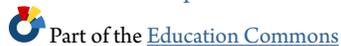Theses

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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

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CHAPTER SIX

PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1   Students' perceptions: Introduction

A number of recent ex-students (n = 36) were interviewed across the nine schools, ranging from those one year out of school to three years out of school. Where students names have been used pseudonyms have been provided. The interviews were designed to gather students' perceptions about leadership in their school, effective teaching and the influence of peers and family. In addition, the researcher sought to investigate whether students' perceptions validated or contested the earlier commentary of leaders and teachers.

It might be argued that of all the 'voices' heard in this research, this group should be listened to most attentively, for, as Gentilucci (2004) said, "what you see depends on where you stand" (p. 133). Standing in the place of students provides the current study with a unique perspective on effective leaders and teachers in schools. Dominant themes relating to students' perceptions regarding their schools' academic success are explored in the following commentary.

6.2   Teachers and relationships

There was no doubt that teachers were viewed by students as the most powerful influence on their academic achievement, validating the literature (Dinham, 2008; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012; Shields & Miles, 2008; Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2009). This was well illustrated in the following:

> You are able to learn more when the relationship is strong (Student, School E).
> If you don't have a relationship with the teacher you cannot learn, it puts you off (Student, School E).

One common factor that was identified by nearly every student focus group was the notion of approachability and availability. The best teachers were described as approachable. When asked to elaborate on the meaning of approachability, students commented:

They invite you to ask questions, it's nice to be encouraged (Student, School E).

They related really well to you, I could feel relaxed around them, I could ask them questions and not feel like an idiot (Student, School B).

Where I did best, it was always with teachers who I felt comfortable with and could ask questions (Student, School G).

Feeling comfortable in a relationship with a teacher was a prominent desire of students and produced tangible results (Hattie, 2012; Purkey, 1992). Comment was made on the importance of teachers being 'invitational' which then generated respect, trust and optimism among students. The researcher would argue that invitational qualities in teachers also created a learning environment which was conducive to high personal achievement. The following quotes provide evidence for this contention:

You actually liked the teachers; you hated the thought of disappointing them (Student, School C).

Mr X would run Chemistry classes on the holidays, you just wanted to do well for him (Student, School D).

In all schools in the study, the 'availability' of teachers was commented on by every focus group of leaders and teachers and this attribute was now validated by students. Students were enormously appreciative of the time teachers gave them, before school, after school, at lunchtimes and not uncommonly during school holidays:

Teachers were so dedicated. I owe a lot of my success to my teachers. Most subjects had after school tutorials on top of normal classes and a large number of students attended (Student, School B).

Teachers would come up to you if you didn't do well and offer support after school (Student, School A).

While recognising teachers' availability, students also noted the sensible encouragement of teachers who desired their students to be independent learners, capable of making the transition to university and the workforce:

When needed or asked they would put in the time but they also gave us the skills and pushed us to be independent (Student, School G).

The appreciation of teachers' availability and approachability was a strong motivator in students' attitude towards their studies. Students did comment that there was a stark contrast in their learning when teachers were less available and not openly inviting:

I always wanted to know why I got 70% and not 80%. Where did I lose those marks? Some teachers just did not make the time to show you. You should be told that! (Student, School B).
Availability of teachers seemed to vary from department to department. It should be consistent. (Student, School D).

The reflection of the student in School D demonstrated an inconsistency in the culture across the departments in that school and confirms the value of the student voice. Students are capable of making comparative assessments of departmental performance and culture and their perceptions should be sought. Another student made a perceptive comment about the impact of passion and enthusiasm on the student-teacher relationship:

I could not relate to the teacher I had in one subject. He had no enthusiasm at all, it really affected my performance in that subject, I could not get motivated (Student, School D).

Notwithstanding this negative observation, the capacity of enthusiasm and passion to develop positive teacher-student relationships is presented below.

6.3   Enthusiasm and passion.

Teachers in the current study had rated enthusiasm and passion as attributes that had significantly contributed to their success as teachers, confirming findings in the literature (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008; Day, 2007; Fried, 1995). These attributes were identified by students as clearly evident in their best teachers and were important contributors to student engagement in the subject matter under study. Passion and enthusiasm were also seen as integral in the

development of positive relationships between students and their teachers. An extract from the focus group conversation in School F supports this observation.

> **Heather**: They had to like teaching, when they had passion it made you love the subject. It made a massive difference.
> **Jennifer**: Yes in history and literature and drama when we had teachers like that, you just want to impress them.
> **Mary**: Yes it's because they believe in you they inspire you.
> **Anne**: Yeh our history teacher would mark the TEE exams every year. He knew the syllabus back to front. He also knew every single student! When he taught the class he made you feel he was teaching *you*.

Yet again this was another illustration of the strength of the focus group in an IPA study. Heather's observation about passion and enthusiasm was made with fervour, particularly her comment about the difference it made in the experience of the subject. Her tone of voice put a great emphasis on the words "massive difference". This prompted Jennifer's reflection about specific teachers and the personal reaction that their enthusiasm and passion produced in students, in this case the motivation to impress, energising behaviour and influencing academic achievement. Her comment took the discussion further with Mary's reflection that such motivations were driven by an appreciation that these teachers believed in their students, so much so that they were able to 'inspire you' in the process of building self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Anne arguably reacted to the word 'inspire' by recounting her experience of her History teacher who was competent in terms of his content knowledge but who also combined that with a deep connection to all his students.

This nexus between knowledge of the subject and knowledge of students had been alluded to in earlier accounts of leaders and teachers and was now strongly confirmed by students.

> Teachers were enthusiastic and passionate, they loved and knew their subject, but they were people. As seniors they related really well to you, you got to know them and they you (Student, School C).

Hazel and Vincent (2005) argued that in secondary schools, with a strong focus on subject content, other elements such as teacher-student relationships are in danger of being displaced. This was clearly not the case in this study; in fact, enthusiasm

and passion for the subject matter became a vehicle for the enhancement of the teacher-student relationship rather than detracting from it.

In an insightful discussion about the role of passion in teaching, Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet and Guay (2008) distinguished between harmonious passion and obsessive passion. They argued that harmonious passion occurs "when an individual freely accepts an activity as important to him or her" (p. 978). In the cases cited above there are no external contingencies exercising force, as such teaching is intrinsically motivated. An internal locus increased wellbeing and work satisfaction, resulting in less burnout. Conversely, teachers with an obsessive passion are described as being controlled by their activity or external pressures related to it and did not report similar levels of wellbeing and satisfaction in their teaching. The authors did note that when there was a healthy balance between harmonious passion and obsessive passion, there were increases in teacher perceived adaptive student behaviours. This could forseeably occur when teachers are intrinsically driven by the love of their subject and a passion for teaching but equally recognise that other drivers, for example external measures of student assessment, impact on their work. For 'well balanced' teachers, external measures are given due recognition but are not allowed to dominate their work in an obsessive manner.

It is argued that in the previous chapter's discussion of teachers' perceptions, the harmonious/obsessive balance was well documented. Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet and Guay (2008) lamented that although their study of 494 teachers showed that "the more passionate the teachers, the more they perceived students to display adaptive behaviours" (p. 984), it would be useful for student behaviours to be reported by students. The current study attempted to do just that and the statement from the student in School C above, attested to the fact that teachers who demonstrated a strong knowledge of the subject and passion for it, with an equally strong interest in their students, were able to achieve adaptive student behaviours in their classrooms. More importantly, students recognised that their teachers had a 'harmonious' balance in their approach to teaching as previously noted: "they were people, you got to know them and they you" (Student, School B). Having addressed student perceptions concerning passion and enthusiasm it is now appropriate to discuss another element that often came to the fore as an allied attribute in the eyes of students: teachers' content knowledge.

6.4   Teachers' content knowledge.

The current study has noted that the enthusiasm of teachers was infectious and helped motivate students. At the same time, the majority of students also commented on the fact that teachers' expertise in their subject knowledge was equally essential. This confirmed the literature, particularly that of Dinham (2008) who found that teachers' orientation to their subject had a strong influence on achievement. Hattie (2003) had also found that expert teachers attended to a deeper representation of their subject. In particular, students spoke about the deep familiarity many of their teacher's had with the syllabus and the highly 'specific' nature of advice they provided in relation to the syllabus and examination technique. Such specificity in terms of teaching was often borne out of experience both as a teacher and as a marker at the external examination level. Students knew the teachers who had external examination marking experience and commented on how useful that relayed expertise was in their own preparation for external assessments.

Many of the students reiterated that while they reviewed many past papers and examination questions, this was not a 'skill and drill' or 'teach to the test' approach on the part of their teachers. Students observed the way their teachers employed a diverse range of resources, noting they were able to enliven discussions in the classroom with activities relevant to the world in which they lived. One student captured this well:

> Her feedback was pertinent, she always brought in a wide range of resources that she referred you to, she was really up to date and relevant and you knew she was widely read (Student, School E).

Brown and Cocking (2000) argued that the benefit of working with relevant knowledge was that it allowed students to go beyond information, facilitating thinking in problem representations and providing cognitive roadmaps. In the previous chapter, the researcher had queried whether students would support teachers' claims concerning the value of relevant knowledge. The following commentary suggests they did:

> **Heather**: He was a teacher who did not just teach to the syllabus, he referred to so much more, to wider knowledge, a teachers' wider knowledge is so important (Student, School F).

Jennifer: Yes, you can tell the teachers who are just teaching from the syllabus and giving you what you need to pass the exam but there are those that not only love the subject but know enough to be able to say, oh by the way, this is related to this, and you go that is incredible. I don't need to know that for the exam but like I never knew that and it's relevant to my life. I really appreciated that (Student, School F).

Mary: Yes I found that the teachers I respected the most were often schooling me for life rather than to get me to pass exams. They would like, say, let's take ten minutes to discuss this; this is what's happening in the world. It made me think they actually care about more than just the TEE so we would discuss the impact of the American elections on Australia. They actually care about the world where I am going to end up. It makes you want to work harder for them, because they care about your future and you want to prove to them that they were right to care (Student, School F).

To illustrate the power of the focus group, as the student above concluded her last sentence, almost in unison the whole group echoed the words *"they were right to care"*. This was a powerful affirmation of their teachers' knowledge and care which was heightened by the instinctive reflex of the group, to one student's reflection.

In the spirit of a phenomenological study, the researcher is called to question why certain responses in the analysis of data provoke such a powerful reaction. For this researcher, analysing the students' expression that their teachers "were right to care" was a very moving experience. The expression triggered a memory of the interview, taking him back to the moment, and capturing the theme of 'care' in the study that had been touched on before. In an attempt to bracket that response the researcher is led to ask the question is this response 'powerful' because it accords with my own personal values as a teacher? Is it powerful because it is an affirmation that psychologically all teachers seek, including the researcher himself? Is it my own personal history being rewarded? The researcher noted in the earlier review of the literature that Isaacs (1999) made an astute point when he said "often when we listen to others we may discover that we are *listening from disturbance.* In other words, we are listening from an emotional memory rather than from the present moment" (p. 98). This may well have been such a moment. Was the response 'powerful' because it confirmed a theme the researcher had hoped would be confirmed? Could a more objective reading simply conclude that the students themselves were, in a certain fashion, reiterating an expectation that teachers

should care rather than an appreciation *of* care? Having bracketed the response and returned to the recorded interview several times, the researcher would argue that the language of the students denoted a genuine appreciation of care, a certain gratefulness, a powerful expression of thanks.

Continuing the theme of breadth of knowledge that students observed in their teachers, another student spoke of her Chemistry teacher who went outside of the syllabus to use books from the UK curriculum to provide broader perspectives and complement the Western Australian curriculum. In the same school, a student spoke of her Economics teacher:

> He seemed to know exactly what would be in the exam. He picked up all the current trends in economics that we might find in the exam (Student, School C).

By contrast, a teacher who had not mastered their subject content was seen as a clear impediment to students' success:

> Their knowledge is important; it is very frustrating if they do not know an answer, very frustrating when you knew they were confused (Student, School D).

Thus the influence of teachers' content knowledge which had been posited by teachers in the preceding chapter as a major element of effective teaching was validated by students. Teachers' engagement with their discipline, their breadth of knowledge and the currency of their knowledge was also an acute expression of care for their students. Students also confirmed what a powerful motivator such knowledge could be in the hands of teachers who could apply it well. Students were also well placed to make observations concerning the variety of effective strategies that teachers employed to convey knowledge.

6.5   Teachers' strategies.

Pedagogical content knowledge, "in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that makes it comprehensible to others" (Schulman, 1986, p. 9) was also a prominent feature of student observations. The utilisation of pedagogical strategies that facilitated student understanding was a dominant theme

in student discussions. Students in School B spoke about the way in which very good teachers were able to communicate with clarity and prioritise what was important as they went about the business of teaching and learning.

> The teacher's ability to make learning relevant is a key. Good teachers made it clear that certain things were important to be done (Student, School B).

> The best teachers were able to absolutely show what was really important to know. I had a 40 year veteran and a first year teacher. The veteran just knew what was key. The younger teacher was more hung up on closely adhering to the syllabus (Student, School B).

Students spoke of the need for balance in teaching strategies. They commented that the more effective teachers used a wide range of strategies from direct instruction, to whole class discussion and group work. Many commented on the more creative things some individual teachers do, for example, in one History class the teacher put the students in pairs to produce a film where they portrayed historical figures from their history text being interviewed. These interviews were kept as resources on the school intranet. Such a strategy brought figures from history alive, encouraged thorough research and provided a rich and diverse range of resources. Another student reflected on the effectiveness of being required to teach certain topics to the class in paired presentations during the semester. The student's experience supported Hattie's (2007) high impact rating of 'reciprocal teaching' ($d = 0.73$). This strategy, which devolved responsibility for learning to students appeared to be highly effective.

The majority of students spoke of the importance of teachers helping them with study skills:

> The more effective teachers were able to teach you how to study, using very good focus questions that applied to most subjects (Student, School C).
> The better teachers were very good at providing useful tips on how to study and have a balanced life. They hammered home study techniques (Student, School B).

A student in School B commented that:

> Teachers got you used to good study techniques in Year Eight which built habits that I had developed before reaching Year Eleven and Year Twelve (Student, School B).

Such endorsement confirmed the commentary by leaders and teachers that it was crucial in lower secondary school to concentrate on the development of skills required for upper secondary courses. Many students also confirmed reported commentary from teachers that note-taking skills in class were an essential component of their learning. Students spoke of teachers who were adept at helping them compile relevant notes for exam preparation and revision. The literature supported the teaching of study skills as a strong influence on student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Kobayashi, 2005; Marzano, 2003). The impact of note-taking was illustrated well in the following student commentary:

> Teachers provided us with extra resources and notes to help you revise and prepare for exams and always stopped the class to say this is useful for your study, make notes on this. By the time the end of the year came we had a really good set of study notes for the TEE (Student, School A).

Simple teacher techniques, such as re-capping from past lessons as students moved on to new lessons, was an obvious but effective tool. Hands-on approaches in the classroom were also commonly spoken of in the sciences. One student spoke about how effective such a simple exercise as holding onto a rope to simulate the energy of a wave in Physics, helped her appreciate a theoretical concept. Time and again, students spoke of obvious but necessary strategies that facilitated understanding. Teachers need to be reminded of the power of the obvious and who better to remind them than their students.

6.5.1 Organisational skills.

Organisation was commented on by a number of students as being a quality portrayed by effective teachers:

> Their planning was meticulous, lesson by lesson step by step; you knew where you were going because they did (Student, School F).

Organisation is a big factor. If teachers are not organised you get lost and do not know where you should be or where you are going (Student, School E). Most teachers were well organised, that helped you know where they were going with the class. You knew when all assignments were due which helped you organise yourself. You received detailed course outlines from the beginning of the year almost lesson by lesson (Student, School E).

Such organisation allowed students to follow their teacher in a learning journey offering a map that more easily helped them reach desired destinations.

6.5.2 Feedback.

Feedback was a key to student learning and many students commented on both the importance of timeliness and detail required for "feeding forward to the next piece of work as the final step in a feedback loop" (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010, p. 127). In a fashion, it was a key 'advanced organiser', enabling students' sense of direction, guiding them to the next task on a scaffolded journey, "providing optimal anchorage for the learning material in the form of relevant and appropriate subsuming concepts at a proximate level of inclusiveness" (Ausubel, 1960, p. 271).

The student's commentary regarding feedback as a significant teaching strategy strongly reinforced other interviews with leaders and teachers as well as findings in the literature (Hattie 2003, 2009; Quinton & Smallbone, 2010; Rowe, 2002).

Feedback was very important. Every assignment and test we received had detailed specific feedback, every term a report. You always want affirmation don't you? This really encouraged academic success. The English Department even used an E Bulletin Board to promote discussion around the assignment and to get input from students (Student, School B).
Teachers would provide us with the best answers as models. They would allow us to redo answers and they would re-mark them again providing more feedback which was very constructive. They would give us topics for practice essays which they were happy to mark and give you additional feedback (Student, School A).

The commentary above confirmed teachers' reflections about their own teaching and the importance they placed on quality feedback. Such commentary also

confirmed leaders' views about the extraordinary lengths many teachers would go to, over and above their normal workload, to ensure that students would make satisfactory progress. In particular, earlier observations about the need for specificity in teachers' advice can be seen in the following illustration.

> **Pauline**: Yes a lot of teachers gave whole class feedback but then it was the individual feedback that mattered, really specific feedback to you as an individual with great examples of what you had done wrong and what you can do better that can be applied to the exam. So my English teacher would expect me to work on my conclusions in essays with advice on what I had to do to practice improving that part of the essay.
>
> **Kate**: Yes a lot of our teachers had been TEE markers which then helped them give you tips that you could easily apply to the exam to pick up marks and they provided great model examples so you could self assess against those standards that was really useful.
>
> **Nadia**: And some teachers allowed you to go to another room to work on extension activities if they felt you would be wasting your time listening to feedback that you did not need. That allowed me to work with students of my own ability. I liked that. (Students, School C).

The observations above highlighted a sophisticated appreciation of a number of hallmarks of good teaching. Students valued specific feedback that could be easily applied to the exam, confirmed in the literature as 'opportunity to learn' (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano, 2003; & Reynolds, 1998). They appreciated teachers who had experience in TEE marking which confirmed the value teachers themselves placed on this form of professional development. Students noted the importance of individualised feedback that allowed them to focus on areas of personal improvement. Students understood the value of self-assessment in their learning and the opportunity for reflection it had provided. McDonald and Boud (2003), echoing these students' observations, argued that students specifically trained in self-assessment, outperformed those who were not so trained, in their preparation for external examinations.

A very strong theme in discussions about feedback was the effect of affirmation. Many students spoke of the impact of teachers who were positive, encouraging and optimistic in their approach. The power of affirmation cannot be underestimated being consistently referred to by students as a major influence in terms of their

motivation to succeed. Constructive, timely, detailed and positive feedback has a powerful effect on student learning.

> Teachers need to be encouraging, so if a class does not do well the teacher should not dwell on the negatives (Student, School D).

Students were perceptive in their observations that while they valued teachers who were encouraging and provided affirmation, this was also done within a climate that had high expectations as is evidenced in the following student comment:

> Good teachers challenged and pushed you. I felt they had confidence in me (Student, School G).

In the process of providing feedback, many students commented on the way in which good teachers set high expectations which were informed by a very thorough knowledge of State-wide standards.

> The teachers always set standards at or a little bit higher than the TEE. We were not surprised by the difficulty of the exams in the TEE unlike some of our friends in other schools. We got scaled up in most subjects (Student, School A).

Setting high expectations meant that when students sat external exams they were prepared for the standard and could cope well. Students also commented that the standards within the school, while high, were realistic and generally attainable. This was exemplified in the following illustration.

> Mr "X" would not accept second best. Yes I suppose our teachers were not happy for you to just pass they expected you to do your best, they wouldn't accept less. That helped a lot (Student, School D).

Darling-Hammond (2010) described intellectually challenging and relevant instruction as a significant factor in 'turnaround' urban schools in the United States. The findings of the current study would support the need for high yet realistic expectations if students are to perform at their optimal level.

In summary, there were a number of teaching strategies that students in the current study perceived as significant supports in their academic attainment. Clarity and specificity in communication and feedback were highly regarded. The utilisation of relevant and current examples to create a link between the object of study and students' everyday life was valued. Creative activities that encouraged hands on, engaged learning, were memorable for many students. A balanced approach to the use of direct instruction, whole class discussion and cooperative learning activities was appreciated by the majority of students. Meta-cognitive strategies, such as teaching students how to study, were commented on frequently and valued when the strategies were contextualised in a specific subject. Note-taking was seen as a very important tool in the development of study skills. Teachers' organisation and capacity to create a logical narrative for student learning was strongly supported as a requirement for effective learning. Feedback was arguably the strategy that students discussed as the most important tool for effective teaching. Students appreciated teachers who provided them with opportunities for reflection and self-assessment, utilising exemplars that facilitated familiarity with external standards. Students appreciated teachers who set high, yet realistic expectations and found the right balance between nurturing students with affirmation and not accepting second best performances.

6.6   Students' perceptions of leaders.

Gentiluci and Muto (2007) argued that research identifying relationships between leadership and student achievement is problematic unless it considers the perspectives of the 'consumer' (i.e., the students). While teachers and quality teaching had the most impact on student achievement, students did not devalue the role of the leadership teams in their schools. They spoke of the personal touch of principals who knew them as individuals and the impact of a principal, who could strike up a conversation with a student in the school yard, knew them by name and knew how they were progressing academically. Some three years after leaving school, one student vividly remembered such a conversation and the influence it had had on her.

> Leadership in the School had a vested interest in you. They got to know you and when you knew they had the time for you and confidence in you it was quite inspiring and motivating. I remember when Mrs XXXX was leaving, and she was strolling around the grounds with the new incoming Principal Mr

YYYY and she stopped me and said to him; "Meet Sally Mr YYYY she is one of our top Year Eleven students". I was so surprised she knew me that well and the following year I really wanted to live up to that introduction. Once they show faith in you, you are on your way (Student, School F).

Students spoke of the number of one-on-one meetings they would have with key staff, deputy principals, heads of year and counsellors. These were people who were tracking their progress, and providing encouragement, advice and practical support:

Kate: Mr XXXX (Deputy Principal) came up to me and congratulated me on my results in the yard.
Pauline: Yeh I couldn't believe it when Mrs XXXX the Head of Maths congratulated me on my test result when she didn't even teach me (Students, School C).

Students were clearly impressed that they were known and acknowledged, particularly by those in leadership roles who did not teach them.

Students also spoke of the less personal but very useful avenue of Year group meetings where the principal and deputy would speak to them as a group encouraging them to achieve their personal best.

Mrs XXXX had a "strive for excellence" motto and the teachers backed it and we could relate to it (Student, School F).

Leadership appeared to be shared here. The attempt to generate a culture of excellence was recognised by the students and in their eyes, the leadership was supported by the teachers. Such distributed leadership may well have facilitated the adoption of that value within the student body. Students' reflections on the culture of their schools were frequently insightful and added a stronger dimension to the observations of leaders and teachers.

6.7 Students' perceptions of the culture of the school.

Across all the interviews from the nine student focus groups, one of the most powerful themes was the concept of culture. Through the varied conversations

common cultural elements emerged. Even without prompting, reflections that related to culture were revealed in the way students spoke of their principals, deputy principals and their teachers.

Unequivocally, students spoke proudly of their schools; the sense of school pride was tangible. Such pride was a product of the complex student-teacher relationships as discussed in each of the previous chapters. School pride was a product of a deep seated authentic sense of belonging, of 'being' in a community where the educational experience was highly personalised. There is little doubt in the mind of the researcher that pride in the school had a profound influence on student achievement, perhaps because it promoted valued attachment. Zbar, Kimber, and Marshall's (2009) study of disadvantaged schools in Victoria found that pride in the school amongst leaders and the teaching staff influenced high levels of student achievement. In the current study a flow on effect was observed amongst students.

The primacy of personal relationships was clearly evident in a number of student reflections concerning their teachers:

> Sr XXXX was a mentor for me, she would always say 'you will do good things in your life' (Student, School E)
> Academic success was always implied as something to aspire to but the focus of the school was pastoral. It was always about you as a person. The motto of the school was 'love in action' and they certainly lived out their motto (Student, School G).
> Teachers knew you, if you were falling behind, Mr XXXX would be there to encourage you (Student, School C).

These comments were endorsed by students who expressed that they felt they had teachers "who believed in me." Another student took the theme of teachers' 'belief' in their students a little further emphasising earlier references to the need for social and emotional support. Speaking about times when they may have been struggling in a personal sense, one student commented:

> Mrs XXXX noticed you. Normally it's your friends that notice you, but she noticed you, she was always *there* (Student, School E).

The sense of teachers being 'present' to their students, 'being there' in relationship, supports Seligman (2011) who argued that optimal performance is tied to personal wellbeing which is a by-product of meaningful relationships.

As students described their delight in being known and noticed, they also commented on the notion of community:

> We are not a big school, teachers knew you, you were part of a community. You felt like you were a person not a number like some of the bigger schools my friends go to (Student, School C).

Pastoral structures like House systems were commented on by students as tools to enhance a sense of community and belonging:

> We lived and breathed House competitions. It really adds to overall pride in the school and a sense of belonging. It's a bit like the slogan "act, commit and belong", there is so much truth in that. It becomes so much more than a place to go to school. It becomes a community (Student, School F).

Such comments strongly confirmed the literature, (Darling-Hammond, 2011; Ofsted, 2009; Shields & Miles, 2008) where personalisation was seen as a contributing factor in improved student achievement. Personalisation was described by Shields and Miles (2008) as the school's capacity to "weave into school designs, multiple ways of fostering relationships between teachers and students" (p. 8). While the preceding commentary has highlighted the impact of the strong pastoral culture that students perceived to be evident in their schools, it is also important to note that in the eyes of students, an equally strong academic culture existed.

An important aspect of the culture of every school in the study was the theme that it was acceptable to achieve academically. In fact, in one school, a student remarked that:

> it was almost unacceptable not to achieve academically (Student, School E).

Students confirmed the attempts of staff to formally recognise academic achievement and how important that was at whole school assemblies and Year

group assemblies. With a strong emphasis on excellence and a focus on academic performance, students commented that:

> There was a culture of success, we wanted to do well for ourselves and for the school name (Student, School E).
>
> I remember seeing past students at assemblies being rewarded for their success, you aspire to do that too and be up there (Student, School C).
>
> There was always recognition of academic success, subject competitions, semester academic awards, Dean's awards, academic honours. At whole of school assemblies academic excellence was always touched on (Student, School A).

Such commentary strongly affirmed the perceptions of leaders and teachers who had previously reflected on the importance of formal recognition and the use of academic awards to both motivate students and build a culture of academic excellence. Student commentary also confirmed the views of some principals and teachers that 'success breeds success' and that capitalising on student achievement is vital in turning around underachievement.

Students also reflected that while they had very strong relationships with their teachers, and that many classrooms were 'fun' to be in due to the good natured humour of the staff, there was also a business-like tone in the classroom:

> Our teachers had a no nonsense approach to get the task done (Student, School C).
>
> They (teachers) had high expectations, you had to get the work done, it was almost a business-like approach (Student, School B).

Needless to say, behaviour management was not an issue in these schools. Students confirmed a sense of purpose, organisation and engaging learning taking place, as well as a broad range of experiences that provided balance:

> While you were expected to do well academically, there was a real balance between sport, culture and study. You had a balanced life and the school really promoted that (Student, School B).

Many students noted that their school afforded a number of opportunities to be involved in a broad range of extra-curricular activities and the same teachers who made themselves available to students outside of class for academic support also participated in sport and cultural pursuits:

> Through all these activities you create a broader network of friends. The experience is about so much more than academics. All these other things were complementary to my experience not a distraction. All the things I learned from sport and debating were able to be applied to my study. It also gave me the confidence to join clubs at University (Student, school F).

It might be expected that in highly successful academic schools there could be an imbalance of emphasis that favoured academic pursuits over other areas of school life. The findings in the current study suggest this was not the case with students broadly reporting a balance across the curriculum. More importantly, it is proffered that endeavouring to strike a balance between academic pursuits and co-curricular activities might actually enhance student academic performance.

In summary, the culture of the school in the eyes of students had a number of dominant elements. These were: a strong sense of pride in the school, an acknowledgement of the primacy of personal relationships between teachers and students, a resultant authentic sense of belonging to community, a culture where academic success was acceptable within the student body and expected by the school, high yet reasonable expectations of individuals and finally a balanced curriculum.

Students spoke of the influence of the student body and this phenomenon could well have been included as an element of culture. It is, however, so significant that the researcher has chosen to discuss this finding as a separate heading.

6.8 Students' perceptions of peer influence.

As reported earlier, there is a strong body of evidence that peer relationships play a significant role in academic achievement and motivation (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Nichols & White, 2001; Rosenberg, McKeon & Dinero, 1999; Ryan, 2011; Stewart, 2008; Wentzel, 2009; Wilkinson & Fung, 2002). Students from all nine schools spoke about the supportive nature of their peers,

healthy competition, the role of peer study groups after school and the fact that as a cohort they generally shared resources with each other very well**.** An example follows:

> It was so important to have a cohort where people share knowledge and are willing to teach each other. I never felt frightened to ask a silly question. Our top students always supported others (Student, School E).

This student's observation supports Edwards and Mullis (2001) who argued that activities such as peer tutoring, peer support and community service enhance connection with others and build capability and the capacity to contribute. The capacity to contribute through peer tutoring opportunities has been found to have an effect size of $d = 0.55$ on student achievement (Hattie, 2009).

The current study had earlier reported student perceptions of the value of meta-cognitive strategies such as study skills. Students spoke of their initiatives to utilise those skills in the support of their peers:

> We knew one girl was spending hours studying ineffectively and she ended up getting a lot of support from other students (Student, School C)

The reflection of the student above suggested that there was a certain degree of altruism present within the student body which generated a willingness to take the initiative and offer support to others. Such altruism might be more accurately described as evidence of Adler's 'Gemeinschaftsgefuhl' or 'social interest' (Ferguson, 1989). The researcher had queried in the literature review whether evidence of 'social interest' might be found in the current study and would now suggest that it was. It is also argued that the distributed leadership evidenced in the teaching fraternity was also evidenced in the student cohort. The maxim that 'values are caught, not taught' is confirmed via the sense of care for others that had been modelled by teachers, and is illustrated in the following reflection:

> If you couldn't find a teacher you could always rely on a mate (Student, School B).
> Our Year Twelve cohort was close knit, friendly and supportive. It's really beneficial to chat things through together, study together (Student, School A).

Importantly, students spoke about the fact that leaders and teachers had fostered this culture of peer support:

> The principal and teachers spoke to us about the need to be encouraging to each other (Student, School E)**.**

This may have been the reason that one student was able to say:

> It was great to share your happiness when you did well and you knew someone (student) would be there when you did not go well (Student, School E).

It is argued that the modelling of altruistic values by teachers in the school may have contributed to such a quality in the micro-culture of the student body, as evidenced in the following observation by another student in the same school.

> Sr. XXXX gives you a sense of belonging. This school was always about appreciating that there is always someone worse off than you and that you have a responsibility to others (Student, School E).

As Hattie (2009) found, all of the above "contributes to making class/school a place students want to come to each day" (p. 105). Peers' ability to provide emotional support and social facilitation is cited by Hattie (2009) as contributing positively in the development of a school and classroom environment. Further, positive peer association is cited by Goldsmith (2004), Nichols and White (2001) and Stewart (2008) as enhancing student achievement. These findings are supported by the findings of the current study.

It would appear then, that students who are unable to connect with their peers, who lack the capacity to socially navigate the difficult terrain of interpersonal relationships within the peer cohort, may well be disadvantaged, both emotionally and academically. Indeed, Fass and Taubman (2002), in a study of college students, found that:

> perceived attachment to both parents and peers is a component of wider patterns of social competence and adjustment that may function as

> protective or compensatory factors during key transitions in young adulthood, such as participation in college, and with its attendant demands for academic achievement. (p. 561)

It could be argued Year Twelve is one of the most significant transitions for late young people, bridging later adolescence and early adulthood. The schools in the current study were achieving more than just the enhancement of academic success as they facilitated peer support and connection.

In the review of literature on peer association, the researcher noted that the current study might seek to ascertain the influence of peers on attitudes to academic achievement and provide insights into whether, within a Year Twelve cohort, there can be a dominant collective peer disposition to achieve that reinforces a pro-school culture and strengthens performance. It is argued that sufficient evidence has been amassed to warrant such an assertion. The power of attitudinal similarity as discussed by Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) is also confirmed as an influence on student achievement:

> The attitudes of your peers is very important, their focus was a strong influence. Staying around other like minded students is helpful (Student, School D).

While much of the student voice captured dominant themes of a culture of connection, care and cooperation among the student body, it was also evident that a contrasting theme of competition existed within the majority of schools:

> There was an unspoken competition. Teachers often announced the top scores in assignments and while we applauded that person you also wanted to aspire to that. We pushed each other to beat him or her, but it was a healthy competition (Student, School G)
> Healthy competition drives you to do well (Student, School D).
> Our teachers encouraged competition, but it was never allowed to get too serious, no one went overboard, you were never made to feel uncomfortable by it (Student, School A).

In the specific context of high achieving schools where it might be argued that competition could potentially negate collaboration, the researcher was particularly interested to ascertain the degree to which both competition and cooperation might

co-exist. It appeared from student focus groups that cooperation and competition co-existed well, confirming previous observations of teachers. In the eyes of students, healthy competition was a significant motivator of student achievement.

> The contrast between my old school and here was huge. There was no competition there, no one cared enough. But the competition here is balanced by support for each other (Student, School B).

The study by Stewart (2008) of nearly 12,000 students from 715 American high schools, showed "that individual-level predictors, such as student effort, parent–child discussion, and associations with positive peers, played a substantial role in increasing students' achievement" (p. 179). Just as positive peer associations can create attachments to school, Stewart (2008) found that parents can influence adolescents in conforming to the ideals associated with schooling.

6.9   Students' perceptions of parental Influence

Bryk and Schneidner (2002) and Fullan (2005) describe the important role that each person plays in a child's education and the mutual dependencies that exist among various parties, acknowledging the role of parents as paramount. Jeynes (2007), in a meta analysis of 52 studies with well over 300,000 subjects involving urban secondary schools in the United States, found that parental involvement affected a number of academic variables. These variables were "academic achievement, combined grades, standardised tests, and other measures .... that included indices of academic attitudes and behaviours" (p. 82). As such, the current study sought to gain the perceptions of students concerning the influence of parents on their academic achievement.

All students spoke about the important role of parents and their influence on academic success. They spoke of a 'subtle' restrained support. Parents, having hopes and expectations for their sons and daughters, wanted them to do their best and had expressed as much. However, in the words of a student, such hopes were not "over the top" (Student, School A). In one focus group, the interviewer started the discussion with the following question: What in general terms contributed to your personal academic success in Year Twelve? The immediate response from a

student, Heather, prompted an animated discussion on the influence of parents and the home as the very first factor contributing to overall academic success.

> **Heather**: I had a very supportive family. It is one of the most important things. Like when I was growing up, learning was always really important. It was like the TV was turned off and we had our heads in books. My mum and dad always pushed learning. So like coming into school they were very supportive of me doing well but not overly pushy about doing well. It was just up to me to do well.
>
> **Interviewer:** Do you think they had an expectation that you would do well?
>
> **Heather:** Uhm, I think they hoped I would do well but if I didn't, they would never get angry or anything like that.
>
> **Jennifer:** I think parents are supportive. I think that is really important so if something goes wrong or you get a bad mark or something, you know, just knowing that as long as you had done your best they would support you makes you feel so much better
>
> **Anne:** Yes I can relate to Heather. I grew up in a very similar family. My dad would encourage us from a very young age to read, to learn. He would teach us at home from the time we were about five. I think starting early had a huge impact. We got into a routine from a very young age, learning, reading and studying was something I got accustomed to. I did not wait until I got to high school to adopt behaviours like study skills. My dad had done such a good job of this at such an early age, setting me up for it, that it was not such a big deal when I got to high school. It was never an option for me that I would not try and that same attitude was fostered by the school. (Students, School F).

The home environment was a significant factor as an influence on achievement in the eyes of these students. Fostering a positive attitude to reading and learning from an early age was recognised as important. The development of routines and the promotion of study habits at home were also deemed to be significant. For Anne, who had lost her mother at an early age, the recognition of the work of her father, a single parent and the sole bread winner was particularly touching. He was rewarded well, with Anne receiving an offer to study at an ivy-league university in the USA. The other striking theme in the majority of student conversations on parental influence was the notion of support. These high achieving students knew their parents were there in the background, always encouraging and offering support.

The capacity of parents to help their sons and daughters during moments of anxiety was seen as necessary by a number of students:

> Lucas: Just being there for me, mum would bring me a cup of tea.
> Nadia: Yeh, my dad would bring me chocolate (Students, School C).

Jeynes (2007) described parental style, or the extent to which a parent demonstrated a supportive and helpful parenting approach as having a moderate effect size ($d = 0.40$) on student achievement.

A striking comparison in parental support was the comment of a student from a very low socio-economic neighbourhood and school:

> My parents are Vietnamese and do not speak English. They both worked long hours to support us through school but they always saw education as the way out (Student, School G).

Parents who viewed education as a means of fulfilling aspirations they had for their children and who consequently placed a value on education were supportive in an indirect yet equally influential sense. Spera, Wentzel and Matto's (2009) study of 13,500 middle and high school parents in the United States certainly confirmed this view, noting that minority parents view education as a vehicle for upward mobility and more broadly that "parents who have high educational aspirations for their children influence their children's academic success, perhaps by influencing children's own expectations about their academic attainments" (p. 1149).

A comment from one student in School C was an observation concerning the alignment of parental and school support:

> Teachers were prepared to talk to our parents, you felt that teachers and parents worked together for you.

This perceived connection between parents and teachers reinforced an earlier observation from a student in School F which is worth repeating:

It was never an option for me that I would not try and that same attitude was fostered by the school.

The alignment of values held by parents and schools sent a unified message that was heard by students. Effort was encouraged, academic pursuits were valued, and students felt supported at home and at school. It is concluded that students without strong parental and home support on a socio-emotional level and whose parents do not share an alignment of values with the schools their children attend, may be disadvantaged.

6.10 Student voice.

In reviewing the literature on student voice, the researcher cited numerous researchers (Beresford, 2003; Flutter, 2006; Pedder & McIntyre, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Ruddock, 2006; Watts & Youens, 2007), who argued that students are capable of insightful reflections concerning their experiences in the classroom. It is hoped that the expressions of the student voice in the current study have added greater texture to the observations of participants in the nine schools. It is the view of the researcher that student commentary is vital in terms of denying or confirming claims made by leaders and teachers, as well as providing the opportunity for students to make claims of their own. As has been noted (Gentlucci, 2004; Hattie, 2009; and Ruddock, 2006), students should not be viewed as passive objects but as active players in any effort to gain data on effective teaching and effective schools. Pedder and McIntyre (2006) suggested that any processes that engaged students in an understanding of how to improve schools has the potential to unearth valuable social capital. The researcher's experience in the current study supports such a position.

In summary, the following tables (6.1 and 6.2) are presented (overleaf) as a way of identifying the key themes found in the perceptions of students concerning the overall success of their school and factors contributing to their individual high academic achievement.

Table 6.1

Students' perceptions of teachers' and leaders' influence on academic achievement and overall school success.

Relationship with teachers. Teacher enthusiasm and passion	Teacher's content knowledge	Teacher's pedagogical strategies	Leadership of the school
Learning is compounded when teacher /student relationship is strong.	Student recognition of the depth of knowledge of better teachers.	Teachers' capacity to communicate with clarity and specificity particularly in relation to feedback.	Leaders' capacity to know their students highly valued and a key motivator.
Approachability and availability of teachers highly valued and desired by students.	Students also recognised currency of knowledge.	Teachers' ability to prioritise what was important to learn.	Students valued one on one contact with senior staff.
Student commentary concerning relationships with teachers provided confirmation of leaders' and teachers' claims.	Student recognition that highly specific knowledge of the syllabus was crucial.	Teachers' capacity to make learning relevant. Utilisation of creative hands on activities appreciated.	Students recognised that senior staff were tracking academic progress.
Teachers' enthusiasm and passion both cultivated relationships and fostered learning.	Breadth of knowledge was evidence that better teachers did not just teach to the syllabus.	Utilisation of meta-cognitive strategies, particularly note taking and subject specific study skills.	Students confirmed leaders' capacity to promote excellence and a culture of success.
Enthusiasm and passion of teachers were key motivators for students.	Teachers' knowledgeable command of their subject matter was seen as an expression of care by their students.	Teachers' organisation and planning highly valued by students. Teachers developed a focused businesslike approach to learning.	Students noticed an alignment in cultural values and expectations between teachers and leaders.
Students confirmed teachers' perceptions concerning the influence of relationships.		Feedback seen as opportunity for affirmation.	
Students perceived high expectations as an expression of care.		Feedback seen as a key organiser for students' learning in moving forward to next task.	

Table 6.2

Students' perceptions of school culture, peers and parental influence on academic achievement and overall school success

Culture of the School	Peer Influence	Parental Influence
Tangible sense of school pride.	Micro-culture of the peer cohort very influential in academic achievement.	Parents regarded as a key influence on academic achievement.
An acknowledgement of the primacy of personal relationships between teachers, leaders and students.	Supportive culture within the peer group on a social and emotional level.	Parental influence manifested in a variety of ways and not always overt often subtle.
An authentic sense of belonging in community confirming leaders' and teachers' commentary.	Students confirmed leaders and teachers promoted a culture of support within the student body.	Parental interventions at an early age seen as influential on attitudinal disposition to school.
Academic success viewed as culturally acceptable.	Pastoral groups particularly 'House' structures enhanced a sense of belonging and promoted opportunities for contribution and connection.	Parental influence at an early age capable of developing routines and study habits that drive achievement.
High yet reasonable expectations by school and teachers viewed favourably by students.	Peer study groups promoted by the school developed into effective learning supports that complemented the work of teachers and enhanced community.	Parental emotional support through school seen as significant by students particularly in Year Twelve.
Schools promoted personal excellence.	Evidence that a pro-school culture strengthens performance.	Students reported a strong alignment between parental values and school values.
Students confirmed a culture of care.	Positive peer association and attitudinal similarity enhances attachment to school and academic performance.	Students reported cooperation and communication between teachers and parents in their schools.
Schools promoted a balanced curriculum not singularly focused on academics.	Cooperation and competition co-existed within the micro-culture of the student cohort.	
Healthy competition co-existed with a high level of cooperation both factors promoted by the school.	Elements of the broader school culture permeated the peer culture.	
Students confirmed majority of teacher and leader perceptions on culture.		