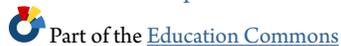

Theses

2014

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

Follow this and additional works at: <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses>



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Publication Details

O'Neill, M. (2014). Perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing West Australian Catholic secondary schools within the context of tertiary entrance examinations (Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)). University of Notre Dame Australia.
<http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/88>

This dissertation/thesis is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



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".

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 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,

2007; Marzano 2003). 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
- 6) Teacher Mentoring (Unpublished policy document, School D).

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, Mckeen & 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

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.

Teachers' Content Knowledge	Teachers' Passion and Enthusiasm	Effective teaching strategies	Curriculum Design	Assessment and Feedback
Not facts and surface knowledge but deeper knowledge	Love of the discipline crucial – shows in enthusiasm	Emphasis on direct instruction and whole class discussion	Scaffolded curriculum from Yr 7 - Yr 12.	Broad array of assessment types Yrs 7-12
Analysis, synthesis, problem solving	Passion for the vocation of teaching	Collaborative group work used but in moderation	Strong emphasis on skill development from Yr 7 – yr 12	Assessment types that replicated external examination
Use of relevant examples	Enthusiasm and passion cannot make up for a lack of knowledge	Note-taking seen as very important. Student note taking supported by teacher direction.	Sequential development of higher order analysis and synthesis, and inquiry learning .	Timely, detailed teacher feedback
Need to apply knowledge to real world	Commitment, availability and approachability	Meta-cognition. What do I need to know? How can I learn it?	Teachers highly organised. Careful attention to lesson planning.	Use of student self evaluation
Must have the relationship to impart knowledge	Love and care shown to students.	Meta-cognitive strategies contextually based within subjects.		
	Need for affirmation to counteract compassion fatigue.	Emphasis on developing literacy skills		
		Use of student self verbalisation		

Table 5.2

Teachers' perceptions of 'whole school' factors and influences of other stakeholders.

Professional Development	Teachers' perception of leaders	Teachers' perceptions of students	Teachers' perception of parents	Teachers' perceptions of the culture of the school
Access to professional development strongly supported by the school.	Leaders supportive of academic culture.	Student micro-culture very influential.	Parents broadly supportive.	Teacher student relationships paramount.
External formal professional development programs most effective	Leaders supportive of professional development.	Academic success supported by student body.	Recognition that parents are partners.	Emphasis on student well being, sense of belonging and community.
TEE Marking highly effective.	Leaders focused on data informed instruction.	Healthy competition amongst students.	Recognition of importance of communication.	Strong collegial relationships among staff.
Consensus moderation meetings very effective.	Deputies and HODS develop professional conversations around learning.	Strong culture of peer support.	Placed emphasis on supporting vulnerable parents.	Teachers outward looking ready to seek and use external support and PD.
External Informal networks with colleagues in other schools.	Emphasis on communication.	Homework clubs, study groups and peer tutoring very effective.	Sense of accountability to parents.	Culture of excellence, high expectations and promotion of academic success. High levels of accountability.
Internal Formal PD.	Teachers supportive of the work of leaders.	Students responsive to high expectations.	Including parents in community.	Strong Catholic identity with emphasis on care and love.
Internal Informal PD Collegial support within departments.	Teachers afforded respect and autonomy.			Challenged the notion that big is better.