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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 SEVEN

PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

7.1 Perceptions of parents: Introduction.

Several researchers, recognised the significant influence of parents on student achievement and psychosocial functioning within the school environment. Acordingly, parental involvement in the school community is seen as an important goal of most school systems. (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Epstein, 2009, 2010; Fan & Chen, 2001; Fass & Taubman, 2002; Feiler, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Harris and Goodall, 2008; Jeynes, 2007, 2011; Spera, Wentzel & Matto, 2009)

A number of parents (n = 37) were interviewed in focus groups to gain perceptions on the influence of the leadership team, teachers and their practice, peer groups, the overall culture of the school and its relationship with the parent body (where the interchange of dialogue is presented pseudonyms are provided for parents). In addition, the researcher sought to investigate whether parents' perceptions validated or contested the commentary of leaders, teachers and students. Overarching themes relating to parents' perceptions are explored in the following commentary.

7.2 Parents' perceptions of leadership in the school.

All parents spoke of the positive influence of leadership in relation to high student academic achievement. Commentary varied from school-to-school as some schools had more visible and perhaps charismatic principals, while in other schools parents commented that the leadership team "worked quietly in the background" (Parent, School A). Having noted some difference in approach, every focus group of parents appreciated that the role of the principal was "pivotal" (Parent, School A) and some said so emphatically. Others recognised the leadership team in the school:

> We actually chose the school based on the leadership. From the Principal to the Deputy Principal and year coordinators they have been very caring and communicative (Parent, School D).

In School A, parents reflected on how the Principal and the broader leadership team focused on key pillars, "culture (the arts), sport, spiritual and academic" (Parent, School A). Within that focus was a concerted effort to help students find something that they were good at, thus enabling accomplishment, as the following discussion illustrates:

> **Interviewer**: Are there particular things that the leadership team do or things you have seen visible in the school?
>
> **Kathy**: I think the way they try to get them all involved, they drill into the kids that everyone has got something that they are good at and they try and focus on finding their passion and what they excel at and can enjoy. I believe all the kids have something special that they are good at.
>
> **Kelly:** Yes the four pillars are always referred to by the principal and it helps them find an avenue.
>
> **Mary**: Yes when they hit high school they flourish because there is always something for them to achieve in (Parents, School A).

In one of the all boys' schools, the influence of the principal in terms of the development of relationships was commented on by parents and confirmed earlier commentary from students. The following interchange illustrates how the principal's behaviour modelled and shaped a culture defined by relationships. The observations of parents also provide some insights on the use of focus groups within an IPA study.

> **Sally**: They let boys be boys here, no matter how many buttons have to be sown on (much laughter).
>
> **Frank**: How many safety pins come home keeping the shirts together? (more laughter).
>
> **Sally**: They can have that relationship with the boys. You just have to walk around and see how many teachers are just chatting to the students at lunchtime and recess.
>
> **Frank**: Yes my son said, the kids really enjoy it, there is always banter back and forth. It comes from "Principal X" he loves the boys. I think if he could chat to the boys all day long he would. When he walks around he knows them. He'll go to the library where other boys are and he'll talk to them asking what are you doing...
>
> **Irene**: That is a very much a heritage of the religious order.

Lynette: But it's not only the teachers it's the admin staff. Whenever I go to the office I am so warmly greeted. It's very welcoming. Staff members say "Hi how are you? Can I help you?

Frank: Yes there is not one time that I have come to the school where I have not been greeted.

Sally: And the boys notice that.

Irene: Yes because I think they are greeted the same (Parents, School B).

In posing a simple open-ended question which asked parents to reflect on the influence of the leadership team within the school, unexpected results can come to the fore as previously discussed in the methodology chapter. Such responses cannot be dismissed; rather they are more authentic because they have come of their own volition. The responses concerning the principal reveal and confirm dominant themes of love, care and knowledge of students, mentioned in previous chapters. Broader observations concerning the permeating qualities of a welcoming and inviting school culture were also facilitated by the use of the focus group.

Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010) argued that the contextual emphasis of IPA "is an integral part of hermeneutic phenomenology. In these terms, person and world are not separate but instead co-constituting and mutually disclosing" (p. 99). It was felt by the researcher, as was hypothesized in the methodology chapter, that the focus group enabled parents to be supported by each other, feeling more comfortable to disclose perceptions. The opening hilarity of the image of bedraggled boys homeward bound, certainly supported Wilkinson (2008) who argued for the use of focus groups within an IPA study, refuting suggestions that they are inhibiting. Wilkinson (2008) suggested that, focus groups are naturalistic, incorporating storytelling and joking. Most importantly, within that storytelling, as evidenced above, there can be found very rich themes. In this case, there were themes of acceptance of boys for who they are, of a world of love and care and in this case the direct influence of a relational principal. Parents may not have been able to narrate such anecdotes if they had not heard them from their own sons in the first place and seen it with their own eyes because they felt welcomed in the school. Thus, from an initial response concerning the modelling of relationships through the leadership of the principal, the focus group was clearly a source of rich further observations.

The majority of parents commented that leadership was very much shared. Parents spoke of the individual roles of many deputy principals, heads of year and heads of departments who had a more visible and hands-on involvement with their sons and daughters. Earlier findings related to distributed leadership (Harris, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane, 2009; Spillane & Coldren, 2011; Spillane & Healey, 2010) were confirmed. Parents' observations of effective distributed leadership are provided below:

> **Kelly**: Having a dean of studies move through with the children from year to year was a very useful system. He got to know the kids really well. They made that connection together. So if the students had problems they felt comfortable going to see the dean for their year group.
> **Interviewer**: Did that also make you as a parent feel comfortable?
> **Kelly**: Yeh, Yeh, you know I felt as though I knew him. You come into the school and they know you and say hello it makes you feel very comfortable (Parent, School A).

> The Head of Year is a very important role – they become a big part of the girls' lives (Parent, School E).

These comments validated other earlier findings in the perceptions of teachers and students, namely, that connectedness to significant staff particularly in middle management roles, impacted positively on students. Parental observations also strongly supported the findings of Shields and Miles (2008) and Darling Hammond (2010) whose research noted the positive impact of structures that promoted 'personalised' support.

Parents also spoke of the role of deputy principals who had specific responsibility for academic matters across the school.

> **Parent 1**: When we first came to the school it had a reputation for being a very caring environment and that, plus its geographic location was a major reason why we chose it. I would have to say though, that the academic reputation of the school was not that strong. But since then, when Mr X came on board (the deputy principal) if I could pinpoint... we started to see a greater emphasis on the academics, it appeared in the newsletter, you

started to hear the kids talk about it, academic excellence. He has done a really good job in promoting that.

Parent 2: But they have such lovely teachers too! I mean they enjoy coming to school. The teachers *they make it!* (Parents, School C)

In summary, parents appreciated the role of the leadership of the principal as 'pivotal' in the success of the schools. They also observed leadership as genuinely distributed through a number of roles from deputy principals to middle management. Leadership teams fostered and promoted cultural elements of the school in the eyes of parents such as academic excellence, opportunities for involvement and accomplishment, care, community, and connectedness. These cultural elements will be discussed more fully later in this chapter. In the majority of the focus group interviews, while parents were discussing the attributes of leadership within the school they were more often than not drawn to include teachers, suggesting that there was a synergy of shared values between the leadership team, middle management and the broader teaching body. The comment above (from Parent 2, school C) is a natural segue for the discussion of parental perceptions concerning the role of teachers, particularly how '*they make it'* a positive experience.

7.3   Parents' perceptions of teachers.

There was little doubt that of all the ingredients in the mix of factors that contributed to high achieving students, or students achieving their personal best, 'the teacher' was the essential component in the eyes of parents:

The teacher is everything; the teacher can make or break a child (Parent, School G).

Every year is only as good as the teacher (Parent, School F).

Such comments confirm the insights of those who argue that the quality of a school will always be determined by the quality of its teachers (Caldwell, 2008; Dinham, 2008; Hattie, 2009, 2012; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2007). The impact of the teacher in the perceptions of parents is elaborated under the following themes: The teacher-student relationship, communication, feedback and affective qualities of teachers.

7.3.1 Teacher-student relationship.

In accord with Ewington and McPherson's (1998) study of parental perceptions, parents indicated that a positive teacher-student relationship leads to increased learning:

> The best teachers are just there for the boys, talking to them, knowing them, and recognising them as individuals (Parent, School B).
>
> Good teaching is about having good relationships that is the feature of this school (Parent School F).
>
> I cannot believe the level of support my daughter has received. The teachers here are so accessible (Parent, School A).
>
> Teachers know students right up to the principal. Our children simply enjoy coming to school and that is due to the teachers (Parent, School C).
>
> I cannot believe the extra help my daughter has received, the teachers go the extra mile, meeting kids at lunchtime or after school (Parent, School A).

Conversely, when the relationship was not a positive experience parents spoke of the resulting impact:

> My child had a bad year in terms of relationships with teachers and that year was a disaster (Parent, School G).
>
> There is nothing worse than a teacher who 'fobs off' a child seeking help, it destroys the relationship and my child has experienced that (Parent, School B).

Predominantly though, the perceptions of parents concerning the quality of the teacher-student relationship above, were illustrated by the extraordinary lengths that teachers went to, in order to provide extra support for their sons and daughters. This characteristic was common across all schools and confirmed the commentary of all other focus groups in the study. Such support was captured in another subtly different observation from a parent in School B:

> **Parent**: In my case I had a particular staff member really push my son along. He sort of got half way through year 12 and fell apart and they didn't let him go, they just kept at him. That kept him going and getting him through. So I think they are a huge …

> **Interviewer**: So when you say they kept at him what were they doing? (Laughter from other parents).
>
> **Parent**: They'd go up and talk to him, pull him aside during the day and get him to come to them at lunchtime and make sure that he did. They wouldn't say meet me at this time and not follow it up, they would follow it up and make sure he was there and if he wasn't, they'd approach him on the school ground and say come on let's go.

While the provision of extra academic support in an after-hours context was lauded by parents, the fact that teachers consistently followed-up students who needed that support, urging them to attend, was deeply appreciated and was witness to the notion of 'relational trust' identified by Bryk and Schneider (2002). In particular, the constitutional elements of relational trust; respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity, were evident in this reported social exchange in the school community. Of note, was the level of integrity on the part of the teacher as observed by the parent in 'following up' and not 'letting go'. This reminded the researcher of a recent presentation by Mooney (2012) who used the metaphor of travelling on buses in India to describe the culture of her school for homeless girls in Calcutta:

> In India you do not merely travel by bus. You hold on to someone, who holds on to someone else, who holds on to someone else. This seems to me to be a good description of our learning journey and our school.

Mooney's observation also seems to be an apt metaphor of the level of connectedness in the teacher-student relationship as observed by the mother in the focus group above. It is also worth noting the dynamics of the conversation in this reported exchange within the focus group of School B. Had the interviewer not subtly probed further by asking for clarification from the interviewee about what was meant by "keeping at him" the explanation may never have been offered and the richness of the response would have been lost. Such probes, subtly utilised, are an important skill in the interviewing process within phenomenologically-based research.

Having noted this exchange as a rich confirmatory example of the teacher-student relationship from the viewpoint of parents, another parent in the same focus group interjected not long after, with a contrary view:

My kids (twins) have been average performers and one in particular had an attitude that everything will be all right. I must admit that I did get a little bit disappointed that things were not followed up. For example, after school tutorials were offered in this subject and when not enough kids turned up, the tutorials were cancelled. My two *did* turn up, but the teacher did not follow through. I think if you advertise the support no matter how many turn up it should be provided (Parent, School B).

Clearly in this case, relational trust between the parent and school had been damaged as the parent perceived a disconnect in the relationship between her sons and the teacher. Parents desire consistency and follow-through in the behaviour of teachers, particularly when they offer support.

In terms of the IPA methodology (Smith, 1996, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) it is vital that the researcher presents a balanced perspective. The bracketing process demands that the researcher suspends a natural inclination not to include a dissenting voice because it does not sit comfortably with his or her experience, or the hegemony of positive parental opinion on the matter in hand, in this case, the teacher–student relationship. In fact, such dissent speaks to the truth of data as strongly as the representation of a consensus of opinion.

In the case of conflicting views presented here, the researcher would argue that there is evidence of child-parent discussion as described by Stewart (2008), the showing of a high degree of parental interest and knowledge of the child's experiences at school. Stewart (2008) argued that such parent-child discussions at home were a contributing factor in increased academic achievement. The level of parental interest in their children's education within the current study was illustrated by a parent quoting the observation of her son:

Mum, all you ever do is ask me questions about school (Parent, School G).

The school's capacity to provide parents with avenues of communication was a strong feature of the focus group discussions. This was particularly true of direct communication in relation to their child's academic progress.

7.3.2 Communication.

Parents spoke of the importance of communication between the school and home. Epstein (1983a, 1983b, 2009, 2010) noted the positive impact of two-way communication in the relationship between parents and school, arguing that the effect of family and school processes was greater than those of socioeconomic status and race. Bronfenbrenner (1994) referred to this important linkage as a 'mesosystem' linking two or more settings in the life of an individual, in this case, the home and school. Parents in the current study wanted a strong partnership and expected it. In most schools this was provided wth one parent summing up the majority view:

> They deliver on their promises of strong communication (Parent, School H).

Another parent spoke about the process of sending out the school newsletter to all prospective parents the year before their child commenced their studies at the school:

> The news letter is great. It is sent to you twelve months before your child arrives. It draws you into the community (Parent, School B).

Earlier comments from principals and deputy principals on the importance of communication about student progress were certainly reinforced by parents:

> Communication can be great but it can also be hit and miss. We really want communication. Some teachers are very good, some not so (Parent, School A).
> Communication could be improved a lot. I had a terrible shock when I found out that my daughter was not doing well in maths. There was no prior warning (Parent, School D).

Parents did not want surprises in relation to their child's academic progress. The notion of communication between the school and parents was the source of greatest concern. Leaders and teachers felt that their lines of communication were strong and while a majority of parents agreed, the objections of others require schools to recognise that parents have an almost insatiable and justifiable desire for communication about their child's academic progress. Feedback on students'

assessment, both formative and summative was a central feature of conversations across all focus groups.

7.3.3 Feedback.

Again, to reiterate observations from leaders, teachers and student focus groups, parents spoke about the role of feedback quite passionately. Commentary on the importance of feedback finds support in the literature (Creemers, 1994; Hattie, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012; Marzano 2003). The absolute necessity of 'timely' feedback and comments on the wasted opportunity when feedback was provided too many weeks after the assessment submission, were central to parental concerns. Parents also confirmed the need for detailed feedback that guided their children on "what to do next and how or where to go from here" (Parent, School C), almost echoing Hattie (2012), who had contended that feedback is concerned with three questions. "Where am I going? How am I going there? Where to next?" (p. 116). One parent in (School C) captured others' views, when he reflected (referring to a metric that had been introduced and then abandoned in the Western Australian school system) that: "I want to see results that are measurable and understandable. Anything but levels!". In Australia at this time there had been much debate around metrics related to outcomes based education, prompting the federal government to intervene and introduce a requirement for a 'plain english report' utilising grades of A-D.

This commentary confirmed the observations of the OECD (2012) which noted that publishing school information which is transparent and understandable means that parents, among others, "have the evidence they need to make informed decisions about student learning" (p. 8).

Epstein, (2010) recognised the challenges of communication with parents and strongly supported the view that schools should "review the readability, clarity and frequency of all communications" (p. 86). Clinton, Hattie and Dixon (2007) supported this parental request as they suggested that educational jargon can be an impediment to parental communication.

The evidence of the potential in parental-child discussions at home (Stewart 2008), also came to the fore as another parent commented on teachers' availability and approachability in the context of feedback:

> Good teachers are genuinely interested in kids, they're good listeners. My son was frightened to keep on asking questions but I told him good teachers listen and encourage you to ask questions (Parent, School G).

This expression of affinity with the role of the teacher, highlighted the views of Epstein (2010) who noted that "understanding the teacher's job, increased comfort in school, and carry-over of school activities at home" (p. 87).

Just as parents desire understandable feedback they also commented that before students can ask the questions referred to above, they too need understandable feedback.

> Detailed feedback is very important. They need to know where they went wrong to start a conversation with their teacher (Parent School, B).
> They cannot get enough feedback, written comments on assessments are so important. It gives me as a parent some clue as to how to help him. Maybe I'm being too controlling but I just want to help (Parent, School D).

Further, parents spoke about the impact of 'affirmation', both formal and informal, which supported student conversations about feedback.

> You cannot underestimate how important it is to be acknowledged, to be told you did a good job (Parent, School G).

Parents of boys in particular, spoke of how much their sons had benefited from positive affirmation and how they often proudly brought home certificates of merit and encouragement to show their parents, even in upper secondary school. As conversations moved from discussions about communication and feedback to affirmation, inevitably parents spoke of the personal traits of teachers that had impacted on their sons' or daughters' achievement.

7.3.4 Affective qualities of teachers.

Parents reinforced the need for qualities of patience, authentic active listening, passion for their subject and thorough organisation. Added to these were exhibiting encouragement, displaying approachability, and being willing to 'follow up'. A sense of humour was also mentioned often. A striking comment came from a parent of

triplets who reflected on conversations with her daughters about the characteristics of the best teachers (Day, 2007; Fried, 1995) and their display of passion for their learning area.

> The thing that rubs off on them the most is passion. They have a teacher who loves Human Biology and despite the fact that when they started they didn't personally like her, they like that enthusiasm and passion and they now love the subject and the teacher (Parent, School F).

This observation was repeated in another school:

> My daughter had friends over on the weekend and they were talking about their History lessons with Mr C. It was so unusual to hear kids animated, recollecting History lessons, but I could hear that it was all because of his passion. He was inspirational to them (Parent School E).

In addition to the qualities cited above, all parents spoke of the need for the teacher to be a master of their subject matter, stating that "kids see straight through them otherwise" (Parent, School F).

The current study was contextualised within a group of high performing academic schools. The study therefore, was interested to investigate whether parents were drivers of a culture that was results focused and whether that dominated why they chose a particular school for their children.

7.4   Parents' perceptions concerning academic results.

While the leadership teams in schools had commented on their need to be cognisant of 'the data' regarding student performance (Fullan 2005; Mulford & Silins, 2011; Timperley, 2010), parents were mixed in their observations when asked if schools should be results-focused. Parents spoke of the reality of a 'league table' driven society, as can be seen in the following observations:

> That is the reality, schools have no choice these days, they have to be results focused (Parent, School E).

You cannot afford not to be engaged with the results and if you visibly address it, talk about it, kids notice and it helps them achieve (Parent, School F).

Parents confirmed the earlier commentary of leaders and teachers that academic results could not be ignored and that data on student performance could be used to good effect. However, parental observations were tempered by a number of reflections that while results in the tertiary entrance examinations were important, and these schools had achieved very good results, most parents were looking for much more, thereby confirming research by Independent Schools Queensland (2011) which found that when parents were choosing to send their children to an independent school three key factors influenced choice, "preparation for students to fulfil their potential in life, good discipline and encouragement of a responsible attitude to work" (p. 3). Parents in School G, within the current study complemented these observations further:

Parent 1: They (schools) need to focus on everything, not just the academics, the whole person.
Parent 2: They also focus on life-skills here, for some kids just getting through the week is an achievement!

The comments from parents in School G were particularly powerful, as this was a school with a very low socio-economic index level and parents acknowledged the extremely difficult challenges faced by many students in their community. Examples of these challenges were families coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, recently arrived migrants from war-torn countries and as a consequence children suffering from trauma. These students grappled with considerable language and cultural adjustments together with issues related to their social and emotional wellbeing.

The comment of another parent in School B reinforces the perceptions of the two parents cited above:

Results are important for the school's profile but not important for me as a parent. It is not my sole focus. I want kids that are well rounded and think that should be the main aim of the school. Offering a variety of academic

programs such as vocational education, the arts and sport is just as important.

In another school a parent offered the following observation:

> We were not exclusively after results, we wanted a school with community and this school has it. We also wanted a school that engaged with the *wider* community and this school does, with its service programs and opportunities for student exchange (Parent, School C).

A final reflection on academic results highlighted yet another element that parents desired in their child's education:

> We could have put our kids in School "X" which is just around the corner and has a strong pedigree of academic results but we wanted the "*Mercy heritage*" (religious order), the strong co-curricular program and the values.

The researcher was surprised at the extent to which parents downplayed academic results. The researcher had to consciously bracket his own views, both as a parent and educator within the IPA study, suspending a belief that parents would be results-driven and select schools on academic reputation, as he had done with his own children.

Parents prioritised individual needs of students, breadth of co-curricular programs; specific cultural values and social capital. Commentary from parents supported Hargraves and Fullan (2012) who made the observation that schools should be "evidence informed not data driven" (p. 172). The authors reminded school leaders not to "overload yourself with data, so that you have no room as a community, to think about or discuss anything else" (p. 172). Parents reminded the researcher that there is so much more to a school community than merely a uni-dimensional focus on academic performance. Parents would be comforted to know that leaders and teachers supported their views. Parental perceptions of the culture of schools are now explored.

7.5   Parents' perceptions of culture.

When asked whether the culture of the school played a part in its success, parents focused on the sense of community and belonging, well captured in the following comment:

> It is a warm, welcoming community, it is a school with a great ambience (Parent, School (B).

This statement echoed and confirmed the comments of students and teachers in previous focus groups. More acute observations came from other parents:

> It is about community here, everyone does care about everyone, the pastoral is the strength, it is as if they are saying, if you come, we can help... the kids see it (Parent, School G).
>
> We brought our daughter from School "Z". It was a school that had everything in terms of facilities but no sense of community, no parent participation (Parent, School F).

Many parents spoke about the need for students to have opportunities to **"find a niche,** to participate**"** (Parent, School C) and thus to belong:

> My daughter is very much an atypical kid, but she found a place. They accept difference here (Parent, School A).
>
> When you find a niche it impacts on all other areas (Parent, School E).
>
> It is a very supportive culture, kids are encouraged to have a go (Parent, School F).

The collective voice of parents spoke of students finding a place, of being welcomed, and of experiencing an acceptance of difference, confirming student commentary in the preceding chapter. Parents who observe their children being welcomed, feel welcomed too, and when this occurs community flourishes. The National Catholic Education Commission of Australia (2011) suggested that parents have a right to expect that their children's education is focused on their cognitive, physical, social and spiritual growth. The parents in the current study confirmed those expectations and saw them as the fulfilment of that social contract.

Parents commented on the importance of a broad, sporting and cultural program in their schools and applauded the way in which it enhanced commitment and school pride through broader opportunities to participate. Parent perceptions concerning the benefits of sporting and cultural programs reinforced earlier observations by students in the previous chapter. A majority of parents spoke of the pride that their children had in the school:

> Our girls are proud of their community, their school. They wear their uniform with pride (Parent, School F).
>
> There is an incredible sense of pride amongst the kids. In year 8 my son made a comment as we were driving past the school. 'You know Dad, I love my school I could give it a great big hug'. He has now left the school and still wears his sports pants or leavers' jacket (Parent, School A).

This sense of comfort, pride and belonging could well have been enhanced by the perception that the schools strived to provide genuinely safe environments, as one parent remarked:

> It is a safe school environment, there is very little bullying and when it occurs it is dealt with quickly, our children simply enjoy coming to school (Parent, School D).

In focus groups, parents often expressed the need for a safe, orderly environment that enabled students to focus on learning. More importantly, parents confirmed the presence of such an environment.

The strongest theme in all discussions around the culture of the schools was that relating to the quality of relationships between teachers and students which had been earlier addressed in this chapter. Parents recognised that teachers had, in many cases, quite extraordinarily authentic relationships with their sons and daughters. Teachers knew them as individuals, with the relationship being characterised by mutual respect and trust and as a consequence, student learning was enhanced. Parents confirmed the earlier accounts of students (albeit different parents speaking about different students) around the powerful impact of informal conversations in the school yard, or in the sporting arena, or the music rehearsal, where teachers made the effort to develop the relationship in another context that ultimately deepened the relationship in the classroom.

Set against the theme of personal relationships was the Catholic context of the schools and the unsolicited observations about the heritage of the religious orders that had established them. It must be remembered that in an earlier chapter the researcher noted the reflection of a deputy principal from School E, who had commented on the charism of 'hospitality' that was central to the founding order of that school the Presentation nuns. That notion was embodied in the observations of many parents across the schools in the current study. Equally, the researcher noted the observations of parents in School F who had chosen the school for their daughters based on its 'Mercy' heritage and the values stemming from the religious order of the Sisters of Mercy. School, G and C were also schools that had a 'Mercy' heritage where compassion, respect, excellence, hospitality and justice were core values of the religious order's charism and alluded to by parents. Parents from School F, when asked to make some summative observations at the end of the interview, all spoke of the powerful influence of the presence of nuns on the campus who resided in the convent but had no formal teaching role.

> **Parent 1**: The sisters tell them that everyday we will pray for you for the rest of your life. Well you know we'll take all the help we can get but how wonderful is that thought?
>
> **Parent 2**: And when the kids are teary the first thing they say is where is Sr Mary?
>
> **Parent 3**: Yes but where is the next Sr Mary?

It might be said that parents had answered that very question themselves in their observations of the values-laden culture of the schools their sons and daughters were inhabiting. It is argued that the lay leaders and teachers who had taken the place of the religious orders in these schools were preserving their values, their "charism".

7.6   Parents' perceptions of the peer group influence.

Parents acknowledged the effect of the peer group on their sons' and daughters' achievement. In fact, it might be argued they were the best placed group of all to make such an observation of the impact of the peer group. They supported leaders and teachers who spoke of the tone within the student cohort as almost a micro environment within the school, characterised by respect, support and care.

Bronfenbrenner (1994) would refer to this as a 'microsystem' within his ecological model of human development. He defined it in the following way:

> A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face to face setting with particular physical, social and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. Examples include such settings as family, school, peer group, and workplace (p. 39).

Bronfenbrenner's theory stated that within the microsystem proximal processes operate to produce and sustain development. However, such development depends on the microsystem's capacity to function positively. In the current study, the microsystem of the peer group is observed as a positive, supportive agent in academic achievement as represented by the following parental observations:

> The peer group is a huge influence, these kids push each other, support each other, ring each other about their study, email and text each other, meet with each other and it helps produce the results they achieve (Parent, School F).

> Students encourage and support each other to have a go (Parent, School F).
> Peers are massively influential. This year my son has befriended kids who do study and it has helped him enormously (Parent, School G).
> Other kids are very important, a big influence. This Year 12 group were academically focused, there was healthy competition and friendly rivalry (Parent, School C).

A contrary view was proffered by one parent to remind teachers that not all students will be swept up by the enthusiasm of an academically able group:

> ...XXXX could get high scores but he worked hard to stay average! He was a nightmare and it was only until he got to year 11 and 12 that he started to focus on his study but even then he just did the minimum in a good year group (Parent, School D).

While examples like XXXX exist in every school the majority of parents interviewed would have concurred with the following parent:

> The peer group is pervasive. But no matter what the results the girls respect different talents. The Dux of the Vocational program was as highly regarded for her achievement as the Dux of the TEE pathway (Parent, School E).

Parents of students who had left the school a few years ago spoke about the enduring bond of social connection that had characterised the cohort and how the support they received from each other was evident in relationships that lasted through to university, for example:

> When they get to university they are almost expected to look after each other. My daughter was struggling with some work in the library at Uni one day, almost to the point of tears. She bumped into another girl from school who was in the year above her who offered help and her notes, who just set her up, who re-directed her and told her not to worry. I thought what an amazing experience that was. Here are these kids who have left school but still looking after each other (Parent, School F).

This observation supports Fass and Taubman (2002) who not only found that attachment to parents and peers increased social competence and academic achievement but supported adaptive pathways in post-school transition.

Parents' perceptions of the influence of peers confirmed commentary from leaders, teachers and students themselves. The influence of the peer group in these high achieving schools was "pervasive' in terms of pro-academic behaviours. Parents also confirmed the students' own observations that they were able to be both supportive and collaborative, yet harness a healthy competitiveness in the pursuit of academic achievement. Having surveyed parental perceptions of the roles of leaders, teachers and the student peer group, it seemed prudent to ask parents to reflect on how they saw their role as an influence on the academic achievement of their children.

7.7 Parental perceptions' of their own influence on student academic achievement.

Parents had an acute sense of their capacity to influence their children's academic endeavour. In many cases, their reflections addressed the social and emotional support and nurturing they offered. Parents also reflected on their broader practical roles in helping with study and getting students to and from events. A final feature of the perceptions of their role was the social and emotional support they provided.

7.7.1 Social and emotional support.

When parents reflected on their role in the educational life of their children the instinctive response was to comment on the provision of social and emotional support. Epstein's (2010) model of six types of parental involvement would categorise these responses under Type 1 "supporting, nurturing and rearing" (p. 94). The following commentary from parents is illustrative of this social and emotional dimension of parental influence:

> At the beginning of year 11 Kate came home in tears saying "I cannot do this". I remained calm, supported her with choices and things then moved on. We provided stability at home (School, C).
>
> You have to love them, support them, encourage them and be interested and involved (Parent, School B).
>
> You just do as much as you can to support them emotionally to lighten the load, running them around and giving them self belief and confidence.... we are prepared to fill the gaps (Parent, School A).

Another parent from the same school responded by adding:

> But it is not only the parents who fill the gap, it is the community. If I couldn't be there I knew there would be others who could (Parent, School A).

Just as parents supported their children, they recognised they could be a powerful support to each other, illustrating Epstein's (2010) Type 3 form of Parental Involvement, "volunteering, supervising, fostering" (p. 94).

> Part of parenting is getting to know your children's friends' parents. So you know when they are going somewhere, what type of household are they going into and what type of family are they mixing with. Because kids can just do stupid things so you know that if you can ring up other parents and talk to them about your concerns it is a support (Parent, School B).

Chen, Dornbusch and Liu (2007) and Parke et al. (1989) noted that parents have an influence on adolescent peer associations through facilitation, approval or disapproval, conversations about friends and meeting other parents. The reflection above is illustrative of an indirect influence by parents on the peer selection effect referred to earlier in the literature review and also confirms the multi-dimensional construct of parental behaviours. In a subtle way, the parent in School B was endeavouring to facilitate peer connection through a vetting process via approval of the parents of her child's peers. Such approval strengthens and affirms connections with like-minded peers who may share similar pro-academic dispositions, so confirming the work undertaken by Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001).

Parents spoke emphatically about their parenting role as providing encouragement.

> **Parent 1**: We have to be there providing encouragement especially when they are unsure of themselves. You need to support them in their decision making at this age.
> **Parent 2**: And I think it's important parents should be encouraging the students to do what the school wants of them. Parents should back the school in that regard. It's often the kids who are in trouble who do not have supportive parents. I think it's our job to say have you done your homework, do you look decent in the morning, things like that. The kids learn discipline if you back up the teachers.
> **Parent 1**: And the teachers need to be consistent in backing our efforts up (Parents, School D).

In the conversations with parent focus groups, the researcher found that there was often a high degree of "collaboration with the school community" another of Epstein's (2010, p. 94) "Types" of parental engagement. One parent within the same focus group reflected on the importance of parents taking an interest in their child's experiences at school:

Researcher: Do you find that the interest you are taking in your children makes a difference?

Parent 3: Well you know we did a little experiment recently. We are always following up on our kids. Have you done your homework, how much homework have you got, what did you do in school today? And it is always at times a battle. So we decided that for a term we would leave the kids to themselves – let them do what they want to do. And within a few weeks it was a disaster. They were falling behind, they were disorganised, they needed someone to be interested and they asked us for support. Parents being interested in what their kids are doing at home makes a lot of difference (Parent, School D).

This observation by the parent in School D that 'they needed someone to be interested' is a telling commentary on the role of parents and reflects the literature well. While Epstein (2010) argued that the parents' role at home should be more focused on encouragement and support through listening and guiding rather than direct teaching, many parents spoke about the need for information about study skills and practical strategies to help their children be better organised at home.

7.8   Parental engagement with school activities.

A majority of parents spoke of engagement in a wide variety of school activities. These activities ranged from sporting, musical and dramatic events; art exhibitions; fundraising events; and purely social activities. As one parent said:

This school is a huge part of our life, we live here, we are so involved (Parent, School F).

Such an observation highlights the welcoming environment parents spoke about in the majority of schools. Equally, other parents noted:

Parent 1: From the very first parent briefing in year 8 we felt the school was telling us *we have got to be involved.*

Parent 2: They tell you that every year.

Parent 3: It remains for parents to then follow that up. But the school is doing their part (Parents, School D).

In order for parents to feel at home in the school, there is a need for a clear invitation to be extended and for parents to be reminded that it is a standing invitation. In such invitational gestures by schools, partnerships can flourish.

The parents in the identified schools were clearly engaged and supportive, the partnership between school and parents being strongly aligned: "it is the community spirit, we share similar values about education" (Parent, School A). Parents knew that they should support the work of the teachers in the classroom and be supportive of the culture of the school.

The focus groups highlighted how much more difficult the task of education can be when without parents who can "fill the gaps" or accept the invitation of partnership (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Indeed, other 'gaps' can be caused when there is an absence of parents or the presence of dysfunctional families. Parents in School G noted that for some parents with very different cultural backgrounds, it is not a cultural norm for them to be involved in their child's education, being something they leave to the school. Lack of involvement may not necessarily be a sign of indifference but simply a cultural disposition. A parent in School G also noted that:

> It's interesting that we think there is a common definition of 'parents'. For many of our students it's aunties and uncles, older brothers and sisters. Some kids just fend for themselves, with no parents in the house. There are parents with alcohol, drug and mental health problems (Parent, School G).

This school would often use a variety of community welfare support services to make contact with parents. In many cases, staff from the school would visit homes to engage with parents who were simply not contactable through any other means. One poignant story was told about a teacher in charge of the Year 12 cohort who actually took a student out shopping for a suit, to attend his end-of-year ball. The student had no one else capable of supporting him in this endeavour. Cases like this highlight the school 'filling the gaps" in parenting.

Notwithstanding the exceptions cited above, the majority of parents spoke of flourishing partnerships being built through welcoming communities based on

mutual respect between parents and schools. In this regard, Epstein (2010) suggested that:

> Schools have choices... One approach emphasises conflict and views the school as a battle ground. The other approach emphasises partnership and views the school as a homeland (p. 94).

Evidence suggests that the schools in the current study were, for the majority of parents, 'a homeland' and as such, a place where parents felt they could contribute to the wellbeing and academic achievement of their children. As Putnam (2003) noted 'we are better together' (p. 1).

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, and by way of chapter summary, Table 7.1 (overleaf) identifies the key overarching themes found in the perceptions of parents concerning factors contributing to their children's high academic achievement and the overall academic success of their school. Table (7.2) identifies cultural factors parents attributed to their school's success.

Table 7.1

Perceptions' of Parents in Relation to Factors that Contributed to their Children's High Academic Achievement and the Overall Academic Success of their School.

Perceptions of Leadership	Perceptions of Teachers	Perceptions of the student peer group	Perceptions of their own role.
Leadership is *pivotal.*	Teachers viewed as the *most significant influence* on student achievement.	Peer group viewed as a *pervasive influence* on achievement.	Parents viewed their role as *overtly supporting the social and emotional* domain.
Leadership perceived as *distributed.*	Teacher-student *relationship crucial.*	Peer group clearly a *"microsystem".*	Strong correlation with Epstein's typology of engagement.
Roles of middle managers Deputies and Heads of Year significant.	Confirmed *extraordinary accessibility and availability* outside of the classroom.	Peers respectful of *individual difference.*	Evidence of *facilitation of peer associations.*
Parents saw leaders as key *champions of cultural values.*	Teachers played a key role in the development of *relational trust* between parents and the school.	Peers both supportive, collaborative *and* engaged in healthy competition.	Parents valued *connections with other parents* that fostered mutual support.
Leaders modelled strong *relationships* with students.	Parents placed high stock on teachers being *communicative* with them.	Collaboration and support *endures beyond school* into post-school destinations.	Recognised that they played a role in *supporting teachers.*
Leaders, key drivers of an *academic culture.*	Parents confirmed *quality feedback* as critical to student success.	A *pro-academic culture* common among peer groups across the study.	Recognised that they should be *affirming of school values.*
Leaders acknowledged as addressing *data.*	Parents confirmed *passion and enthusiasm* as essential feature of quality teaching.	Parents valued students being given *opportunities to lead.*	Engaged in discussions about school at home. Sought more advice on how to support study at home.
Ensured parents felt *welcomed.*	Agreed with other respondents that content knowledge was very important.		Valued the *religious setting and values* of the school. Strongly valued heritage of religious orders.
			Willingness to participate in broad range of school activities.

Table 7.2

Cultural Factors Parents Believed Contributed to their Children's High Academic Achievement and the Overall Academic Success of their School.

Parents' Perceptions of the Culture of the School
While recognising the importance of academic results in a school parents *sought more.*
Parents valued *a holistic focus* on their children and a culture that supported such a focus.
Parents sought a school that was a *community* and they affirmed that they had found it.
While recognising that facilities were important *people and relationships were a higher priority.*
Student engagement with the wider community through *service programs* was valued by parents.
Parents strongly endorsed the religious setting of the school, particularly the *charism* of the religious orders that founded some of the schools in the study. The religious setting was seen as a vehicle for the enculturation of values.
Parents own values were comfortably aligned with the values of the school.
Parents endorsed the views of leaders, teachers and students that relationships fostered both community *and a sense of belonging.*
A sense of *belonging influenced student* achievement.