidelines. All participants were informed that their responses would be completely anonymous and confidential and that they may withdraw from the study at any time.
without prejudice. Schools were informed that they would be de-identified in published results.

3.11 Summary

The study sought to represent the perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing schools. A purposive sample of nine schools was therefore chosen. In effect, the study sought to describe the ‘gestalt’ of effective schools through the disaggregated data of four component parts and as such, a largely qualitative methodological approach was chosen. The epistemology was constructivist and the theoretical perspective interpretivist, utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis as the chosen methodology. Data was analysed through qualitative thematic coding (see Table 3.2) to provide a coherent description of the phenomenon.
CHAPTER FOUR

PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERS: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of the next four chapters is to present the findings of a thesis that examined the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding why their schools achieved better than expected results in the tertiary examination context. In presenting the findings, their implications are also discussed. These findings are a synthesis of data gained from qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis of individual and focus group interviews of leaders, teachers, students and parents. The quotations presented in each of the following four chapters are illustrative at the point of discussion and are more broadly representative in the summary at the end of each chapter. This chapter, Chapter 4, focuses specifically on research question one:

What are the perceptions of leaders in schools achieving better than expected results in the tertiary examination context?

As previously mentioned, ‘leaders’ in this study consisted of the executive leadership in each school: the principal and the deputy principal with responsibility for teaching and learning, and subject heads of departments. Dominant themes relating to the perceptions of leaders regarding their schools’ academic success are explored in the following commentary.

4.2 Principals’ perceptions.

Principals’ perceptions will be presented under the following headings derived from dominant themes that revealed themselves naturally during data analysis: principals’ perceptions of their roles, use of data, leadership teams, deputy principals, heads of departments, teachers, parents and students.

4.2.1 Principals’ perceptions of their roles.

4.2.1.1 Setting the vision.

A comment from the first principal interviewed for this study captured a common finding also supported in the literature (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, 2010; Masters, 2010; OECD, 2008), namely,
The role of the principal is crucial in setting a vision about where you can go with your students (Principal, School F).

Overall, principals saw their role as significant in the development and maintenance of a school culture that fosters academic success. In the current study, there was no doubt that as a group they were collectively conscious of their responsibility to provide the best academic programs they could for all students. Their role was also significant in the eyes of their teaching staff with a mean score across the nine schools of 4.31 on the likert survey item “Our executive leadership team strongly promotes academic success.” Principals were goal oriented in their focus on improving student outcomes and they played a key part in the development of an academic focus, defining mission and communicating it, evaluating instruction and monitoring student progress (Hallinger, 2003). As Spillane and Coldren (2011) noted in their discussion of the use of a distributed perspective, principals were strategically engaged in the diagnosis of problems, defining them and co-designing approaches with others that might ameliorate them. It was evident in the current study that principals worked ‘with’ others rather than purely delegating ‘to’ others.

Subtle differences emerged around the definition of ‘success’ and ‘successful schools’. So, while this research study specifically defined success in the context of the tertiary entrance exam results, principals were keen to emphasize that, success should be measured in broader terms. In particular, they voiced the concern that success should be defined by the quality of pastoral care that is afforded to each student in a school, a theme which will be addressed throughout this chapter.

In the context of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the reporting of such a finding posed a challenge to the researcher’s world-view. The researcher had expected to find an emphasis on goal setting focused on targets driven by external tables related to academic achievement. The researcher had also expected to see a high priority placed on academics in highly successful academic schools. This view had been driven by his own personal experiences as an administrator and the personal priorities he adopted whilst in leadership roles. Allowing a personal orientation such as this, could have skewed the selection and reporting of data from participants, as it might be argued researchers are far too easily drawn to data that is in accordance with their own views. In these circumstances, bracketing must be
adopted to allow an objective representation of participants’ perceptions (Langdridge, 2007; Smith, 2004, 2008; Smith and Osborne, 2008).

For many of the principals interviewed in this study, success was measured in terms of individual personal improvement by each student in addition to the collective performance of the student cohort reported in external tables. The principal of School F spoke of her intimate knowledge of the academic and pastoral progress of her year 12 cohort:

I’m not sure I was a results focused principal but at the interview of each student I always stated I expected students to perform at their best, at their personal best. Students also know, I know how they are going, it sends a message.

The principal of School I described this emphasis succinctly; “we are not results focused, we are student focused”.

As the study progressed, it became clear that this “student focused” rather than purely “results focused” approach was evident across all of the nine schools. The schools’ holistic view of education was quite profound and their high academic achievement had not meant that other equally important foci had been sacrificed. Although Hallinger (2003) had argued that studies of effective schools more often focus on schools targeting improved student outcomes, which meant that their mission was subsequently narrowed, this was not the case in the current study. It became apparent that a number of schools articulated their holistic approach through various expressions of core aspirations in keeping with the Catholic tradition of education to which they belonged. As an example School I, defined its mission by noting that it aimed to provide a holistic education that empowered its students to serve others with an explicit emphasis on core values, spirituality, community, service and excellence.

The holistic focus on spirituality, community, service and excellence in fact nurtured academic achievement rather than detracted from it. This trait will be revisited in the concluding chapter but for now it behoves the researcher to return to the equally valid and very specific pedagogical work evidenced in this study and alluded to in the literature review by Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe (2008).
4.2.1.2 Leading improvement.

A number of the principals elicit narratives that described journeys of improvement. While all of the schools in the study had been selected because of their sustained academic success over time, the majority had not always been successful. In fact, the principal of School C, described his school as not only academically unsuccessful but bordering on ‘feral’ when he first arrived some ten years earlier. The principal’s challenge inevitably lay in at first understanding his school and then making teaching and learning a key priority, supporting Robinson (2010). The principal had recognised an imbalance between pastoral care and academic goals and set about re-dressing deficits. Fullan (2005) argued that effective principals see that failure is an opportunity to recover and learn, this was clearly the case in School C.

Another principal provided commentary on how the journey of improvement is undertaken once the opportunity is seized, highlighting Spillane and Coldren’s (2011) call for “diagnosis and design” (p. 4):

> Principals have to do their homework, they have to know their school, know their parents, know their staff and know their kids. You have to ask the question, are they (students) performing as they should? You need to constantly ask, could our results be better? (Principal, School A).

This principal spoke of the need to be outward looking, comparing his school’s performance to external benchmarks with other ‘like’ schools. The comment also captured a common thread throughout many interviews in the current study; these were leaders that battled complacency and promoted high expectations. In order to create an aspirational culture, principals recognised that they must understand available data as a starting point for discussions about student achievement. Understanding the data would allow them to support their teachers through an evidence informed approach to their own practice (Masters, 2010; Spillane & Coldren, 2011; Timperley, 2010).

4.2.1.3 Use of Data.

Principals spoke of the need to acknowledge the large amount of data at their fingertips. Four out of the nine schools were composite schools; that is, schools combining both primary and secondary sub-schools. Their principals spoke about the need to examine Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) on entry to
the early years, as the first step in tracking student performance. This data allowed schools to diagnose where students were in terms of their literacy and numeracy, as they began their educational journey. National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data allowed schools to continue to track literacy and numeracy performance at years three, year five, year seven and year nine.

The principal of School A, commented on the performance of his year 7’s in NAPLAN testing:

We know we have a strong year 7 intake, our data is strong. So we have a great year group. Now we want to look at how we can value add to that.

This was a comment laden with knowledge about students’ ability but also reflecting a determination to enhance performance and not become complacent in the comfort of having an academically capable cohort. The same principal made yet another pertinent comment:

When we compare our NAPLAN data with other like schools at the ICSEA level we find we are not that much better, but at TEE level we are well ahead of like schools.

The first comment may well provide a reason for this, knowledge of data, desire to enhance performance and an unwillingness to accept complacency at the lower secondary grades can create the necessary culture for high achievement in upper secondary grades.

The relationship between high achieving schools and their central office in this study was a significant one. The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) provided detailed analysis of all data to schools. The CEOWA also provided detailed longitudinal data on TEE performance to allow schools to track their performance over time and benchmark themselves against other like schools. In respect to this process, the Principal of School A commented:

I am not afraid of tables of performance at all. It helps me identify other good performers and I can learn from them.
Principals acknowledged the work of the CEOWA in providing data and professional development to work with it, a salient characteristic of all nine schools was their capacity to make the most of that opportunity. They spoke of the need for close analysis of such data at the executive leadership level with their deputies in the first instance and with heads of subject departments, focusing on specific subjects in need of attention. At staff meetings principals would address whole of school performance with all teachers. One principal spoke of the importance of data:

You must have data. It enables you to ask the right questions. You cannot ignore data; you must answer it (Principal, School A).

The comment above was indicative of the majority of principals in the study and particularly illustrative of Spillane and Coldren's (2011) emphasis that principals should be able to ‘diagnose’ problems. In doing so, data can be used to build a pro-academic culture.

In addition to the data on TEE performance provided by the CEOWA, a number of schools had been compiling their own internal longitudinal data on performance of year 10 and year 11 students to provide indicative predictions of performance at Year 12 and to guide methodical counselling of students from Year 10 into Year 11 and Year 11 into Year 12. The schools’ own internal data then complemented systemic data from the CEOWA. Data also informed counselling of students. This pro-active use of data described above reflects the commentary of Fullan (2005) who offered such processes as evidence of ‘deep learning’, of transparent data gathering and mechanisms to act on the data. The reported use of data above also confirms Frost (2009) and Harris et al., (2007) who argued that leadership of teaching and learning is framed by accountability to external stakeholders and to those with whom they work in schools. Principals in these schools were very focused and knowledgeable about their own school's data, keenly involved in its analysis and used the data to inform decision making around curriculum offerings and subject counselling. Internal data was used to help students and parents make informed decisions about a student’s capacity to successfully engage with certain subjects in Year 11 and Year 12. Mulford and Silins (2011) contention, that the higher the report of accountability mechanisms in the school, the higher the reports of student achievement, is confirmed in this study.
Another feature of principals' use of data was the capacity to focus on individual teachers whose students did not achieve as well as could be expected. One principal spoke of the need to provide these teachers with extra support in professional development and external mentoring. She offered teachers time away from their duties to visit other colleagues in the system that were regarded as experts in the area. As the principal of School F noted:

We need to look at how other schools and their teachers do things.

Fullan (2005) described such behaviour as lateral capacity building through networks. Such a process recognises the benefits of flatter dispersed leadership built through networks of external trainers and more laterally with colleagues in other schools. This is a humble leadership, recognising that others have something to offer; it sheds pride and opens up the school to external wisdom. It also sets a model of behaviour that might suggest to teachers within the school that they too have something to learn from others perhaps even their own colleagues.

Principals of these identified successful schools were immersed in the data. They used data to lead strategic approaches to school improvement, to set goals, to benchmark performance against ‘like’ schools, to counsel, monitor and track individual and cohort performance and to develop an aspirational culture. In their desire to be student-focused their engagement with data about student performance was critical in helping students improve and reach their potential. Elmore’s (2004) notion of ‘routinized accountability’ and tight instructional focus as principles required for large scale school improvement were evident in this study. An alignment between the principal’s vision and instructional focus and its adoption by the teaching body across the nine schools was evident and was confirmed with teachers across the nine schools awarding a rating of 4.54 to item 19 in the likert survey “a school culture supportive of academic success is vital”.

4.2.1.4 Alternative academic pathways.

All principals made the point that while their schools had achieved success in the tertiary entrance exams that success was partly due to the fact that they had offered equally beneficial vocational pathways for students. Ordinarily, these students would not be suited to the suite of offerings under the umbrella of a university bound course. Many schools had introduced Vocational Education and Training (VET)
courses and very strong workplace training programs. Students were able to gain nationally recognised qualifications during Years 10-12 in VET Certificate courses. Principals consistently made the point that these programs provided students with credible alternative pathways. These courses also aided the counselling process between Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12. Alternative pathways gave students an opportunity to experience success.

4.2.1.5 Team Focus.

A characteristic of most principals in this study was that they were team-oriented, working with their deputy principals very closely and fulsome in praise of their work. They did not take personal credit for the success of the school but always focused on success as a whole-of-school achievement:

The principal is only one part of a team effort. I see my role as an empowering one (Principal, School I).

The success of Year 12 students was attributed to the collective work of teachers who had participated in the students’ learning from Year 8 through to Year 12 or in the case of composite schools from Kindergarten–Year 12:

I really work hard at acknowledging the work of my staff and honouring their commitment (Principal, School C).

While acknowledging a team approach, principals made a number of observations about the role of deputy principals, heads of subject departments and teachers. The acknowledgement of the important roles that others played, and an emphasis on empowerment, highlights a strongly distributed leadership at work (Caldwell, 2006; Caldwell & Spinks, 1998; Duignan 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris et al., 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Spillane, 2006, 2009, 2011; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane & Healey, 2010). It should also be noted that in all of the nine schools in this study, principals have always had the capacity to personally employ teachers, heads of subject departments and deputy principals. The following perceptions of the roles of each group, illustrates what principals looked for when they made these appointments.
4.2.2 Principals’ perceptions of deputy principals.

Principals of the identified schools sought to appoint deputies who were “creative, dynamic and broadly experienced” (Principal, School E). They spoke of the need for their deputies to be collegial and collaborative. Principals spoke of the importance of a deputy of curriculum having to have a track record as an outstanding teacher and head of subject department, as these were the very people they had to lead and work with. In a similar vein, these principals saw their own role as being a ‘head teacher’ (Principal, A). The majority of the principals in this study had also been deputy principals of curriculum and heads of departments.

The Principal of School A commented that:

The deputy’s role is amazing. My deputy has a great relationship with his heads of subject departments and his intimate knowledge of student data is extraordinary. He has even developed a process whereby parents can log in from home to the student data base through a particular portal to see ‘point in time’ results for their child.

This observation reflected the creativity and innovation that a number of principals expected from their deputies and characterised the reflective and innovative culture of the majority of the schools in the study.

The deputy must be involved, a strong teacher, a great head of department and able to work well with others (Principal, School F).

Many principals also commented that their deputies could not be exclusively focused on academics, that there was a broader pastoral role in their work and they looked for candidates who could do both, equally well.

As much as these principals were strong leaders they were unafraid to empower their deputies. A number spoke of appointing deputies who were their equal, if not in some areas their better. They saw their deputies as future principals. Most importantly, they spoke of the need for a synergy between the two roles and the need for a shared vision.

We have moved this school from a laissez faire culture to one that celebrates success. Okay is not okay, or good enough. The leadership team all have to
have this view and work with staff to embrace this view. It takes a lot of effort and you can let it go but you cannot afford to (Principal, School F).

4.2.3 Principals’ perceptions of Heads of Subject Departments.

The role of heads of subject departments (HODS) could not be underestimated in the eyes of most principals interviewed. HODS were the key to the establishment of strongly performing departments. In the words of the Principal of School H, they were “evangelists” for their discipline. They needed to be passionate about results and in these schools most were. They have the capacity to create a culture,

where going the extra mile becomes the way we operate (Principal School, H).

One principal commented on the need to find the time to informally communicate with his HODS.

I am always talking with my heads of department, walking around the school and popping into their offices (Principal, School C).

A number of Principals talked about the need to be in a position to use these conversations to find out how they can support their middle managers and resource their departments appropriately. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) commented that when such collaborative cultures are in place, they have a very real impact on student achievement, this was evident in the current study.

Principals required HODS to develop ‘chemistry’ and camaraderie in their departments, to allow robust debate but respect each other as colleagues. They also acknowledged the role of HODS in providing mentoring to young teachers. A requirement of the role touched on by a number of principals was the maintenance of standards, appropriate assessment items and knowledge of standards at a state wide level. They spoke of the need for their HODS to be involved in professional forums, subject associations, external moderation meetings, involvement as external examination markers, constantly looking outside their own school.

HODS have to be strong team players, less so managers and see how their subject fits into the whole curriculum. They need to be involved in network
meetings and Curriculum and Standards Authority forums. They need to get out of their own cloistered world (Principal, School H).

This fostering and support of external professional development, building productive relationships and connecting the school to its wider community is supported by Leithwood (2010). Hargraves and Fink (2006) had also noted that comments such as those expressed by the principal of School H, are characteristic of a school that has moved from a surface first order transactional mode of leadership focused on the managerial issues, to a deeper transformational culture where common goals and empowerment of people is privileged. Harris (2007, 2008a, 2008b); Spillane (2006) and Spillane and Diamond (2007) would argue that such commentary is also indicative of a culture where leadership is distributed, not overly invested in one person or position. The schools in the current study recognised and affirmed a plurality of leadership and benefited from contours of expertise within their staff Duignan (2006).

4.2.4 Principals’ perceptions of teachers.

There were a number of common themes around principals’ perceptions of their teaching staff. Most principals spoke of the need for careful selection processes of new staff to get the right ‘cultural fit’. In addition, they also looked for strong subject knowledge, passion for the subject and capacity to relate with students, as evidence in the following:

The real ‘guns’ know their subject inside and out. They do not teach to the test but they have very high expectations of their students and their programs are engaging. As a consequence there are few behavioural issues. This is complemented by great rapport. Students don’t care what you know until they know you care (Principal, School A).

Four principals spoke of the need for teaching staff to teach within their discipline not outside of it and also to teach across Years seven–twelve. Principals also commented on the need to get a balance right between employing young enthusiastic staff and more experienced teachers who have the capacity to mentor them.
The majority of principals spoke of the emphasis they placed on professional learning. They encouraged their staff to participate in as much professional development as practical, both outside of the school and ‘in-house’. One school in particular placed a strong emphasis on staff presenting to each other in relation to recent professional development they had undertaken or innovations within their own department that might be beneficial for others to consider. The researcher had a sense of genuine learning communities thriving in these schools. Hargreaves (2009) spoke of such schools as having living communities and lively cultures. This was strongly in evidence in schools that spoke about their various in-house professional learning.

The principal of School D spoke of his school’s involvement with the literature on teacher designed schools (Martin, 2008). The school sought to develop a culture that utilised teacher expertise, finding time to bring teachers together regularly, to break isolation and develop conversations around teaching and learning that shared best practice. This principal spoke proudly of his teachers as researchers, committed and engaged in a three year long project around reflective practice. The principal of (School B) spoke of his ‘strategic approach’ to teaching and learning where the deputy principal of curriculum led research groups. Their current focus had been the utilisation of a one-one laptop program, examining its benefits and endeavouring to maximise the program’s potential across the school.

Principals encouraged staff to be creative and not be tied to formulaic approaches, they fostered experimentation. In a number of these schools, principals encouraged staff to spend time with students beyond the classroom, building relationships and in most of the schools in the study this was a key characteristic of the teaching staff.

Our staff have a great work ethic, long hours, huge commitment, very active in their professional associations. I really work hard at acknowledging the work of my staff and honouring their commitment (Principal, School C).

The principal of School D made an observation that was typical across many of the schools:

Our best teachers work to get to know the students and ensure they are teaching for understanding. They go the extra mile, tutorials at lunchtimes,
after school and on weekends and holidays. There is a genuine concern for kids. They know when kids are not travelling well.

This confirmed the commentary of Shields and Miles’ (2008) findings in their work with ‘leading edge’ urban high schools in the USA where students were known by at least one significant adult.

Another common thread in interviews with principals was the need for teachers to be ‘focused’ on teaching and learning, time on task was essential.

No one particular style of learning is privileged but there is always the expectation of focus. I reinforce that when I speak to staff. I am pleased when I showed Mr and Mrs so and so (sic) around to see students busily at work (Principal, School D).

Maximising teaching time through the utilisation of thoughtful timetabling was a feature in School I.

Recently we re-structured our time table to take away free periods and give students 15 % more contact time.

The principal of School G reiterated this notion when he spoke of the processes of turning his school around:

We improved the structure of our day so there were less interruptions to teaching and learning.

All of the above sentiments strongly support the research undertaken on effective schools (Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Marzano, 2003; Mortimer et al. 1988; Sammons, Hill & Mortimer, 1995) which noted the impact of focused work centred environments, purposeful teaching and maximisation of teaching time.

A large number of principals had high expectations of their staff in terms of communication with parents:

I want parents to be informed of their sons and daughters progress, they should never get a surprise when their child is not making satisfactory
progress. We have to get parents in to talk with staff or email and telephone. (Principal, School F)

The same standards of communication applied to students. All principals required their staff to give appropriate and timely feedback to students and spoke of this as a key focus in their schools.

4.2.5 Principals’ perceptions of students.

As the current study was primarily focused on successful schools in the TEE context, most discussions revolved around senior students in Years ten to twelve, but many principals also talked about their students at both the senior and middle school level. One theme that came out strongly was the knowledge that principals had of their senior school cohorts. A number of the principals taught these students and they were very conscious of how they had been progressing as a cohort from Year 10 through to Year 12:

I have to be careful that I can be dragged away from curriculum issues because of administrative accountability...I still teach a class and strive to remain current and in touch with my students (Principal, School A).

Principals spoke of their intimate knowledge of individual students. The Principal of School I, spoke of the efforts the school went to gain the views of students about their experience of the school:

We survey kids about their experience at a number of points. In year twelve, I invite the boys for a coffee in my study, all 180 of them (not at once). It is like an exit survey to get a feel for what we can do better.

The literature (Beresford, 2003; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004; Flutter, 2006; Pedder and McIntyre, 2006; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Ruddock, 2006) strongly supports such practice, arguing that students have insightful reflections concerning their own learning and the teaching they have received. In fact, Hattie (2012) argued that interviewing and listening to students allows schools and teachers to see the effects of their practice. Birkett’s (2001) study also confirmed that students themselves suggested that ‘schools we’d like’ are schools that listen to them.
In the majority of schools, principals talked about the strength of peer support programs enabling academically strong students to work with and support those who may need extra help. In addition, a variety of student leadership programs were in place that complemented peer support programs:

We strongly promote leadership roles to students and provide as many leadership opportunities as we can. We are often overwhelmed by the number of students volunteering to do things around the school (Principal, School C).

One principal spoke about the senior students staying back after school working in academic groupings until 6pm or even 7pm, stating that “this was normal” (Principal, School F). Shields and Miles (2008) refer to such processes as community practices, in which relationships are developed through identification with an established group that shares norms and time. These community practices were evident in School C:

Our students are kept in the same form class in Years 8, 9, 10 and 11 (Principal, School C).

The pastoral house structures in many of the schools were seen as further avenues to support the development of community and belonging, structures not dissimilar to the Shields and Miles (2008) study.

An overriding observation of principals concerning the culture among the students in these schools was that it was ‘cool’ to be academically successful. Students would spend time on study during lunch hours, before school and after school. Most importantly, teachers were very willing to make themselves available to students at these times. Another support provided was the use of IT and intranet facilities where it was not uncommon for staff to respond to questions from students, out of school hours via email.

Across the board, all Principals spoke of the need to constantly affirm student academic success at whole of school assemblies, at Year assemblies and through parent newsletters:
Success breeds success, our students are proud of their achievements (Principal, School C).

Principals commented on the need to not only provide first class curriculum programs but also quality pastoral care programs. Many commented on the importance of sound career counselling, learning support programs and psychological support. All of the schools had a resident child psychologist to provide appropriate professional advice to children and parents on mental health and social and emotional well being. Two principals number (School D and School G) noted the very difficult home life of some students and the requirement to provide as much support as possible at school to enable them in their study:

We have a very strong counselling process. Students are informed about pathways that will suit their directions and destinations as well as the results required to get there (Principal, School H).

Broader academic and career counselling provided students with directions and goals which in turn supported motivation.

4.2.6 Principals’ perceptions of parents.

Most of the principals surveyed commented on how important it was to communicate with parents and engage them in a productive relationship. In the words of one:

Good staff and engaged parents is a recipe for success (Principal, School F).

A number of principals spoke of the need to constantly use every forum possible to communicate with parents, confirming Epstein’s (2010) contentions. Principals noted the need to articulate to parents the expectations the school has of them in relation to the partnership they share in the education of their children. Principals also recognised that parents had expectations of the school and “it is so important to get parents on side” (Principal, School A).

The parent-school relationship can be problematic and complex in terms of the development of trust and engagement but it is crucial in any process of school
improvement and cultural change (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fullan, 2005). In light of this, one of the principals made a salient comment that it was:

important to offer ‘quality’ parent information evenings or forums, which were carefully devised and not overly long. You want parents to come back because the experience has been useful. We also use these forums to thank parents for their engagement. Parents need affirmation (Principal, School A).

This statement supports the notion of relational trust that is required between the school and the parent body (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) described thoughtful, reflective and caring engagement with parents, having the capacity to invite reciprocation and social affiliation, as fundamental to the development of relational trust.

A key theme was the obvious strong influence of the parent body that valued education, had high expectations of their children and were broadly aspirational. This is seen in the following commentary:

We were very conscious that if we did not deliver, parents would vote with their feet and go to School ‘X’ nearby. For example, in 2005 School ‘X’ had enormous success with a number of high performers who had left our school in year ten. We had a “nice” school but parents wanted performance and excellence, so strategically we set out to achieve that (Principal, School H).

The schools in the current study operated in communities where there was significant choice for parents in selecting schools for their children. It could be argued that such choice heightened accountability and clearly in the case of School H, this drove improvement.

Only two schools with relatively lower ICSEA indexes had comparatively low parent participation in the school but that did not necessarily imply that their parents were not aspirational (Spera, Wentzel & Matto, 2009). In fact, principals of the lower socio-economic schools commented on the enormous sacrifices their parents made to send their children to these schools. Even though the fees were modest, it still represented a struggle for many families. Some parents held down two jobs to ensure they could provide their children with the education that they had not been afforded themselves. Principals were aware that they needed to constantly engage
with time-poor parents, and accordingly, find a variety of ways to communicate with them.

4.2.7 Principals' perceptions of the culture of the school.

The strongest theme coming through all interviews with principals was the importance of developing a ‘culture’ that supported a climate where teaching and learning was seen as core business, where academic success was applauded and affirmed, where staff were appointed according to their cultural fit and where the vision of the principal was shared by all concerned.

It could be said that the principals in the current study were anything but insular. They constantly encouraged their staff to engage with professional development outside of the school. They wanted to be benchmarked against external measures and used such benchmarking processes to reflect on their practice. This was noted in the following commentary:

You must have data; it enables you to ask the right questions. I applaud those working in the (central) office who prepare the data for schools, particularly the longitudinal data. It challenges us to compare ourselves with other like schools. Our teachers need to make judgements from a broad basis not an insular one (Principal, School A).

Some schools in this study had periods in their history where their results were poor but they used data, sought outside external advice, brought in staff from other schools and the CEOWA, then set about to strategically plan and improve the educational outcomes for their students. Having done so, they reaped rewards but these rewards came from systematic plans and targeted approaches. Complacency was not in their vocabulary:

We do not just rest on comparing ourselves within the CEOWA system but across all sectors (Principal, School F).

Principals commented on the many important and pressing administrative responsibilities that caused them to be ‘pulled away’ from the essentials of teaching and learning. All of the principals spoke of the need to constantly resist that pull. As one stated:
It takes a lot of effort and you can let it go, but you cannot afford to (Principal, School A).

Principals exhibited a fierce pride in their school and an abiding respect for the efforts of their staff. It could be easily seen that this pride was infectious and, as will be discussed later, had a big impact on students.

Another feature of leadership in the nine schools was the synergy within leadership teams. The relationships between the principal and deputy principal charged with responsibility for curriculum was exceptionally strong and this filtered down to middle management positions. Dialogue around teaching and learning was common as evidenced by a typical comment from the deputy principal in School F:

We are constantly in conversations around what does it mean to learn.

The researcher had a sense that he was often analysing the commentary of teachers rather than managers, although clearly, some were exceptional managers as evidenced by the comments of their staff, the organisational structures in place in their schools and the strategic way in which they had managed change.

Leithwood et al. (2006) speak of four major domains of leadership that have an impact on student learning:

- Setting direction;
- Managing teaching and learning;
- Developing people; and,
- Developing the organisation to create evidence based schools.

It could be argued that there was clear evidence that all four domains were well accounted for in the interviews with the principals in this study.

4.3 Perceptions of Deputy Principals: Introduction.

Of the nine deputies interviewed, their breadth of experience across a number of schools in the Catholic system was evident. Many had also taught in other systems and in other States. Predominantly, most had attained their position having previously been a head of a subject department and were thus steeped in a
background of managing curriculum. They had all spent many years teaching TEE subjects and some still were, with a number currently teaching Year Twelves.

The major themes derived from these interviews were the importance of counselling; knowledge and use of data; relationships with students; relationships with parents; strategic planning and the development of an appropriate culture. These themes are considered in detail in what follows.

4.3.1 Deputy principals’ perceptions: Their role.

4.3.1.1 Counselling of students and use of data.

In all interviews with deputy principals, counselling was a dominant theme and one that cannot be underestimated. This could be attributed to the fact that most deputies managed counselling and subject/pathway choices from Year 10 to Year 11 and from Year 11 to Year 12 and they all argued unanimously that it was a crucial factor in the success of the students in their schools.

Processes where students were interviewed one to one by senior staff, tracked and then interviewed again where necessary, were common. Counselling was informed by detailed statistics on school performance history. This historical data was used to show students what might be expected if they attained a certain grade in Year Ten or Year Eleven based on the school’s ‘in-house’ longitudinal data. Aligned to the use of data was the development and application of desired pre-requisites for individual subjects. These pre-requisites were rigorously applied, although many deputies did make the comment that ultimately they do “give students a go” (Deputy Principal, School I). Thus efforts to gain good results were not achieved by denying students opportunities:

We want the ‘person’ to do their best; we are not focused on getting into the West Australian (newspaper) (Deputy Principal, School I).

4.3.1.2 Student wellbeing.

Counselling was defined broadly by many deputies and did not just refer to ‘subject’ or ‘pathways’ counselling. Many deputies spoke of the integral role of careers counsellors in their schools who helped students identify goals and ‘end
point’ directions, this was crucial in enabling decision making. Careers counsellors worked very closely with deputies in a support role in the counselling process. The role of psychological counselling and the issue of student social and emotional well being were raised by a number of deputies.

The more we can do to support the ‘well being’ of the student the better. Good results come if you are looking after the kid, good teaching and good curriculum is a given.

The human person is the key. If they are comfortable and happy they will perform better (Deputy Principal, School I).

When students are happy, feel safe and connected and are able to work in an environment conducive to personal well being, they are potentially able to perform at their best (Seligman, 2011). Following Seligman, it was noticeable that a number of deputy principals commented on the need for sound behaviour management programs and policies in their schools, they knew that orderly focused learning environments are critical and said so often:

Kids need to feel good about being at school and have opportunities to achieve satisfaction or achievement in something, then you do not get behavioural problems (Deputy Principal, School A).

Such a theme also appeared in interviews conducted with parents who saw the development of resilience and optimism as important factors in their sons’ and daughters’ education. One of the schools in the study had recognised this and had started to explore in more depth the contribution of the field of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011: Waters, 2013), with a view to applying the principles of well-being derived from positive psychology to the classroom. This observation was acknowledged by another deputy who remarked that increasingly:

we are being a little overwhelmed by the number of students presenting with social and emotional issues (Deputy School E).

Commentary on the amount of time staff spent dealing with issues that stemmed from an alarming level of dysfunction in the home were common. These broader social-emotional issues are emblematic of the multi-layered work of contemporary schooling. An emerging picture was beginning to develop where nurturing and
supportive relationships were seen as a central to the development of academically successful schools supporting the commentary in the literature (Adler, 1937; Edwards & Mullis, 2001; Ferguson, 1989; Maslow, 1968, 1970) cited earlier.

4.3.2 Deputy principals’ perceptions: Teacher-student relationships.

Relationships took on an almost mantra-like quality in this study and in some ways it should have been predictable given the emphasis of the Catholic school system. The Mandate for Catholic schools in WA notes that God is calling people into relationship today and that “students need to feel loved by their teachers and by other school staff, just as his disciples felt loved by Jesus”, Catholic Education Commission of WA (2009, Paragraph 38).

As such, relationships and community featured very strongly in interviews with the deputy principals. The personal generosity of teachers with respect to the time they gave to students over and above normal teaching hours was striking; in fact, it could be said that the ‘norm’ started to take on a completely new dimension. Repeatedly, deputys across all schools spoke of the hours undertaken before school, at lunchtime and after school to provide students with extra support. One school ran after-school tutorials on Friday and it was not unusual to see up to three classrooms full of students gladly remaining behind to avail themselves of extra tuition. In the same school, teachers volunteered to run seminars on Saturdays. This spirit of service had a great impact on students as will be seen in the summary of student interviews and it helped build very authentic relationships between students and their teachers.

After hours work and extra-curricular activities were important, but it should be noted that it was relationship formation that was first emphasised in the classroom. As one deputy put it:

among a number of things, relationships is what makes a good teacher, but they are not only developed in social settings, it is done with and through the subject (Deputy Principal, School E).

The same deputy went on to describe those moments in teaching where teachers take the subject matter back to the lives of their students, making learning relevant, giving it sense and purpose and even providing anecdotes from their own life
experience. He captured that concept of the passionate teacher bringing students into the life of the relationship she or he has with their subject and thus inspiring a similar love. This confirmed Reynolds (1998) observation that effective teachers “carry the content personally to the student” (p. 148). Another deputy characterised the relationship in the classroom as a process where:

our better teachers work to get to know students, this ensures they are teaching for understanding (Deputy Principal, School B).

Getting to know students thus took on a double dimension here, where teachers not only know the person but what the person knows or does not know concerning the topic under investigation.

On a broader level, what characterised many of these conversations was the discussion around the significance of community. Where there are strong relationships, a strong community tends to exist. One interview centred around the focus on community in the school and the enormous contribution of the religious order that founded the school. That order’s charism was singularly defined by a tradition of ‘hospitality’. The school had to be a welcoming place, a place of support and nurture. As the deputy commented:

they (students) will always study and do well when they feel they belong (Deputy, School E).

This notion of belonging is strongly supported in the secular literature, (Adler, 1929, 1935,1937; Glasser, 1998; Maslow, 1968; Seligman, 2011; Waters, 2013). The benefits of connectedness and community are confirmed in the current study through the perceptions of executive leaders. It will be important to verify through focus groups, whether student perceptions confirm such a view.

On a structural level, practical strategies were harnessed to enhance a sense of belonging. Deputies spoke of the benefit of having form classes or house groups move from year to year with the same staff member. This process allowed the staff member to develop an intimate pastoral knowledge of the group and individuals within the group. On a more formal level, one deputy spoke of the school’s work in surveying students:
I survey students about their study habits; I survey them about their course experiences. The surveys tell us what works, and what doesn’t. How can we improve? What can the students tell us? (Deputy Principal, School I).

The students’ voice was being heard and respected here, a notion that was championed by Gentilucci (2004) who argued that giving students a voice allowed leaders in schools an opportunity to view their work from a different perspective. The student voice added to teachers’ reflections about the strengths and weaknesses of the new courses of study they were teaching.

4.3.3 Deputy principals’ perceptions: Parents.

The relationship with parents was a strong theme in all conversations with the deputies. Almost to a person, they emphasised the need to have strong lines of communication with parents regarding the academic progress of their children. A partnership with parents was fundamental in achieving academic success in these schools.

Parents are an important factor. Parents entrust us with their kids and we take that responsibility seriously (Deputy, School H).

It was fascinating to hear almost every deputy say parents should never get a ‘surprise’ on their child’s report. As mentioned in the summary on principals’ perceptions, one deputy had developed a tool on ‘Maze’ (a learning management system) for parents to access their child’s grades from home. For all bar one of the schools, deputies spoke of parents as supportive partners in the education of their children with very high attendance at all school information and communication forums.

4.3.4 Deputy principals’ perceptions: Culture of the school and alignment with principals’ vision.

In a similar vein to the principals, deputy principals spoke of the culture of the school as a major contributing factor in its academic success. In fact, what was clear to the researcher in terms of culture, was the synergy that existed between the principal and deputy in a strongly shared vision (Leithwood, 2010).
A major theme among the deputies was the centrality of teaching and learning as a focus in the school and the development of a reflective culture around practice. It was mentioned by the deputy of School E, that “to be a ‘Catholic’ school requires that we are a good school”. As a consequence, academic results were high on the agenda. Deputy principals were less coy than principals about using the word ‘results’, in fact, the deputy of School I, commented that the school was “unashamedly focused on results”. The deputy principal of School A, commented that:

I stew over kids’ reports. It is very time consuming. I do this because I want to get to know kids and affirm them but I want to know who is not doing well and feed that data down the line to HODS and teachers.

Deputy principals reinforced the commentary of principals that data were always used to further the personal improvement of individual students,

all our focus is on those not performing, to try and help remediation (Deputy Principal, School D).

Results were not seen as a means of promoting the school although celebrating success was considered to be very important.

The Deputy Principal of School D reinforced his principal's enthusiasm for the work the school had done in investigating the literature on ‘teacher designed schools', which had generated dialogue around teaching practice and encouraged staff to open up each other’s classrooms for peer evaluation of their teaching. A similar experience to that of School D was reflected on by the Deputy Principal of School G. A number of years previously, the school had extremely poor academic results. The school made a number of structural changes, in particular moving away from an approach that organised teaching around an integrated studies program to a more subject-based focus, with expert teachers in the subject, teaching within their discipline, not outside it. School G gave more prominence to the role of heads of subject departments and resourced them accordingly with more time to manage teaching and learning. Behaviour management was also targeted for improvement, creating classrooms that were far more focused and orderly. The school brought in principals from other schools who had been successful in their TEE results and looked at the strategies they had employed. This models another principle
articulated by Elmore (2004), who suggested that if there is to be large scale improvement, schools must reduce isolation and open up practice to direct observation, analysis, and criticism. The school set about focussing on relationships between staff and students, articulating academic and behavioural expectations and addressing absenteeism. Absenteeism had been “astronomically” high but was immediately rectified with very tight scrutiny of attendance and immediate follow up. Time on-task was seen as a crucial focus for success.

The Deputy Principal of School G spoke of constantly walking around the school, “putting out fires before they started”. He would literally move around the campus five or six times a day, stating, “I had to be a presence”. The school had also undergone a building program that opened up classrooms with glass walls so that people could see each other teach. The deputy spoke about the fact that whenever he bumped into students he would always bring up their study, how they were progressing with homework, assignments and targeted goals. HODS and Heads of Year together with the deputy, followed up students who were absent from school or missing assessment tasks. This approach was pursued relentlessly and in addition senior staff used every means possible to celebrate success whenever they could. As a consequence, for three successive years the school had received a 100% Graduation rate. Its academic results have been extremely high compared to like schools and the overall tone of the school has improved enormously as a result of the initiatives.

A number of deputies often used the word ‘excellence’. They were striving to attain excellence on a number of fronts: excellence in teaching, assessment practice, fostering an attitude amongst their students to strive for excellence. In doing so, they often echoed the commentary of the principals they worked with, because as good as the strategic plans they had implemented for school improvement were, they wanted to review them and search for more ways to fine-tune what they were doing, “to get better and better, to move from good to great” (Deputy Principal, School D). They were highly focused, and wanted their students and staff to be highly focused, as the Deputy Principal of School D commented “we have business to do here”. Yet as business-like and as focused on pedagogical practice as these leaders were, another element of their work always emerged, that of supporting the school culture.
In terms of culture, an inescapable emerging theme was the context of Catholic faith and values, which permeated the way deputys spoke about relationships:

I aim to treat staff and students well, as simple as that. People treat each other well here, we are known for it. Our faith and values base are.... we don’t just say things to parents or students our values are authentic, relief teachers comment on it. We treat each other courteously and respectfully and it just flows through. Visitors comment on the gentle environment and the focus here, we have things to do and it shows. We simply live our gospel values by the way we care for each other and as such staff want to stay here, we have a very stable staff and it’s why we can attract students here (Deputy Principal, School H).

It was becoming clear to the researcher that the language of leaders was dominated by an attention to well-being, care of others, particularly students but also staff and the development of community. In the context of an IPA study, this emerging theme was a personal challenge. The study by its nature had intended to focus on instructional practices related to academic success, but more and more, conversations with individual leaders were drawn to the importance of pastoral care, not just instructional practice. The researcher, whose natural interest drew him to all things instructional, had to confront and allow another focus to be represented. In a phenomenological sense, this is the challenge that Moustakas (1994) spoke of as the researcher endeavours to be respectful of the participants’ expressions of experience, he/she must establish “the truth of things” (p. 57). In this case, irrespective of a personal bias to privilege instructional practices or exhibiting a self-consciousness about how commentary of a religious nature might be received by a secular audience, the expression of such an experience could not be hidden.

4.4 Perceptions of heads of subject departments: Introduction.

Heads of subject departments in secondary schools (commonly referred to as HODS) play a pivotal role in the design and implementation of curriculum. HODS sit in a space between deputy principals and teachers in middle management roles and it is argued they have the capacity to be highly influential leaders in their own right (Brown, Rutherford, Boyle, 2000; Dinham, 2006; Harris,1998, 2000, 2004). They have often been selected for these roles because they are ‘master’ teachers and have the potential to lead. The HODS interviewed in this study ranged across the
broad spectrum of all subject areas including religious education. Discussions revolved around the ‘role’ of the head of department; issues related to teaching, assessment, planning and programming, the culture of the school, executive leadership, parents and students.

4.5 Heads’ of subject departments perceptions of their role.

A common theme among most HODS was the fact that they viewed their role as not just administrative, but also as transformational, relationship-centred (Leithwood, 2010; Mulford & Silins, 2011;) and instructional (Edmunds, 1979; Hallinger, 2003):

Being a good head of department is not just about being a good administrator, but also about building relationships. Affirming staff is crucial, being available to support people in their teaching (HOD, School E).

Developing positive relationships was seen as a premise for further engagement in communities of practice. There was also a strong sense of leadership as service in many of the conversations (Greenleaf, 1977; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002; Sergiovani, 2005).

There is no ego, no rivalry, it is all about doing the best for the students (HOD, School E).

This sublimation of ego privileges a leadership style based on a selfless disposition that focuses on serving others, first their colleagues and finally through their colleagues, their students.

While organisational skills were often relegated to a second tier in terms of importance, their necessity was acknowledged. The “busyness” of many schools required the HOD to be highly organised in order to support their staff and continue to serve them appropriately. Interestingly, HODS acknowledged their jobs in these schools was made easier by the very competent deputies they worked with, who were often meticulous in their planning, organisation and communication.

Leadership and support at the executive level is crucial, our DP is incredibly helpful, very flexible and supportive. He tries to find little ways to help, providing us with time (HOD, School F).
Another HOD in School D, commented:

We have a strong relationship with our deputy he is methodical, he steers the ship, he never gave up on the notion that results could improve. He is a strong role model. Administration sets the standard and this has permeated through the school. The data is presented in such a simple form by “X” that I can see things that would otherwise have escaped me.

The synergy between the executive leadership group and middle managers was clearly evident in most schools, which produced collaborative relationships and furthered an alignment of vision. The commentary of the HODS concerning their relationships with their deputy was emblematic of the interdependence and mutual influence of both parties resulting in a conjoint agency as observed by Gronn (2000).

4.5.1 Relationships and teams.

Heads of Departments talked of the need to work on relationships. Teamwork was a key theme woven through many conversations:

We are a team (HOD, School B).

We use the strengths of different individuals to drive particular areas of the curriculum, working strongly as a team, and working on weaknesses (HOD, School D).

Team teaching, cross marking, strong comparability measures and a culture of sharing were common features of the conversations between HODS:

We work as a team and plan as a team, I facilitate the planning and communication and bring everyone on board (HOD, School F).

When you have a strong team you find it really creates focus (HOD, School H).

HODS saw themselves as builders, building relationships, building teamwork, thus strongly confirming their role as transformational leaders (Hargraves & Fink, 2006; Leithwood, 2010).
There was also acknowledgement that HODS required a generosity of spirit, as many leaders do:

accept praise, but acknowledge the team and when things go wrong, take a hit for the team (HOD, School, F).

The way in which principals had declined to accept the praise for academic success preferring to direct praise to the whole staff was also evident in HODS’ responses. A key feature of the HODS’ leadership was the notion that it was imperative to lead by example, with one HOD stating:

From the way I talk on the phone, write programs or get marking back I model by example (HOD, School E).

These were people who were acutely conscious of their responsibilities and wanted to foster that same sense of accountability within their staff through the modelling of their own behaviour and practice.

4.5.1.1 Communication in the department

In a number of the interviews, the subject of communication came up as a central characteristic of strongly functioning departments as one HOD indicated:

Having everyone in an office together is really conducive to conversations around curriculum (HOD, School E).

The built environment was a key feature around the theme of communication. Having staff together in a central office space was seen as the ideal and where schools could not provide such a space, it was seen as a limiting factor. Heads of departments who were not sharing offices with their staff spoke of the disadvantages, particularly the sense of isolation. One head of religious education spoke about the problem of having few specialist teachers in her subject area which meant she had a department of sixteen teachers drawing from seven other departments. This was extremely limiting in a number of ways. It was difficult to develop regular communication or informal conversations around practice and sharing of resources. Heads of department commented on the need for open lines
of communication, the need for robust debate and the requirement that staff, reflect with and listen to each other in respectful dialogue.

Having everyone together in an office is really conducive to good conversations being generated around teaching, around curriculum. It means we are having informal meetings all the time, sharing subject knowledge and resources (HOD, School B).

One HOD also noted that:

I have to make time to talk to people individually, find out their needs and take time to affirm them (HOD School C).

Ironically, this need to talk with people individually reflected the comments of principals who had earlier spoken of their need to find time to speak one-on-one with their subject heads and confirms the view of Harris (2000) who argued that heads of department contribute to departmental performance in much the same way that principals contribute to overall school performance.

While Information Communication Technology (ICT) can be taken for granted, many HODS commented on its use particularly as a medium for communication in their role. Utilising common drives within a network server as a repository for teaching resources enhanced their accessibility to teachers. Knowledge of ICT resources in particular subject areas and the ease with which technology can now be used to store and send resources to colleagues in an instant, was noted as a valuable teaching aid by a number of HODS.

4.5.1.2 Planning and programming.
As has been mentioned already in this study, planning and programming was strongly characterised by a collaborative, team approach within the majority of schools in the current study. Wherever possible, individual strengths of particular staff members were employed, teachers shared responsibilities for programming at different year levels and HODS ensured that standards and attention to detail required by school policy were applied.
HODS commented on the need for middle school programming to provide scaffolding towards skills and knowledge required in upper secondary school. There was a great need to be conscious of scope and sequence in programs, developing and building skills at each year level, without also creating repetition and duplication.

A number of schools spoke about the relative freedom to be creative and experimental in lower school programs, for example:

We experiment a lot in our programming, we are relatively creative, open to change but not obsessed by it (HOD, School E).

While there was an acknowledgement that traditional skills were very important, attainment of those skills in lower school was not sacrificed at the expense of imaginative and creative programming.

HODS spoke of their need to teach across lower secondary and upper secondary levels to get “a helicopter view” (HOD, School I) of curriculum and a more nuanced appreciation of scope and sequence. Many also demanded that their teachers teach across the full range from Year Seven to Year Twelve. Department meetings were often used to develop conversations around the scope and sequence of the curriculum; Year Eleven and Year Twelve teachers talking about skills that might be deficient in students so that those teachers in lower secondary might be a little more focused on these areas. The following, illustrates this proposition:

We spend a lot of time auditing the Year Eleven and Year Twelve programs to inform programming in Years Seven to Ten in order to achieve specific outcomes in years 11 and 12 (HOD, School D).

This commentary was affirmed by teachers in the likert survey statement “working with colleagues on collaborative programming enhances my teaching” with a mean score of 4.29 across the 450 teachers surveyed.

A feature of the research was the variance in streaming into ability groups. While some schools did stream in English and Mathematics from Year 8 onwards a larger number did not stream until Year Ten. Year Ten was certainly the stage where streaming was common rather than the exception. Clearly Year Ten was seen in many schools as a preparatory year for the Year Eleven and Year Twelve courses of study, and a year where significant course counselling took on an important role.
HODS confirmed the commentary of deputy principals in their expression that career
counselling and counselling of subject choice was crucial at Year Ten and HODS
recognised that they played a part in this process.

4.5.1.3 Assessment.

In a number of the semi-structured interviews, conversations around assessment
practices dominated discussion, as might be expected given the role of this group.
HODS spoke passionately about the need for well developed assessment policy and
practice, with one stating:

Ninety percent of our time is spent writing assessments in mathematics, we
pore over them to ensure it is a quality assessment, looking for flaws or
talking about how to make it better (HOD, School F).

Conversations about assessment did not just take place around the departmental
table; it was part and parcel of whole school staff meetings with common whole
school templates, being used for assessment and planning. A balanced approach to
frequency of assessment was the generally accepted view. It was important to have
regular assessments to develop and refine skills, to monitor learning and to provide
feedback, but having too many assessments could then mean that quality feedback
was difficult.

4.5.1.4 Feedback.

Quality feedback was a central feature of the conversations about assessment,
confirming Hattie’s (2003, 2009, 2012) observations that feedback has a strong
influence on student achievement:

I say to my teachers, I want to be able to go to your students’ files and see
your writing all over their work. But I also want to see timely feedback. There
is no point providing feedback a month later (HOD, School E).

Speaking of her own classroom practice, one HOD in school E commented that:

I like to get students to write a reflection on the feedback they have been
given. It ensures they have read it! (much laughter). It provides a sort of
closure.
Common assessment tasks were considered very important in terms of achievement of comparability across a cohort of students:

Assessments need to be uniform and comparable, we cross mark constantly (HOD, School G).

Many heads of department talked about the need in Years 11 and Year 12 to use challenging assessment types confirming numerous authors (Dinham, 2008; Hattie, 2003; & Marzano, 2003) who argued that expert teachers often had high expectations, set challenging tasks and supported students in meeting the challenge. HODS spoke of the need to replicate exam questions and develop exam-taking skills. One HOD in School F, spoke of the need to “build up resilience to test taking and exams”. Providing opportunities for students to experience writing under time constraints, and developing the ability to read questions appropriately under pressure, helped reduce anxiety.

Consensus marking meetings were regarded as essential to moderate standards and set appropriate assessments. A number of schools also used external markers for some assessments in order to have their students’ work benchmarked against a State-wide standard. Tools for feedback were also discussed, such as well designed rubrics, marking keys linked to the syllabus, use of student exemplars and engaging students in self-evaluation. Mathematics HODS talked about the need for mathematics teachers to model solutions often taking a whole period to go over a test with students “line-by-line modelling the answers and how to get there” (HOD, School E).

Affirmation was repeatedly mentioned in relation to assessments and feedback. In particular, HODS in the all boys schools spoke about the impact of positive affirmation with boys and the need to use every opportunity and medium to provide it, recognising that it must be authentic, otherwise the success attained and the affirmation provided is demeaned. A HOD in School D, said “we provide a lot of one-on-one verbal feedback”. Another HOD in School H commented that “I want my teachers to be approachable, talk things through with students”. Of particular interest to the researcher is whether the broader teaching staff and students would confirm the views of HODS concerning assessment, feedback and affirmation. This is explored later in this work.
4.5.2 Heads’ of department perceptions: Selection and development of teachers.

Many HODS spoke of the need for new staff to be expert in their discipline, both in content knowledge and pedagogy but time and time again they talked about the need for staff to:

fit in, both to our department and to the mission of the school (HOD, School E).

One HOD in the same school elaborated on that comment and described that cultural fit in terms of the charism of the religious order that founded the school.

Our charism demands that they have to be people who look for the good in others (HOD, School E).

Again the cultural values of the Catholic school appeared in a very subtle natural way. One HOD in School C, described his staff this way:

they are passionate, they care and connect, and they love them (students).

Clearly affective qualities of teachers were highly sought after in the majority of the appointments in these schools.

If, as has been seen, teamwork was an essential ingredient of the culture and general success of these schools, then maintaining that collegiality was a priority and much thought went into the appointment of staff who would fit the culture. A HOD in School H, spoke of the need to select staff who were willing to contribute generously to the work of the team and to the students they teach:

everyone pitches in and helps here, we spend hours after school and even on weekends or holidays.

As an adjunct to the long hours and commitment required, a common theme was the need for a sense of humour. One HOD in School H, whose daughter attended the school she taught in, commented that:
my daughter has really appreciated the way teachers relate to students here. They are good natured, good humoured, wonderful sense of humour.

Another HOD in School E, whose daughter also attended her school reflected that:

I chose (School E) for its ethos and community, more than its academic standards. It was more important for me that she was happy. I chose school E before it chose me. I felt my daughter was in a good place.

In terms of professional development, all HODS spoke strongly about the need for their teaching staff to access high quality professional development. In particular, many spoke of the benefits of TEE marking and working on subject curriculum panels at the Curriculum and Standards Authority of WA. Gaining experience as TEE markers was seen by many as the very best professional development a Year 11 and Year 12 teacher could access. Networking with colleagues through professional associations was also highly valued. HODS shared the views of their deputies and principals; they were outward looking, always willing to support their staff in the search for external resources, advice, support and professional development.

4.5.3 Heads’ of department perceptions of students.

HODS saw the role of students as influential in terms of the schools academic success. A great deal of the commentary revolved around reflections that described a cultural journey with students, for example:

The attitude of students has improved, the tone of the school has improved, the school is in a period of transition and students have picked up on this. Students believe in the College. Students have more acceptance of the school as an entity; they have confidence in the school (HOD, School D).

There was a reiteration of the commentary from principals and deputies that the nine schools in the study strived for excellence and significantly, the message had clearly been heard by many students, with one HOD making the comment that:
Students are motivated, they strive for excellence, there is a great learning environment. A lot can get done in a lesson here (HOD, School E).

This comment was tempered by commentary from a HOD in School H who noted that:

a large number of students are very focused, there is healthy competition here. But some are laid back due to the country surfing culture and we have to work with students we believe could do more.

One HOD in School I, noted that:

using the exemplars of high achieving students was a useful motivator, helping others to aim high.

In many of the schools, conversations around healthy competition among students surfaced time and again, illustrated by the following:

We have House faction competitions run in academics as well as sports and the arts. It works well, particularly in English, Maths and Humanities. Students are very competitive and results focused. You then have to acknowledge and reward success formally and informally. Informal feedback in conversation with the student is just as important as assemblies. Tell them you believe in them (HOD, School B).

Recognising students through award systems for achievement, effort and application was constantly referred to in many of the schools by all HODS. Students applauded and appreciated the achievement of their peers and academic success became something that was seen to be acceptable and even ‘cool’ in the peer culture. One HOD in School I went so far as describing an “esprit de corps” where “the boys’ behaviour in everything they do is a contributing factor”. This HOD elaborated on the powerful potential of the single sex environment for boys in developing a culture where academic success was valued rather than denigrated. Affirmation of students’ academic success through institutionalised processes both formal and informal is important, but when the peer culture affirms success as evidenced by the HODS, this is a potent combination.
Many HODS reflected on the contribution of leadership programs, peer support programs, and mentoring programs that gave students opportunities to work with their peers and younger students. Leadership programs had a positive impact on peer culture in the eyes of many HODS and flowed on as a contributing factor in high academic achievement. As one HOD in School F commented:

students are generous because staff are generous not just academically.

The service and generosity that was modelled by staff had clearly impacted on students in the eyes of the HODS.

4.5.4 Heads’ of department perceptions of parents.

HODS recognised that parents had a significant, although varying influence, on the academic achievement of their sons and daughters. In the two schools with the lowest ICSEA measure, parents were less engaged in terms of their active involvement and presence in the school. Both groups of HODS in these schools commented that parents were supportive and aspirational for their students but on the whole “the parents are just happy to trust the school” (HOD, School H). HODS in these schools confirmed the views of principals and deputy principals that it was important to meet with parents regularly and HODS repeated the necessity for staff to contact parents concerning student progress.

HODs in the other seven schools talked of very strong parental support, attendance at parent information evenings and parental contribution to the development of community. In fact one HOD in School H described the school as having a real sense of “family and community” which was in many ways a result of the close partnership between parents and the school. Many of the HODS argued that parents contributed to the development of an academic culture with one stating:

Our parents want results, they send their students here because of the culture of the school, because they know it can broaden opportunities for their children (HOD, School A).

While the HODS of most schools remarked on and welcomed the engagement of parents as partners, HODs in the school with the highest ICSEA measure
commented that some parents could be demanding and overly intrusive, illustrated in the following commentary:

Parents are not homogenous, some are highly supportive, some very critical and defensive. The majority are affirming but squeaky wheels are demanding. Now with emails, ICT they are relatively more intrusive.... have greater access to us. You need to spend a reasonable amount of time helping staff deal with parents.

The complexity of the role of the HOD was evident in this comment. They were themselves buffers for their staff between administration, students and parents and their role required not only a mix of transformational and instructional leadership skills but a high degree of interpersonal skills.

4.6 Chapter summary.

This chapter has addressed Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of leaders in schools achieving better than expected results in the tertiary examination context? A number of emerging themes arising out of the participants’ perceptions concerning contributing factors that led to their school’s high achievement have been presented. These factors are summarised in Table 4.1 overleaf.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principals</th>
<th>Deputy Principals</th>
<th>Heads of Department</th>
<th>Congruent Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting a vision and development of culture. High expectations.</td>
<td>Immersed in data. Focused on results. Culture of academic excellence.</td>
<td>Good HODs build relationships, affirm staff. Recognise their own role is a leadership role.</td>
<td>Alignment in cultural values between principals, deputy principals and HODS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and sequence of curriculum.</td>
<td>Quality assessment and feedback.</td>
<td>Strong emphasis on scope and sequence in programming from Year 7 – Year 12.</td>
<td>Importance of relationships in leadership teams. Relationships between staff and students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing data. Knowing individual students.</td>
<td>Alignment with Principals’ vision.</td>
<td>Close relationship with executive leadership in review of data.</td>
<td>Catholic cultural emphasis on care and community.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Importance of Leadership “team”.</td>
<td>Scaffolded curriculum.</td>
<td>Develop culture of reflective practice and conversations on learning both formally and informally.</td>
<td>Attention to scope and sequence in programming.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Careful selection of staff – cultural fit. Leaders must be outstanding teachers.</td>
<td>Staff work ethic very strong. Availability to students.</td>
<td>Acknowledgement of Catholic culture of care and community.</td>
<td>Emphasis on reflective practice and development of learning communities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff must know content but also care for students and demonstrate rapport.</td>
<td>Building relationships between staff.</td>
<td>Fostering an academic culture of excellence.</td>
<td>Acknowledgement of accountability to parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic and availability of staff.</td>
<td>Strong focus on teaching and learning. Emphasis on reflective practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis on staff professional development and learning.</td>
<td>Support staff in seeking professional development.</td>
<td>Quality assessment and feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging and communicating with parents important.</td>
<td>Communication with parents crucial.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promoting student achievement.</td>
<td>Promotion and celebration of success.</td>
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<td>Provision of VET alternative pathways.</td>
<td>Ensuring time on task.</td>
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<td>Equal emphasis on academic outcomes and pastoral well being.</td>
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<td>Orderly focused environment.</td>
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In summary, many of the elements of sound instructional leadership identified by Frost (2009) and Southworth (2005) are highlighted in this chapter. The schools in the current study were strongly committed to student learning, teacher learning, organisational learning and the development of learning networks. They also had a deep sense of internal and external accountability. Promotion of a positive school learning climate was also clearly evident (Hallinger, 2003). The schools in the current study were led by men and woman who also understood the need for defining a mission and vision and developing leadership teams who worked well with each other in articulating and sustaining the vision. On many levels, their leadership was also transformational. Leaders were focused on setting directions, building a shared vision, developing people and building collaborative cultures (Leithwood, 2010). All three leadership groups endeavoured to empower others, utilising the strengths of the leadership group rather than relying on charismatic individuals. It was clear that distributed leadership was at work (Harris, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Spillane, 2006, 2009; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane & Healey, 2010). The voices of teachers, students and parents who will be discussed in the forthcoming chapters may also have more to contribute in this regard.

Given the factors attributed to the success of these high performing schools, it becomes clear that leadership is complex, demanding many skills. As such, it would be unwise to think that a singular approach or model would ever suit the complexity of contemporary secondary schooling. Although clearly recognising the influence of instructional leadership in the current study, the researcher would contest the findings of Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) who argued that instructional leadership had three to four times as great an influence as transformational leadership on student outcomes. At the very least a blended model of leadership might better describe the behaviours of leaders in the schools within this study.
CHAPTER FIVE

PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Perceptions of teachers: Introduction

Teacher focus group interviews explored questions around the influence of content knowledge, teaching strategies, planning, assessment, feedback and affective qualities of expert teachers on student achievement. In addition, time and again teachers in the classroom added yet another layer of commentary about the importance of cultural factors that contributed to the academic tone of the school and its influence on student achievement. The interaction of teachers in the context of the focus groups justified its inclusion as a tool within an IPA methodology and this will be referred to in the course of this chapter. Where teachers names have been used pseudonyms have been provided. The key themes relating to teachers’ perceptions of factors that contributed to their successful teaching practices are explored in detail in what follows.

5.2 Content Knowledge

I know my stuff, and I therefore teach by instinct...if we don’t (know content) students don’t respect us (Teacher, School F).

You have to have knowledge of the content. They (students) have to have confidence in you, but that also comes with the relationship (Teacher, School E).

Content knowledge is a key element, the way you are seen to value your subject shows as well. They respect you, because they see that you see the subject as important (Teacher, School G).

As an icebreaker, at the start of each interview in every school, teachers were asked to briefly reflect on what were the major influences in their success as effective teachers in the tertiary examination context. Reflections concerning content knowledge were instinctually the first to arise and the responses above are emblematic of the commentary and supported the survey statement “thorough content knowledge on the part of the teacher is essential in helping students achieve success” which had a mean score of 4.68. Teachers’ perceptions in Schools F, G
and E above, supported the findings of Dinham (2008) who found that teachers’ orientation to their subject had a strong influence on student achievement, this included content knowledge and love of the subject matter. Hattie (2003) argued that content knowledge *per se* does not have a high impact on student achievement “it is what teachers know, do and care about which is very powerful” (p. 1-2). This is exemplified in teachers’ reflections, where they argued that content knowledge on the part of the teacher helps to build trust and respect in the student–teacher relationship. There is no doubt that a major contributor to successful teaching in the perceptions of those interviewed was innate, deep, content knowledge. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) noted that trust, confidence and emotion are sources of renewal for teachers and thus it might be argued that the development of deeper subject knowledge in teachers may well be in itself an agent of renewal for the teacher as well as having an impact on student achievement. The development of confidence and trust between the two parties in the student-teacher relationship reduces anxiety in both parties and is thus an enabling force for improved learning in the student and sustains passion in the teacher.

Teachers commented that expert content knowledge was not surface knowledge. The teachers in the current study confirmed Hattie’s (2003) proposition that expert teachers attended to a deeper representation of their subject:

You have to show your understanding, you cannot give them basic answers, give them the bigger picture, apply information (Teacher, School H).
You have to understand issues, events and trends rather than filling their heads with facts (Teacher, School A).

Teachers were deeply conscious of the need for higher order understandings of analysis and synthesis as well as seeking out subject matter that was current and relevant, as can be seen in the following comment:

I give them real world examples. I teach ICT and I take the kids to the back end of our system, the server room. They need to see what drives everything (Teacher, School E).

Another example from the conversation within the focus group of School E provided further elaboration:
Melissa: yeh if you throw in a story, (well I teach Human Biol) that you’ve heard or read about, something that I’m interested in...then they can make little links and they get interested. I say it should be their favourite subject and I like to think they are coming along.

Researcher: What are the stories you tell?

Melissa: Well I guess in Human Biology there are always medical stories I had an aunt or uncle who had this or did that. You open the door and they (students) enter with their stories and you take it back to the syllabus (Teacher, School E)

This metaphor of opening the door to student stories is a vivid image of a teacher’s capacity to bring a subject to life and weave it into the lives of the students, thereby allowing the students to enter the story of the subject matter. The utilization of relevant knowledge is explicated in Brown and Cocking (2000) who argued that the benefit of working with relevant knowledge was that it allowed students to go beyond information, facilitating thinking in problem representations and providing cognitive roadmaps. Brown and Cocking’s finding was supported by Darling-Hammond (2010) who described intellectually challenging and relevant instruction as a significant factor in ‘turnaround’ urban schools in the United States. Sahlberg (2011) attributed Finland’s success in the OECD PISA tests to a strong emphasis on problem-solving. In terms of cognitive science Brown and Cocking (2000) also argued that relevant knowledge helps students organise information in ways that support memory.

The sharing of relevant ‘stories’ allowed teachers to heighten the experience of the subject and at the same time deepen the relationship between themselves and their students. This point was picked up in the voice of another teacher who made an important distinction:

“What do you teach? Physics? Chemistry? No you don’t, you teach kids, you teach people, and you teach them about physics (Teacher, School A).

The comment of the teacher in School A reflects the research of Hattie (2009) who argued that teacher-student relationships had an effect size of 0.72 on student achievement as opposed to subject matter knowledge per se, which had an effect size of only 0.09. The current study contests Hattie’s finding in relation to subject matter knowledge. Clearly teachers valued content knowledge and would argue it has a much stronger effect on achievement than Hattie’s findings revealed.
However, this finding was tempered by focus group interviews where it was noted that without the development of a relationship built on trust and confidence that recognises the stories of students and allows them to experience real life examples of the knowledge under study, knowledge without the capacity to relate will not suffice. Teachers in the current study were skilled in the way they used knowledge, recognised that it must be combined with relevant, contemporary subject matter and allowed the class to explore and combine students’ stories concerning their own understanding.

The majority of teachers interviewed discussed the requirement of an intricate knowledge of the syllabus which maximized teaching time and ensured that all activities were relevant to syllabus requirements. As one teacher put it:

(content knowledge)... must be complemented by methodical, careful, effective focus on the curriculum (Teacher, School I).

Such attention to the curriculum did not limit the scope of teachers work. In School F, a discussion took place with teachers, who were working with students focused on international curriculum, one applying to Oxford and another applying to the ‘Ivy League’ universities in the USA. Helping these students come to terms with demanding entrance exams in the international arena was an educative professional development experience for those involved. The researcher was taken aback by the many hours spent after school working with these students to help them reach their goal, a common feature across all schools in the current study. One student is now studying at St Andrews University in Scotland having been offered a place at Oxford, while another is studying at Columbia University in New York having been offered a place at Princeton. The work on this international curriculum was done in addition to the teacher’s high quality work on the local curriculum. The following comments are illustrative of this ethic:

**David**: I spent three days trying to get my head around the entrance exam to Oxford, once I did, we then spent a huge amount of time working with the student after school and in free periods.

**Samantha**: ....yeh but we do this for all students, if you come here at 7.30 in the morning you will see extra classes going on, mornings or afternoons, teachers care... (Teachers, School F).
These teachers were animated as they discussed the need to challenge and work with their brightest students to excel and reach their potential as well as focusing on students who may have been struggling academically. A teacher in School B, affirmed the usefulness of other international syllabus materials:

I scoured the UK syllabus materials in science to supplement the work I was doing with my Chemistry students, something different and useful... (Teacher, School E).

Just as leaders in these schools were outward looking, so were the teachers. They accepted challenges to broaden knowledge and engage with external resources, as one teacher in School C noted; “we are hunters and gatherers”. A teacher in School G, made an astute and humble observation:

You cannot know everything and you need to be able to admit it, but you have to be able to direct them to the knowledge (Teacher, School G).

The level of animation with which teachers described their work cannot be accounted for in any transcribed data. The pitch of their voice, the interplay with their peers in dialogue, the sparkle and fondness in their facial expression as they recalled students, certainly justified the use of focus group interviews. Such animation required the researcher to document a major theme across all data in the nine schools, the level of enthusiasm with which teachers embraced their vocation.

5.3 Passion and Enthusiasm.

While a great majority of teachers spoke of the need for content knowledge they equally spoke about the need for enthusiasm and passion, as suggested by the following:

I just love it; it’s the best job in the world (Teacher, School H).
You have to be passionate and demonstrate this to students, in lower school enthusiasm is so important (Teacher, School H).
I’m enthusiastic and expect students to be enthusiastic (Teacher, School A).

The Likert survey used to inform the construction of semi-structured interview questions revealed a mean score of 4.69 (the highest score on the scale) for the
statement “passion and enthusiasm for your subject is vital for student success”. This was supported in the language of teachers in the focus groups, enthusiasm, passion, care, love of the subject, were common words and phrases in their discourse. Studies by Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, and Guay, 2008; Day, 2007; Dinham, 2008; and Hattie, 2003, 2009, all confirmed the importance of teachers’ capacity to attend to affective attributes such as enthusiasm and passion as powerful contributors to student learning and motivation. Fried (1995) argued that passion and enthusiasm are at the heart of what teaching is or should be about.

Not only did teachers ‘know’ their subject but they ‘loved’ it and they wanted to convey that love of the subject to their students. A caveat though, was that enthusiasm and passion could not make up for a ‘lack’ of knowledge. Day (2007) supported this finding in that he defined a passion for teaching as the combination of emotional engagement and intellectual rigour. Teachers in focus groups agreed:

**Tom**: ...the degree of enthusiasm is hugely important
**Melissa**: enthusiasm... amazing
**Tom**: ...as well as knowledge of the subject matter
**Debra**: You have to enjoy your area
**Melissa**: You need that, to me it’s one of the key things that separate...I don’t know what other teachers think, but for me it’s enthusiasm. If you’re enthusiastic they will go with you (Teachers, School E).

The commitment, enthusiasm, passion and level of care exhibited by teachers in the current study were extraordinary, yet teachers accepted it as the norm. They did so because student well-being was at the centre of everything they did in their professional life. This can be seen in the comments below:

**David**: I don’t think we do anything out of the ordinary, I’m just prepared to...if a kid says to you I don’t get this, can I see you at lunch, you just go alright. If that’s out of the ordinary I don’t know... you give...you give 100% and your prepared to go the extra distance to get the result.
**Catherine**: and genuine concern, most teachers here care (Teachers, School F).
Staff here are often back after school working with kids or early morning (Teacher School, H)
A lot of staff do a lot of things after school. It started with one staff member volunteering to take maths classes after school. Other departments soon followed. (Teacher, School C).

**Jan:** We run our Gold Medal program after school for identified academically talented students. It works in sports so why not academics?

**Donna:** Yes and we’ve got Wednesday afternoons where we provide extra tutorials for all students across a variety of subjects with staff on roster. These tutorials are all voluntary on the part of teachers and students. (Teachers, School D).

While this level of enthusiasm and care is laudable, researchers (Everall & Paulson, 2004; Day, 2007; Hargraves & Fink, 2006; Hochschild, 1983; Mathieu, 2007; Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011) caution against burnout from the degree of emotional labour that is required in professions such as teaching. Hargraves and Fink (2006) cite emotion as an indispensable source of human energy. There is, however, a clear risk that teachers might succumb to compassion fatigue, a common phenomenon in the caring professions (Mathieu, 2007). Leaders in schools need to be very conscious of this and look for ways to make the work of teachers sustainable. As one teacher in School F reflected:

> there are few layers of bureaucracy here, you’re trusted, you can get on with the job, it reduces the stress.

Teachers’ relationships with their peers were also sustaining and the camaraderie of the subject department was cited as a strong bonding and supportive factor in teachers’ work. This confirmed the views of heads of subject departments in earlier findings and will be discussed further under the heading of teachers’ perceptions of culture in the school. Some teachers did note that they required positive feedback and acknowledgement for their work, to feel appreciated and affirmed. This should be seen as an important strategy for leaders to consider in their quest to sustain the emotional labour of their teachers. An illustrative example of this sustaining behaviour was evident in the following comment,

> At staff briefings there is a lot of thanks and acknowledgement for what you do, much more so than at other schools I have worked in. (Teacher, School C).
Teachers spoke positively of the effects of such affirmation. The human need for acknowledgement is as necessary for teachers as it is for students (Maslow, 1968).

While content knowledge and affective attributes were seen as significant factors in the repertoire of teachers in these high achieving schools, their range of pedagogical approaches was also a key focus of the current study.

5.4 Teachers’ perceptions concerning effective teaching strategies

5.4.1 Direct instruction, whole class discussion and collaborative learning.

Teachers were asked to reflect on the various strategies and approaches they used with their Year 11 and Year 12 classes. For those concentrated in upper school, a greater emphasis on direct instruction and teacher-led whole class discussion was favoured over collaborative learning approaches, although there was arguably a real attempt to use a wide variety of strategies. It should be noted that ‘direct instruction’ as referred to by these teachers should not, as Hattie (2009) cautioned, be confused with “didactic teacher-led talking from the front” (p. 204). ‘Direct Instruction’, as evidenced in teacher focus group discussions, was more akin to the model alluded to by Hattie (2009) which adopts a seven step process of outlining learning intentions, developing success criteria, building engagement, modelling and checking for understanding through class discussion, guided practice, closure and further independent practice (pp. 204-206). It should also be noted that Reynolds (1998) as discussed in the literature review, had found teacher led discussion and monitoring for understanding to be a significant influence on student achievement.

In lower school in the current study, where the curriculum allowed a greater degree of flexibility there was an increased use of collaborative group work and a very strong focus on the development of skills. In upper school, modelling and checking for understanding through whole class discussion was a key feature of teaching strategies. Mathematics was an area where a greater dominance of direct instruction occurred followed by students working individually after they had engaged with teachers modelling approaches to particular problems. Across the nine focus groups, it must be said that teachers consistently reported using a broad array of teaching styles, as one teacher in School I reported, “Good teaching is about variety”.

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5.4.2 Note taking.

Many teachers spoke of the opportunities that present themselves in whole class discussion; teaching moments where there is recognition that the discussion is ‘priceless’ and highly relevant to a major aspect of the syllabus or the exam. One such comment highlighted this view:

At moments in these discussions we have to stop and write notes and points down, you show them the relevance (of the discussion) to the course and the exam (Teacher, School E)

Another teacher reflected on how his school had introduced a study journal devoted to the compilation of relevant notes to help their students in preparation for tests and exams. In this school, a great emphasis was placed on developing students’ study and organisational skills. This was a school with a very low socio-economic cohort where parent support with study skills and homework was minimal. The school went to great lengths to compensate for this lack of support by providing a homework club after school, with many teachers volunteering their time to attend. Teachers spoke of the need for specificity in their direction to students in note-taking, for example:

I give the kids fairly clear precise notes so they have something concrete to go by. There are times when I say you might need to add something yourself here, but I’m usually quite specific about what I want them to write down (Teacher, School H).

Reflections concerning the usefulness of note taking were very common in the majority of discussions about teaching strategies across the nine schools in the study. This finding confirms aspects of the literature on teaching approaches that affect student achievement. Marzano (2003) specifically referred to the effect size of summarizing and note taking \((d = 1.00)\). Kobayashi (2006) argued that effect sizes were higher when students were given instructors’ notes to work from \((d = 0.82)\). Hattie’s (2009) study found a significant effect size \((d = 0.59)\) for study skills which included note taking. In the current study, teachers spoke predominantly of a blended approach, utilising teachers’ notes and requiring students to build their own, with guided instruction. Teachers spoke of the usefulness of students writing their own notes because it encouraged active listening. Individual note-taking was also supplemented by students compiling study notes together in groups broadening and sharing resources.
5.4.3 Meta–cognition.

Broader meta-cognitive strategies were common in teachers’ perceptions related to student achievement. A number of year 11 and 12 teachers spoke of the need to focus on ‘how to learn’ strategies, for example:

Kids need to ask, what do I need to know and how can I learn it? (Teacher, School E).

Meta-cognitive strategies were deemed important but they were very contextually based within individual subjects and had a direct relationship to the syllabus. For example, English teachers spoke of the notion of pre-reading as an important strategy that might precede a discussion of a text in the English class. Maths teachers spoke of re-capping the logic of steps in approaching a problem at the start of a lesson before engaging with the next step in the process of tackling a higher order problem. Teachers also spoke of the use of mind maps, PMI and brainstorming activities as commonly used strategies. Lavery (2008) noted that such exercises are crucial at the forethought phase of learning.

In one of the boys’ schools, teachers spoke of the need to get boys to write:

Boys need to write something every day. Boys need to write first then articulate. They find it hard to articulate first (Teacher, School I).

Literacy skills were emphasised strongly in the two boys’ schools in the study. They were also recognised as fundamental elements of academic success in the majority of the schools in the current study. The literature (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Hawkes, 2001) identifies concerns with an increasingly ‘feminised’ curriculum requiring far greater literacy skills in subjects that would be traditionally taken by boys, particularly the maths and sciences. Noting the underperformance of boys compared with girls in literacy tests and other assessments (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002), boys schools in the current study were mindful of strategies that encouraged reading and writing as fundamental skills.

A greater number of teachers spoke of the importance of recognising students’ knowledge and expertise. An illustrative example is provided:
I utilise kids, some are exceptional at explaining a concept. They use the language of their peers (Teacher, School G).

The use of students in the explanation of concepts also reinforces another commonly reported technique in the study, self-verbalisation. Hattie (2009) found that self-verbalisation/self-questioning had an effect size of \( d = 0.64 \) on student academic achievement. Teachers were very diligent in requiring students to articulate and express understanding particularly in whole class discussion. This approach was taken further, with the majority of the schools instituting peer-tutoring programs and peer study groups after school. Teachers reiterated their leaders’ acknowledgement of the impact these groups had on student achievement.

5.5 Curriculum Design.

Echoing earlier comments from all other focus groups; teachers placed great store in the importance of careful curriculum design, organised planning, quality assessment and feedback. Teachers reiterated the need for years 7-10 to be sequenced as clear building blocks, or scaffolded years, for the development of essential skills. Darling-Hammond (2010), in a study of high achieving urban high schools in the United States, noted that a key element of instruction in such schools was the employment of careful scaffolding. Such scaffolding gave the curriculum a sense of coherence and taught core skills in the earlier years of high school that aided more complex learning in the upper years. Teachers supported this notion:

**Deb:** I suppose scaffolding learning is very important. When we get them in year 12 they have to have the skills and we are preparing those skills in year 11, and in year 10 we are providing the skills for year 11 and so on. And giving them expectations, telling them how to succeed, they need to know what they have to be able to do.

**Melissa:** Yes for me it is also about setting the bar when you are teaching, having high expectations of them but also for myself (Teachers, School E).

Teachers aligned the necessity for scaffolding skills with the requirement to set high expectations in the early years of the high school experience, for example:

We do look at assessments in years 7-10 as building blocks for years 11 and 12. We need to develop skills in lower school so that suddenly the
complexity of year 11 and 12 does not seem so overwhelming. You cannot afford to make lower school courses too easy because you are making a rod for your own back. We are always reviewing lower school curriculum to see how we can improve the preparation for year 11 and 12 but still keeping the fun in place (Teacher, School E).

Years 7, 8 and 9 have a more creative approach but the bones of the curriculum have the TEE in mind so assessment types have to build the skills needed for assessment in year 11 and 12. We can teach to that end point but still be as creative and as interesting as possible (Teacher, School F).

In reflecting on the need for a scaffolded curriculum a majority of teachers also spoke of the importance of teaching across grades 7-12.

Year 7-11 builds the foundation for year 12 and I enjoy teaching in the lower school so I can engage kids in science, help them enjoy science and let them see it is a dynamic subject. I want to build their understanding of scientific method, predictions, hypothesis and reasoning (Teacher, School H).

Another teacher in School H spoke of a different kind of scaffolding:

You need to develop a love of learning in years 7-9, it all starts there.

While there was much thought and reflection about the process of curriculum design, there was again evidence of the discussion returning to instructional strategies related to organisation and relational qualities in the management of students. In addition, the provision of foundational skills was seen as a tool to develop resilience in the face of high expectations. Scaffolding a ‘love’ of learning was also equally as important as scaffolding skills.

5.6 Organisation, structure and an orderly environment

A significant number of teachers spoke of the need to be highly organised and structured in their approach to teaching, for example:
With boys you need to be structured and organised, boys need structures (Teacher, School I).
I am highly organised, even though I have been teaching a long time, I am very organised in my lesson planning (Teacher, School H).
I have a well kept lesson book, always have a plan for every lesson (Teacher School, H).

In the eyes of these teachers, organisation and planning was closely linked to the provision of order and structure which helped create an environment conducive to learning. Teachers also spoke of the schools’ efforts to create a culture focused on learning with high expectations regarding behaviour. These views accorded with the commentary of executive leaders and heads of subject departments. Comments included:

You have to have clear expectations, fairness and a sense of humour. (Teacher, School E).
We have to be consistent with boys, they need to know your expectations, they need routines and boundaries (Teacher, school I).
**Michael:** Classroom management needs to be tight
**Jane:** But it always depends on the relationships you have with the kids
**Peter:** Yes the relationship you have with them is crucial, when you gel with the class it really affects the tone (Teachers, School C).

The last comment, from teachers in School C, reflects the capacity of the focus group discussion to draw out other elements of the above response. Jane’s interjection concerning relationships took Michael’s comment further and invited the corroboration from Peter. Responses like this further supported the use of focus groups in an IPA study. School C had been labelled as ‘feral’ by its principal when he first arrived to take up his appointment. However, similar to other schools in the study, an emphasis on structure, order, high expectations and strong relationships helped turn this school around and for many other schools was a key part in the achievement of high academic results. This finding also confirmed the literature, which indicated that high expectations, an orderly environment and strong teacher-student relationships influenced student achievement (Dinham, 2008; Kimber & Marshall, 2009; Marzano, 2003; Ofsted, 2009; Shields & Miles, 2008; Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2009).
While attention to scaffolded curriculum design, high expectations, relationships and an orderly environment were clearly perceived by teachers as important factors in their students’ achievement, teachers also spoke about the equally important influence of quality assessment types and regular timely feedback.

5.7 Assessment types.

Teachers employed a broad array of assessment types in lower school and upper school but they were conscious of the need to expose students to assessments that were found in the external exams. Illustrative commentary is provided:

It would be irresponsible of me to give multi choice tests just because they may be easy to mark when that assessment type does not appear in the exam, it would be a waste of time for my students (Teacher, School I).

I need to build analytical skills and inquiry skills in lower school because that is what the exam demands in year 12 but at the same time we utilize extended projects and external academic competitions to broaden their knowledge (Teacher, School F).

Our assessments in Year 12 are strongly focused on “November” (the month of the tertiary entrance exams). Practise and routine is very important (Teacher, School F).

At the end of the day it would be negligent of me not to give them thorough practise and experience in these assessment types and they are all about higher order thinking not lower order, setting assessments at the appropriate level is also important (Teacher, School E).

Such commentary strongly supports Dinham (2008) who also found, in his study of high achieving secondary schools in NSW, that assignments replicating questions and time scales found in external exams were very beneficial. Dufour and Marzano (2011) and Marzano (2003) also support such a finding arguing that ‘curriculum-sensitive’ assessment and opportunity to learn was conducive to high achievement.

Many teachers spoke of their efforts to improve literacy in their subject, and across the curriculum. In particular, writing skills were high on the agenda as students needed to meet the demands of sophisticated questions in TEE exam papers requiring well developed analytical skills and expository writing. This was a very strong focus in the two boys’ schools that took part in the study, where typically,
boys are out-performed by girls on assessments requiring high literacy skills. School C ran after school seminars and essay writing workshops for students.

We get our students to do a lot of writing. They need to practise responses to open ended exam questions that require well constructed essays (Teacher, School C).

School C had the highest mean score for the Tertiary Entrance exam in English across all Catholic schools in the state in 2010.

5.8 Regular timely feedback.

All teachers reinforced that regular assessment and timely detailed feedback was crucial for student success in the tertiary exam context.

I’m the feedback queen... I model answers in class and then save them for students to access any time on our ICT network. I am very transparent with assessments; students know where every mark has come from (Teacher, School E).

This was finding was complemented by the survey item “regular feedback to students is necessary” with a mean score of 4.54 on the five point scale.

A number of teachers spoke of the use of students’ exemplary answers (provided with their permission) and how useful they were in helping peers learn from each other. Equally, others spoke with great enthusiasm about self-evaluation techniques and their role in learning.

I actually read a paper about how often students only go to the grade or mark and do not engage enough with the comment. Self evaluation and reflection techniques are very important. I ask them to write a reflection about my comments and the mark and I collect it. I then ask them to re-read the feedback before attempting the next assessment where the skills may be similar. (Teacher, School E).

Students need to see the best answers, the ideal answers (Teacher, School H).
Teachers noted that students wanted feedback and should receive it within a minimum time frame for it to be relevant.

At this school if you have a test in period 1 students want feedback by recess (Teacher, School I)

**Jan:** Feedback needs to be very regular. They know exactly where they are sitting on every assessment and overall.

**John:** The kids demand it, they need to know. How am I going? Where am I at? They are very keen! Turnaround of marking needs to be in a reasonable time frame. (Teachers, School D).

The last comment by John in School D clearly supports Hattie (2012), who contended that feedback is concerned with three questions. “Where am I going? How am I going there? Where to next?” (p. 116). Another teacher commented on the need for regular assessment and feedback pointing out that, “if you did not assess boys would not learn ... you do assessment for learning, it is a very effective teaching strategy (Teacher, School I).

A number of teachers spoke about the need for clear, specific feedback that related to how students might apply the feedback in future assessments and more specifically, the end of year exam.

We give detailed feedback and we gear feedback towards the TEE exam. The feedback relates to how the student would approach this task in the examination and what would be expected of you in the examination (Teacher, School C).

The requirement for specificity was also illustrated in the comment below utilising rubrics:

In English we have a very structured rubric and a space for comments and it is pretty much expected by the HOD that you will fill it (Teacher, School A).

While many teachers spoke of the time-consuming nature of assessment and feedback, the great majority confirmed the findings of the literature, namely, that quality assessment and timely feedback had a significant effect on student achievement (Creemers, 1994; Hattie, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012; Hattie & Timperley,
Teachers in the current study consistently spoke of thoughtful assessment design that related to high-order skills of inquiry, investigation, analysis and synthesis. Their commentary reflected a pragmatism that feedback must be clear and specifically oriented in order for students to master skills required at a later date in the tertiary entrance exam context. The majority of teachers recognised that assessment and feedback was never undertaken in a vacuum, rather that it is an act of teaching and learning, equally powerful for the student and the teacher: “you do assessments to learn” (Teacher, School I). The researcher found that for many teachers, assessment was future-focused, an integral cog in a future-oriented goal.

5.9 Professional Development.

Leaders interviewed in the current study all confirmed the necessity of providing and promoting professional development. The promotion of professional development is cited in the literature on effective schools and school improvement as being critical (Darling Hammond, 2010; Dinham, 2008; Frost, 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Jensen, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Southworth, 2005). Teachers in the current study confirmed its importance.

There were two major types of professional development experiences that dominated the conversations of teachers: formal external professional development opportunities and ‘in-house’, ‘whole school’ and departmental professional development. External opportunities valued by teachers were tertiary entrance exam marking, consensus network meetings and subject specific curriculum meetings. The in-house professional development opportunities were both formal and informal experiences, equally worthwhile in the eyes of the participants.

5.9.1 Formal external professional development.

In the context of the current study’s focus on successful teaching in the tertiary entrance exam context, the large majority of teachers noted that the most useful professional development they had experienced was the opportunity to be contracted to mark the external public exams. In Western Australia, the tertiary entrance exams are marked by a range of experienced teachers, along with university academics and curriculum consultants from the school systems who apply to mark the exams. Darling-Hammond (2010), citing similar Australian, English and Swedish examples, argues that this process is best practice professional
development for teachers. An experience such as this ensures teachers derive a number of very useful skills to implement in the classroom, as is evidenced by the following:

Through TEE marking you develop contacts and get a more nuanced understanding of the course (Teacher, School I).

The really good experience is the one you can apply. I have been a TEE marker for 9 years it is the best PD you can get. I can share what I learn there with my students. It helps you distinguish between what needs to be done, what is to be avoided and what is rewarded. (Teacher, School C).

I feed off colleagues who have done TEE marking, it helps you get a sense of the standard required (Teacher, School F).

Tertiary entrance exam (TEE) marking enhanced teachers’ understanding of the syllabus and provided maximum benefit to students in the eyes of a large number of teachers. A significant advantage to school departments was the capacity of such experiences by one individual to furnish the department with a rich understanding of assessment to enhance the pedagogy of colleagues. TEE marking gave a clearer understanding of standards so that internal assessment in the school was aligned with State norms and students were not disadvantaged in statistical scaling and moderation. One teacher spoke about how his experience had even given him ‘practical’ ideas related to the way students could ‘lay out’ their responses in the exam context, so that they were able to be easily read by examiners marking hundreds of papers.

Attending School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) assessment and moderation meetings was also seen as essential. These were external meetings where teachers of specific subjects met, bringing with them student portfolios for comparison with colleagues from other schools. Each teacher reviewed the files of their peers and discussed the grades that had been assigned to students’ work. This process enhanced moderation of the formative assessments in school and provided teachers with the opportunity to compare programs and take away new approaches to teaching a topic. As one teacher noted,

Networking with colleagues outside of the system is crucial. You need to mix with teachers from all systems and sectors in the State (Teacher, School F).
The teachers echoed the commentary of their principals and middle managers. They too appreciated the need to be outward looking and were conscious that while they belonged to the Catholic education system they saw benefits in liaising with colleagues across the state in other systems. The acknowledgement of the powerful influence of external professional connections supports the views of Hargraves and Fink (2006) and Leithwood (2010) who argued that building collaborative cultures and connecting the school to its wider environment are key features of transformational leadership at work in effective and improving schools. Fullan (2005) also argued that lateral capacity building through networks is a key element of sustainability as it has the capacity to re-energise and enthuse practice through fresh professional conversations and new lenses.

While teachers in the current study spoke more often about cross-sectoral professional development experiences, they also recognised the benefits of network meetings that were organised for them by the CEOWA. These were opportunities to come together with colleagues teaching the same subject in other Catholic schools across the state. They were regarded as beneficial because they enabled teachers to share pedagogical practice in the subject discipline, hear from experts in the field and gain further access to knowledge about assessment practices, particularly issues related to moderation and scaling in the State exams. The CEOWA also provided teachers with detailed statistical feedback on their school’s individual subject performance in State exams. This allowed teachers in the semi-structured interview to reflect on how statistical knowledge of student performance influenced curriculum design. As one teacher volunteered:

Well, in History in the ‘document analysis’ our average in the four standing questions was 17 or 18 while the state average was 13. The reason it is so high is that in years past when we analysed the data on our school’s performance it was our student’s weakest area so we turned a weakness into a strength. We started to focus more on analysis of historical documents in the lower school curriculum at years 9 and 10 so by the time they got into year 11 and 12... well they know, they know what the question is asking and how to answer it when they were presented with these analytical questions (Teacher, School F).

Interestingly, leaders in the same school had spoken passionately about the need to be engaged with data on student achievement and had spoken about the
responsibility that the school has to ‘answer’ the data. The alignment between leaders and teachers in School F, concerning the analysis of data, strongly supports the literature’s recognition of the need for accountability and shared leadership (Frost, 2009) as well as supporting Timperley’s (2010) call for data-informed instruction. The alignment between leaders and teachers views on the use of data also provides a clear picture of what Spillane (2010) described as the leader-plus aspect of distributed leadership where a reciprocity and interdependence characterises the complex relationships in schools and where groups and individuals work collectively towards the common goal of instructional effectiveness.

In the analysis of the conversations about external professional development, the researcher was struck by the value of the semi-structured focus group within the IPA study. Teachers from School D provided a useful illustration:

**Erin:** I get together with a teacher at XXXX (another Catholic high school in Perth). We met at our network meeting. We set assessments together because we only have the one class in this subject. That way we get a better benchmark in our assessment.

**Jan:** Yeh cross curricular as well. I often talk to teachers in similar areas for example I teach human biology so I ask Steve how particular students are going in maths because the skills intersect. I also do this with Phys Ed – I think this sort of communication benefits the kids.

**Donna:** Yeh Gavin and I do that between English and Media and we are programming together for a new course next year, sharing resources making sure there is no overlap of assessments.

As discussed in the methods chapter, while a purist IPA study would insist on individual semi-structured interviews, the flow of the conversation in the focus group allowed for a broader, and perhaps in this instance richer, portrayal of the lived experience of professional interaction. Jan’s intervention takes the discussion to another example to describe the local cross-departmental conversations that can be professionally enriching. This commentary was a catalyst for Donna to contribute her recollection of her relationship with Gavin who belongs to another faculty, thus yet again highlighting another element of the fruitfulness of collegial conversations both externally and internally. In the space of these three contributions, assessment and benchmarking, pastoral care, personal progress of students and cross-curricular programming had been dialogued. Had these teachers been interviewed individually, one wonders whether the richness of these observations would have been unearthed. The analysis of this conversation might well be what Crotty (2010) described as the hermeneutic act and “the revelatory aspect of ‘phenomenological
seeing’ whereby existential structures and then Being itself come into view” (p. 96). The researcher would also argue that the semi-structured interview honours a ‘Weberian’ view of the phenomenon under study, that is, “it cannot be analyzed sociologically without consideration of the nature of the social relationship in which it was perpetrated” (Tucker, 1965, p. 159). The dialogue of Erin, Jan and Donna in an empty classroom between teaching periods captures that very social relationship. The discourse is an illustrative justification for the use of semi-structured interviews within an interpretivist, phenomenological analysis.

A few teachers in the current study had also been members of State subject committees that wrote the course syllabus, reviewed teacher feedback and communicated to teachers concerning any changes that might be required. Such endeavour kept them at the cutting edge of their subject and proved to be of benefit to colleagues and students alike. Others spoke of the benefits of sitting on examination panels. In WA, State examination panels have teacher representation as well as academics from universities. Such membership means that the teacher could not teach the course in the given year they wrote the exam. However, after their term was completed, the experience of being an examiner contributed to their in-depth understanding of the syllabus and was clearly a benefit to their colleagues and students. In addition, such experiences enriched their networks with colleagues from other teaching sectors and universities. Darling-Hammond (2010) spoke of the need for teachers to have opportunities to engage with consultants, researchers and academics in their discipline, so that their knowledge could be deepened and networks broadened. External professional development opportunities similar to those outlined above allowed for such enrichment and it might be argued that it enhanced the professional lives of all concerned; academics, consultants and teachers alike. In particular, teachers in the one regional school in the study spoke of the absolute necessity of getting out of their relatively comfortable but isolated country community to access the professional development available in the city. This was seen as important for the purpose of benchmarking standards and accessing contemporary professional development.

5.9.2 Formal internal professional development.

External professional development was complemented by a variety of formal and informal professional development opportunities in the schools surveyed in the current study. School D had embraced the philosophy of teacher-designed schools
(Martin, 2008), meaning, the school engaged outside facilitation to build on their understanding of the philosophy which argues change should be teacher driven and led. The staff decided that they would focus on the following areas over a three year period:

1) Jesus as a Person  
2) Excellence in Teaching Practice  
3) Staff Accountability  
4) Pastoral Care in the School  
5) Positive School Image  

Staff volunteered to participate in groups that would develop action plans with key goals to facilitate understanding and improvement in each of the six targeted areas. Teachers researched the topic, shared their research, defined achievable goals and disseminated their findings to the whole staff. As a Catholic school, the first topic of ‘Jesus as a person’ placed an emphasis on how the school could live out Gospel values on a day-to-day basis, thus enhancing the Catholic identity of the school. The other five topics responded to teachers’ perceived needs in the school. This resulted in a number of significant initiatives being implemented, with these being largely teacher led and significantly supported by the senior leadership group. Teachers spoke about the influence of these initiatives on their practice, particularly mentoring.

Our involvement in ‘teacher designed schools’ has been important, especially mentoring. It has enabled us to experience peer mentoring, to get feedback on our teaching and just have conversations with your colleagues (Teacher, school D).

Jensen (2012) noted that a feature of the highest performing school systems in the OECD PISA testing was their attention to peer mentoring and feedback as well as teachers actively engaged in research. This was particularly strong in the school systems of Shanghai, Singapore and Korea and arguably also evidenced in School D in Western Australia. Dinham (2007) argued that in his study of high performing secondary schools in NSW there was evidence of professional capacity, common purpose, collaboration and teacher learning. Such collegiality was clearly evident in the current study and through the process of self evaluation adopted in School D, there was a high level of what Darling-Hammond (2010) and Salhberg (2011) referred to as intelligent accountability, namely, an accountability not driven solely...
by external inspection but rather more by introspection. Mulford and Silins' (2011) observation is again confirmed that the higher the levels of accountability and evaluation mechanisms in a school, the higher the student outcomes.

As mentioned earlier, teachers reported the influence of a structured environment as having a strong influence on student achievement. School's C and G had engaged external consultants to work with their teaching staff to improve practical elements of teacher classroom management and whole of school behaviour management. Such processes enabled the schools to develop a more orderly environment and teachers spoke about the improvement this had made to the tone of the school. In fact it was also a feature of teachers’ discussions in other schools, as one teacher indicated:

I came from a very different type of school to School E. The big difference I found is that you can actually teach here (Teacher, School E).

The literature, (Dinham, 2008; Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2009; Ofsted, 2009) supports the need for a safe and orderly environment as a pre-requisite for effective teaching. Teachers in the current study confirmed the findings in the literature. Similar findings, as has already been noted, were confirmed by principals, deputy principals and heads of department regarding the importance of an orderly environment.

5.9.3 Informal internal professional development.

Through the course of the various semi-structured interviews it became clear that a great deal of ‘informal’ professional development occurred in the schools surveyed. Such informal professional development was evidenced in teachers recollecting the importance of conversations of a professional nature in their departmental offices, either about programming, assessment, successful practice, what did not work, and sharing insights about students they were teaching. Such observations are explored in the following commentary:

We talk about our work, our subject constantly (English teacher, School F).
I learn a lot from Dave, the way he has designed his course in PE, I took a lot of the principles in his programming and applied them (Teacher, school I).
Sharing the same office is a huge help. We are often discussing what we are doing, how things went (Teacher, School H).

Half of what I have learned as a teacher I have learned from Bronwen (Teacher, school A).

The built environment seemed to have a positive impact on informal professional learning, in that being located together in one office fostered professional conversation. Heads of subject departments had commented on this earlier and teachers supported their views. Many teachers spoke of the role of experienced teachers mentoring younger teachers in casual but professional conversations. This informal context was also often led by the head of department and teachers acknowledged their valuable role.

Our department is very important to us. The support you get from your HOD is very important. You need to be able to work with him or her. Working together and getting support from colleagues rather than being alone and flying solo is vital. The HOD needs to develop conversations (Teacher, School E).

The collaborative culture of the department was also broadly reflected at the macro level of the school across a number of dimensions: the relationship between the principal and deputies, the executive leadership and middle management, leaders and teachers, leaders and students. One of the most significant relationships was that established between teachers and parents.

5.10 Teachers’ perceptions of the role of parents.

Teachers recognised the importance of the relationship with parents as partners in their child’s learning. Teachers, for the most part, were appreciative of parental support and sensitive to their needs. Examples of that sentiment follow:

Parents are a part of that three way partnership; kids do not get away with much because parents are supportive (Teacher, School H).

Parents are very supportive; parents are part of community (Teacher, School B).
Teachers also recognised the myriad communication strategies that their schools engaged to stay in contact with parents: newsletters, information nights, booklets on subject selection, and counselling advice for university entrance, in addition to formal occasions to discuss student progress. The need to keep parents apprised of processes in high school was noted by one teacher in School H:

Sometimes parents are lost when students get to high school and do not know how to deal with it. Sometimes there is conflict with the aspiration parents have for their children and the reality of the student performance. They have to be given guidance here.

This was strongly supported by the likert survey item “counselling of students in subject choice is vital” with a mean score of 4.60 across all nine schools.

This was a comment that recognised what Bryk and Schneider (2002) had referred to as parental vulnerability. The intuition to recognise such vulnerability, and the attempt to reduce it, was clear evidence of ‘care’, as alluded to by Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993). Expressions of care are also evidenced in attempts to communicate with those parents who might sometimes feel that they are merely observers of their children’s journey through school.

Teachers were clearly cognizant of the need parents have for communication. An indicative comment is provided:

They like it when you ring them up. You get the feeling they are going to act on the conversation (Teacher, School C).

This comment would hearten the leaders and heads of subject departments who had earlier so strongly reiterated the need for teachers to communicate with parents.

Conversely, teachers in school D expressed another side of the teacher-parent relationship:

Jan: You can get abused or you can get total support. You get the full range here just like most schools.

Ciaran: Most parents want to come in at parent teacher nights whether we have requested them to or not. So generally parents are supportive.
Jan: We do spend a lot of our time that we could be marking or planning, instead we spend it chasing parents and meeting parents but it is important. I found if I have repeatedly requested to speak to a parent about their child’s progress and they do not accept the invitation then I say that is on me now. That child becomes my responsibility.

Jan’s first observation elicits the full spectrum of parental responses but it was her last comment in the discussion that said much more about the cultural attitudes in place in the school. She did not give up on the student because the relationship with the parents had broken down. This was a clear acceptance of an intrinsic accountability that said much about this teacher’s acknowledgement of her ethical responsibility to the student. While the personal trust between parents and teachers that Bryk and Schneider (2002) alluded to as being so fundamental might be damaged here, the teacher had recognised that the relationship with the student ought not to be broken.

Teachers’ constant acknowledgement of the primacy of the relationship with their students placed them in a strong position to comment on how the student body played a role in their school's high academic achievement.

5.11 Teachers’ perceptions of students

Teachers confirmed the commentary of leaders that in nearly all schools, there had been a consistent effort to move the student culture from a casual, indifferent attitude to academic work, to a more focused culture where academic success had become accepted or ‘cool’. The following comments illustrate this cultural shift:

Initially, I felt students just did what they needed to do, not much more, things have changed. Much of that has been driven by the efforts of the leadership team (Teacher, School E).
It wasn’t cool to be a high achiever at one stage, but things have evolved significantly, so kids are pulled along by this, they now want to do the best they can. They are competitive in a good way (Teacher, school H).
Kids push each other along, a lot study together (Teacher, School G).
You appeal to their competitive nature, they are results focused (Teacher, School I).
The peer group is a very important influence on achievement. If there is a culture where it is OK to achieve they will (Teacher, School B).

The majority of teachers recognised that a culture promoting academic success was a pre-requisite for strong results. The comment from the teacher in School H who noted that students can be “pulled along” by a pro-academic culture within their cohort, strongly supported Chen, Dornbusch and Liu’s (2007) observation concerning the positive influence of attitudinal similarity within the peer group. The development of this culture was attended to from the beginning of students’ entry to high school. Healthy competition was also recognised as evident among the student body. Allied to this healthy competition was an acknowledgement that students supported and cared for each other in collaborative study and friendship groups, supporting Fass and Tubman’s (2002) proposition that such peer attachment functions as a protective factor in transitions such as movement from school to university. A key finding of the current study is that both competition and collaboration seemed to be able to co-exist in these high achieving schools.

The acknowledgment of the role of peer support groups as a positive influence on student achievement confirmed the earlier observations of leaders in the current study. Such a finding also reinforced earlier commentary concerning the impact of belonging and connectedness, particularly Stewart’s (2008) finding that association with pro-academic peers develops a broader attachment to the school itself and “to the ideals associated with it” (p. 197). Teachers’ perceptions of the micro-culture among the student cohort and the broader culture of their school offered insights that confirmed the commentary of leaders.

5.12 Teachers perceptions of the culture of the school

A key theme from many conversations with teachers in the focus groups was the theme of culture. On many levels, whether the discussion was centred on subject specific knowledge, pedagogy, or planning and assessment, there were constant references to culture and relationships. Clearly, there was much more to the success of teachers in the study cohort than just their mastery and execution of the technical requirements of their craft.
5.12.1 The teacher–student relationship.

Teachers talked about the more “affective” aspects of their lives as teachers. One example follows:

We are not just about the attainment of results we are about developing the person. (Teacher, School I).

One suspects though, that it was precisely the attention to the development of the whole person that might also have contributed to the attainment of results. These were teachers who knew their students, those ‘at risk’ and those who were ‘exceptional’. Whatever category students belonged to, teachers aimed to help them achieve as well as they could. Another teacher offered this observation:

The students know you care about them and when they know that, they will work for you (Teacher, School F).

Other teachers expressed the importance of personal relationships by noting that:

Interest in the kids is just as important as interest in the subject (Teacher, School A).

Our school is about developing the person rather than just looking for quantitative results (Teacher, School E).

These perceptions were supported by the likert survey statement “building relationships with students is necessary for successful teaching” with a mean score of 4.63 across the 450 teachers who responded.

While academic results were important and the academic program was seen as core business of the school, there was an overriding emphasis on student well being. This theme was portrayed in commentary around community and the sense of belonging that teachers’ sensed students felt. As one teacher observed:

Boys here feel they belong, that engages them as a human person, it inspires them (Teacher, School I).

The comment above confirms the literature (Goodenow, 1991; Rosenberg, Mckeon & Dinero, 1999; Edwards & Mullis, 2001). These authors found that a sense of belonging in the classroom influenced academic success, students’ intrinsic interest
and teachers’ rating of student effort. There can be no doubt that the discourse surrounding care, approachability and quality relationships enhanced student belonging. Many teachers spoke of the need to be approachable, thus implying that the invitation to relate and be open to others was an integral part of their professional outlook.

Shields and Miles (2008) added another dimension to observations concerning belonging. They strongly argued that schools with smaller student numbers had a greater capacity to foster a degree of ‘personalisation’ where students were known by at least one teacher. Some teachers in the current study supported this view because their schools were relatively small in size, while others criticised decisions to increase student enrolment, as can be seen in the following comments:

**Wayne:** You can be more pastoral when your school is smaller. We have 550 students.

**Lisa:** Our real strength is we are not particularly large, so students are well known by staff. Things are done at a very personal level; it makes a huge difference (Teachers, School H)

Our size helps, we are not too big, it really means you know the kids. (Teacher, School C)

Bigger is not better, and I assume it is a business decision. We are now too big and in danger of becoming impersonal, losing our sense of identity (Teacher, School F).

The teacher in School F regretted decisions to increase student enrolments in order to attract increased funding giving the school the capacity to provide facilities at a very high standard. Other teachers in the same focus group commented that having a smaller sub-school, for example, the middle school, and strong house systems and pastoral care groups was an attempt to cater for relationship formation in the face of burgeoning growth, but there was a clear desire to return to a time when the school was moderate in size.

### 5.12.2 Collegial relationships.

A number of the teacher focus groups commented on the general sense of mutual respect teachers had for each other, both within specific departments and across the school as a whole. While secondary schools are at times criticised for
creating “silos” in departments, this was not the case in the experiences of these teachers.

Kids see the rapport between staff and it flows on to teacher student relationships (Teacher, School B).

Another factor in the fostering of collegial relationships was the appreciation of the work of those in leadership roles including heads of department, deputies and principals. Two accounts follow:

Our HOD generates conversations around learning (Teacher, School C).
This school has been built on the three C’s communication, collaboration and consultation; it is part of the fabric. Staff have a sense that they have input into change and are listened to (Teacher, School D).

The latter comment by the teacher in school D strongly supports Mulford’s (2007) assertion that success is more likely where collaboration, trust and a feeling of being valued is evident in professional learning communities.

5.12.3 Culture of excellence and high expectations.
High expectations dominated the discussions of teachers and this in turn created a culture of academic excellence, yet it did not result in schools becoming myopic. One example is provided:

You are allowed to be excellent here, but you are also required to be a man for others, it provides a great balance. We could dominate academic results but it would be at the expense of so many other areas (Teacher, School I).

This comment reflected a dominant view across the nine schools that while academic programs were core business, broader cultural, sporting, spiritual and service learning programs were not to be sacrificed. Many teachers believed the breadth of other programs offered in their schools actually enhanced student connectedness, created school community, contributed to well being and facilitated academic achievement. This view was supported by Edwards and Mullis (2001) who argued that belonging is nurtured when students have experiences that enhance connection, capability and the capacity to contribute.
While there was recognition that engagement in the broader life of the school community was important, a culture that affirmed success and promoted excellence was strongly evident in all schools. In particular, teachers recognised that when the school and its students attained success, opportunity was created. One comment exemplifying this notion follows:

Good results help create a culture shift. Our results have told the staff our kids can do this. We now never say we can't do this because of our kids. The kids start to take pride in the school too (Teacher, School D).

School D had a comparatively lower socio-economic index than others in the study and the reflection above represented an outlook that challenged the context of the school, providing an opportunity to focus on aspirational goals, a feature also identified in the Ofsted (2009) study. Zbar, Kimber and Marshall (2009) also found that pride in the school was a factor of high achieving low socio-economic schools.

5.12.4 Safe and orderly environment.

A majority of teachers spoke about the need for a safe classroom environment and similarly a whole school environment where teachers and students were focused on the business of learning. Purposeful, organised, well structured classrooms were commonplace. This was exemplified in the following comment from one teacher:

This school has an extraordinary level of appropriate behaviour. I have never seen a school yard fight here. It has been built into the culture of the school over a period of time (Teacher, School H).

The establishment of an orderly environment was a dominant feature of the culture across all nine schools, but as has been noted earlier, such order was built through first establishing strong relationships between teachers and students.

5.12.5 Catholic identity.

While not a stated focus of this study, it became apparent that the Catholic identity of the school played a key role in the establishment of a culture of care, generosity and love, and was evident in the language employed by the teachers
surveyed. The contemporary mission of Catholic schools is well captured in the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of WA (2009). An example follows:

God is calling people into relationship today...students need to feel loved by their teachers and by other school staff, just as his disciples felt loved by Jesus (p. 22).

Given that all nine schools in the study were Catholic schools, this should not have been unexpected but it was not an intentional focus. No questions were posed about the specific influence of Catholic identity, rather the focus of the study was on the broader aspects of pedagogy, leadership and general cultural influences.

As indicated in chapter one the researcher has spent a significant amount of time in Catholic schools, therefore in the spirit of reflexivity required in an IPA study he is not quite sure whether the reluctance to pursue specific questions about Catholic identity were driven by a certain self-consciousness or motivated by a desire to be as objective as possible and set the study in a more secular framework. The researcher must interrogate whether the findings related to Catholic identity arise out of an empathy produced by his own lived experience or as observed earlier, the researcher is simply striving to be respectful to the participants expressions’ of their experience. If the latter, he is attempting, to answer Heidegger’s (1962) reminder to “thrust aside our interpretative tendencies” (p. 96) and ‘bracket’ the response. Having noted that, elements of a specific ‘Catholic’ nature did emerge and require the researcher to “inspect these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon under investigation” Denzin (1989, p. 56).

A powerful observation was provided about the culture of one school that had been founded by an order of nuns who still had a convent on site. The teacher remarked that:

The very presence of the Sisters is amazing. They can walk in, wave as they go by. They are incredibly encouraging; they make you feel as though you are the most important person in the world (Teacher, School E).

Other teachers in the focus group from School E, made a similar observation and there was unanimous agreement about the impact affirmation makes in a person’s working life. Teachers also commented on the remarkable legacy of the religious orders in the Catholic school system. The particular ‘gift’ of this religious order

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placed an emphasis on hospitality, insisting that the school should be a welcoming place where all have a sense of belonging. Seven out of the nine schools were founded by religious orders and focused on the legacy of that order to drive their mission. As an example, the earlier comment from a teacher in School I, that the boys in that school were reminded that they had to be “men for others” was a direct acknowledgement of the founding religious order.

Cook and Simmonds (2011) argued that into the future, the challenge of Catholic schools will be to retain their Catholic identity and build a ‘charism’ or ‘gift’ based on a ‘culture of relationships’. It is argued that in the voices of leaders and teachers heard in the current study, such a culture is evident. It should also be noted that the researcher is not claiming that the qualities of love, care and quality relationships are exclusive to the Catholic school system. In fact, Darling-Hammond, (2010); Dinham, (2008); and Shields and Miles (2008) speak of such qualities found in the public school systems of Australia and the USA. The difference is that the Catholic school system in the current study mandates such qualities. Of interest to the researcher is the degree to which these qualities might also be evidenced in the perceptions of students and parents. This will be addressed in the next two chapters.

5.13 Summary.

In summary, the following tables overleaf are presented to identify the key themes found in perceptions of teachers concerning factors contributing to their schools’ success. The tables present two dimensions of teachers’ perceptions. Table 5.1; relates to the personal practice of teachers within the nine schools in the current study, whereas Table 5.2 represents factors teachers perceived as influential at the whole school level and in the roles of other key stakeholders.
Table 5.1

*Teachers' perceptions of factors contributing to their schools' success in relation to their personal practice.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers' Content Knowledge</th>
<th>Teachers' Passion and Enthusiasm</th>
<th>Effective teaching strategies</th>
<th>Curriculum Design</th>
<th>Assessment and Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not facts and surface knowledge but deeper knowledge</td>
<td>Love of the discipline crucial – shows in enthusiasm</td>
<td>Emphasis on direct instruction and whole class discussion</td>
<td>Scaffolded curriculum from Yr 7 - Yr 12.</td>
<td>Broad array of assessment types Yrs 7-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis, synthesis, problem solving</td>
<td>Passion for the vocation of teaching</td>
<td>Collaborative group work used but in moderation</td>
<td>Strong emphasis on skill development from Yr 7 – yr 12</td>
<td>Assessment types that replicated external examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of relevant examples</td>
<td>Enthusiasm and passion cannot make up for a lack of knowledge</td>
<td>Note-taking seen as very important. Student note taking supported by teacher direction.</td>
<td>Sequential development of higher order analysis and synthesis, and inquiry learning.</td>
<td>Timely, detailed teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to apply knowledge to real world</td>
<td>Commitment, availability and approachability</td>
<td>Meta-cognition. What do I need to know? How can I learn it?</td>
<td>Teachers highly organised. Careful attention to lesson planning.</td>
<td>Use of student self evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must have the relationship to impart knowledge</td>
<td>Love and care shown to students.</td>
<td>Meta-cognitive strategies contextually based within subjects.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for affirmation to counteract compassion fatigue.</td>
<td>Emphasis on developing literacy skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of student self verbalisation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2

Teachers’ perceptions of ‘whole school’ factors and influences of other stakeholders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Development</th>
<th>Teachers’ perception of leaders</th>
<th>Teachers’ perceptions of students</th>
<th>Teachers’ perception of parents</th>
<th>Teachers’ perceptions of the culture of the school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to professional development strongly supported by the school.</td>
<td>Leaders supportive of academic culture.</td>
<td>Student micro-culture very influential.</td>
<td>Parents broadly supportive.</td>
<td>Teacher student relationships paramount.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External formal professional development programs most effective</td>
<td>Leaders supportive of professional development.</td>
<td>Academic success supported by student body.</td>
<td>Recognition that parents are partners.</td>
<td>Emphasis on student well being, sense of belonging and community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEE Marking highly effective.</td>
<td>Leaders focused on data informed instruction.</td>
<td>Healthy competition amongst students.</td>
<td>Recognition of importance of communication.</td>
<td>Strong collegial relationships among staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus moderation meetings very effective.</td>
<td>Deputies and HODS develop professional conversations around learning.</td>
<td>Strong culture of peer support.</td>
<td>Placed emphasis on supporting vulnerable parents.</td>
<td>Teachers outward looking ready to seek and use external support and PD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Informal networks with colleagues in other schools.</td>
<td>Emphasis on communication.</td>
<td>Homework clubs, study groups and peer tutoring very effective.</td>
<td>Sense of accountability to parents.</td>
<td>Culture of excellence, high expectations and promotion of academic success. High levels of accountability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Formal PD.</td>
<td>Teachers supportive of the work of leaders.</td>
<td>Students responsive to high expectations.</td>
<td>Including parents in community.</td>
<td>Strong Catholic identity with emphasis on care and love.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Informal PD Collegial support within departments.</td>
<td>Teachers afforded respect and autonomy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Challenged the notion that big is better.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER SIX
PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Students’ perceptions: Introduction

A number of recent ex-students (n = 36) were interviewed across the nine schools, ranging from those one year out of school to three years out of school. Where students names have been used pseudonyms have been provided. The interviews were designed to gather students’ perceptions about leadership in their school, effective teaching and the influence of peers and family. In addition, the researcher sought to investigate whether students’ perceptions validated or contested the earlier commentary of leaders and teachers.

It might be argued that of all the ‘voices’ heard in this research, this group should be listened to most attentively, for, as Gentilucci (2004) said, “what you see depends on where you stand” (p. 133). Standing in the place of students provides the current study with a unique perspective on effective leaders and teachers in schools. Dominant themes relating to students’ perceptions regarding their schools’ academic success are explored in the following commentary.

6.2 Teachers and relationships

There was no doubt that teachers were viewed by students as the most powerful influence on their academic achievement, validating the literature (Dinham, 2008; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012; Shields & Miles, 2008; Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2009). This was well illustrated in the following:

You are able to learn more when the relationship is strong (Student, School E).

If you don’t have a relationship with the teacher you cannot learn, it puts you off (Student, School E).

One common factor that was identified by nearly every student focus group was the notion of approachability and availability. The best teachers were described as approachable. When asked to elaborate on the meaning of approachability, students commented:
They invite you to ask questions, it’s nice to be encouraged (Student, School E).
They related really well to you, I could feel relaxed around them, I could ask them questions and not feel like an idiot (Student, School B).
Where I did best, it was always with teachers who I felt comfortable with and could ask questions (Student, School G).

Feeling comfortable in a relationship with a teacher was a prominent desire of students and produced tangible results (Hattie, 2012; Purkey, 1992). Comment was made on the importance of teachers being ‘invitational’ which then generated respect, trust and optimism among students. The researcher would argue that invitational qualities in teachers also created a learning environment which was conducive to high personal achievement. The following quotes provide evidence for this contention:

You actually liked the teachers; you hated the thought of disappointing them (Student, School C).
Mr X would run Chemistry classes on the holidays, you just wanted to do well for him (Student, School D).

In all schools in the study, the ‘availability’ of teachers was commented on by every focus group of leaders and teachers and this attribute was now validated by students. Students were enormously appreciative of the time teachers gave them, before school, after school, at lunchtimes and not uncommonly during school holidays:

Teachers were so dedicated. I owe a lot of my success to my teachers. Most subjects had after school tutorials on top of normal classes and a large number of students attended (Student, School B).
Teachers would come up to you if you didn’t do well and offer support after school (Student, School A).

While recognising teachers’ availability, students also noted the sensible encouragement of teachers who desired their students to be independent learners, capable of making the transition to university and the workforce:
When needed or asked they would put in the time but they also gave us the skills and pushed us to be independent (Student, School G).

The appreciation of teachers’ availability and approachability was a strong motivator in students’ attitude towards their studies. Students did comment that there was a stark contrast in their learning when teachers were less available and not openly inviting:

I always wanted to know why I got 70% and not 80%. Where did I lose those marks? Some teachers just did not make the time to show you. You should be told that! (Student, School B).

Availability of teachers seemed to vary from department to department. It should be consistent. (Student, School D).

The reflection of the student in School D demonstrated an inconsistency in the culture across the departments in that school and confirms the value of the student voice. Students are capable of making comparative assessments of departmental performance and culture and their perceptions should be sought. Another student made a perceptive comment about the impact of passion and enthusiasm on the student-teacher relationship:

I could not relate to the teacher I had in one subject. He had no enthusiasm at all, it really affected my performance in that subject, I could not get motivated (Student, School D).

Notwithstanding this negative observation, the capacity of enthusiasm and passion to develop positive teacher-student relationships is presented below.

6.3 Enthusiasm and passion.

Teachers in the current study had rated enthusiasm and passion as attributes that had significantly contributed to their success as teachers, confirming findings in the literature (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008; Day, 2007; Fried, 1995). These attributes were identified by students as clearly evident in their best teachers and were important contributors to student engagement in the subject matter under study. Passion and enthusiasm were also seen as integral in the
development of positive relationships between students and their teachers. An extract from the focus group conversation in School F supports this observation.

**Heather:** They had to like teaching, when they had passion it made you love the subject. It made a massive difference.

**Jennifer:** Yes in history and literature and drama when we had teachers like that, you just want to impress them.

**Mary:** Yes it’s because they believe in you they inspire you.

**Anne:** Yeh our history teacher would mark the TEE exams every year. He knew the syllabus back to front. He also knew every single student! When he taught the class he made you feel he was teaching you.

Yet again this was another illustration of the strength of the focus group in an IPA study. Heather’s observation about passion and enthusiasm was made with fervour, particularly her comment about the difference it made in the experience of the subject. Her tone of voice put a great emphasis on the words “massive difference”. This prompted Jennifer’s reflection about specific teachers and the personal reaction that their enthusiasm and passion produced in students, in this case the motivation to impress, energising behaviour and influencing academic achievement. Her comment took the discussion further with Mary’s reflection that such motivations were driven by an appreciation that these teachers believed in their students, so much so that they were able to ‘inspire you’ in the process of building self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Anne arguably reacted to the word ‘inspire’ by recounting her experience of her History teacher who was competent in terms of his content knowledge but who also combined that with a deep connection to all his students.

This nexus between knowledge of the subject and knowledge of students had been alluded to in earlier accounts of leaders and teachers and was now strongly confirmed by students.

Teachers were enthusiastic and passionate, they loved and knew their subject, but they were people. As seniors they related really well to you, you got to know them and they you (Student, School C).

Hazel and Vincent (2005) argued that in secondary schools, with a strong focus on subject content, other elements such as teacher-student relationships are in danger of being displaced. This was clearly not the case in this study; in fact, enthusiasm
and passion for the subject matter became a vehicle for the enhancement of the teacher-student relationship rather than detracting from it.

In an insightful discussion about the role of passion in teaching, Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet and Guay (2008) distinguished between harmonious passion and obsessive passion. They argued that harmonious passion occurs “when an individual freely accepts an activity as important to him or her” (p. 978). In the cases cited above there are no external contingencies exercising force, as such teaching is intrinsically motivated. An internal locus increased wellbeing and work satisfaction, resulting in less burnout. Conversely, teachers with an obsessive passion are described as being controlled by their activity or external pressures related to it and did not report similar levels of wellbeing and satisfaction in their teaching. The authors did note that when there was a healthy balance between harmonious passion and obsessive passion, there were increases in teacher perceived adaptive student behaviours. This could forseeably occur when teachers are intrinsically driven by the love of their subject and a passion for teaching but equally recognise that other drivers, for example external measures of student assessment, impact on their work. For ‘well balanced’ teachers, external measures are given due recognition but are not allowed to dominate their work in an obsessive manner.

It is argued that in the previous chapter’s discussion of teachers’ perceptions, the harmonious/obsessive balance was well documented. Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet and Guay (2008) lamented that although their study of 494 teachers showed that “the more passionate the teachers, the more they perceived students to display adaptive behaviours” (p. 984), it would be useful for student behaviours to be reported by students. The current study attempted to do just that and the statement from the student in School C above, attested to the fact that teachers who demonstrated a strong knowledge of the subject and passion for it, with an equally strong interest in their students, were able to achieve adaptive student behaviours in their classrooms. More importantly, students recognised that their teachers had a ‘harmonious’ balance in their approach to teaching as previously noted: “they were people, you got to know them and they you” (Student, School B). Having addressed student perceptions concerning passion and enthusiasm it is now appropriate to discuss another element that often came to the fore as an allied attribute in the eyes of students: teachers’ content knowledge.
6.4 Teachers’ content knowledge.

The current study has noted that the enthusiasm of teachers was infectious and helped motivate students. At the same time, the majority of students also commented on the fact that teachers’ expertise in their subject knowledge was equally essential. This confirmed the literature, particularly that of Dinham (2008) who found that teachers’ orientation to their subject had a strong influence on achievement. Hattie (2003) had also found that expert teachers attended to a deeper representation of their subject. In particular, students spoke about the deep familiarity many of their teacher’s had with the syllabus and the highly ‘specific’ nature of advice they provided in relation to the syllabus and examination technique. Such specificity in terms of teaching was often borne out of experience both as a teacher and as a marker at the external examination level. Students knew the teachers who had external examination marking experience and commented on how useful that relayed expertise was in their own preparation for external assessments.

Many of the students reiterated that while they reviewed many past papers and examination questions, this was not a ‘skill and drill’ or ‘teach to the test’ approach on the part of their teachers. Students observed the way their teachers employed a diverse range of resources, noting they were able to enliven discussions in the classroom with activities relevant to the world in which they lived. One student captured this well:

Her feedback was pertinent, she always brought in a wide range of resources that she referred you to, she was really up to date and relevant and you knew she was widely read (Student, School E).

Brown and Cocking (2000) argued that the benefit of working with relevant knowledge was that it allowed students to go beyond information, facilitating thinking in problem representations and providing cognitive roadmaps. In the previous chapter, the researcher had queried whether students would support teachers’ claims concerning the value of relevant knowledge. The following commentary suggests they did:

Heather: He was a teacher who did not just teach to the syllabus, he referred to so much more, to wider knowledge, a teachers’ wider knowledge is so important (Student, School F).
**Jennifer:** Yes, you can tell the teachers who are just teaching from the syllabus and giving you what you need to pass the exam but there are those that not only love the subject but know enough to be able to say, oh by the way, this is related to this, and you go that is incredible. I don’t need to know that for the exam but like I never knew that and it’s relevant to my life. I really appreciated that (Student, School F).

**Mary:** Yes I found that the teachers I respected the most were often schooling me for life rather than to get me to pass exams. They would like, say, let’s take ten minutes to discuss this; this is what’s happening in the world. It made me think they actually care about more than just the TEE so we would discuss the impact of the American elections on Australia. They actually care about the world where I am going to end up. It makes you want to work harder for them, because they care about your future and you want to prove to them that they were right to care (Student, School F).

To illustrate the power of the focus group, as the student above concluded her last sentence, almost in unison the whole group echoed the words “they were right to care”. This was a powerful affirmation of their teachers' knowledge and care which was heightened by the instinctive reflex of the group, to one student's reflection.

In the spirit of a phenomenological study, the researcher is called to question why certain responses in the analysis of data provoke such a powerful reaction. For this researcher, analysing the students’ expression that their teachers “were right to care” was a very moving experience. The expression triggered a memory of the interview, taking him back to the moment, and capturing the theme of ‘care’ in the study that had been touched on before. In an attempt to bracket that response the researcher is led to ask the question is this response ‘powerful’ because it accords with my own personal values as a teacher? Is it powerful because it is an affirmation that psychologically all teachers seek, including the researcher himself? Is it my own personal history being rewarded? The researcher noted in the earlier review of the literature that Isaacs (1999) made an astute point when he said “often when we listen to others we may discover that we are listening from disturbance. In other words, we are listening from an emotional memory rather than from the present moment” (p. 98). This may well have been such a moment. Was the response ‘powerful’ because it confirmed a theme the researcher had hoped would be confirmed? Could a more objective reading simply conclude that the students themselves were, in a certain fashion, reiterating an expectation that teachers
should care rather than an appreciation of care? Having bracketed the response and returned to the recorded interview several times, the researcher would argue that the language of the students denoted a genuine appreciation of care, a certain gratefulness, a powerful expression of thanks.

Continuing the theme of breadth of knowledge that students observed in their teachers, another student spoke of her Chemistry teacher who went outside of the syllabus to use books from the UK curriculum to provide broader perspectives and complement the Western Australian curriculum. In the same school, a student spoke of her Economics teacher:

He seemed to know exactly what would be in the exam. He picked up all the current trends in economics that we might find in the exam (Student, School C).

By contrast, a teacher who had not mastered their subject content was seen as a clear impediment to students' success:

Their knowledge is important; it is very frustrating if they do not know an answer, very frustrating when you knew they were confused (Student, School D).

Thus the influence of teachers' content knowledge which had been posited by teachers in the preceding chapter as a major element of effective teaching was validated by students. Teachers' engagement with their discipline, their breadth of knowledge and the currency of their knowledge was also an acute expression of care for their students. Students also confirmed what a powerful motivator such knowledge could be in the hands of teachers who could apply it well. Students were also well placed to make observations concerning the variety of effective strategies that teachers employed to convey knowledge.

6.5 Teachers' strategies.

Pedagogical content knowledge, “in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that makes it comprehensible to others” (Schulman, 1986, p. 9) was also a prominent feature of student observations. The utilisation of pedagogical strategies that facilitated student understanding was a dominant theme
in student discussions. Students in School B spoke about the way in which very good teachers were able to communicate with clarity and prioritise what was important as they went about the business of teaching and learning.

The teacher’s ability to make learning relevant is a key. Good teachers made it clear that certain things were important to be done (Student, School B).

The best teachers were able to absolutely show what was really important to know. I had a 40 year veteran and a first year teacher. The veteran just knew what was key. The younger teacher was more hung up on closely adhering to the syllabus (Student, School B).

Students spoke of the need for balance in teaching strategies. They commented that the more effective teachers used a wide range of strategies from direct instruction, to whole class discussion and group work. Many commented on the more creative things some individual teachers do, for example, in one History class the teacher put the students in pairs to produce a film where they portrayed historical figures from their history text being interviewed. These interviews were kept as resources on the school intranet. Such a strategy brought figures from history alive, encouraged thorough research and provided a rich and diverse range of resources. Another student reflected on the effectiveness of being required to teach certain topics to the class in paired presentations during the semester. The student’s experience supported Hattie’s (2007) high impact rating of ‘reciprocal teaching’ ($d = 0.73$). This strategy, which devolved responsibility for learning to students appeared to be highly effective.

The majority of students spoke of the importance of teachers helping them with study skills:

The more effective teachers were able to teach you how to study, using very good focus questions that applied to most subjects (Student, School C). The better teachers were very good at providing useful tips on how to study and have a balanced life. They hammered home study techniques (Student, School B).
A student in School B commented that:

Teachers got you used to good study techniques in Year Eight which built habits that I had developed before reaching Year Eleven and Year Twelve (Student, School B).

Such endorsement confirmed the commentary by leaders and teachers that it was crucial in lower secondary school to concentrate on the development of skills required for upper secondary courses. Many students also confirmed reported commentary from teachers that note-taking skills in class were an essential component of their learning. Students spoke of teachers who were adept at helping them compile relevant notes for exam preparation and revision. The literature supported the teaching of study skills as a strong influence on student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Kobayashi, 2005; Marzano, 2003). The impact of note-taking was illustrated well in the following student commentary:

Teachers provided us with extra resources and notes to help you revise and prepare for exams and always stopped the class to say this is useful for your study, make notes on this. By the time the end of the year came we had a really good set of study notes for the TEE (Student, School A).

Simple teacher techniques, such as re-capping from past lessons as students moved on to new lessons, was an obvious but effective tool. Hands-on approaches in the classroom were also commonly spoken of in the sciences. One student spoke about how effective such a simple exercise as holding onto a rope to simulate the energy of a wave in Physics, helped her appreciate a theoretical concept. Time and again, students spoke of obvious but necessary strategies that facilitated understanding. Teachers need to be reminded of the power of the obvious and who better to remind them than their students.

6.5.1 Organisational skills.

Organisation was commented on by a number of students as being a quality portrayed by effective teachers:

Their planning was meticulous, lesson by lesson step by step; you knew where you were going because they did (Student, School F).
Organisation is a big factor. If teachers are not organised you get lost and do not know where you should be or where you are going (Student, School E). Most teachers were well organised, that helped you know where they were going with the class. You knew when all assignments were due which helped you organise yourself. You received detailed course outlines from the beginning of the year almost lesson by lesson (Student, School E).

Such organisation allowed students to follow their teacher in a learning journey offering a map that more easily helped them reach desired destinations.

6.5.2 Feedback.

Feedback was a key to student learning and many students commented on both the importance of timeliness and detail required for “feeding forward to the next piece of work as the final step in a feedback loop” (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010, p. 127). In a fashion, it was a key ‘advanced organiser’, enabling students’ sense of direction, guiding them to the next task on a scaffolded journey, “providing optimal anchorage for the learning material in the form of relevant and appropriate subsuming concepts at a proximate level of inclusiveness” (Ausubel, 1960, p. 271).

The student’s commentary regarding feedback as a significant teaching strategy strongly reinforced other interviews with leaders and teachers as well as findings in the literature (Hattie 2003, 2009; Quinton & Smallbone, 2010; Rowe, 2002).

Feedback was very important. Every assignment and test we received had detailed specific feedback, every term a report. You always want affirmation don’t you? This really encouraged academic success. The English Department even used an E Bulletin Board to promote discussion around the assignment and to get input from students (Student, School B).

Teachers would provide us with the best answers as models. They would allow us to redo answers and they would re-mark them again providing more feedback which was very constructive. They would give us topics for practice essays which they were happy to mark and give you additional feedback (Student, School A).

The commentary above confirmed teachers’ reflections about their own teaching and the importance they placed on quality feedback. Such commentary also
confirmed leaders’ views about the extraordinary lengths many teachers would go to, over and above their normal workload, to ensure that students would make satisfactory progress. In particular, earlier observations about the need for specificity in teachers’ advice can be seen in the following illustration.

**Pauline:** Yes a lot of teachers gave whole class feedback but then it was the individual feedback that mattered, really specific feedback to you as an individual with great examples of what you had done wrong and what you can do better that can be applied to the exam. So my English teacher would expect me to work on my conclusions in essays with advice on what I had to do to practice improving that part of the essay.

**Kate:** Yes a lot of our teachers had been TEE markers which then helped them give you tips that you could easily apply to the exam to pick up marks and they provided great model examples so you could self assess against those standards that was really useful.

**Nadia:** And some teachers allowed you to go to another room to work on extension activities if they felt you would be wasting your time listening to feedback that you did not need. That allowed me to work with students of my own ability. I liked that. (Students, School C).

The observations above highlighted a sophisticated appreciation of a number of hallmarks of good teaching. Students valued specific feedback that could be easily applied to the exam, confirmed in the literature as ‘opportunity to learn’ (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano, 2003; & Reynolds, 1998). They appreciated teachers who had experience in TEE marking which confirmed the value teachers themselves placed on this form of professional development. Students noted the importance of individualised feedback that allowed them to focus on areas of personal improvement. Students understood the value of self-assessment in their learning and the opportunity for reflection it had provided. McDonald and Boud (2003), echoing these students’ observations, argued that students specifically trained in self-assessment, outperformed those who were not so trained, in their preparation for external examinations.

A very strong theme in discussions about feedback was the effect of affirmation. Many students spoke of the impact of teachers who were positive, encouraging and optimistic in their approach. The power of affirmation cannot be underestimated being consistently referred to by students as a major influence in terms of their
motivation to succeed. Constructive, timely, detailed and positive feedback has a powerful effect on student learning.

Teachers need to be encouraging, so if a class does not do well the teacher should not dwell on the negatives (Student, School D).

Students were perceptive in their observations that while they valued teachers who were encouraging and provided affirmation, this was also done within a climate that had high expectations as is evidenced in the following student comment:

Good teachers challenged and pushed you. I felt they had confidence in me (Student, School G).

In the process of providing feedback, many students commented on the way in which good teachers set high expectations which were informed by a very thorough knowledge of State-wide standards.

The teachers always set standards at or a little bit higher than the TEE. We were not surprised by the difficulty of the exams in the TEE unlike some of our friends in other schools. We got scaled up in most subjects (Student, School A).

Setting high expectations meant that when students sat external exams they were prepared for the standard and could cope well. Students also commented that the standards within the school, while high, were realistic and generally attainable. This was exemplified in the following illustration.

Mr “X" would not accept second best. Yes I suppose our teachers were not happy for you to just pass they expected you to do your best, they wouldn’t accept less. That helped a lot (Student, School D).

Darling-Hammond (2010) described intellectually challenging and relevant instruction as a significant factor in ‘turnaround’ urban schools in the United States. The findings of the current study would support the need for high yet realistic expectations if students are to perform at their optimal level.
In summary, there were a number of teaching strategies that students in the current study perceived as significant supports in their academic attainment. Clarity and specificity in communication and feedback were highly regarded. The utilisation of relevant and current examples to create a link between the object of study and students’ everyday life was valued. Creative activities that encouraged hands on, engaged learning, were memorable for many students. A balanced approach to the use of direct instruction, whole class discussion and cooperative learning activities was appreciated by the majority of students. Meta-cognitive strategies, such as teaching students how to study, were commented on frequently and valued when the strategies were contextualised in a specific subject. Note-taking was seen as a very important tool in the development of study skills. Teachers’ organisation and capacity to create a logical narrative for student learning was strongly supported as a requirement for effective learning. Feedback was arguably the strategy that students discussed as the most important tool for effective teaching. Students appreciated teachers who provided them with opportunities for reflection and self-assessment, utilising exemplars that facilitated familiarity with external standards. Students appreciated teachers who set high, yet realistic expectations and found the right balance between nurturing students with affirmation and not accepting second best performances.

6.6 Students’ perceptions of leaders.

Gentiluci and Muto (2007) argued that research identifying relationships between leadership and student achievement is problematic unless it considers the perspectives of the ‘consumer’ (i.e., the students). While teachers and quality teaching had the most impact on student achievement, students did not devalue the role of the leadership teams in their schools. They spoke of the personal touch of principals who knew them as individuals and the impact of a principal, who could strike up a conversation with a student in the school yard, knew them by name and knew how they were progressing academically. Some three years after leaving school, one student vividly remembered such a conversation and the influence it had had on her.

Leadership in the School had a vested interest in you. They got to know you and when you knew they had the time for you and confidence in you it was quite inspiring and motivating. I remember when Mrs XXXX was leaving, and she was strolling around the grounds with the new incoming Principal Mr
YYYYY and she stopped me and said to him; “Meet Sally Mr YYYY she is one of our top Year Eleven students”. I was so surprised she knew me that well and the following year I really wanted to live up to that introduction. Once they show faith in you, you are on your way (Student, School F).

Students spoke of the number of one-on-one meetings they would have with key staff, deputy principals, heads of year and counsellors. These were people who were tracking their progress, and providing encouragement, advice and practical support:

Kate: Mr XXXX (Deputy Principal) came up to me and congratulated me on my results in the yard.

Pauline: Yeh I couldn't believe it when Mrs XXXX the Head of Maths congratulated me on my test result when she didn't even teach me (Students, School C).

Students were clearly impressed that they were known and acknowledged, particularly by those in leadership roles who did not teach them.

Students also spoke of the less personal but very useful avenue of Year group meetings where the principal and deputy would speak to them as a group encouraging them to achieve their personal best.

Mrs XXXX had a “strive for excellence” motto and the teachers backed it and we could relate to it (Student, School F).

Leadership appeared to be shared here. The attempt to generate a culture of excellence was recognised by the students and in their eyes, the leadership was supported by the teachers. Such distributed leadership may well have facilitated the adoption of that value within the student body. Students' reflections on the culture of their schools were frequently insightful and added a stronger dimension to the observations of leaders and teachers.

6.7 Students’ perceptions of the culture of the school.

Across all the interviews from the nine student focus groups, one of the most powerful themes was the concept of culture. Through the varied conversations
common cultural elements emerged. Even without prompting, reflections that related to culture were revealed in the way students spoke of their principals, deputy principals and their teachers.

Unequivocally, students spoke proudly of their schools; the sense of school pride was tangible. Such pride was a product of the complex student-teacher relationships as discussed in each of the previous chapters. School pride was a product of a deep seated authentic sense of belonging, of ‘being’ in a community where the educational experience was highly personalised. There is little doubt in the mind of the researcher that pride in the school had a profound influence on student achievement, perhaps because it promoted valued attachment. Zbar, Kimber, and Marshall’s (2009) study of disadvantaged schools in Victoria found that pride in the school amongst leaders and the teaching staff influenced high levels of student achievement. In the current study a flow on effect was observed amongst students.

The primacy of personal relationships was clearly evident in a number of student reflections concerning their teachers:

Sr XXXX was a mentor for me, she would always say ‘you will do good things in your life’ (Student, School E)
Academic success was always implied as something to aspire to but the focus of the school was pastoral. It was always about you as a person. The motto of the school was ‘love in action’ and they certainly lived out their motto (Student, School G).
Teachers knew you, if you were falling behind, Mr XXXX would be there to encourage you (Student, School C).

These comments were endorsed by students who expressed that they felt they had teachers “who believed in me.” Another student took the theme of teachers’ ‘belief’ in their students a little further emphasising earlier references to the need for social and emotional support. Speaking about times when they may have been struggling in a personal sense, one student commented:

Mrs XXXX noticed you. Normally it’s your friends that notice you, but she noticed you, she was always there (Student, School E).
The sense of teachers being ‘present’ to their students, ‘being there’ in relationship, supports Seligman (2011) who argued that optimal performance is tied to personal wellbeing which is a by-product of meaningful relationships.

As students described their delight in being known and noticed, they also commented on the notion of community:

We are not a big school, teachers knew you, you were part of a community. You felt like you were a person not a number like some of the bigger schools my friends go to (Student, School C).

Pastoral structures like House systems were commented on by students as tools to enhance a sense of community and belonging:

We lived and breathed House competitions. It really adds to overall pride in the school and a sense of belonging. It’s a bit like the slogan “act, commit and belong”, there is so much truth in that. It becomes so much more than a place to go to school. It becomes a community (Student, School F).

Such comments strongly confirmed the literature, (Darling-Hammond, 2011; Ofsted, 2009; Shields & Miles, 2008) where personalisation was seen as a contributing factor in improved student achievement. Personalisation was described by Shields and Miles (2008) as the school’s capacity to “weave into school designs, multiple ways of fostering relationships between teachers and students” (p. 8). While the preceding commentary has highlighted the impact of the strong pastoral culture that students perceived to be evident in their schools, it is also important to note that in the eyes of students, an equally strong academic culture existed.

An important aspect of the culture of every school in the study was the theme that it was acceptable to achieve academically. In fact, in one school, a student remarked that:

it was almost unacceptable not to achieve academically (Student, School E).

Students confirmed the attempts of staff to formally recognise academic achievement and how important that was at whole school assemblies and Year
group assemblies. With a strong emphasis on excellence and a focus on academic performance, students commented that:

There was a culture of success, we wanted to do well for ourselves and for the school name (Student, School E).
I remember seeing past students at assemblies being rewarded for their success, you aspire to do that too and be up there (Student, School C).
There was always recognition of academic success, subject competitions, semester academic awards, Dean’s awards, academic honours. At whole of school assemblies academic excellence was always touched on (Student, School A).

Such commentary strongly affirmed the perceptions of leaders and teachers who had previously reflected on the importance of formal recognition and the use of academic awards to both motivate students and build a culture of academic excellence. Student commentary also confirmed the views of some principals and teachers that ‘success breeds success’ and that capitalising on student achievement is vital in turning around underachievement.

Students also reflected that while they had very strong relationships with their teachers, and that many classrooms were ‘fun’ to be in due to the good natured humour of the staff, there was also a business-like tone in the classroom:

Our teachers had a no nonsense approach to get the task done (Student, School C).
They (teachers) had high expectations, you had to get the work done, it was almost a business-like approach (Student, School B).

Needless to say, behaviour management was not an issue in these schools. Students confirmed a sense of purpose, organisation and engaging learning taking place, as well as a broad range of experiences that provided balance:

While you were expected to do well academically, there was a real balance between sport, culture and study. You had a balanced life and the school really promoted that (Student, School B).
Many students noted that their school afforded a number of opportunities to be involved in a broad range of extra-curricular activities and the same teachers who made themselves available to students outside of class for academic support also participated in sport and cultural pursuits:

Through all these activities you create a broader network of friends. The experience is about so much more than academics. All these other things were complementary to my experience not a distraction. All the things I learned from sport and debating were able to be applied to my study. It also gave me the confidence to join clubs at University (Student, school F).

It might be expected that in highly successful academic schools there could be an imbalance of emphasis that favoured academic pursuits over other areas of school life. The findings in the current study suggest this was not the case with students broadly reporting a balance across the curriculum. More importantly, it is proffered that endeavouring to strike a balance between academic pursuits and co-curricular activities might actually enhance student academic performance.

In summary, the culture of the school in the eyes of students had a number of dominant elements. These were: a strong sense of pride in the school, an acknowledgement of the primacy of personal relationships between teachers and students, a resultant authentic sense of belonging to community, a culture where academic success was acceptable within the student body and expected by the school, high yet reasonable expectations of individuals and finally a balanced curriculum.

Students spoke of the influence of the student body and this phenomenon could well have been included as an element of culture. It is, however, so significant that the researcher has chosen to discuss this finding as a separate heading.

6.8 Students' perceptions of peer influence.

As reported earlier, there is a strong body of evidence that peer relationships play a significant role in academic achievement and motivation (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Nichols & White, 2001; Rosenberg, McKeon & Dinero, 1999; Ryan, 2011; Stewart, 2008; Wentzel, 2009; Wilkinson & Fung, 2002). Students from all nine schools spoke about the supportive nature of their peers,
healthy competition, the role of peer study groups after school and the fact that as a cohort they generally shared resources with each other very well. An example follows:

It was so important to have a cohort where people share knowledge and are willing to teach each other. I never felt frightened to ask a silly question. Our top students always supported others (Student, School E).

This student’s observation supports Edwards and Mullis (2001) who argued that activities such as peer tutoring, peer support and community service enhance connection with others and build capability and the capacity to contribute. The capacity to contribute through peer tutoring opportunities has been found to have an effect size of $d = 0.55$ on student achievement (Hattie, 2009).

The current study had earlier reported student perceptions of the value of meta-cognitive strategies such as study skills. Students spoke of their initiatives to utilise those skills in the support of their peers:

We knew one girl was spending hours studying ineffectively and she ended up getting a lot of support from other students (Student, School C)

The reflection of the student above suggested that there was a certain degree of altruism present within the student body which generated a willingness to take the initiative and offer support to others. Such altruism might be more accurately described as evidence of Adler’s ‘Gemeinschaftsgefühl’ or ‘social interest’ (Ferguson, 1989). The researcher had queried in the literature review whether evidence of ‘social interest’ might be found in the current study and would now suggest that it was. It is also argued that the distributed leadership evidenced in the teaching fraternity was also evidenced in the student cohort. The maxim that ‘values are caught, not taught’ is confirmed via the sense of care for others that had been modelled by teachers, and is illustrated in the following reflection:

If you couldn’t find a teacher you could always rely on a mate (Student, School B).

Our Year Twelve cohort was close knit, friendly and supportive. It’s really beneficial to chat things through together, study together (Student, School A).
Importantly, students spoke about the fact that leaders and teachers had fostered this culture of peer support:

The principal and teachers spoke to us about the need to be encouraging to each other (Student, School E).

This may have been the reason that one student was able to say:

It was great to share your happiness when you did well and you knew someone (student) would be there when you did not go well (Student, School E).

It is argued that the modelling of altruistic values by teachers in the school may have contributed to such a quality in the micro-culture of the student body, as evidenced in the following observation by another student in the same school.

Sr. XXXX gives you a sense of belonging. This school was always about appreciating that there is always someone worse off than you and that you have a responsibility to others (Student, School E).

As Hattie (2009) found, all of the above “contributes to making class/school a place students want to come to each day” (p. 105). Peers’ ability to provide emotional support and social facilitation is cited by Hattie (2009) as contributing positively in the development of a school and classroom environment. Further, positive peer association is cited by Goldsmith (2004), Nichols and White (2001) and Stewart (2008) as enhancing student achievement. These findings are supported by the findings of the current study.

It would appear then, that students who are unable to connect with their peers, who lack the capacity to socially navigate the difficult terrain of interpersonal relationships within the peer cohort, may well be disadvantaged, both emotionally and academically. Indeed, Fass and Taubman (2002), in a study of college students, found that:

perceived attachment to both parents and peers is a component of wider patterns of social competence and adjustment that may function as
protective or compensatory factors during key transitions in young adulthood, such as participation in college, and with its attendant demands for academic achievement. (p. 561)

It could be argued Year Twelve is one of the most significant transitions for late young people, bridging later adolescence and early adulthood. The schools in the current study were achieving more than just the enhancement of academic success as they facilitated peer support and connection.

In the review of literature on peer association, the researcher noted that the current study might seek to ascertain the influence of peers on attitudes to academic achievement and provide insights into whether, within a Year Twelve cohort, there can be a dominant collective peer disposition to achieve that reinforces a pro-school culture and strengthens performance. It is argued that sufficient evidence has been amassed to warrant such an assertion. The power of attitudinal similarity as discussed by Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) is also confirmed as an influence on student achievement:

The attitudes of your peers is very important, their focus was a strong influence. Staying around other like minded students is helpful (Student, School D).

While much of the student voice captured dominant themes of a culture of connection, care and cooperation among the student body, it was also evident that a contrasting theme of competition existed within the majority of schools:

There was an unspoken competition. Teachers often announced the top scores in assignments and while we applauded that person you also wanted to aspire to that. We pushed each other to beat him or her, but it was a healthy competition (Student, School G)
Healthy competition drives you to do well (Student, School D).
Our teachers encouraged competition, but it was never allowed to get too serious, no one went overboard, you were never made to feel uncomfortable by it (Student, School A).

In the specific context of high achieving schools where it might be argued that competition could potentially negate collaboration, the researcher was particularly interested to ascertain the degree to which both competition and cooperation might
It appeared from student focus groups that cooperation and competition co-existed well, confirming previous observations of teachers. In the eyes of students, healthy competition was a significant motivator of student achievement.

The contrast between my old school and here was huge. There was no competition there, no one cared enough. But the competition here is balanced by support for each other (Student, School B).

The study by Stewart (2008) of nearly 12,000 students from 715 American high schools, showed “that individual-level predictors, such as student effort, parent–child discussion, and associations with positive peers, played a substantial role in increasing students’ achievement” (p. 179). Just as positive peer associations can create attachments to school, Stewart (2008) found that parents can influence adolescents in conforming to the ideals associated with schooling.

6.9 Students' perceptions of parental Influence

Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Fullan (2005) describe the important role that each person plays in a child’s education and the mutual dependencies that exist among various parties, acknowledging the role of parents as paramount. Jeynes (2007), in a meta analysis of 52 studies with well over 300,000 subjects involving urban secondary schools in the United States, found that parental involvement affected a number of academic variables. These variables were “academic achievement, combined grades, standardised tests, and other measures .... that included indices of academic attitudes and behaviours” (p. 82). As such, the current study sought to gain the perceptions of students concerning the influence of parents on their academic achievement.

All students spoke about the important role of parents and their influence on academic success. They spoke of a ‘subtle’ restrained support. Parents, having hopes and expectations for their sons and daughters, wanted them to do their best and had expressed as much. However, in the words of a student, such hopes were not “over the top” (Student, School A). In one focus group, the interviewer started the discussion with the following question: What in general terms contributed to your personal academic success in Year Twelve? The immediate response from a
student, Heather, prompted an animated discussion on the influence of parents and the home as the very first factor contributing to overall academic success.

**Heather:** I had a very supportive family. It is one of the most important things. Like when I was growing up, learning was always really important. It was like the TV was turned off and we had our heads in books. My mum and dad always pushed learning. So like coming into school they were very supportive of me doing well but not overly pushy about doing well. It was just up to me to do well.

**Interviewer:** Do you think they had an expectation that you would do well?

**Heather:** Uhm, I think they hoped I would do well but if I didn’t, they would never get angry or anything like that.

**Jennifer:** I think parents are supportive. I think that is really important so if something goes wrong or you get a bad mark or something, you know, just knowing that as long as you had done your best they would support you makes you feel so much better.

**Anne:** Yes I can relate to Heather. I grew up in a very similar family. My dad would encourage us from a very young age to read, to learn. He would teach us at home from the time we were about five. I think starting early had a huge impact. We got into a routine from a very young age, learning, reading and studying was something I got accustomed to. I did not wait until I got to high school to adopt behaviours like study skills. My dad had done such a good job of this at such an early age, setting me up for it, that it was not such a big deal when I got to high school. It was never an option for me that I would not try and that same attitude was fostered by the school. (Students, School F).

The home environment was a significant factor as an influence on achievement in the eyes of these students. Fostering a positive attitude to reading and learning from an early age was recognised as important. The development of routines and the promotion of study habits at home were also deemed to be significant. For Anne, who had lost her mother at an early age, the recognition of the work of her father, a single parent and the sole bread winner was particularly touching. He was rewarded well, with Anne receiving an offer to study at an ivy-league university in the USA. The other striking theme in the majority of student conversations on parental influence was the notion of support. These high achieving students knew their parents were there in the background, always encouraging and offering support.
The capacity of parents to help their sons and daughters during moments of anxiety was seen as necessary by a number of students:

Lucas: Just being there for me, mum would bring me a cup of tea.
Nadia: Yeh, my dad would bring me chocolate (Students, School C).

Jeynes (2007) described parental style, or the extent to which a parent demonstrated a supportive and helpful parenting approach as having a moderate effect size ($d = 0.40$) on student achievement.

A striking comparison in parental support was the comment of a student from a very low socio-economic neighbourhood and school:

My parents are Vietnamese and do not speak English. They both worked long hours to support us through school but they always saw education as the way out (Student, School G).

Parents who viewed education as a means of fulfilling aspirations they had for their children and who consequently placed a value on education were supportive in an indirect yet equally influential sense. Spera, Wentzel and Matto’s (2009) study of 13,500 middle and high school parents in the United States certainly confirmed this view, noting that minority parents view education as a vehicle for upward mobility and more broadly that “parents who have high educational aspirations for their children influence their children’s academic success, perhaps by influencing children’s own expectations about their academic attainments” (p. 1149).

A comment from one student in School C was an observation concerning the alignment of parental and school support:

Teachers were prepared to talk to our parents, you felt that teachers and parents worked together for you.

This perceived connection between parents and teachers reinforced an earlier observation from a student in School F which is worth repeating:
It was never an option for me that I would not try and that same attitude was fostered by the school.

The alignment of values held by parents and schools sent a unified message that was heard by students. Effort was encouraged, academic pursuits were valued, and students felt supported at home and at school. It is concluded that students without strong parental and home support on a socio-emotional level and whose parents do not share an alignment of values with the schools their children attend, may be disadvantaged.

6.10 Student voice.

In reviewing the literature on student voice, the researcher cited numerous researchers (Beresford, 2003; Flutter, 2006; Pedder & McIntyre, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Ruddock, 2006; Watts & Youens, 2007), who argued that students are capable of insightful reflections concerning their experiences in the classroom. It is hoped that the expressions of the student voice in the current study have added greater texture to the observations of participants in the nine schools. It is the view of the researcher that student commentary is vital in terms of denying or confirming claims made by leaders and teachers, as well as providing the opportunity for students to make claims of their own. As has been noted (Gentlucci, 2004; Hattie, 2009; and Ruddock, 2006), students should not be viewed as passive objects but as active players in any effort to gain data on effective teaching and effective schools. Pedder and McIntyre (2006) suggested that any processes that engaged students in an understanding of how to improve schools has the potential to unearth valuable social capital. The researcher’s experience in the current study supports such a position.

In summary, the following tables (6.1 and 6.2) are presented (overleaf) as a way of identifying the key themes found in the perceptions of students concerning the overall success of their school and factors contributing to their individual high academic achievement.
Table 6.1

*Students’ perceptions of teachers’ and leaders’ influence on academic achievement and overall school success.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship with teachers. Teacher enthusiasm and passion</th>
<th>Teacher’s content knowledge</th>
<th>Teacher’s pedagogical strategies</th>
<th>Leadership of the school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning is compounded when teacher/student relationship is strong.</td>
<td>Student recognition of the depth of knowledge of better teachers.</td>
<td>Teachers’ capacity to communicate with clarity and specificity particularly in relation to feedback.</td>
<td>Leaders’ capacity to know their students highly valued and a key motivator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approachability and availability of teachers highly valued and desired by students.</td>
<td>Students also recognised currency of knowledge.</td>
<td>Teachers’ ability to prioritise what was important to learn.</td>
<td>Students valued one on one contact with senior staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student commentary concerning relationships with teachers provided confirmation of leaders’ and teachers’ claims.</td>
<td>Student recognition that highly specific knowledge of the syllabus was crucial.</td>
<td>Teachers’ capacity to make learning relevant. Utilisation of creative hands on activities appreciated.</td>
<td>Students recognised that senior staff were tracking academic progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ enthusiasm and passion both cultivated relationships and fostered learning.</td>
<td>Breadth of knowledge was evidence that better teachers did not just teach to the syllabus.</td>
<td>Utilisation of metacognitive strategies, particularly note taking and subject specific study skills.</td>
<td>Students confirmed leaders’ capacity to promote excellence and a culture of success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm and passion of teachers were key motivators for students.</td>
<td>Teachers’ knowledgeable command of their subject matter was seen as an expression of care by their students.</td>
<td>Teachers’ organisation and planning highly valued by students. Teachers developed a focused businesslike approach to learning.</td>
<td>Students noticed an alignment in cultural values and expectations between teachers and leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students confirmed teachers’ perceptions concerning the influence of relationships.</td>
<td>Feedback seen as opportunity for affirmation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students perceived high expectations as an expression of care.</td>
<td>Feedback seen as a key organiser for students’ learning in moving forward to next task.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.2

Students’ perceptions of school culture, peers and parental influence on academic achievement and overall school success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture of the School</th>
<th>Peer Influence</th>
<th>Parental Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangible sense of school pride.</td>
<td>Micro-culture of the peer cohort very influential in academic achievement.</td>
<td>Parents regarded as a key influence on academic achievement.</td>
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<td>An acknowledgement of the primacy of personal relationships between teachers, leaders and students.</td>
<td>Supportive culture within the peer group on a social and emotional level.</td>
<td>Parental influence manifested in a variety of ways and not always overt often subtle.</td>
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<tr>
<td>An authentic sense of belonging in community confirming leaders’ and teachers’ commentary.</td>
<td>Students confirmed leaders and teachers promoted a culture of support within the student body.</td>
<td>Parental interventions at an early age seen as influential on attitudinal disposition to school.</td>
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<td>Academic success viewed as culturally acceptable.</td>
<td>Pastoral groups particularly ‘House’ structures enhanced a sense of belonging and promoted opportunities for contribution and connection.</td>
<td>Parental influence at an early age capable of developing routines and study habits that drive achievement.</td>
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<td>High yet reasonable expectations by school and teachers viewed favourably by students.</td>
<td>Peer study groups promoted by the school developed into effective learning supports that complemented the work of teachers and enhanced community.</td>
<td>Parental emotional support through school seen as significant by students particularly in Year Twelve.</td>
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<td>Schools promoted personal excellence.</td>
<td>Evidence that a pro-school culture strengthens performance.</td>
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<td>Students confirmed a culture of care.</td>
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<td>Students reported cooperation and communication between teachers and parents in their schools.</td>
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<td>Cooperation and competition co-existed within the micro-culture of the student cohort.</td>
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CHAPTER SEVEN
PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

7.1 Perceptions of parents: Introduction.

Several researchers, recognised the significant influence of parents on student achievement and psychosocial functioning within the school environment. Accordingly, parental involvement in the school community is seen as an important goal of most school systems. (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Epstein, 2009, 2010; Fan & Chen, 2001; Fass & Taubman, 2002; Feiler, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Harris and Goodall, 2008; Jeynes, 2007, 2011; Spera, Wentzel & Matto, 2009)

A number of parents (n = 37) were interviewed in focus groups to gain perceptions on the influence of the leadership team, teachers and their practice, peer groups, the overall culture of the school and its relationship with the parent body (where the interchange of dialogue is presented pseudonyms are provided for parents). In addition, the researcher sought to investigate whether parents’ perceptions validated or contested the commentary of leaders, teachers and students. Overarching themes relating to parents’ perceptions are explored in the following commentary.

7.2 Parents’ perceptions of leadership in the school.

All parents spoke of the positive influence of leadership in relation to high student academic achievement. Commentary varied from school-to-school as some schools had more visible and perhaps charismatic principals, while in other schools parents commented that the leadership team “worked quietly in the background” (Parent, School A). Having noted some difference in approach, every focus group of parents appreciated that the role of the principal was “pivotal” (Parent, School A) and some said so emphatically. Others recognised the leadership team in the school:

We actually chose the school based on the leadership. From the Principal to the Deputy Principal and year coordinators they have been very caring and communicative (Parent, School D).
In School A, parents reflected on how the Principal and the broader leadership team focused on key pillars, "culture (the arts), sport, spiritual and academic" (Parent, School A). Within that focus was a concerted effort to help students find something that they were good at, thus enabling accomplishment, as the following discussion illustrates:

**Interviewer:** Are there particular things that the leadership team do or things you have seen visible in the school?

**Kathy:** I think the way they try to get them all involved, they drill into the kids that everyone has got something that they are good at and they try and focus on finding their passion and what they excel at and can enjoy. I believe all the kids have something special that they are good at.

**Kelly:** Yes the four pillars are always referred to by the principal and it helps them find an avenue.

**Mary:** Yes when they hit high school they flourish because there is always something for them to achieve in (Parents, School A).

In one of the all boys’ schools, the influence of the principal in terms of the development of relationships was commented on by parents and confirmed earlier commentary from students. The following interchange illustrates how the principal’s behaviour modelled and shaped a culture defined by relationships. The observations of parents also provide some insights on the use of focus groups within an IPA study.

**Sally:** They let boys be boys here, no matter how many buttons have to be sown on (much laughter).

**Frank:** How many safety pins come home keeping the shirts together? (more laughter).

**Sally:** They can have that relationship with the boys. You just have to walk around and see how many teachers are just chatting to the students at lunchtime and recess.

**Frank:** Yes my son said, the kids really enjoy it, there is always banter back and forth. It comes from “Principal X” he loves the boys. I think if he could chat to the boys all day long he would. When he walks around he knows them. He’ll go to the library where other boys are and he’ll talk to them asking what are you doing...

**Irene:** That is a very much a heritage of the religious order.
Lynette: But it’s not only the teachers it’s the admin staff. Whenever I go to the office I am so warmly greeted. It’s very welcoming. Staff members say “Hi how are you? Can I help you?"

Frank: Yes there is not one time that I have come to the school where I have not been greeted.

Sally: And the boys notice that.

Irene: Yes because I think they are greeted the same (Parents, School B).

In posing a simple open-ended question which asked parents to reflect on the influence of the leadership team within the school, unexpected results can come to the fore as previously discussed in the methodology chapter. Such responses cannot be dismissed; rather they are more authentic because they have come of their own volition. The responses concerning the principal reveal and confirm dominant themes of love, care and knowledge of students, mentioned in previous chapters. Broader observations concerning the permeating qualities of a welcoming and inviting school culture were also facilitated by the use of the focus group.

Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010) argued that the contextual emphasis of IPA “is an integral part of hermeneutic phenomenology. In these terms, person and world are not separate but instead co-constituting and mutually disclosing” (p. 99). It was felt by the researcher, as was hypothesized in the methodology chapter, that the focus group enabled parents to be supported by each other, feeling more comfortable to disclose perceptions. The opening hilarity of the image of bedraggled boys homeward bound, certainly supported Wilkinson (2008) who argued for the use of focus groups within an IPA study, refuting suggestions that they are inhibiting. Wilkinson (2008) suggested that, focus groups are naturalistic, incorporating storytelling and joking. Most importantly, within that storytelling, as evidenced above, there can be found very rich themes. In this case, there were themes of acceptance of boys for who they are, of a world of love and care and in this case the direct influence of a relational principal. Parents may not have been able to narrate such anecdotes if they had not heard them from their own sons in the first place and seen it with their own eyes because they felt welcomed in the school. Thus, from an initial response concerning the modelling of relationships through the leadership of the principal, the focus group was clearly a source of rich further observations.
The majority of parents commented that leadership was very much shared. Parents spoke of the individual roles of many deputy principals, heads of year and heads of departments who had a more visible and hands-on involvement with their sons and daughters. Earlier findings related to distributed leadership (Harris, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane, 2009; Spillane & Coldren, 2011; Spillane & Healey, 2010) were confirmed. Parents’ observations of effective distributed leadership are provided below:

**Kelly**: Having a dean of studies move through with the children from year to year was a very useful system. He got to know the kids really well. They made that connection together. So if the students had problems they felt comfortable going to see the dean for their year group.

**Interviewer**: Did that also make you as a parent feel comfortable?

**Kelly**: Yeh, Yeh, you know I felt as though I knew him. You come into the school and they know you and say hello it makes you feel very comfortable (Parent, School A).

The Head of Year is a very important role – they become a big part of the girls’ lives (Parent, School E).

These comments validated other earlier findings in the perceptions of teachers and students, namely, that connectedness to significant staff particularly in middle management roles, impacted positively on students. Parental observations also strongly supported the findings of Shields and Miles (2008) and Darling Hammond (2010) whose research noted the positive impact of structures that promoted ‘personalised’ support.

Parents also spoke of the role of deputy principals who had specific responsibility for academic matters across the school.

**Parent 1**: When we first came to the school it had a reputation for being a very caring environment and that, plus its geographic location was a major reason why we chose it. I would have to say though, that the academic reputation of the school was not that strong. But since then, when Mr X came on board (the deputy principal) if I could pinpoint... we started to see a greater emphasis on the academics, it appeared in the newsletter, you
started to hear the kids talk about it, academic excellence. He has done a really good job in promoting that.

**Parent 2:** But they have such lovely teachers too! I mean they enjoy coming to school. The teachers *they make it!* (Parents, School C)

In summary, parents appreciated the role of the leadership of the principal as ‘pivotal’ in the success of the schools. They also observed leadership as genuinely distributed through a number of roles from deputy principals to middle management. Leadership teams fostered and promoted cultural elements of the school in the eyes of parents such as academic excellence, opportunities for involvement and accomplishment, care, community, and connectedness. These cultural elements will be discussed more fully later in this chapter. In the majority of the focus group interviews, while parents were discussing the attributes of leadership within the school they were more often than not drawn to include teachers, suggesting that there was a synergy of shared values between the leadership team, middle management and the broader teaching body. The comment above (from Parent 2, school C) is a natural segue for the discussion of parental perceptions concerning the role of teachers, particularly how ‘they make it’ a positive experience.

### 7.3 Parents’ perceptions of teachers.

There was little doubt that of all the ingredients in the mix of factors that contributed to high achieving students, or students achieving their personal best, ‘the teacher’ was the essential component in the eyes of parents:

The teacher is everything; the teacher can make or break a child (Parent, School G).

Every year is only as good as the teacher (Parent, School F).

Such comments confirm the insights of those who argue that the quality of a school will always be determined by the quality of its teachers (Caldwell, 2008; Dinham, 2008; Hattie, 2009, 2012; Moursheed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2007). The impact of the teacher in the perceptions of parents is elaborated under the following themes: The teacher-student relationship, communication, feedback and affective qualities of teachers.
7.3.1 Teacher-student relationship.

In accord with Ewington and McPherson’s (1998) study of parental perceptions, parents indicated that a positive teacher-student relationship leads to increased learning:

The best teachers are just there for the boys, talking to them, knowing them, and recognising them as individuals (Parent, School B).
Good teaching is about having good relationships that is the feature of this school (Parent School F).
I cannot believe the level of support my daughter has received. The teachers here are so accessible (Parent, School A).
Teachers know students right up to the principal. Our children simply enjoy coming to school and that is due to the teachers (Parent, School C).
I cannot believe the extra help my daughter has received, the teachers go the extra mile, meeting kids at lunchtime or after school (Parent, School A).

Conversely, when the relationship was not a positive experience parents spoke of the resulting impact:

My child had a bad year in terms of relationships with teachers and that year was a disaster (Parent, School G).
There is nothing worse than a teacher who ‘fobs off’ a child seeking help, it destroys the relationship and my child has experienced that (Parent, School B).

Predominantly though, the perceptions of parents concerning the quality of the teacher-student relationship above, were illustrated by the extraordinary lengths that teachers went to, in order to provide extra support for their sons and daughters. This characteristic was common across all schools and confirmed the commentary of all other focus groups in the study. Such support was captured in another subtly different observation from a parent in School B:

Parent: In my case I had a particular staff member really push my son along. He sort of got half way through year 12 and fell apart and they didn't let him go, they just kept at him. That kept him going and getting him through. So I think they are a huge …
**Interviewer:** So when you say they kept at him what were they doing? (Laughter from other parents).

**Parent:** They'd go up and talk to him, pull him aside during the day and get him to come to them at lunchtime and make sure that he did. They wouldn't say meet me at this time and not follow it up, they would follow it up and make sure he was there and if he wasn't, they'd approach him on the school ground and say come on let's go.

While the provision of extra academic support in an after-hours context was lauded by parents, the fact that teachers consistently followed-up students who needed that support, urging them to attend, was deeply appreciated and was witness to the notion of ‘relational trust’ identified by Bryk and Schneider (2002). In particular, the constitutional elements of relational trust; respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity, were evident in this reported social exchange in the school community. Of note, was the level of integrity on the part of the teacher as observed by the parent in ‘following up’ and not ‘letting go’. This reminded the researcher of a recent presentation by Mooney (2012) who used the metaphor of travelling on buses in India to describe the culture of her school for homeless girls in Calcutta:

> In India you do not merely travel by bus. You hold on to someone, who holds on to someone else, who holds on to someone else. This seems to me to be a good description of our learning journey and our school.

Mooney’s observation also seems to be an apt metaphor of the level of connectedness in the teacher-student relationship as observed by the mother in the focus group above. It is also worth noting the dynamics of the conversation in this reported exchange within the focus group of School B. Had the interviewer not subtly probed further by asking for clarification from the interviewee about what was meant by “keeping at him” the explanation may never have been offered and the richness of the response would have been lost. Such probes, subtly utilised, are an important skill in the interviewing process within phenomenologically-based research.

Having noted this exchange as a rich confirmatory example of the teacher-student relationship from the viewpoint of parents, another parent in the same focus group interjected not long after, with a contrary view:
My kids (twins) have been average performers and one in particular had an attitude that everything will be all right. I must admit that I did get a little bit disappointed that things were not followed up. For example, after school tutorials were offered in this subject and when not enough kids turned up, the tutorials were cancelled. My two did turn up, but the teacher did not follow through. I think if you advertise the support no matter how many turn up it should be provided (Parent, School B).

Clearly in this case, relational trust between the parent and school had been damaged as the parent perceived a disconnect in the relationship between her sons and the teacher. Parents desire consistency and follow-through in the behaviour of teachers, particularly when they offer support.

In terms of the IPA methodology (Smith, 1996, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) it is vital that the researcher presents a balanced perspective. The bracketing process demands that the researcher suspends a natural inclination not to include a dissenting voice because it does not sit comfortably with his or her experience, or the hegemony of positive parental opinion on the matter in hand, in this case, the teacher–student relationship. In fact, such dissent speaks to the truth of data as strongly as the representation of a consensus of opinion.

In the case of conflicting views presented here, the researcher would argue that there is evidence of child-parent discussion as described by Stewart (2008), the showing of a high degree of parental interest and knowledge of the child’s experiences at school. Stewart (2008) argued that such parent-child discussions at home were a contributing factor in increased academic achievement. The level of parental interest in their children’s education within the current study was illustrated by a parent quoting the observation of her son:

Mum, all you ever do is ask me questions about school (Parent, School G).

The school’s capacity to provide parents with avenues of communication was a strong feature of the focus group discussions. This was particularly true of direct communication in relation to their child’s academic progress.
7.3.2 Communication.

Parents spoke of the importance of communication between the school and home. Epstein (1983a, 1983b, 2009, 2010) noted the positive impact of two-way communication in the relationship between parents and school, arguing that the effect of family and school processes was greater than those of socioeconomic status and race. Bronfenbrenner (1994) referred to this important linkage as a ‘mesosystem’ linking two or more settings in the life of an individual, in this case, the home and school. Parents in the current study wanted a strong partnership and expected it. In most schools this was provided with one parent summing up the majority view:

They deliver on their promises of strong communication (Parent, School H).

Another parent spoke about the process of sending out the school newsletter to all prospective parents the year before their child commenced their studies at the school:

The newsletter is great. It is sent to you twelve months before your child arrives. It draws you into the community (Parent, School B).

Earlier comments from principals and deputy principals on the importance of communication about student progress were certainly reinforced by parents:

Communication can be great but it can also be hit and miss. We really want communication. Some teachers are very good, some not so (Parent, School A).

Communication could be improved a lot. I had a terrible shock when I found out that my daughter was not doing well in maths. There was no prior warning (Parent, School D).

Parents did not want surprises in relation to their child’s academic progress. The notion of communication between the school and parents was the source of greatest concern. Leaders and teachers felt that their lines of communication were strong and while a majority of parents agreed, the objections of others require schools to recognise that parents have an almost insatiable and justifiable desire for communication about their child’s academic progress. Feedback on students’
assessment, both formative and summative was a central feature of conversations across all focus groups.

7.3.3 Feedback.

Again, to reiterate observations from leaders, teachers and student focus groups, parents spoke about the role of feedback quite passionately. Commentary on the importance of feedback finds support in the literature (Creemers, 1994; Hattie, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012; Marzano 2003). The absolute necessity of ‘timely’ feedback and comments on the wasted opportunity when feedback was provided too many weeks after the assessment submission, were central to parental concerns. Parents also confirmed the need for detailed feedback that guided their children on “what to do next and how or where to go from here” (Parent, School C), almost echoing Hattie (2012), who had contended that feedback is concerned with three questions. “Where am I going? How am I going there? Where to next?” (p. 116). One parent in (School C) captured others’ views, when he reflected (referring to a metric that had been introduced and then abandoned in the Western Australian school system) that: “I want to see results that are measurable and understandable. Anything but levels!”. In Australia at this time there had been much debate around metrics related to outcomes based education, prompting the federal government to intervene and introduce a requirement for a ‘plain english report’ utilising grades of A-D.

This commentary confirmed the observations of the OECD (2012) which noted that publishing school information which is transparent and understandable means that parents, among others, “have the evidence they need to make informed decisions about student learning” (p. 8).

Epstein, (2010) recognised the challenges of communication with parents and strongly supported the view that schools should “review the readability, clarity and frequency of all communications” (p. 86). Clinton, Hattie and Dixon (2007) supported this parental request as they suggested that educational jargon can be an impediment to parental communication.

The evidence of the potential in parental-child discussions at home (Stewart 2008), also came to the fore as another parent commented on teachers’ availability and approachability in the context of feedback:
Good teachers are genuinely interested in kids, they’re good listeners. My son was frightened to keep on asking questions but I told him good teachers listen and encourage you to ask questions (Parent, School G).

This expression of affinity with the role of the teacher, highlighted the views of Epstein (2010) who noted that “understanding the teacher’s job, increased comfort in school, and carry-over of school activities at home” (p. 87).

Just as parents desire understandable feedback they also commented that before students can ask the questions referred to above, they too need understandable feedback.

Detailed feedback is very important. They need to know where they went wrong to start a conversation with their teacher (Parent School, B). They cannot get enough feedback, written comments on assessments are so important. It gives me as a parent some clue as to how to help him. Maybe I’m being too controlling but I just want to help (Parent, School D).

Further, parents spoke about the impact of ‘affirmation’, both formal and informal, which supported student conversations about feedback.

You cannot underestimate how important it is to be acknowledged, to be told you did a good job (Parent, School G).

Parents of boys in particular, spoke of how much their sons had benefited from positive affirmation and how they often proudly brought home certificates of merit and encouragement to show their parents, even in upper secondary school. As conversations moved from discussions about communication and feedback to affirmation, inevitably parents spoke of the personal traits of teachers that had impacted on their sons’ or daughters’ achievement.

7.3.4 Affective qualities of teachers.

Parents reinforced the need for qualities of patience, authentic active listening, passion for their subject and thorough organisation. Added to these were exhibiting encouragement, displaying approachability, and being willing to ‘follow up’. A sense of humour was also mentioned often. A striking comment came from a parent of
triplets who reflected on conversations with her daughters about the characteristics of the best teachers (Day, 2007; Fried, 1995) and their display of passion for their learning area.

The thing that rubs off on them the most is passion. They have a teacher who loves Human Biology and despite the fact that when they started they didn’t personally like her, they like that enthusiasm and passion and they now love the subject and the teacher (Parent, School F).

This observation was repeated in another school:

My daughter had friends over on the weekend and they were talking about their History lessons with Mr C. It was so unusual to hear kids animated, recollecting History lessons, but I could hear that it was all because of his passion. He was inspirational to them (Parent School E).

In addition to the qualities cited above, all parents spoke of the need for the teacher to be a master of their subject matter, stating that “kids see straight through them otherwise” (Parent, School F).

The current study was contextualised within a group of high performing academic schools. The study therefore, was interested to investigate whether parents were drivers of a culture that was results focused and whether that dominated why they chose a particular school for their children.

7.4 Parents’ perceptions concerning academic results.

While the leadership teams in schools had commented on their need to be cognisant of ‘the data’ regarding student performance (Fullan 2005; Mulford & Silins, 2011; Timperley, 2010), parents were mixed in their observations when asked if schools should be results-focused. Parents spoke of the reality of a ‘league table’ driven society, as can be seen in the following observations:

That is the reality, schools have no choice these days, they have to be results focused (Parent, School E).
You cannot afford not to be engaged with the results and if you visibly address it, talk about it, kids notice and it helps them achieve (Parent, School F).

Parents confirmed the earlier commentary of leaders and teachers that academic results could not be ignored and that data on student performance could be used to good effect. However, parental observations were tempered by a number of reflections that while results in the tertiary entrance examinations were important, and these schools had achieved very good results, most parents were looking for much more, thereby confirming research by Independent Schools Queensland (2011) which found that when parents were choosing to send their children to an independent school three key factors influenced choice, “preparation for students to fulfil their potential in life, good discipline and encouragement of a responsible attitude to work” (p. 3). Parents in School G, within the current study complemented these observations further:

**Parent 1**: They (schools) need to focus on everything, not just the academics, the whole person.

**Parent 2**: They also focus on life-skills here, for some kids just getting through the week is an achievement!

The comments from parents in School G were particularly powerful, as this was a school with a very low socio-economic index level and parents acknowledged the extremely difficult challenges faced by many students in their community. Examples of these challenges were families coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, recently arrived migrants from war-torn countries and as a consequence children suffering from trauma. These students grappled with considerable language and cultural adjustments together with issues related to their social and emotional wellbeing.

The comment of another parent in School B reinforces the perceptions of the two parents cited above:

Results are important for the school’s profile but not important for me as a parent. It is not my sole focus. I want kids that are well rounded and think that should be the main aim of the school. Offering a variety of academic
programs such as vocational education, the arts and sport is just as important.

In another school a parent offered the following observation:

We were not exclusively after results, we wanted a school with community and this school has it. We also wanted a school that engaged with the wider community and this school does, with its service programs and opportunities for student exchange (Parent, School C).

A final reflection on academic results highlighted yet another element that parents desired in their child's education:

We could have put our kids in School “X” which is just around the corner and has a strong pedigree of academic results but we wanted the “Mercy heritage” (religious order), the strong co-curricular program and the values.

The researcher was surprised at the extent to which parents downplayed academic results. The researcher had to consciously bracket his own views, both as a parent and educator within the IPA study, suspending a belief that parents would be results-driven and select schools on academic reputation, as he had done with his own children.

Parents prioritised individual needs of students, breadth of co-curricular programs; specific cultural values and social capital. Commentary from parents supported Hargraves and Fullan (2012) who made the observation that schools should be “evidence informed not data driven” (p. 172). The authors reminded school leaders not to “overload yourself with data, so that you have no room as a community, to think about or discuss anything else” (p. 172). Parents reminded the researcher that there is so much more to a school community than merely a unidimensional focus on academic performance. Parents would be comforted to know that leaders and teachers supported their views. Parental perceptions of the culture of schools are now explored.
7.5 Parents’ perceptions of culture.

When asked whether the culture of the school played a part in its success, parents focused on the sense of community and belonging, well captured in the following comment:

> It is a warm, welcoming community, it is a school with a great ambience (Parent, School (B)).

This statement echoed and confirmed the comments of students and teachers in previous focus groups. More acute observations came from other parents:

> It is about community here, everyone does care about everyone, the pastoral is the strength, it is as if they are saying, if you come, we can help... the kids see it (Parent, School G).
> We brought our daughter from School “Z”. It was a school that had everything in terms of facilities but no sense of community, no parent participation (Parent, School F).

Many parents spoke about the need for students to have opportunities to “find a niche, to participate” (Parent, School C) and thus to belong:

> My daughter is very much an atypical kid, but she found a place. They accept difference here (Parent, School A).
> When you find a niche it impacts on all other areas (Parent, School E).
> It is a very supportive culture, kids are encouraged to have a go (Parent, School F).

The collective voice of parents spoke of students finding a place, of being welcomed, and of experiencing an acceptance of difference, confirming student commentary in the preceding chapter. Parents who observe their children being welcomed, feel welcomed too, and when this occurs community flourishes. The National Catholic Education Commission of Australia (2011) suggested that parents have a right to expect that their children’s education is focused on their cognitive, physical, social and spiritual growth. The parents in the current study confirmed those expectations and saw them as the fulfilment of that social contract.
Parents commented on the importance of a broad, sporting and cultural program in their schools and applauded the way in which it enhanced commitment and school pride through broader opportunities to participate. Parent perceptions concerning the benefits of sporting and cultural programs reinforced earlier observations by students in the previous chapter. A majority of parents spoke of the pride that their children had in the school:

Our girls are proud of their community, their school. They wear their uniform with pride (Parent, School F).
There is an incredible sense of pride amongst the kids. In year 8 my son made a comment as we were driving past the school. ‘You know Dad, I love my school I could give it a great big hug’. He has now left the school and still wears his sports pants or leavers’ jacket (Parent, School A).

This sense of comfort, pride and belonging could well have been enhanced by the perception that the schools strived to provide genuinely safe environments, as one parent remarked:

It is a safe school environment, there is very little bullying and when it occurs it is dealt with quickly, our children simply enjoy coming to school (Parent, School D).

In focus groups, parents often expressed the need for a safe, orderly environment that enabled students to focus on learning. More importantly, parents confirmed the presence of such an environment.

The strongest theme in all discussions around the culture of the schools was that relating to the quality of relationships between teachers and students which had been earlier addressed in this chapter. Parents recognised that teachers had, in many cases, quite extraordinarily authentic relationships with their sons and daughters. Teachers knew them as individuals, with the relationship being characterised by mutual respect and trust and as a consequence, student learning was enhanced. Parents confirmed the earlier accounts of students (albeit different parents speaking about different students) around the powerful impact of informal conversations in the school yard, or in the sporting arena, or the music rehearsal, where teachers made the effort to develop the relationship in another context that ultimately deepened the relationship in the classroom.
Set against the theme of personal relationships was the Catholic context of the schools and the unsolicited observations about the heritage of the religious orders that had established them. It must be remembered that in an earlier chapter the researcher noted the reflection of a deputy principal from School E, who had commented on the charism of ‘hospitality’ that was central to the founding order of that school the Presentation nuns. That notion was embodied in the observations of many parents across the schools in the current study. Equally, the researcher noted the observations of parents in School F who had chosen the school for their daughters based on its ‘Mercy’ heritage and the values stemming from the religious order of the Sisters of Mercy. School, G and C were also schools that had a ‘Mercy’ heritage where compassion, respect, excellence, hospitality and justice were core values of the religious order’s charism and alluded to by parents. Parents from School F, when asked to make some summative observations at the end of the interview, all spoke of the powerful influence of the presence of nuns on the campus who resided in the convent but had no formal teaching role.

**Parent 1:** The sisters tell them that everyday we will pray for you for the rest of your life. Well you know we’ll take all the help we can get but how wonderful is that thought?

**Parent 2:** And when the kids are teary the first thing they say is where is Sr Mary?

**Parent 3:** Yes but where is the next Sr Mary?

It might be said that parents had answered that very question themselves in their observations of the values-laden culture of the schools their sons and daughters were inhabiting. It is argued that the lay leaders and teachers who had taken the place of the religious orders in these schools were preserving their values, their “charism”.

### 7.6 Parents’ perceptions of the peer group influence.

Parents acknowledged the effect of the peer group on their sons’ and daughters’ achievement. In fact, it might be argued they were the best placed group of all to make such an observation of the impact of the peer group. They supported leaders and teachers who spoke of the tone within the student cohort as almost a micro environment within the school, characterised by respect, support and care.
Bronfenbrenner (1994) would refer to this as a ‘microsystem’ within his ecological model of human development. He defined it in the following way:

A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face to face setting with particular physical, social and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. Examples include such settings as family, school, peer group, and workplace (p. 39).

Bronfenbrenner’s theory stated that within the microsystem proximal processes operate to produce and sustain development. However, such development depends on the microsystem’s capacity to function positively. In the current study, the microsystem of the peer group is observed as a positive, supportive agent in academic achievement as represented by the following parental observations:

The peer group is a huge influence, these kids push each other, support each other, ring each other about their study, email and text each other, meet with each other and it helps produce the results they achieve (Parent, School F).

Students encourage and support each other to have a go (Parent, School F). Peers are massively influential. This year my son has befriended kids who do study and it has helped him enormously (Parent, School G). Other kids are very important, a big influence. This Year 12 group were academically focused, there was healthy competition and friendly rivalry (Parent, School C).

A contrary view was proffered by one parent to remind teachers that not all students will be swept up by the enthusiasm of an academically able group:

...XXXX could get high scores but he worked hard to stay average! He was a nightmare and it was only until he got to year 11 and 12 that he started to focus on his study but even then he just did the minimum in a good year group (Parent, School D).
While examples like XXXX exist in every school the majority of parents interviewed would have concurred with the following parent:

The peer group is pervasive. But no matter what the results the girls respect different talents. The Dux of the Vocational program was as highly regarded for her achievement as the Dux of the TEE pathway (Parent, School E).

Parents of students who had left the school a few years ago spoke about the enduring bond of social connection that had characterised the cohort and how the support they received from each other was evident in relationships that lasted through to university, for example:

When they get to university they are almost expected to look after each other. My daughter was struggling with some work in the library at Uni one day, almost to the point of tears. She bumped into another girl from school who was in the year above her who offered help and her notes, who just set her up, who re-directed her and told her not to worry. I thought what an amazing experience that was. Here are these kids who have left school but still looking after each other (Parent, School F).

This observation supports Fass and Taubman (2002) who not only found that attachment to parents and peers increased social competence and academic achievement but supported adaptive pathways in post-school transition.

Parents’ perceptions of the influence of peers confirmed commentary from leaders, teachers and students themselves. The influence of the peer group in these high achieving schools was “pervasive’ in terms of pro-academic behaviours. Parents also confirmed the students’ own observations that they were able to be both supportive and collaborative, yet harness a healthy competitiveness in the pursuit of academic achievement. Having surveyed parental perceptions of the roles of leaders, teachers and the student peer group, it seemed prudent to ask parents to reflect on how they saw their role as an influence on the academic achievement of their children.
7.7 Parental perceptions of their own influence on student academic achievement.

Parents had an acute sense of their capacity to influence their children’s academic endeavour. In many cases, their reflections addressed the social and emotional support and nurturing they offered. Parents also reflected on their broader practical roles in helping with study and getting students to and from events. A final feature of the perceptions of their role was the social and emotional support they provided.

7.7.1 Social and emotional support.

When parents reflected on their role in the educational life of their children the instinctive response was to comment on the provision of social and emotional support. Epstein’s (2010) model of six types of parental involvement would categorise these responses under Type 1 “supporting, nurturing and rearing” (p. 94). The following commentary from parents is illustrative of this social and emotional dimension of parental influence:

At the beginning of year 11 Kate came home in tears saying “I cannot do this”. I remained calm, supported her with choices and things then moved on. We provided stability at home (School, C).
You have to love them, support them, encourage them and be interested and involved (Parent, School B).
You just do as much as you can to support them emotionally to lighten the load, running them around and giving them self belief and confidence.... we are prepared to fill the gaps (Parent, School A).

Another parent from the same school responded by adding:

But it is not only the parents who fill the gap, it is the community. If I couldn’t be there I knew there would be others who could (Parent, School A).

Just as parents supported their children, they recognised they could be a powerful support to each other, illustrating Epstein’s (2010) Type 3 form of Parental Involvement, “volunteering, supervising, fostering” (p. 94).
Part of parenting is getting to know your children’s friends’ parents. So you know when they are going somewhere, what type of household are they going into and what type of family are they mixing with. Because kids can just do stupid things so you know that if you can ring up other parents and talk to them about your concerns it is a support (Parent, School B).

Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) and Parke et al. (1989) noted that parents have an influence on adolescent peer associations through facilitation, approval or disapproval, conversations about friends and meeting other parents. The reflection above is illustrative of an indirect influence by parents on the peer selection effect referred to earlier in the literature review and also confirms the multi-dimensional construct of parental behaviours. In a subtle way, the parent in School B was endeavouring to facilitate peer connection through a vetting process via approval of the parents of her child’s peers. Such approval strengthens and affirms connections with like-minded peers who may share similar pro-academic dispositions, so confirming the work undertaken by Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001).

Parents spoke emphatically about their parenting role as providing encouragement.

**Parent 1:** We have to be there providing encouragement especially when they are unsure of themselves. You need to support them in their decision making at this age.

**Parent 2:** And I think it’s important parents should be encouraging the students to do what the school wants of them. Parents should back the school in that regard. It’s often the kids who are in trouble who do not have supportive parents. I think it’s our job to say have you done your homework, do you look decent in the morning, things like that. The kids learn discipline if you back up the teachers.

**Parent 1:** And the teachers need to be consistent in backing our efforts up (Parents, School D).

In the conversations with parent focus groups, the researcher found that there was often a high degree of “collaboration with the school community” another of Epstein’s (2010, p. 94) “Types” of parental engagement. One parent within the same focus group reflected on the importance of parents taking an interest in their child’s experiences at school:
Researcher: Do you find that the interest you are taking in your children makes a difference?

Parent 3: Well you know we did a little experiment recently. We are always following up on our kids. Have you done your homework, how much homework have you got, what did you do in school today? And it is always at times a battle. So we decided that for a term we would leave the kids to themselves – let them do what they want to do. And within a few weeks it was a disaster. They were falling behind, they were disorganised, they needed someone to be interested and they asked us for support. Parents being interested in what their kids are doing at home makes a lot of difference (Parent, School D).

This observation by the parent in School D that ‘they needed someone to be interested’ is a telling commentary on the role of parents and reflects the literature well. While Epstein (2010) argued that the parents’ role at home should be more focused on encouragement and support through listening and guiding rather than direct teaching, many parents spoke about the need for information about study skills and practical strategies to help their children be better organised at home.

7.8 Parental engagement with school activities.

A majority of parents spoke of engagement in a wide variety of school activities. These activities ranged from sporting, musical and dramatic events; art exhibitions; fundraising events; and purely social activities. As one parent said:

This school is a huge part of our life, we live here, we are so involved (Parent, School F).

Such an observation highlights the welcoming environment parents spoke about in the majority of schools. Equally, other parents noted:

Parent 1: From the very first parent briefing in year 8 we felt the school was telling us we have got to be involved.

Parent 2: They tell you that every year.

Parent 3: It remains for parents to then follow that up. But the school is doing their part (Parents, School D).
In order for parents to feel at home in the school, there is a need for a clear invitation to be extended and for parents to be reminded that it is a standing invitation. In such invitational gestures by schools, partnerships can flourish.

The parents in the identified schools were clearly engaged and supportive, the partnership between school and parents being strongly aligned: “it is the community spirit, we share similar values about education” (Parent, School A). Parents knew that they should support the work of the teachers in the classroom and be supportive of the culture of the school.

The focus groups highlighted how much more difficult the task of education can be when without parents who can “fill the gaps” or accept the invitation of partnership (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Indeed, other ‘gaps’ can be caused when there is an absence of parents or the presence of dysfunctional families. Parents in School G noted that for some parents with very different cultural backgrounds, it is not a cultural norm for them to be involved in their child’s education, being something they leave to the school. Lack of involvement may not necessarily be a sign of indifference but simply a cultural disposition. A parent in School G also noted that:

It's interesting that we think there is a common definition of ‘parents’. For many of our students it's aunties and uncles, older brothers and sisters. Some kids just fend for themselves, with no parents in the house. There are parents with alcohol, drug and mental health problems (Parent, School G).

This school would often use a variety of community welfare support services to make contact with parents. In many cases, staff from the school would visit homes to engage with parents who were simply not contactable through any other means. One poignant story was told about a teacher in charge of the Year 12 cohort who actually took a student out shopping for a suit, to attend his end-of-year ball. The student had no one else capable of supporting him in this endeavour. Cases like this highlight the school ‘filling the gaps” in parenting.

Notwithstanding the exceptions cited above, the majority of parents spoke of flourishing partnerships being built through welcoming communities based on
mutual respect between parents and schools. In this regard, Epstein (2010) suggested that:

Schools have choices... One approach emphasises conflict and views the school as a battle ground. The other approach emphasises partnership and views the school as a homeland (p. 94).

Evidence suggests that the schools in the current study were, for the majority of parents, ‘a homeland’ and as such, a place where parents felt they could contribute to the wellbeing and academic achievement of their children. As Putnam (2003) noted ‘we are better together’ (p. 1).

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, and by way of chapter summary, Table 7.1 (overleaf) identifies the key overarching themes found in the perceptions of parents concerning factors contributing to their children’s high academic achievement and the overall academic success of their school. Table (7.2) identifies cultural factors parents attributed to their school’s success.
Table 7.1

*Perceptions’ of Parents in Relation to Factors that Contributed to their Children’s High Academic Achievement and the Overall Academic Success of their School.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of Leadership</th>
<th>Perceptions of Teachers</th>
<th>Perceptions of the student peer group</th>
<th>Perceptions of their own role.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership is <em>pivotal.</em></td>
<td>Teachers viewed as the <em>most significant influence</em> on student achievement.</td>
<td>Peer group viewed as a <em>pervasive influence</em> on achievement.</td>
<td>Parents viewed their role as <em>overly supporting the social and emotional domain.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership perceived as <em>distributed.</em></td>
<td>Teacher-student <em>relationship crucial.</em></td>
<td>Peer group clearly a &quot;microsystem&quot;.</td>
<td>Strong correlation with Epstein’s typology of engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles of middle managers Deputies and Heads of Year significant.</td>
<td>Confirmed <em>extraordinary accessibility and availability</em> outside of the classroom.</td>
<td>Peers respectful of <em>individual difference.</em></td>
<td>Evidence of facilitation of peer associations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents saw leaders as key champions of <em>cultural values.</em></td>
<td>Teachers played a key role in the development of <em>relational trust</em> between parents and the school.</td>
<td>Peers both supportive, collaborative and engaged in healthy competition.</td>
<td>Parents valued <em>connections with other parents</em> that fostered mutual support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders modelled <em>strong relationships</em> with students.</td>
<td>Parents placed high stock on teachers being <em>communicative</em> with them.</td>
<td>Collaboration and support <em>endures beyond school</em> into post-school destinations.</td>
<td>Recognised that they played a role in <em>supporting teachers.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders, <em>key drivers of an academic culture.</em></td>
<td>Parents confirmed <em>quality feedback</em> as critical to student success.</td>
<td><em>A pro-academic culture</em> common among peer groups across the study.</td>
<td>Recognised that they should be <em>affirming of school values.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders acknowledged as addressing <em>data.</em></td>
<td>Parents confirmed <em>passion and enthusiasm</em> as essential feature of quality teaching.</td>
<td>Parents valued students being given <em>opportunities to lead.</em></td>
<td>Engaged in discussions about school at home. Sought more advice on how to support study at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensured parents felt <em>welcomed.</em></td>
<td>Agreed with other respondents that content knowledge was very important.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Valued the <em>religious setting and values</em> of the school. Strongly valued heritage of religious orders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Willingness to <em>participate in broad range of school activities.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7.2

*Cultural Factors Parents Believed Contributed to their Children’s High Academic Achievement and the Overall Academic Success of their School.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Parents’ Perceptions of the Culture of the School</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>While recognising the importance of academic results in a school parents <em>sought more.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents valued a <em>holistic focus</em> on their children and a culture that supported such a focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents sought a school that was a <em>community</em> and they affirmed that they had found it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While recognising that facilities were important <em>people and relationships were a higher priority.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement with the wider community through <em>service programs</em> was valued by parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents strongly endorsed the religious setting of the school, particularly the <em>charism</em> of the religious orders that founded some of the schools in the study. The religious setting was seen as a vehicle for the enculturation of values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents own values were comfortably aligned with the values of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents endorsed the views of leaders, teachers and students that relationships fostered both community and a <em>sense of belonging.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of <em>belonging influenced student achievement.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER EIGHT
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Introduction.  
The purpose of this research was to investigate the factors attributed to the academic success of nine selected Catholic secondary schools. These schools had consistently outperformed other ‘like’ schools in the context of the State tertiary entrance examinations. Attributes were gathered in each of the nine schools in the study via the perceptions of key stakeholders: leaders, teachers, students and parents.

The study was based on an epistemology of qualitative research, the chosen theoretical perspective was interpretivism and the methodology was an interpretative phenomenological analysis. The data were gathered through the use of qualitative semi-structured one-on-one interviews with principals and deputy principals. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with heads of subject departments, teachers, students and parents in each of the nine schools.

The main research question framing the study was:

*What are the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the success of their schools in the tertiary examination context?*

Four sub-questions explored the perceptions of key stakeholder groups: leaders, teachers, students and parents:

- What are the perceptions of leaders concerning their role, and the role of teachers, students and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context?
- What are the perceptions of teachers concerning their role, and the role of leaders, students and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context?
- What are the perceptions of students concerning their role, and the role of leaders, teachers and parents in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context?
• What are the perceptions of parents concerning their role, and the role of leaders, teachers and students in the success of their school in the tertiary examination context?

This chapter is structured by considering each of the four sub-questions in turn and concluding with a response to the main question. The researcher has endeavoured to present not just the singular roles of each stakeholder group but also explore that role within the context of the role of others. In doing so, the researcher has sought to triangulate the data in a way that would provide a gestalt of these school communities.

8.2 Leaders’ perceptions: Introduction.

From an analysis of leaders’ perceptions, the following overarching themes emerged: aligned strategic leadership; the predominance of a blended model of leadership; vision that was holistic rather than myopic; and the significant role of the head of department in curriculum design. Collectively, these factors contributed greatly to the success of the schools in the current study.

8.2.1 Aligned strategic leadership.

It was evident that leaders played a vital role in their schools’ academic success. A salient feature of this role was the way in which leaders worked as a team across three levels: the principal who articulated a strategic vision focused on academic excellence, the deputy principal who drove the vision and led heads of department in its implementation and heads of departments (HODs) who worked with teachers to ensure that the vision thrived in the classroom setting. Alignment across these three groups was strongly evident, and thus, leadership in the schools in the current study could be described as aligned strategic leadership. Each layer of leadership had a distinct role to play, but leaders worked as a team to push the school forward in a journey of improvement. Improvement was attained by giving attention to teaching and learning and exhibiting an intolerance of complacency.

The literature on leadership far too often focuses on the role of the principal and it is the view of this researcher that the synergy created between layers of leadership, particularly within secondary schools, needs greater recognition. It is hoped that the current study has taken a small step in highlighting the productive capacity of aligned leadership.
8.2.2 A blended model of leadership.

The current study concurs with Mulford (2008) who warned against categorising leadership approaches in any one singular fashion. Across the nine schools in the study, there was evidence of a blended model of leadership. This blended model consisted of: instructional leadership (Edmonds, 1979; Frost, 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Southworth, 2005), transformational leadership (Bass, 1998; Burns, 1978; Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005), distributed leadership (Caldwell, 2006; Duignan, 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Spillane, 2006, 2009; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane & Healey, 2010) and sustainable leadership (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2006). Given the identified success of the blended model in the schools investigated, it is recommended that this blended model of leadership is considered in any school seeking to maximise student achievement through improvements in teaching and learning.

In the current study, an ‘instructional focus’ provided for targeted academic goals focused on improvements in student achievement which was informed and driven by comprehensive data. There was a strong (but not exclusive) academic focus which fostered a culture of high expectations for students and teachers alike where teaching and learning was seen as core business (Mortimer, 1993; Purkey & Smith, 1984). Unlike the earlier literature in the field on instructional leadership which tended to draw on the work of the principal in primary schools, the current study with its focus on secondary schools argues that an instructional focus is driven by a leadership team not one leader. A transformational focus by leaders in the current study allowed for sharing of a vision, developing of people, the building of collaborative cultures and a focus on careful staffing (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 2009). In the current study, distributed leadership was evidenced by reciprocity of influence (Harris, 2005) between the three key leadership roles.

As discussed in the findings chapter, teachers also played a part in enacting the vision and strategies to achieve targeted goals, even students were empowered to lead in their own right. Again citing Harris (2005), it could be compellingly argued that leadership within the schools in the current study was characterised by a collective “conjoint agency” (p. 163). Given that high academic achievement had been sustained over time it was likely that elements of sustainable leadership might come to the fore. This was indeed the case. There were a number of Fullan’s (2005) elements in evidence: service with a moral purpose, commitment to change, lateral capacity building through networks, cyclical energising and a strong focus on
accountability. Figure 8.2 adapts Mulford’s (2008) four key models of leadership by suggesting, from the study findings, that a blended approach provides a gestalt that no single model could achieve on its own.

Figure 8.2 Blended model of leadership

### 8.2.3 Holistic vision.

The articulated vision in these schools was hypermetropic. While academic results were targeted as a key element in terms of strategic goals, broader holistic and pastoral needs of students were given an equal priority and were not diminished in the pursuit of academic excellence. It is argued that superior academic achievement need not necessarily result in a diminishment of broader personal, social and cultural goals. Accordingly, it is recommended that goals related to academic achievement can and should be pursued in tandem with extra-curricular programs and goals that are more personally and socially oriented.

Leaders nurtured a particular culture that may be defined predominantly as student-focused rather than results-focused. Such a culture was characterised by an
emphasis on the building of relationships between staff and students, with the result that social and emotional wellbeing of students became a high priority. This student focused culture was seen as a foundation for the attainment of academic results. Leaders demanded that students were ‘known as individuals’ and they modelled this in their own interactions, talking with them and listening to them. Leaders sought teachers who were also highly relational as well as good pedagogues. Leaders were immersed in data on holistic student performance which was used to track, counsel and monitor students as well as drive improvements in teaching and learning. Data enabled students to be known in more than just an academic sense. The culture of these successful schools was not insular, instead leaders were outward looking, using data to benchmark themselves to other like schools and nurture reflective practice.

Leaders promoted a culture of care and developed this through a vibrant sense of community. They spoke of the need for students to be provided with opportunities to achieve personal excellence and accomplishment and repeatedly spoke of the need to insist on high expectations. Student achievements were consistently celebrated and schools encouraged students to participate across the broad spectrum of co-curricular activities. Participation enabled a sense of belonging which enhanced community and wellbeing. The existence of such a culture created a foundation for academic success, where both academic and personal growth contributed to a holistic vision (Figure 8.2).

![Figure 8.2 Holistic School vision](image)
8.3 Curriculum design and heads of subject departments.

Leadership teams were strongly focused on curriculum design with scaffolded curriculum in lower-secondary school meeting the skills required of curriculum in upper-secondary. Deputies and HODS monitored scope and sequencing in programming from Year 7 – Year 12. Quality assessment design and attention to timely detailed feedback was a hallmark of conversations concerning teaching and learning. The role of HODS in the development of assessment, feedback and monitoring of student performance was crucial. The role of the subject head of department has been the focus of significant study in Australia (Deece, 2003; Dinham, 2006; Dinham, Brennan, Collier, Deece & Mulford, 2000; Dinham & Scott, 1999; White, 2001), and the United Kingdom (Brown, Boyle & Boyle 2000; Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Brown, Rutherford, Boyle, 2000; Harris, 1995, 1998, 2000) as well as New Zealand New Zealand, (O’Neill, 2000), and the United States (Siskin, 1994, 1995). The results of the present study support the proposition that the HOD is a highly influential leader, playing a significant role in the process of school improvement. Executive leaders and teachers in the current study confirmed the crucial role of the HOD in these high performing secondary schools. The present study addressed, at least in part, the concern of Brown and Rutherford (1999) that there is need for more research into the strengths and weaknesses of leadership in middle management.

8.4 Perceptions of Leaders: Conclusion and recommendations

With reference to school leaders, the following conclusions and recommendations, based on the findings of the current study, are made:

- In the context of high performing secondary schools, leadership is best provided through a team approach, uniting the principal, deputy principals and heads of subject departments.
- Effective leadership thrives in secondary schools when there is an aligned strategic vision at all three levels of leadership.
- Leadership by its very nature is complex and potential leaders would be naïve to think that one model of leadership will ever suffice. A blended model of leadership is strongly recommended for aspiring leaders in contemporary secondary schools. The findings of the current study would suggest that a blended model focusing on elements of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership and sustainable
leadership best serves schools attempting to improve the academic performance of their students.

- High performing secondary schools were characterized by a leadership and culture that was outward looking, seeking to benchmark themselves with other like schools in terms of academic performance, and prepared to learn from them.

- Secondary school leaders seeking to improve academic results should not be myopic in their vision. High academic performance can be achieved without sacrificing broader personal, social and cultural goals. It is recommended that goals related to academic achievement can and should be pursued in tandem with extra-curricular programs and goals that are more personally and socially oriented. Indeed an emphasis on the development of a culture that emphasizes care, community and the primacy of positive relationships promoted not only well being but also improved academic outcomes.

- The current study has found that across all nine schools there were flourishing communities with high levels of connectedness between students and teachers and a deep sense of personal belonging among students. Such connectedness suggests a spiritual influence in both the work of leaders and teachers (Nouwen, 1998; Palmer, 2007). It is recommended that further research on the influence of a ‘spiritual leadership’ (Lavery, 2012; Okomo - Okello, 2011; Rebore & Walmsley, 2009) in high performing schools be undertaken.

- In the light of an increased focus on leadership development in schools through the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and the development of the Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2011), it is suggested that the findings within the current study may have implications for the professional development of principals and leaders in secondary schools. All five elements of the Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2011) are addressed within the current study.

- In recognition of the unique roles of deputy principals and heads of subject departments in the secondary school context, further research into their contribution to academic achievement of students is recommended.

Leaders spoke of the vital contribution of teachers across the nine schools in the current study. Conclusions and recommendations concerning the perceptions of teachers are provided overleaf.
8.5 Perceptions of Teachers: Conclusions and recommendations

The quality of the aligned strategic leadership at three distinct levels has been referred to earlier in this chapter. Teachers confirmed the influence of leadership at all three levels particularly the influence of deputy principals and heads of departments who they worked with closely. Teachers viewed leaders as key agents in the development of an academic focus in the schools. Teachers felt supported through professional development, communication, consultation and a sense of autonomy. Their relationship with their head of department was crucial to the development of a culture of collegiality and reflective practice. Teachers require and appreciate leaders who are pro-active in the development of an academic culture and thrive when they feel that they themselves are consulted and given personal autonomy. As noted by Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet and Guay (2008) such autonomy facilitates an internal locus of control leading to greater work satisfaction and the potential for less burnout.

8.5.1 Teachers’ orientation to the subject matter.

When asked to reflect on key attributes that had enabled them to achieve high academic results with their students, teachers’ responses covered a number of areas, chief among them was content knowledge. Teachers spoke of the need for in-depth content knowledge that enabled automaticity in their teaching and inspired confidence in their students. Content knowledge in and of itself was not enough though, it had to be paired with subject matter that was relevant and authentic to the lives of students. Materials that examined contemporary issues, events and trends in the discipline were the mainstay of effective programs. Teachers spoke of the need to explicitly address the content of the examined curriculum, consistently highlighting the relevance of classroom activities to the curriculum itself and then being prepared to take the topic under investigation beyond the curriculum. Intellectually challenging and relevant instruction was a hallmark of the teaching in these schools. Based on these findings, there may well be implications for professional development of teachers that not only focuses on pedagogy but enriches content knowledge with contemporary, discipline specific, subject matter. These findings also have implications for the training of secondary teachers in higher education where curriculum design in secondary teaching programs needs to strike the appropriate balance between relevant, subject specific content and broader theoretical pedagogy.
Teachers noted that their own efficacy concerning their knowledge of subject matter enhanced the quality of the relationship they built with students as such subject content knowledge inspired trust. Teachers attributed the quality of the teacher–student relationship as a significant factor in student performance. Teachers argued that with trust as a foundation, passion and enthusiasm for the subject further enhanced and sustained relationships with students, inspiring engagement and increasing motivation, thus confirming the literature (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008; Day, 2007; Fried, 1995). Teachers and pre-service teachers seeking to improve their own practice and student achievement in their classrooms are reminded that knowledge, passion and enthusiasm for the subject facilitate learning and can be a conduit for the development and enhancement of the student-teacher relationship. Classroom discussions that are relevant to the lives of students animate subject matter, connecting students to their subjects and to their teachers.

8.5.2 Teacher-student relationship: A manifestation of love and care.

The teacher-student relationship was also noted by teachers as a central attribute of their practice over-and-above its observance in the classroom. On an interpersonal level, to re-iterate the words of one teacher, “interest in the kids is just as important as interest in the subject” (Teacher, School E). Teachers’ availability and approachability was an extension of a love and care that created a genuine sense of personal wellbeing which teachers regarded as intrinsic to student performance. The manifestation of this love and care of students was seen as closely linked to the Catholic identity of the schools under study and answered the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of WA (2009). It is recommended that Catholic schools engage in reflection about the nature of their Catholic identity not only because it questions what is taught and how, but also because it goes to the heart of how people relate to one another in community (Convey, 2012). The retention and maintenance of this Catholic identity is a goal worthy of pursuit and one that has implications for the Catholic school system of Western Australia.

8.5.3 Pedagogy and curriculum design.

Teaching strategies in the current study were varied with a genuine balance of approaches between direct instruction and collaborative group work being favoured. Given the nature of the Year 11 and Year 12 context, a slightly greater emphasis on direct instruction and teacher-led whole class discussion was evident in upper
secondary classes. Teachers spoke of the very prominent role of note-taking as a reflective, meta-cognitive practice for students. Note-taking needed to be guided by teachers who were able to identify what mattered most in relation to the curriculum and how activities or discussions at a point in time, related to an examinable topic. Teachers believed this practice enhanced students’ study skills and students strongly confirmed this. Subject specific meta-cognitive practices (specifically referred to in Chapter 5) were deemed important contributors to academic achievement of students. The reflections of teachers concerning their teaching strategies in the context of the Year 11 and Year 12 classroom have the potential to inform professional development. This is particularly true in respect to note-taking and study skills as well as subject specific meta-cognitive strategies. More research could be valuable within subject departments to isolate subject specific practice as opposed to general meta-cognitive practices.

Thoughtful, scaffolded, curriculum design from Years Seven to Twelve was confirmed by teachers as a powerful enabler of strong academic achievement in upper secondary classrooms. The planning, scope and sequence of curriculum was integral to the development of core skills that gave students the competence required for more complex tasks in Year Eleven and Year Twelve classrooms. Teachers also spoke of the necessity to design a variety of assessment types that authentically evaluated the conceptual understandings required by the curriculum. Opportunity to learn essential skills within a guaranteed and viable curriculum was evident (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano, 2003). Quality assessment, regularly undertaken with detailed and timely feedback, was seen as crucial within the cycle of planning, teaching and evaluating. Assessment was a unique opportunity for tracking, counselling and providing personal direction to students (Dinham, 2008; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012). In these successful schools, curriculum design and its execution was taken very seriously. Such findings have significant implications for schools seeking to improve the academic performance of their students. Firstly, as was earlier discussed, curriculum design must be promoted and led by engaged ‘hands on’ leadership across all three levels of the secondary school. There are also significant implications for subject departments as this is where the collaborative endeavour of teaching teams provides the architectural drawings of such designs before their implementation in the classroom. Communication between teaching teams across the year levels becomes a significant responsibility of the HOD to enable appropriate sequencing of skills.
8.5.4 Professional development.

The promotion of professional development is cited in the literature on effective and improving schools as being critical (AITSL, 2012; Darling Hammond, 2010; Dinham, 2008; Frost, 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Jensen, 2012; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Southworth, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 5, teachers in the current study cited two major types of professional development: formal external professional development and in-house whole of school and departmental professional development. External opportunities valued by teachers were tertiary entrance exam (TEE) marking, (clearly the most beneficial in the eyes of teachers), consensus network meetings and subject specific curriculum meetings, usually run by professional organisations or system/sector offices. Teachers were fulsome in their praise of opportunities provided by CEOWA to engage in activities that enhanced their capacity to understand and interpret external data on student performance. The in-house professional development opportunities were both formal and informal experiences. These in-house experiences ranged from formal whole of school programs, for example, Teacher Designed Schools or whole of school behavioural management programs, to less formal departmental meetings and peer mentoring. Informal conversations in the departmental office were often seen by teachers as productive opportunities to discuss professional practice and reflected the high degree of professionalism and camaraderie among the teaching staff.

In keeping with their outward looking leaders, teachers also acknowledged the power of engagement with external networks which supported the literature, (AITSL, 2012; Fullan, 2005; Hargraves and Fink, 2006; Leithwood, 2010) suggesting that lateral capacity building through external networks re-energises practice and facilitates a transformational culture in schools seeking to improve. From the findings of the current study, it is recommended that schools balance both external and internal professional development opportunities as teachers attest to the value of both forms. In the context of the current study, teachers would be strongly advised to participate in any opportunity they have to be engaged as external examiners in tertiary entrance exams. In the light of external standardised testing, schools would be advised to heed the feedback of teachers concerning the need to be ‘data literate’ and provide professional development opportunities in this area for their staff. It is clear that engagement in quality professional development has the potential to develop teachers as leaders in professional practice, facilitating what Spillane (2010) referred to as the leader-plus aspect of distributed leadership and
enabling collective improvements in instructional effectiveness. The provision of quality professional development creates what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) described as “professional capital” (p. 80), a necessary component if teaching is to be transformed in schools.

8.5.5 Teachers’ perceptions of the student micro-culture.

Teachers reported that the student body was a very influential micro-culture. When students are persuaded to support a pro-academic culture, academic achievement can be enhanced. The majority of teachers noted that students responded well to high expectations irrespective of socio-economic context. Benchmarking student work to well understood external standards facilitates high achievement. Healthy competition was seen as a positive influence on student performance and motivation. A strong collaborative culture of peer support was perceived as co-existing with healthy competition across the nine schools in the study. It is strongly recommended that schools and teachers acknowledge the powerful influence of the student body in efforts to develop a pro-academic culture. The promotion of an academic culture through highly visible, consistent affirmation of academic achievement at public ceremonies and through school newsletters should be adopted.

8.5.6 The teacher-parent relationship.

The role of parents as partners in the educational experience of their children was acutely appreciated by teaching staff. Teachers were conscious of the powerful influence of supportive parents and on some occasions despondent about the small minority who were less than supportive. Teachers’ acknowledgement of their responsibility to consistently communicate with parents concerning their children’s academic progress reinforced the emphasis that leaders placed on keeping parents informed. Expressions of ‘care’ as alluded to by Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) and an awareness of what Bryk and Schneider (2002) described as parental vulnerability were strongly evident. Such expressions of care and sensitivity to parental needs nurtured personal trust in the teacher-parent relationship. Leaders and teachers should not lose sight of the need for vigilant attention to communication with the parent body as parents who feel they are participants in their children’s education rather than spectators can be a force for great good.
8.5.7 Teachers' perceptions in summary

In summary, and based on the findings pertaining to teachers, the following conclusions and recommendations are made:

- Professional development for teachers in Secondary schools should focus just as much on contemporary content knowledge as it does on pedagogy.
- An appropriate balance between content knowledge and broader instructional skills should be a feature of Secondary teacher training.
- The teacher-student relationship is crucial in any effort to improve academic performance of students. The relationship can flourish through knowledgeable, passionate and enthusiastic teaching which builds trust and respect between the student and teacher. Teachers also have the capacity to nurture their relationship with students by focusing on the wellbeing of the individual through care and love, manifested in the quality of their professional practice, availability and accessibility. The current study suggests that such endeavours are not mutually exclusive, indeed they are mutually beneficial. Such a view was illustrated well in the following student comment “Yeh our history teacher would mark the TEE exams every year. He knew the syllabus back to front. He also knew every single student! When he taught the class he made you feel he was teaching you” (Student, School F).
- Catholic schools need to engage consistently in reflections on their own Catholic identity as such reflective practice has the potential to re-affirm their purpose and mission but also aid effective teaching, built as it is on a mandate of love and care.
- Teachers should be balanced in their employment of a variety of instructional strategies acknowledging that direct instruction and whole class discussion were seen to be slightly more effective within the Year 11 and Year 12 context.
- Meta-cognitive strategies within a subject specific context need to be carefully considered by Secondary teachers.
- At the departmental level, it is recommended that diligent attention be given to the scope and sequence of curriculum from Year 7 to Year 12. Equally, thoughtful design of assessment tasks aligned to upper Secondary syllabus requirements and specific detailed feedback are key attributes of effective teaching in the Year 11 and Year 12 context.
- Teacher reflections on the powerful influence of professional development should be heeded by leaders. Encouraging staff to participate as examiners
in external public examinations has great potential. Providing a balance of both in-house and external professional development in schools is encouraged. Schools must ensure appropriate resourcing of professional development as high performing schools in the current study have reaped the rewards of such investment. Equally, resourcing professional development has the potential to renew the passion and commitment of teachers, combating burnout.

- Teachers’ observations concerning leadership in their schools should be taken into consideration by principals and deputy principals. Teachers believed that leaders who do not allow themselves to be distracted by relentless administrative requirements, and instead promote an academic culture and foster professional learning communities, have a greater influence on school improvement.

- Teachers need to remain cognizant of harnessing the capacity of productive partnerships with parents. Consistent and sensitive attention to communication with parents will build trust and foster relationships.

- The micro-culture of the student body is a powerful influence in the development of a pro-academic culture within a school. Teachers and leaders should promote high expectations, healthy competition and collaborative peer support structures to facilitate a pro-academic culture. After-school peer study groups, peer mentoring and teacher led tutorials have the potential to improve academic performance and foster an appropriate academic culture.

Conclusions and recommendations arising out of findings related to student perceptions are presented below.

8.6 Perceptions of students: Conclusions and recommendations

As has been previously stated, the researcher sought to investigate whether student commentary would contest or validate leaders’ and teachers’ responses. Of all the voices in the current study, the researcher believed student perceptions had the greatest potential to add a unique dimension to observations about the effectiveness of their leaders, teachers and the culture of their schools. The following conclusions and recommendations, based on the findings of the current study, underscore the significance of the student voice.
8.6.1 Students and leadership

It has already been stated that research attempting to identify relationships between leadership and student achievement must consider the perspectives of the ‘consumer’ (Gentiluci & Muti, 2007). Students made a number of pertinent observations concerning the leadership in their schools. Students spoke of the personal touch of principals who knew them as individuals. Principals cannot underestimate the powerful impact of personal conversations with students and their motivating influence. A majority of students spoke about the personal interviews and conversations they had with deputy principals who were particularly knowledgeable about their academic achievement, tracking and counselling them on their progress, providing acknowledgement and affirmation. Most importantly students spoke of the role of leaders in promoting an academic culture which emphasised personal excellence and in turn was supported by teachers. There could be no better claim for distributed leadership than this observation by students. The utilisation of year group assemblies where ‘cultural values’ like academic excellence and personal excellence were addressed, had left a marked impression on students and should be noted as a very important tool for communication and promotion of cultural values.

8.6.2 To be known

Students commented on pastoral structures like ‘House’ systems which promoted participation in sporting, cultural and service-oriented activities, inspiring observations that “it becomes so much more than a place to go to school. It becomes a community (Student, School F)”. Students spoke of an educational experience that was highly personalised, where they were known, loved and valued as individuals, “It was always about you as a person. The motto of the school was ‘love in action’ and they certainly lived out their motto” (Student, School G). It would be heartening for the system and the schools themselves that students confirmed leaders’ and teachers’ observations regarding the importance of personal relationships, connectedness in community and the powerful influence of being known and loved.

8.6.3 The teacher-student relationship: Sustaining passion and enthusiasm

Students strongly confirmed the importance that leaders and teachers gave to the primacy of the teacher-student relationship and in doing so, confirmed what is found in the literature (Dinham, 2008; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012; Shields & Miles,
2008; Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2009). Student commentary was emphatic, “if you do not have a relationship with the teacher you cannot learn” (Student, School E). Of particular note were student observations of the ‘invitational’ nature of their teachers’ interactions, “they invite you to ask questions, it is nice to be encouraged” (Student, School E). Students also confirmed the dedication of teachers that leaders had spoken about, particularly teachers’ availability and accessibility outside of the classroom. Students also spoke of the stark contrast in their learning when teachers were less invitational and accessible. Teachers seeking to improve their relationship with students need to consider how they might improve their invitational disposition. Accessibility and availability are key attributes in the process of nurturing the student-teacher relationship in the secondary school context.

Students confirmed the importance of teachers who exhibited enthusiasm and passion, “they had to like teaching, when they had passion it made you love the subject. It made a massive difference” (Student, School F). Given that accessibility, availability, enthusiasm and passion were all attributes confirmed and admired by students in their best teachers, the danger of teacher burnout looms large. It behoves leaders who manage teachers to care for teachers as much as they care for their students. Affirmation, access to professional learning opportunities and sometimes protection from their own zeal need to be provided for teachers by leaders if teacher effectiveness is to be sustained.

8.6.4 Students’ perceptions concerning teacher content knowledge and pedagogy

The value of teacher content knowledge was also supported by student observations. Students were keen to point out, however, that simply teaching to the syllabus and the exam was not a common feature of their better teachers’ approach, “he was a teacher who did not just teach to the syllabus he referred to so much more, a teachers’ wider knowledge is so important” (Student, School F). The acknowledgement of wider knowledge confirms Brown and Cocking’s (2000) view that working with relevant knowledge allowed students to go beyond information, facilitating thinking in problem representations and providing further cognitive roadmaps within the discipline. This also confirms the earlier suggestion that specific professional development in content knowledge and perhaps even on-going post graduate study in a discipline area, may have considerable benefits for teacher effectiveness in secondary school classrooms.
For students, teachers who were able to teach with clarity and specificity were seen as highly effective. A teacher's capacity to prioritise what was 'important to know' and 'be able to do' was valued highly by students. In short, it might be said that there was an 'economy' to their teaching. Students also appreciated variety in the adoption of teaching styles from purposeful direct instruction to collaborative activities and practical experiments. The majority of students spoke of the importance of study skills being developed in lower secondary classrooms that paid dividends when they undertook study in their senior years. They confirmed teachers' observations that quality note-taking was an integral part of the development of sound study skills, an insight also supported by the literature (Hattie, 2009; Kobayashi, 2005; and Marzano, 2003). It was clear from student perceptions that effective teachers were also highly organised and this allowed students to know where the lesson or series of lessons was heading, in a sense, there was a clear 'narrative' in their teaching. Teaching skills and strategies such as clarity and specificity around what was important to know, the use of varied teaching styles, the utilisation of note taking and explanation of study skills were valued by students and should thus be adopted by teachers.

Another element of teacher organisation as perceived by students was their attention to feedback on student assessments. If the narrative in teaching and learning is to flow, sound feedback that mapped 'where to next' was a clear requirement of students. Students spoke of the extra care exhibited by teachers in providing 'best answer models' and allowing students to re-submit in order to gain further understanding and more feedback. The majority of students spoke about teachers allowing students to hand in extra 'practice' assignments broadly replicating examination tasks that would be assessed, in addition to the normal assessment regime. This allowed for highly individualised and specific feedback to be given to individuals before final submission. Students also spoke positively of the value of 'self assessment' as an effective assessment strategy, supporting the views of their teachers and confirming the literature (Brady & Kennedy, 2012; Hattie, 2009; McDonald & Boud, 2003). Teachers who may not utilise this practice would do well to consider the commentary of teachers and students in the current study, and confirmation of the literature concerning its effectiveness.
8.6.5 Students' ‘insider’ perceptions of their peer culture

Students confirmed leaders’ and teachers’ observations concerning the impact of the peer ‘micro-culture’. As previously stated, schools in the current study had provided mechanisms that enhanced peer support through after-school study groups, peer-tutoring and a variety of community service opportunities. Teachers had modelled a high degree of care and it is argued that this modelling influenced student behaviours. Student observations re-enforced Edward and Mullis (2001) who suggested that service experiences such as peer-tutoring and supportive study groups enhanced a sense of connection and capability through opportunities to contribute. Students spoke of a supportive and collaborative culture within the peer cohort, particularly evidenced in a willingness to share resources and expertise, “It was so important to have a cohort where people share knowledge and are willing to teach each other... our top students always supported others (Student, School E). Equally, there was evidence of competitiveness in terms of academic achievement that was grounded in a culture that encouraged students to strive for excellence. Students maintained that a healthy competitiveness could co-exist alongside a collaborative and supportive culture within the peer group.

8.6.6 Students’ perceptions of parents: Being there

Leaders and teachers had viewed parents as important ‘partners’ in the educational experience of their sons and daughters. The literature also highlights the powerful influence of parents on student achievement (Bryk & Schneidner, 2002; Epstein, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Jeynes, 2007; Simon, 2009; Stewart, 2008). Student reflections on the role of parents in their academic success supported the literature and confirmed parental influence as significant. Students spoke of the benefits of supportive parents. Support was defined in the context of providing a home environment where learning was valued, where expectations were balanced and most importantly, when academic success was not always attained, encouragement was provided. Students spoke about their memories as very young children, of parents who encouraged them to read and who would read to them. They spoke of routines being established at home that were conducive to learning. Pro-academic behaviours were adopted early through the encouragement of parents in relation to study skills and support with homework. Students reported that this meant the transition to high school was relatively smooth as they had already adopted skills seen as pre-requisites for success in a more demanding academic environment.
Students spoke of their appreciation of parents who were subtle and restrained in their support, "being there" in the background with gentle encouragement. This was particularly relevant given the high levels of anxiety that are sometimes experienced by students in their final year of school. Students also commented on a perceived alignment between parents and the school in terms of values and communication. Speaking of her father, one student noted “it was never an option for me that I would not try, and that same attitude was fostered by the school” (Student, School F). Another student noted that “teachers were prepared to talk to our parents, you felt that teachers and parents worked together for you” (Student, School F). The current study confirms Simon’s (2009) findings that even in the last few years of the educational journey students report a positive impact on their academic achievement when family and school are perceived to have a flourishing partnership.

8.6.7 Students’ perceptions: Summary and recommendations

A significant body of research has argued that students are capable of insightful reflections concerning their experiences of learning in the classroom (Beresford, 2003; Flutter, 2006; Pedder and McIntyre, 2006; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Ruddock, 2006; Watts and Youens, 2007). More recently, there is even an increasing call to actually put structures in place that formally facilitate student feedback on teaching performance (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2011; Jensen and Reichl, 2011; Nous Group, NILS, MGSE, 2011). The current study would concur with this view.

In summary, and based on the findings pertaining to students, the following conclusions and recommendations can be made:

- Students were emphatic in their confirmation of the importance that leaders and teachers gave to the primacy of the teacher-student relationship as an attribute of their effective practice. Teachers must never lose sight of this and be cognizant that their approachability, availability as well as enthusiasm and passion for their subject can enhance the teacher-student relationship. Leaders need to nurture teachers’ capacity to sustain these qualities through affirmation and access to professional development.

- Students noted that teachers’ content knowledge, both breadth and depth was an essential feature of their best teachers’ practice. It is recommended that teachers seek subject-specific professional development that enhances
content knowledge and that formal post-graduate study may also be an option facilitating this. Leaders should seek avenues to support teachers in this endeavour.

- Teaching skills and strategies such as clarity and specificity around what was important to know, varied teaching styles and the utilisation of note taking and study skills were valued by students and should clearly be covered by teachers.

- Teacher organisation that provided a sense of direction and a narrative from one lesson to another was a skill valued by students and is strongly recommended. Such a finding emphasises the need for teachers to remain cognizant of Ausubel’s (1960, 1968) injunction of “cognitive scaffolding” via the use of “advance organizers” which supports students reflections that new knowledge is better understood under broader earlier cognitive structures. Ausubel (1960), referred to this sequencing as progressive differentiation and student’s confirmation of its benefits has implications for macro-curricula design as well as teacher lesson sequencing.

- Students required timely, detailed feedback. They strongly supported the use of student exemplars or ‘best answer’ models. Students spoke favourably about opportunities to be allowed to hand in drafts of responses to assessment before final submission and appreciated teachers who gave them feedback at this point in time. Self-assessment opportunities were deemed valuable by students and allowed them to reflect on their learning. All of these assessment practices are recommended for adoption by teachers. There is considerable merit in professional development for teachers on the topic of student self-assessment and the use of student exemplars.

- Students noted that those principals and deputy principals who took the time to get to know students as individuals had a motivating influence on their achievement. Leaders need to utilize opportunities for one-on-one conversations with students that provide acknowledgement, affirmation, counselling and direction. Leaders can utilize more formal mechanisms such as year group assemblies to address significant cultural values such as academic excellence and personal excellence, as students reported these experiences as influential.

- Broader pastoral mechanisms such as “house” systems were valued by students and helped to promote opportunities for participation and connection in the wider life of the school. Such structures enhanced a
personalised educational experience which was conducive to increased academic achievement. Opportunities for sporting, cultural and service activities enhanced a sense of community and belonging, which in turn appeared to enhance academic achievement. Schools would be wise to acknowledge that an emphasis on extra-curricular activities can co-exist, complement and facilitate academic excellence.

- Students supported leaders’ and teachers' observations concerning the powerful influence of the pro-academic peer culture. Structured study groups in after-school settings are avenues that may be used to enhance student capacity to socially navigate their way into productive, positive peer relationships.

- Students provided accounts that answered Harris and Goodall’s (2008) statement that parents “need to know they matter” (p. 286). This was true on two distinct levels, the provision of structures in the home that facilitated learning and the provision of emotional capital (Reay, 2000). Parental support in homework and study habits from a young age at home and engaging in reading with their children, were memories that eighteen year old students found to be influential in their academic achievement.

- Subtle emotional support and encouragement by parents was seen by the majority of students as an attributable influence in their success. It is recommended that schools encourage parental engagement with their children’s studies at home over the course of their children’s learning journey. Parents need to know that their sons and daughters benefit from their (parents) ‘being there’. Schools would do well to provide parents with information/training programs addressing the perceptions of their sons’ and daughters’ that engagement and support in their learning, working with the school in partnership and providing an emotional safety-net matters in relation to their well being and academic achievement.

- Schools need to do everything in their power to work with students who, for a variety of reasons, do not have the necessary parental support at home. Such support can often compensate for the lack of emotional capital in students’ lives and improve their psychosocial functioning in school.

- Schools should consider processes that allow them to regularly gather student perceptions of learning and teaching in their classroom. Such data can be utilized as a useful tool in teacher formation and school improvement and directly benefit student learning.
• Above all, teachers should never lose sight of the powerful impact of expressions of care: "you want to prove to them that they were right to care" (Student, School F).

Conclusions and recommendations arising out of findings related to parental perceptions are presented below.

8.7 Perceptions of Parents: Conclusions and recommendations

Parents perceptions centred on the following overarching themes. The ‘pivotal’ role of broadly distributed leadership, teachers who played the most significant role in their child’s academic achievement, relational trust between teachers and the school, insights on the influence of the peer culture and reflections on their own capacity to enhance the educational experience of their child.

8.7.1 Leadership is pivotal

Parents viewed the role of leadership in the school as ‘pivotal’. This was particularly true of the role of the principal. The majority of parents confirmed the view of leaders, teachers and students that leadership ought to be widely distributed in order to utilise all the skills and abilities parents had witnessed at differing levels of leadership roles. The role of deputy principals and middle managers, such as heads of year or heads of subject departments, played a significant role in the provision of academic guidance and pastoral care as perceived by parents. Parents also saw leaders as key champions of school cultural values, for example, providing care, encouraging participation and accomplishment, promoting personal excellence and modelling interpersonal relationships where students were known as individuals. Leaders were seen as key drivers of an academic culture but were able to balance that with an equal emphasis on the arts, sports and the development of spiritual growth. In the eyes of parents, the leadership team in the schools was knowledgeable about data on academic performance. Parents added the caveat that although school academic performance data was necessary, they also valued an emphasis on the development of the whole person.

8.7.2 The teacher is everything

While leadership was ‘pivotal’, for parents the teacher was ‘everything’, “Each year is only as good as the teacher” (Parent, School F). Parents viewed the teacher-
student relationship as the most important among a number of elements in teacher effectiveness. In particular, parents argued that the capacity of a teacher to be invitational, to be accessible and available was crucial and confirmed that this was clearly evident in their children’s experience of schooling. Passion and enthusiasm aligned with strong content knowledge was also regarded by parents as a significant feature of teacher effectiveness.

Parents also suggested that teachers played a key role in the development of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) between themselves and the school. This was particularly evident in parents’ praise of teachers who ‘followed up’ on their sons’ and daughters’ progress and persisted with offers of support. Teachers who do not follow through with offers to provide support, risk damaging the social capital of relational trust as a parent in School B had noted, “I must admit that I did get disappointed that things were not followed up”. Relational trust was also found in the teachers’ and schools’ capacity to provide consistent communication and feedback on student academic performance. It might be said that parent-school communication was an area where there was some dissonance between parents and the school. Leaders and teachers had felt that levels of communication were high but parents were not in total agreement with such an opinion, suggesting that communication from teachers with particular reference to their child’s academic progress could be more consistent. It was clear that parents had a prodigious appetite for communication. It is recommended that schools review their communication protocols with parents and that in doing so they consult parents themselves, with regard to communication type, quality and frequency. Such an approach has been found in the literature to be efficacious (Epstein, 2010). The current study concurs with this view and notes that parents, viewed regular, clear, feedback on student performance as the most important form of communication. Parents appreciated policies that required them to sign teachers’ commentary on assessments, as this gave them opportunities to engage in conversation with their children about their progress. Parents found that student diaries, where teachers wrote quick notes about student progress, provided an informal medium of communication over and above parent-teacher meetings and formal reports.
8.7.3 The pervasive peer culture

The peer culture was regarded by parents as ‘pervasive’ in its influence on academic achievement and was clearly a ‘micro-culture’ that needed to be understood by the school. Parents supported leaders, teachers and students themselves in describing the peer culture in their schools as an overwhelmingly pro-academic culture. In the eyes of parents, students were respectful of individual difference, supportive and collaborative as well as pushing each other to achieve in healthy competition. Parents valued the role of the school in providing avenues for peer support and collaboration through lunch-time and after school study groups. Parents also reported the benefit of providing opportunities for students to take up leadership roles in service programs and pastoral care groups such as the ‘house system’.

8.7.4 Parental reflections on their own influence: Emotional support and aligned values

Confirming the commentary of students in the current study, parents viewed their own role as overtly supporting the social and emotional needs of their children. There was strong support of Epstein’s (2010) typology of effective parental involvement in parent commentary in the current study. Parents’ reflections confirmed that the quality of their parenting, communication with the school, supporting learning at home and volunteering at the school all contributed in a positive manner to their child’s academic achievement and well-being. Parents valued connections with other parents that offered mutual support and there was evidence that this facilitated peer associations that might benefit their children. Parents also expressed a willingness to be more involved with and supportive of their children’s study at home but required advice from the school on how best to do this particularly with regard to study skills and homework. Stewart (2008) found that parent-child discussions about student experiences at school influenced student achievement. It is recommended that schools provide workshops and seminars to facilitate such discussions and to enable parents to understand the discourse of contemporary learning.

The capacity to play a role as a partner in their children’s education was acknowledged, particularly in their obligation to support and affirm the values of the school. The affirmation of school values was evidenced in parental reflections on the importance of the religious education their children received and the heritage of the
religious orders in seven of the nine schools in the study. Parents attached a particular significance to the culture of the school as a key influence in their child’s academic success. While recognising the importance of academic results, parents sought more from a school. Parents wanted a holistic focus on their child’s development. They valued the sense of community that they observed in their children’s experience and felt that it contributed to their success. Parents reported being welcomed in the school which facilitated their engagement and consequently their support. Parents’ own values were comfortably aligned with the schools’ and were enhanced by the religious setting which they strongly endorsed, particularly the *charism* of the religious orders when present. While recognising that facilities were important, values and community relationships were regarded as far more valuable in the eyes of parents.

8.7.5 Parents perceptions summary and recommendations

In summary, and based on the findings pertaining to parents, the following conclusions and recommendations can be made:

- Parents require leaders to be champions of the cultural values within the school.
- Parents viewed all three levels of leadership: principals, deputy principals and middle management (Heads of Year and Heads of Departments) as central to the provision of pastoral care. Principals who engaged with students in a personalized manner had a strong influence on both students and parents, facilitating relational trust.
- Structures that allowed a pastoral leader such as a head of year or dean of studies to move with the group from one year to the next were viewed very favourably by parents. Such structures should be considered in all secondary schools.
- Parents viewed leaders’ knowledge of data on student academic performance and its communication to the parent body as significant. Parents also perceived leaders as having a key role in the promotion of academic excellence but equally they argued leaders must be involved in the development of their sons and daughters in a holistic sense. Leaders in schools should not lose sight of such parental expectations.
- Parents argued that teachers were clearly the most powerful influence in their child’s academic achievement. The development of the teacher-student
relationship was again confirmed as central to student motivation and performance, supporting leaders’, teachers’ and students’ perceptions.

- Parents confirmed teachers’ extraordinary availability and accessibility in after-hours contexts and the influence it had on their child’s achievement. Parents also acknowledged the impact of teachers’ content knowledge, passion and enthusiasm and capacity to provide quality feedback as key attributes of teacher effectiveness, supporting leaders’, teachers’ and students’ observations.

- Parents placed great importance on quality communication between the school and home. In particular, parents placed great store in teachers providing clear, ‘jargon–free’ advice on student performance in a timely manner. Teachers cannot underestimate the importance of their communications with parents and its capacity to develop relational trust. Teachers and schools need to recognize that parents have a prodigious appetite for communication and communication practices should be reviewed regularly. Surveying parents about the quality and quantity of communication between the school and the home is recommended.

- Parents viewed the influence of the peer group as pervasive. In the high performing secondary schools in the current study, parents observed a pro-academic culture within the peer cohort as an attribute of student achievement.

- Parents supported earlier observations that students were supportive and collaborative in their relationships with each other, as well as benefitting from healthy competition.

- The evidence of supportive and collaborative relationships that facilitate a pro-academic culture confirms earlier recommendations for schools to provide opportunities for student engagement in lunchtime and after-school peer support and study groups.

- Parents’ gratitude for the leadership opportunities provided to their children, also attests to the fact that peer mentoring and pastoral mechanisms such as “House” structures can enable leadership and develop a supportive peer culture. The provision of quality programs in the area of peer support and pastoral care is worthy of further investigation by secondary schools.

- Parents viewed their own role as predominantly residing in the social and emotional domain. Parents confirmed the view of Reay (2000) who argued that parents have the capacity to provide emotional capital for their children.
Schools must be able to identify those children who for many reasons come from homes devoid of emotional capital and work toward providing compensatory mechanisms through strong pastoral care structures. Parents across all schools in the study were highly engaged and interested in their child’s experience of school. However, such engagement and interest was weakened by feelings of inadequacy in participating in discussion related to their child’s homework and supporting them in advice on study skills. Schools would do well to provide parents with informative workshops on study skills, so that they might be better equipped to support their sons and daughters through the final years of schooling. De-mystifying contemporary jargon used in education would be welcomed by parents.

- Parents valued opportunities to connect with other parents and on occasions also used this as an agency to facilitate peer associations with other families that shared similar values. Parents commentary on how welcomed they felt in the school community on both formal and informal occasions reminds schools of the enormous benefits that are derived from making parents feel ‘at home’ in their school. Esteemed parents are a powerful force in the promotion of social capital in a school.

- Parents within the current study were aligned to and strongly supportive of the schools’ religious and cultural values. It is suggested that this alignment and support may have helped their children find a ‘fit’ with the school’s values which enhanced the sense of belonging and pride that students reported. Catholic schools are reminded that this alignment and support is productive and should be nurtured. Where leaders perceive a lack of parental alignment with the school’s values, a deliberate effort must be made to impress upon parents that such support can enhance their children’s achievement and connectedness to the school.

8.8 Concluding Statement

The researcher has sought to present not just the singular roles of each stakeholder group but also explore that role within the context of the role of others. In doing so, the researcher has attempted to triangulate the data in a way that would provide a gestalt of these school communities, an organized whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts. It is the attempt to provide a ‘gestalt’ of all of the key stakeholders in each community of the nine schools involved in the study that provides a unique contribution to the research on effective schools. Far too often studies focus on leaders’ and / or teachers’ contributions to school effectiveness but
rarely do studies focus on all four stakeholders, viz, connecting leaders’, teachers’, students’ and parents’ contributions to the performance of an effective school.

In the earlier methodology chapter the researcher referred to Denzen and Lincoln (2003) who described the qualitative researcher as a *bricoleur* or maker of quilts, seeking in the current study to stitch together the perceptions of leaders, teachers, parents and students to create a quilt of views on effective schools. To take the language of the visual arts further, the study has endeavoured to provide a portrait, ‘a speaking likeness’, of the inter-connectedness of these key agents, leaders, teachers, students and parents, highlighting their singular and combined impact on student achievement. It has been argued that the palette of an interpretative phenomenological analysis has enhanced the portrait of the phenomenon under investigation.

Another distinguishing feature of the study is that this is the first time that a detailed investigation of high performing secondary schools in the Catholic education system of Western Australia has been carried out. The study has the potential to provide significant feedback to schools, and the system itself, on strategies and processes that enhance performance within the context of the tertiary entrance exams and more broadly across the lower secondary classes in general. It might be argued that it adds further evidence to the work of other Australian studies (Mulford, 2007; Mulford & Silins, 2010, 2011; Reid et al, 2010) that the non-cognitive outcomes of schooling such as the fostering of student social development need to be investigated and reported.

What remains is to distil the ‘essence’ of the study and answer the main research question framing the investigation, namely, *What are the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the success of their schools in the tertiary examination context?* To assist in this endeavour the following points of agreement across all stakeholders is provided. Reference to such evidence-based information may be of value to schools wishing to improve student academic performance within the provision of a supportive environment.

- Leadership teams within the schools viewed teaching and learning as ‘core business’ and fostered a culture of academic excellence which was supported by students and parents.
The pursuit of academic excellence was enhanced by a holistic focus on personal well-being provided through a variety of mechanisms (alluded to earlier) affording high levels of pastoral care.

The work of teachers was seen by all stakeholders as fundamental to the school's success. The teacher-student relationship was a major influence on academic achievement, characterized by consistent availability and accessibility. Such relationships nurtured trust, which in turn created 'social capital' that gave purpose to learning.

Teachers’ innovative curriculum, attention to instructional strategies particularly personalized feedback, deep content knowledge, passion and enthusiasm nurtured student engagement and had a motivating influence on student achievement.

Teachers’ engagement in current, relevant, subject based professional development enhanced professional learning communities and impacted strongly on student achievement.

The student body across all schools in the study was characterized by a pro-social and pro-academic peer culture arguably modeled and witnessed by the teaching staff within each school. Students were proud of ‘their’ school.

Parental provision of ‘social’ and ‘emotional’ capital had a significant influence on student achievement and well-being.

Parents and students alike, ‘felt at home’ in the school. All parties reported flourishing communities with high levels of connectedness and a deep sense of belonging.

Love, care and a ‘personalized’ educational experience were integral features of the school’s Catholic identity.

More broadly, ‘networks’ of purposeful positive relationships supported individual student accomplishment founded in a communal identity aligned to a moral purpose that all parties supported. Simon, Lopez and Pedrottie (2011) argued that where attachment, love, and purposeful positive relationships exist, relationships will be sustained and ultimately flourish. As such, the current study suggests these schools were flourishing in the finest sense of the word.

Although the present work has been comprehensive, to keep it manageable, its scope has been deliberately limited. As the work progressed, spheres for further
investigation presented themselves. Accordingly, in terms of future directions, the current research may springboard into areas such as:

- Conducting a similar investigation in public and non-Catholic independent secondary schools.
- Further exploring the impact of Catholic identity on leadership with a view to determining whether the outcomes reported in this research project are a direct result of excellent leadership or influenced by the context of the faith based schools in which leaders operate (Bednall, 2006a).
- Investigating whether leaders, teachers and parents in other non-Catholic ‘church’ schools regard their religious identity as having an impact on student wellbeing and achievement.
- Further researching the impact of deputy principals and middle managers such as heads of subject departments and even heads of year as leaders in overall school improvement.
- Given the impact of student connectedness and wellbeing on academic achievement in the current study, an investigation of formal programs that seek to enhance connectedness and well-being may benefit further consideration. In this vein, further investigation into the application of ‘positive psychology’ programs in schools is warranted.
- While the current study included a broad representation of co-educational and single sex schools, further investigation of student perceptions based on gender may be useful.

For now, the following might be said: Good schools are places where students are known and found. The culture of a school unequivocally matters. Care and love of students are not qualities to be ascribed to the early years alone, they are equally essential at the end of the school continuum. When the roles of all stakeholders: leaders, teachers, students and parents are collectively well executed, much can be contributed to the common good, or as astutely put by Putnam & Feldstein (2003) “we are better together” (p. 1).
REFERENCES


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# APPENDIX 1

## TEACHER SURVEY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (Optional):</th>
<th>Gender (Optional):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The following statements have been designed to measure the role of key indicators in achieving successful tertiary entrance results in your school. Please respond to each statement using the scale provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Thorough subject content knowledge on the part of the teacher is essential in helping students achieve success.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Direct instruction is more important than group work.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Passion and enthusiasm for your subject is vital for student success.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Building relationships with students is necessary.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Further study and PD is necessary for successful teaching.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Careful assessment design cannot be underestimated as a teaching tool.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Timely, detailed feedback is important.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Regular feedback to students is necessary.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Working with colleagues on collaborative programming enhances my teaching.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. ICT as an important teaching tool and should be integrated into teaching methods.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Being results focused is important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Our department works as a close knit team</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Our department values the academic success of its students and therefore it is results focused</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Our department has a strong developmental sequence in programming from Year 7-12 designed to maximize TCE results.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Our department engages in meaningful moderation and cross marking exercises.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Our department engages regularly in professional conversations.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Members of our department engage in professional conversations with staff in other departments</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Counselling of students in subject choice is important.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. A school culture supportive of academic success is vital.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. A key role of the Head of Department is to promote and celebrate success of students and teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Our executive leadership team strongly promotes academic success.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 2

Semi Structured Interviews of Leaders

Deputy Principals and Principals

The following questions were designed to promote a dialogue around the following topics, given the context of the school being identified as having attained a degree of success in the Tertiary Entrance Examinations results:

1. Leadership style – strengths and areas for development
2. Personal contribution to the enhancement of a successful academic culture
3. Overall culture of the school
4. Academic culture of the school
5. How does the Leader view characteristics of a successful department?
6. How does the leader view characteristics of a successful teacher?
7. What were the perceptions of the leader in relation to student contributions?

How long have you been a Principal / Deputy Principal?
How long have you been Principal / Deputy Principal at this school?
Your school has performed well in the TEE. Why do you think this is the case?
In what way do you think you have contributed to the enhancement of a successful academic culture in the school through your role as Deputy Principal or Principal?
How would you characterize your leadership strengths and where do you think you might need to develop?
What have been your key areas of focus?
Do you set high expectations of staff?
Is there a results focus?
Are you strategic in the way you approach teaching and learning in this school?
Are you personally engaged with the key curriculum issues?
Is curriculum a passion of yours? Do you see it as “core business”?
Is TEE success celebrated, promoted and valued?
How would you describe the characteristics of the successful TEE teachers on your staff?
How would you describe the characteristics of the successful departments in your school?
Do students contribute to a culture of success in this school? Do you deliberately look at ways to promote student contribution to the development of that culture?

Are parents a strong factor in the school's success?

How much personal contact do you have with the Year 12 students?

Do you promote goals and academic success with your Year 12 students? If so, how do you go about this?
Semi-structured interview questions for Heads of Department

How long have you been a Head of Department?

How long have you been a Head of Department at this school?

How would you describe your role?

Do you aspire to further promotional positions?

How would you describe your relationships with colleagues in your department? Is it a close knit team?

Do you share resources, ideas, programme collaboratively, have common assessment tasks, cross mark regularly? Do you have a high degree of professional dialogue?

Is there anything unique about your approach to programming and assessment?

As Head of Department are you relatively prescriptive or do you allow teachers a great degree of individual freedom in their programming and assessment?

Do you assess frequently? Do you use a variety of assessment types? Do you tend to design assessments that replicate exam scenarios or are your assessment tasks broader in their scope?

Do you insist on certain standards in terms of feedback to students?

Do you spend a lot of time and thought in planning and selection of resources? Is this done collaboratively or individually?

Is there a strong developmental sequence in your programming from Year 7-12 designed to maximize results in year 12? Or does that type of approach really start to take shape about year 10 - 12? Or is the Year 11 and 12 programme the key?

How would you describe your department? Experienced? Collegial? Organised? What is its focus? How would you describe the culture or feel of the faculty staff room?

Do you as the Head of Dept lead in a particular way or with a particular focus?

Is the Dept results focused? Do you celebrate good results?

What are some of the mechanisms your department use that you think contribute to your success?

Do you see the leadership of the executive team as important in the development of a successful academic culture?

Are parents an influence in the development of the culture here?

Do students themselves contribute to a culture of success in this school? Do you deliberately look at ways to promote student contribution to the development of that culture?
Questions for Semi - Structured Interviews of Teachers

The following provides a framework for questions to initiate dialogue with identified teachers.

How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

What do you think contributes to your success in achieving the highest TEE subject score in the system?

To what degree has content knowledge played in your success? Is passion and enthusiasm also a key factor?

Could you outline the professional development that you engage in to enhance your capacity as a teacher? For example, active membership of professional associations, further post-graduate study and experiences such as TEE marking

What teaching strategies do you employ in your classroom?

To what degree would you favour direct instruction, or collaborative group work?

Do you use whole class discussion often? How would you rate your facility with questioning techniques?

Is there anything unique about your approach to programming and assessment?

Do you assess frequently? Do you use a variety of assessment types? Do you tend to design assessments that replicate exam scenarios? Or are your assessment tasks broader in their scope?

How do you provide feedback to your students?

Do you spend a lot of time and thought in planning and selection of resources? Is this done collaboratively or individually?

Is there a strong developmental sequence in your programming from Year 7-12 designed to maximize results in year 12? Or does that type of approach really start to take shape about year 10 - 12? Or is the Year 11 and 12 programme the key?

Do you think counselling of students in subject choice is important?

Are field experiences, labs, excursions important to you?

How would you describe your classroom management and the climate of your class?

Could you describe your expectations of students?

Do you do anything out of the ordinary?

Are you results focused?
Does the culture of the school support your work with students? Describe the culture?

Who shapes the culture and how?

How would you describe the student body here?

How would you describe your relationship with students?

Are parents an influence in the development of the culture here?

How would you describe your relationships with colleagues in your department? Is it a close knit team?

Do you share resources, ideas, programme collaboratively, have common assessment tasks, cross mark regularly? Do you have a high degree of professional dialogue?

How would you describe your department? Experienced? Collegial? Organised? What is its focus? What is the feel? How would you describe the faculty staff room? The culture?

Does the Head of Dept lead in a particular way or with a particular focus?

Is the Dept results focused? Do you celebrate good results?

What are some of the mechanisms your department use that you think contribute to your success?

Are parents an influence in the development of the culture here?

Do students themselves contribute to a culture of success in this school? Do you deliberately look at ways to promote student contribution to the development of that culture?
Semi Structured Interview questions for past students

You did well in your tertiary entrance exams last year. What were the main reasons for your success?

To what degree do you attribute your success to the work of your teachers?

What are some of the important things that good teachers do that helped you achieve your success?

Are there specific features of good teaching that are unique in particular subjects or are they found across most subjects?

Do you find that good teachers have particular personal traits?

To what extent were your peers an influence on your success?

Do you think the overall culture of the school was significant?

How do leaders such as the principal, deputy principal and heads of departments have an influence on the academic success of the school?

To what extent did your parents have an influence on your academic success?
QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS IN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Going around the circle maybe we could share our experience and connection with the school. For example how many children have you had through the school over how many years?

How important is the leadership in the School in developing an academic culture?

To what degree do you attribute the school’s success to the work of the teachers?

What are some of the important things that good teachers do that helped your child?

We may have covered this but do you find that good teachers have particular personal traits?

Do you think it is important for schools to be results focused and acknowledge academic success?

To what extent were your child’s peers an important influence on their approach to study and their overall achievement?

Do you think the overall culture of the school has a significant influence? Can you pinpoint specific things the school does that help to achieve this.

Are facilities important?

To what degree was your support and encouragement at home a factor?

Is homework and the development of study patterns at home an important factor in academic success?

To what extent do you see feedback on your children’s work and reporting mechanisms as important tools for their learning?

Do you think the development of communication and partnerships with parents is important if schools are to develop a strong academic culture? Have you been kept well informed about your child's progress? How?

Do you feel comfortable contacting the School to discuss your child’s progress?