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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

Michael O'Neill
University of Notre Dame Australia

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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 elicited 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, deputies 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 deputies 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 4.1

Leaders' perceptions of factors contributing to schools' success

Principals	Deputy Principals	Heads of Department	Congruent Themes
Setting a vision and development of culture. High expectations.	Immersed in data. Focused on results. Culture of academic excellence.	Good HODs build relationships, affirm staff. Recognise their own role is a leadership role.	Alignment in cultural values between principals, deputy principals and HODS.
Articulation of mission (catholic context). Broad definition of success.	Counselling crucial. Tracking / monitoring of students' achievement.	Emphasis on teams in departments. Utilizing individual strengths.	High expectations. Culture of academic excellence.
Continuous journey of improvement. Outward looking. Willingness to benchmark.	Knowing students, listening to students building relationships. Social and emotional wellbeing supported.	Quality assessment and feedback. Challenging tasks. High expectations.	Knowledge of data.
Scope and sequence of curriculum.	Quality assessment and feedback.	Strong emphasis on scope and sequence in programming from Year 7 – Year 12.	Importance of relationships in leadership teams. Relationships between staff and students.
Embracing data. Knowing individual students.	Alignment with Principals' vision.	Close relationship with executive leadership in review of data.	Catholic cultural emphasis on care and community.
Importance of Leadership "team".	Scaffolded curriculum.	Develop culture of reflective practice and conversations on learning both formally and informally.	Attention to scope and sequence in programming.
High expectations. Battle against complacency.	Orderly environment very important.	Being available to staff.	Availability of staff to students. Engaging student voice. Affirming student achievement.
Careful selection of staff – cultural fit. Leaders must be outstanding teachers.	Staff work ethic very strong. Availability to students.	Acknowledgement of Catholic culture of care and community.	Emphasis on reflective practice and development of learning communities.
Staff must know content but also care for students and demonstrate rapport.	Building relationships between staff.	Fostering an academic culture of excellence.	Acknowledgement of accountability to parents.
Work ethic and availability of staff.	Strong focus on teaching and learning. Emphasis on reflective practice.		Orderly focused environment. Time on task.
Emphasis on staff professional development and learning.	Support staff in seeking professional development.		Quality assessment and feedback.
Engaging and communicating with parents important.	Communication with parents crucial.		
Promoting student achievement.	Promotion and celebration of success.		
Provision of VET alternative pathways.	Ensuring time on task.		
Equal emphasis on academic outcomes and pastoral well being.			
Orderly focused environment.			

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.