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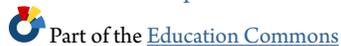
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2014

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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Publication Details

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

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 8.1 Introduction.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the factors attributed to the academic success of nine selected Catholic secondary schools. These schools had consistently outperformed other 'like' schools in the context of the State tertiary entrance examinations. Attributes were gathered in each of the nine schools in the study via the perceptions of key stakeholders: leaders, teachers, students and parents.

The study was based on an epistemology of qualitative research, the chosen theoretical perspective was interpretivism and the methodology was an interpretative phenomenological analysis. The data were gathered through the use of qualitative semi-structured one-on-one interviews with principals and deputy principals. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with heads of subject departments, teachers, students and parents in each of the nine schools.

The main research question framing the study was:

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

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

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

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

This chapter is structured by considering each of the four sub-questions in turn and concluding with a response to the main question. The researcher has endeavoured to present not just the singular roles of each stakeholder group but also explore that role within the context of the role of others. In doing so, the researcher has sought to triangulate the data in a way that would provide a *gestalt* of these school communities.

## **8.2 Leaders' perceptions: Introduction.**

From an analysis of leaders' perceptions, the following overarching themes emerged: aligned strategic leadership; the predominance of a blended model of leadership; vision that was holistic rather than myopic; and the significant role of the head of department in curriculum design. Collectively, these factors contributed greatly to the success of the schools in the current study.

### **8.2.1 Aligned strategic leadership.**

It was evident that leaders played a vital role in their schools' academic success. A salient feature of this role was the way in which leaders worked as a team across three levels: the principal who articulated a strategic vision focused on academic excellence, the deputy principal who drove the vision and led heads of department in its implementation and heads of departments (HODS) who worked with teachers to ensure that the vision thrived in the classroom setting. Alignment across these three groups was strongly evident, and thus, leadership in the schools in the current study could be described as aligned strategic leadership. Each layer of leadership had a distinct role to play, but leaders worked as a team to push the school forward in a journey of improvement. Improvement was attained by giving attention to teaching and learning and exhibiting an intolerance of complacency.

The literature on leadership far too often focuses on the role of the principal and it is the view of this researcher that the synergy created between layers of leadership, particularly within secondary schools, needs greater recognition. It is hoped that the current study has taken a small step in highlighting the productive capacity of aligned leadership.

### **8.2.2 A blended model of leadership.**

The current study concurs with Mulford (2008) who warned against categorising leadership approaches in any one singular fashion. Across the nine schools in the study, there was evidence of a blended model of leadership. This blended model consisted of: instructional leadership (Edmonds, 1979; Frost, 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Southworth 2005,), transformational leadership (Bass, 1998; Burns, 1978; Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005), distributed leadership (Caldwell, 2006; Duignan 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Spillane, 2006, 2009; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane & Healey, 2010;) and sustainable leadership (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2006). Given the identified success of the blended model in the schools investigated, it is recommended that this blended model of leadership is considered in any school seeking to maximise student achievement through improvements in teaching and learning.

In the current study, an 'instructional focus' provided for targeted academic goals focused on improvements in student achievement which was informed and driven by comprehensive data. There was a strong (but not exclusive) academic focus which fostered a culture of high expectations for students and teachers alike where teaching and learning was seen as core business (Mortimer, 1993; Purkey & Smith, 1984). Unlike the earlier literature in the field on instructional leadership which tended to draw on the work of the principal in primary schools, the current study with its focus on secondary schools argues that an instructional focus is driven by a leadership *team* not one *leader*. A transformational focus by leaders in the current study allowed for sharing of a vision, developing of people, the building of collaborative cultures and a focus on careful staffing (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 2009). In the current study, distributed leadership was evidenced by reciprocity of influence (Harris, 2005) between the three key leadership roles.

As discussed in the findings chapter, teachers also played a part in enacting the vision and strategies to achieve targeted goals, even students were empowered to lead in their own right. Again citing Harris (2005), it could be compellingly argued that leadership within the schools in the current study was characterised by a collective "conjoint agency" (p. 163). Given that high academic achievement had been sustained over time it was likely that elements of sustainable leadership might come to the fore. This was indeed the case. There were a number of Fullan's (2005) elements in evidence: service with a moral purpose, commitment to change, lateral capacity building through networks, cyclical energising and a strong focus on

accountability. Figure 8.2 adapts Mulford's (2008) four key models of leadership by suggesting, from the study findings, that a blended approach provides a *gestalt* that no single model could achieve on its own.

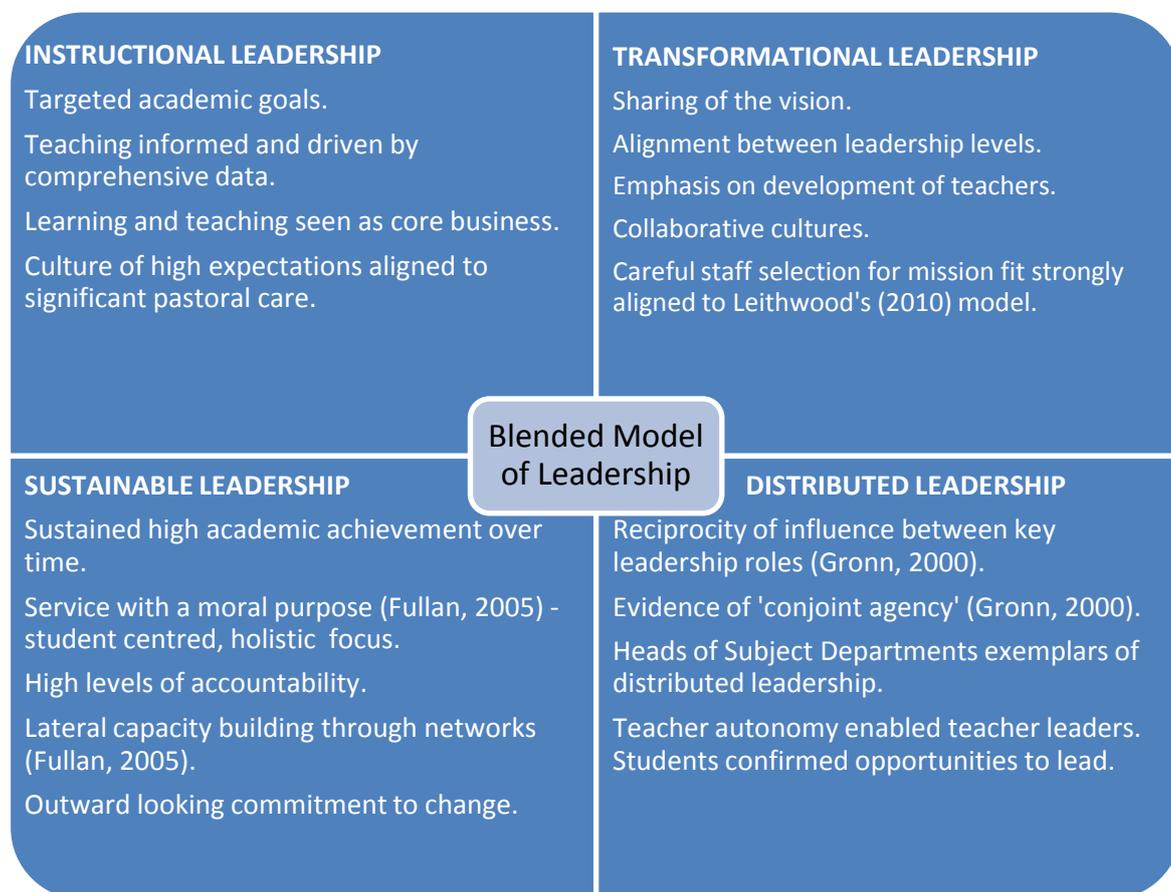


Figure 8.1 *Blended model of leadership*

### 8.2.3 Holistic vision.

The articulated vision in these schools was hypermetropic. While academic results were targeted as a key element in terms of strategic goals, broader holistic and pastoral needs of students were given an equal priority and were not diminished in the pursuit of academic excellence. It is argued that superior academic achievement need not necessarily result in a diminishment of broader personal, social and cultural goals. Accordingly, it is recommended that goals related to academic achievement can and should be pursued in tandem with extra-curricular programs and goals that are more personally and socially oriented.

Leaders nurtured a particular culture that may be defined predominantly as student-focused rather than results-focused. Such a culture was characterised by an

emphasis on the building of relationships between staff and students, with the result that social and emotional wellbeing of students became a high priority. This student focused culture was seen as a foundation for the attainment of academic results. Leaders demanded that students were ‘known as individuals’ and they modelled this in their own interactions, talking with them and listening to them. Leaders sought teachers who were also highly relational as well as good pedagogues. Leaders were immersed in data on holistic student performance which was used to track, counsel and monitor students as well as drive improvements in teaching and learning. Data enabled students to be *known* in more than just an academic sense. The culture of these successful schools was not insular, instead leaders were outward looking, using data to benchmark themselves to other *like* schools and nurture reflective practice.

Leaders promoted a culture of care and developed this through a vibrant sense of community. They spoke of the need for students to be provided with opportunities to achieve personal excellence and accomplishment and repeatedly spoke of the need to insist on high expectations. Student achievements were consistently celebrated and schools encouraged students to participate across the broad spectrum of co-curricular activities. Participation enabled a sense of belonging which enhanced community and wellbeing. The existence of such a culture created a foundation for academic success, where both academic and personal growth contributed to a holistic vision (Figure 8.2).

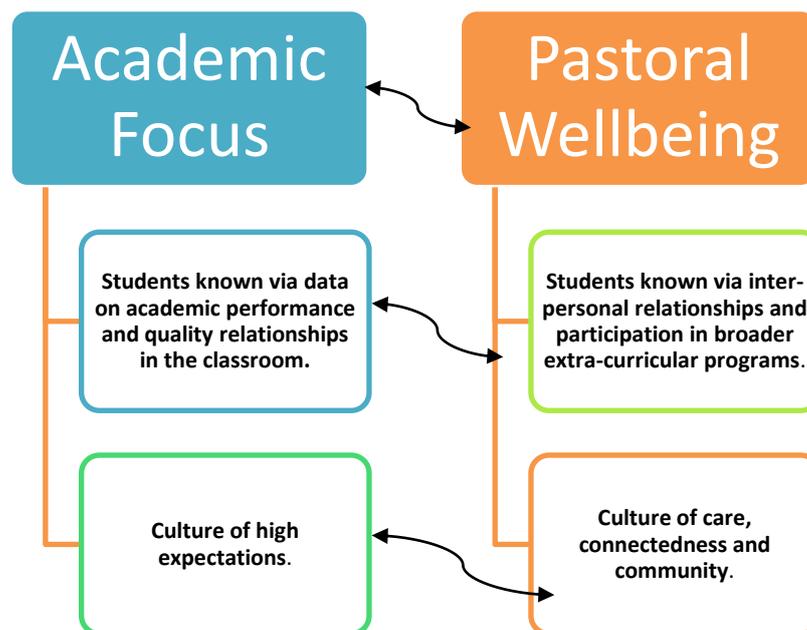


Figure 8.2 *Holistic School vision*

### **8.3 Curriculum design and heads of subject departments.**

Leadership teams were strongly focused on curriculum design with scaffolded curriculum in lower-secondary school meeting the skills required of curriculum in upper-secondary. Deputies and HODS monitored scope and sequencing in programming from Year 7 – Year 12. Quality assessment design and attention to timely detailed feedback was a hallmark of conversations concerning teaching and learning. The role of HODS in the development of assessment, feedback and monitoring of student performance was crucial. The role of the subject head of department has been the focus of significant study in Australia (Deece, 2003; Dinham, 2006; Dinham, Brennan, Collier, Deece & Mulford, 2000; Dinham & Scott, 1999; White, 2001), and the United Kingdom (Brown, Boyle & Boyle 2000; Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Brown, Rutherford, Boyle, 2000; Harris, 1995, 1998, 2000) as well as New Zealand (O'Neill, 2000), and the United States (Siskin, 1994, 1995). The results of the present study support the proposition that the HOD is a highly influential leader, playing a significant role in the process of school improvement. Executive leaders and teachers in the current study confirmed the crucial role of the HOD in these high performing secondary schools. The present study addressed, at least in part, the concern of Brown and Rutherford (1999) that there is need for more research into the strengths and weaknesses of leadership in middle management.

### **8.4 Perceptions of Leaders: Conclusion and recommendations**

With reference to school leaders, the following conclusions and recommendations, based on the findings of the current study, are made:

- In the context of high performing secondary schools, leadership is best provided through a team approach, uniting the principal, deputy principals and heads of subject departments.
- Effective leadership thrives in secondary schools when there is an aligned strategic vision at all three levels of leadership.
- Leadership by its very nature is complex and potential leaders would be naïve to think that one model of leadership will ever suffice. A blended model of leadership is strongly recommended for aspiring leaders in contemporary secondary schools. The findings of the current study would suggest that a blended model focusing on elements of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership and sustainable

leadership best serves schools attempting to improve the academic performance of their students.

- High performing secondary schools were characterized by a leadership and culture that was outward looking, seeking to benchmark themselves with other *like* schools in terms of academic performance, and prepared to learn from them.
- Secondary school leaders seeking to improve academic results should not be myopic in their vision. High academic performance can be achieved without sacrificing broader personal, social and cultural goals. It is recommended that goals related to academic achievement can and should be pursued in tandem with extra-curricular programs and goals that are more personally and socially oriented. Indeed an emphasis on the development of a culture that emphasizes care, community and the primacy of positive relationships promoted not only well being but also improved academic outcomes.
- The current study has found that across all nine schools there were flourishing communities with high levels of connectedness between students and teachers and a deep sense of personal belonging among students. Such connectedness suggests a spiritual influence in both the work of leaders and teachers (Nouwen, 1998; Palmer, 2007). It is recommended that further research on the influence of a 'spiritual leadership' (Lavery, 2012; Okomo - Okello, 2011; Rebore & Walmsley, 2009) in high performing schools be undertaken.
- In the light of an increased focus on leadership development in schools through the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and the development of the Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2011), it is suggested that the findings within the current study may have implications for the professional development of principals and leaders in secondary schools. All five elements of the Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2011) are addressed within the current study.
- In recognition of the unique roles of deputy principals and heads of subject departments in the secondary school context, further research into their contribution to academic achievement of students is recommended.

Leaders spoke of the vital contribution of teachers across the nine schools in the current study. Conclusions and recommendations concerning the perceptions of teachers are provided overleaf.

## **8.5 Perceptions of Teachers: Conclusions and recommendations**

The quality of the aligned strategic leadership at three distinct levels has been referred to earlier in this chapter. Teachers confirmed the influence of leadership at all three levels particularly the influence of deputy principals and heads of departments who they worked with closely. Teachers viewed leaders as key agents in the development of an academic focus in the schools. Teachers felt supported through professional development, communication, consultation and a sense of autonomy. Their relationship with their head of department was crucial to the development of a culture of collegiality and reflective practice. Teachers require and appreciate leaders who are pro-active in the development of an academic culture and thrive when they feel that they themselves are consulted and given personal autonomy. As noted by Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet and Guay (2008) such autonomy facilitates an internal locus of control leading to greater work satisfaction and the potential for less burnout.

### **8.5.1 Teachers' orientation to the subject matter.**

When asked to reflect on key attributes that had enabled them to achieve high academic results with their students, teachers' responses covered a number of areas, chief among them was content knowledge. Teachers spoke of the need for in-depth content knowledge that enabled automaticity in their teaching and inspired confidence in their students. Content knowledge in and of itself was not enough though, it had to be paired with subject matter that was relevant and authentic to the lives of students. Materials that examined contemporary issues, events and trends in the discipline were the mainstay of effective programs. Teachers spoke of the need to explicitly address the content of the examined curriculum, consistently highlighting the relevance of classroom activities to the curriculum itself and then being prepared to take the topic under investigation beyond the curriculum. Intellectually challenging and relevant instruction was a hallmark of the teaching in these schools. Based on these findings, there may well be implications for professional development of teachers that not only focuses on pedagogy but enriches content knowledge with contemporary, discipline specific, subject matter. These findings also have implications for the training of secondary teachers in higher education where curriculum design in secondary teaching programs needs to strike the appropriate balance between relevant, subject specific content and broader theoretical pedagogy.

Teachers noted that their own efficacy concerning their knowledge of subject matter enhanced the quality of the relationship they built with students as such subject content knowledge inspired trust. Teachers attributed the quality of the teacher–student relationship as a significant factor in student performance. Teachers argued that with trust as a foundation, passion and enthusiasm for the subject further enhanced and sustained relationships with students, inspiring engagement and increasing motivation, thus confirming the literature (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008; Day, 2007; Fried, 1995). Teachers and pre-service teachers seeking to improve their own practice and student achievement in their classrooms are reminded that knowledge, passion and enthusiasm for the subject facilitate learning and can be a conduit for the development and enhancement of the student-teacher relationship. Classroom discussions that are relevant to the lives of students animate subject matter, connecting students to their subjects and to their teachers.

### **8.5.2 Teacher-student relationship: A manifestation of love and care.**

The teacher-student relationship was also noted by teachers as a central attribute of their practice over-and-above its observance in the classroom. On an interpersonal level, to re-iterate the words of one teacher, “interest in the kids is just as important as interest in the subject” (Teacher, School E). Teachers’ availability and approachability was an extension of a love and care that created a genuine sense of personal wellbeing which teachers regarded as intrinsic to student performance. The manifestation of this love and care of students was seen as closely linked to the Catholic identity of the schools under study and answered the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of WA (2009). It is recommended that Catholic schools engage in reflection about the nature of their Catholic identity not only because it questions what is taught and how, but also because it goes to the heart of how people relate to one another in community (Convey, 2012). The retention and maintenance of this Catholic identity is a goal worthy of pursuit and one that has implications for the Catholic school system of Western Australia.

### **8.5.3 Pedagogy and curriculum design.**

Teaching strategies in the current study were varied with a genuine balance of approaches between direct instruction and collaborative group work being favoured. Given the nature of the Year 11 and Year 12 context, a slightly greater emphasis on direct instruction and teacher-led whole class discussion was evident in upper

secondary classes. Teachers spoke of the very prominent role of note-taking as a reflective, meta-cognitive practice for students. Note-taking needed to be guided by teachers who were able to identify what mattered most in relation to the curriculum and how activities or discussions at a point in time, related to an examinable topic. Teachers believed this practice enhanced students' study skills and students strongly confirmed this. Subject specific meta-cognitive practices (specifically referred to in Chapter 5) were deemed important contributors to academic achievement of students. The reflections of teachers concerning their teaching strategies in the context of the Year 11 and Year 12 classroom have the potential to inform professional development. This is particularly true in respect to note-taking and study skills as well as subject specific meta-cognitive strategies. More research could be valuable within subject departments to isolate subject specific practice as opposed to general meta-cognitive practices.

Thoughtful, scaffolded, curriculum design from Years Seven to Twelve was confirmed by teachers as a powerful enabler of strong academic achievement in upper secondary classrooms. The planning, scope and sequence of curriculum was integral to the development of core skills that gave students the competence required for more complex tasks in Year Eleven and Year Twelve classrooms. Teachers also spoke of the necessity to design a variety of assessment types that authentically evaluated the conceptual understandings required by the curriculum. Opportunity to learn essential skills within a guaranteed and viable curriculum was evident (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano, 2003). Quality assessment, regularly undertaken with detailed and timely feedback, was seen as crucial within the cycle of planning, teaching and evaluating. Assessment was a unique opportunity for tracking, counselling and providing personal direction to students (Dinham, 2008; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012). In these successful schools, curriculum design and its execution was taken very seriously. Such findings have significant implications for schools seeking to improve the academic performance of their students. Firstly, as was earlier discussed, curriculum design must be promoted and led by engaged 'hands on' leadership across all three levels of the secondary school. There are also significant implications for subject departments as this is where the collaborative endeavour of teaching teams provides the architectural drawings of such designs before their implementation in the classroom. Communication between teaching teams across the year levels becomes a significant responsibility of the HOD to enable appropriate sequencing of skills.

#### **8.5.4 Professional development.**

The promotion of professional development is cited in the literature on effective and improving schools as being critical (AITSL, 2012; Darling Hammond, 2010; Dinham, 2008; Frost, 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Jensen, 2012; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Southworth, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 5, teachers in the current study cited two major types of professional development: formal external professional development and in-house whole of school and departmental professional development. External opportunities valued by teachers were tertiary entrance exam (TEE) marking, (clearly the most beneficial in the eyes of teachers), consensus network meetings and subject specific curriculum meetings, usually run by professional organisations or system/sector offices. Teachers were fulsome in their praise of opportunities provided by CEOWA to engage in activities that enhanced their capacity to understand and interpret external data on student performance. The in-house professional development opportunities were both formal and informal experiences. These in-house experiences ranged from formal whole of school programs, for example, Teacher Designed Schools or whole of school behavioural management programs, to less formal departmental meetings and peer mentoring. Informal conversations in the departmental office were often seen by teachers as productive opportunities to discuss professional practice and reflected the high degree of professionalism and camaraderie among the teaching staff.

In keeping with their outward looking leaders, teachers also acknowledged the power of engagement with external networks which supported the literature, (AITSL, 2012; Fullan, 2005; Hargraves and Fink, 2006; Leithwood, 2010) suggesting that lateral capacity building through external networks re-energises practice and facilitates a transformational culture in schools seeking to improve. From the findings of the current study, it is recommended that schools balance both external and internal professional development opportunities as teachers attest to the value of both forms. In the context of the current study, teachers would be strongly advised to participate in any opportunity they have to be engaged as external examiners in tertiary entrance exams. In the light of external standardised testing, schools would be advised to heed the feedback of teachers concerning the need to be 'data literate' and provide professional development opportunities in this area for their staff. It is clear that engagement in quality professional development has the potential to develop teachers as leaders in professional practice, facilitating what Spillane (2010) referred to as the leader-plus aspect of distributed leadership and

enabling collective improvements in instructional effectiveness. The provision of quality professional development creates what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) described as “professional capital” (p. 80), a necessary component if teaching is to be transformed in schools.

#### **8.5.5 Teachers’ perceptions of the student micro-culture.**

Teachers reported that the student body was a very influential micro-culture. When students are persuaded to support a pro-academic culture, academic achievement can be enhanced. The majority of teachers noted that students responded well to high expectations irrespective of socio-economic context. Benchmarking student work to well understood external standards facilitates high achievement. Healthy competition was seen as a positive influence on student performance and motivation. A strong collaborative culture of peer support was perceived as co-existing with healthy competition across the nine schools in the study. It is strongly recommended that schools and teachers acknowledge the powerful influence of the student body in efforts to develop a pro-academic culture. The promotion of an academic culture through highly visible, consistent affirmation of academic achievement at public ceremonies and through school newsletters should be adopted.

#### **8.5.6 The teacher-parent relationship.**

The role of parents as partners in the educational experience of their children was acutely appreciated by teaching staff. Teachers were conscious of the powerful influence of supportive parents and on some occasions despondent about the small minority who were less than supportive. Teachers’ acknowledgement of their responsibility to consistently communicate with parents concerning their children’s academic progress reinforced the emphasis that leaders placed on keeping parents informed. Expressions of ‘care’ as alluded to by Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) and an awareness of what Bryk and Schneider (2002) described as parental vulnerability were strongly evident. Such expressions of care and sensitivity to parental needs nurtured personal trust in the teacher-parent relationship. Leaders and teachers should not lose sight of the need for vigilant attention to communication with the parent body as parents who feel they are participants in their children’s education rather than spectators can be a force for great good.

### **8.5.7 Teachers' perceptions in summary**

In summary, and based on the findings pertaining to teachers, the following conclusions and recommendations are made:

- Professional development for teachers in Secondary schools should focus just as much on contemporary content knowledge as it does on pedagogy.
- An appropriate balance between content knowledge and broader instructional skills should be a feature of Secondary teacher training.
- The teacher-student relationship is crucial in any effort to improve academic performance of students. The relationship can flourish through knowledgeable, passionate and enthusiastic teaching which builds trust and respect between the student and teacher. Teachers also have the capacity to nurture their relationship with students by focusing on the wellbeing of the individual through care and love, manifested in the quality of their professional practice, availability and accessibility. The current study suggests that such endeavours are not mutually exclusive, indeed they are mutually beneficial. Such a view was illustrated well in the following student comment "Yeh our history teacher would mark the TEE exams every year. He knew the syllabus back to front. He also knew every single student! When he taught the class he made you feel he was teaching *you*" (Student, School F).
- Catholic schools need to engage consistently in reflections on their own Catholic identity as such reflective practice has the potential to re-affirm their purpose and mission but also aid effective teaching, built as it is on a mandate of love and care.
- Teachers should be balanced in their employment of a variety of instructional strategies acknowledging that direct instruction and whole class discussion were seen to be slightly more effective within the Year 11 and Year 12 context.
- Meta-cognitive strategies within a subject specific context need to be carefully considered by Secondary teachers.
- At the departmental level, it is recommended that diligent attention be given to the scope and sequence of curriculum from Year 7 to Year 12. Equally, thoughtful design of assessment tasks aligned to upper Secondary syllabus requirements and specific detailed feedback are key attributes of effective teaching in the Year 11 and Year 12 context.
- Teacher reflections on the powerful influence of professional development should be heeded by leaders. Encouraging staff to participate as examiners

in external public examinations has great potential. Providing a balance of both in-house and external professional development in schools is encouraged. Schools must ensure appropriate resourcing of professional development as high performing schools in the current study have reaped the rewards of such investment. Equally, resourcing professional development has the potential to renew the passion and commitment of teachers, combating burnout.

- Teachers' observations concerning leadership in their schools should be taken into consideration by principals and deputy principals. Teachers believed that leaders who do not allow themselves to be distracted by relentless administrative requirements, and instead promote an academic culture and foster professional learning communities, have a greater influence on school improvement.
- Teachers need to remain cognizant of harnessing the capacity of productive partnerships with parents. Consistent and sensitive attention to communication with parents will build trust and foster relationships.
- The micro-culture of the student body is a powerful influence in the development of a pro-academic culture within a school. Teachers and leaders should promote high expectations, healthy competition *and* collaborative peer support structures to facilitate a pro-academic culture. After-school peer study groups, peer mentoring and teacher led tutorials have the potential to improve academic performance and foster an appropriate academic culture.

Conclusions and recommendations arising out of findings related to student perceptions are presented below.

### **8.6 Perceptions of students: Conclusions and recommendations**

As has been previously stated, the researcher sought to investigate whether student commentary would contest or validate leaders' and teachers' responses. Of all the voices in the current study, the researcher believed student perceptions had the greatest potential to add a unique dimension to observations about the effectiveness of their leaders, teachers and the culture of their schools. The following conclusions and recommendations, based on the findings of the current study, underscore the significance of the student voice.

### **8.6.1 Students and leadership**

It has already been stated that research attempting to identify relationships between leadership and student achievement must consider the perspectives of the 'consumer' (Gentiluci & Muti, 2007). Students made a number of pertinent observations concerning the leadership in their schools. Students spoke of the personal touch of principals who knew them as individuals. Principals cannot underestimate the powerful impact of personal conversations with students and their motivating influence. A majority of students spoke about the personal interviews and conversations they had with deputy principals who were particularly knowledgeable about their academic achievement, tracking and counselling them on their progress, providing acknowledgement and affirmation. Most importantly students spoke of the role of leaders in promoting an academic culture which emphasised personal excellence and in turn was supported by teachers. There could be no better claim for distributed leadership than this observation by students. The utilisation of year group assemblies where 'cultural values' like academic excellence and personal excellence were addressed, had left a marked impression on students and should be noted as a very important tool for communication and promotion of cultural values.

### **8.6.2 To be known**

Students commented on pastoral structures like 'House' systems which promoted participation in sporting, cultural and service-oriented activities, inspiring observations that "it becomes so much more than a place to go to school. It becomes a community (Student, School F)". Students spoke of an educational experience that was highly personalised, where they were known, loved and valued as individuals, "It was always about you as a person. The motto of the school was 'love in action' and they certainly lived out their motto" (Student, School G). It would be heartening for the system and the schools themselves that students confirmed leaders' and teachers' observations regarding the importance of personal relationships, connectedness in community and the powerful influence of being known and loved.

### **8.6.3 The teacher-student relationship: Sustaining passion and enthusiasm**

Students strongly confirmed the importance that leaders and teachers gave to the primacy of the teacher-student relationship and in doing so, confirmed what is found in the literature (Dinham, 2008; Hattie, 2003, 2009, 2012; Shields & Miles,

2008; Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2009). Student commentary was emphatic, “if you do not have a relationship with the teacher you cannot learn” (Student, School E). Of particular note were student observations of the ‘invitational’ nature of their teachers’ interactions, “they invite you to ask questions, it is nice to be encouraged” (Student, School E). Students also confirmed the dedication of teachers that leaders had spoken about, particularly teachers’ availability and accessibility outside of the classroom. Students also spoke of the stark contrast in their learning when teachers were less invitational and accessible. Teachers seeking to improve their relationship with students need to consider how they might improve their invitational disposition. Accessibility and availability are key attributes in the process of nurturing the student-teacher relationship in the secondary school context.

Students confirmed the importance of teachers who exhibited enthusiasm and passion, “they had to like teaching, when they had passion it made you love the subject. It made a massive difference” (Student, School F). Given that accessibility, availability, enthusiasm and passion were all attributes confirmed and admired by students in their best teachers, the danger of teacher burnout looms large. It behoves leaders who manage teachers to care for teachers as much as they care for their students. Affirmation, access to professional learning opportunities and sometimes protection from their own zeal need to be provided for teachers by leaders if teacher effectiveness is to be sustained.

#### **8.6.4 Students’ perceptions concerning teacher content knowledge and pedagogy**

The value of teacher content knowledge was also supported by student observations. Students were keen to point out, however, that simply teaching to the syllabus and the exam was not a common feature of their better teachers’ approach, “he was a teacher who did not just teach to the syllabus he referred to so much more, a teachers’ wider knowledge is so important” (Student, School F). The acknowledgement of wider knowledge confirms Brown and Cocking’s (2000) view that working with relevant knowledge allowed students to go beyond information, facilitating thinking in problem representations and providing further cognitive roadmaps within the discipline. This also confirms the earlier suggestion that specific professional development in content knowledge and perhaps even on-going post graduate study in a discipline area, may have considerable benefits for teacher effectiveness in secondary school classrooms.

For students, teachers who were able to teach with clarity and specificity were seen as highly effective. A teacher's capacity to prioritise what was 'important to know' and 'be able to do' was valued highly by students. In short, it might be said that there was an 'economy' to their teaching. Students also appreciated variety in the adoption of teaching styles from purposeful direct instruction to collaborative activities and practical experiments. The majority of students spoke of the importance of study skills being developed in lower secondary classrooms that paid dividends when they undertook study in their senior years. They confirmed teachers' observations that quality note-taking was an integral part of the development of sound study skills, an insight also supported by the literature (Hattie, 2009; Kobayashi, 2005; and Marzano, 2003). It was clear from student perceptions that effective teachers were also highly organised and this allowed students to know where the lesson or series of lessons was heading, in a sense, there was a clear 'narrative' in their teaching. Teaching skills and strategies such as clarity and specificity around what was important to know, the use of varied teaching styles, the utilisation of note taking and explanation of study skills were valued by students and should thus be adopted by teachers.

Another element of teacher organisation as perceived by students was their attention to feedback on student assessments. If the narrative in teaching and learning is to flow, sound feedback that mapped 'where to next' was a clear requirement of students. Students spoke of the extra care exhibited by teachers in providing 'best answer models' and allowing students to re-submit in order to gain further understanding and more feedback. The majority of students spoke about teachers allowing students to hand in extra 'practice' assignments broadly replicating examination tasks that would be assessed, in addition to the normal assessment regime. This allowed for highly individualised and specific feedback to be given to individuals before final submission. Students also spoke positively of the value of 'self assessment' as an effective assessment strategy, supporting the views of their teachers and confirming the literature (Brady & Kennedy, 2012; Hattie, 2009; McDonald & Boud, 2003). Teachers who may not utilise this practice would do well to consider the commentary of teachers and students in the current study, and confirmation of the literature concerning its effectiveness.

### **8.6.5 Students' 'insider' perceptions of their peer culture**

Students confirmed leaders' and teachers' observations concerning the impact of the peer 'micro-culture'. As previously stated, schools in the current study had provided mechanisms that enhanced peer support through after-school study groups, peer-tutoring and a variety of community service opportunities. Teachers had modelled a high degree of care and it is argued that this modelling influenced student behaviours. Student observations re-enforced Edward and Mullis (2001) who suggested that service experiences such as peer-tutoring and supportive study groups enhanced a sense of connection and capability through opportunities to contribute. Students spoke of a supportive and collaborative culture within the peer cohort, particularly evidenced in a willingness to share resources and expertise, "It was so important to have a cohort where people share knowledge and are willing to teach each other... our top students always supported others (Student, School E). Equally, there was evidence of competitiveness in terms of academic achievement that was grounded in a culture that encouraged students to strive for excellence. Students maintained that a healthy competitiveness could co-exist alongside a collaborative and supportive culture within the peer group.

### **8.6.6 Students' perceptions of parents: Being there**

Leaders and teachers had viewed parents as important 'partners' in the educational experience of their sons and daughters. The literature also highlights the powerful influence of parents on student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Epstein, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Jeynes, 2007; Simon, 2009; Stewart, 2008). Student reflections on the role of parents in their academic success supported the literature and confirmed parental influence as significant. Students spoke of the benefits of supportive parents. Support was defined in the context of providing a home environment where learning was valued, where expectations were balanced and most importantly, when academic success was not always attained, encouragement was provided. Students spoke about their memories as very young children, of parents who encouraged them to read and who would read to them. They spoke of routines being established at home that were conducive to learning. Pro-academic behaviours were adopted early through the encouragement of parents in relation to study skills and support with homework. Students reported that this meant the transition to high school was relatively smooth as they had already adopted skills seen as pre-requisites for success in a more demanding academic environment.

Students spoke of their appreciation of parents who were subtle and restrained in their support, “being there” in the background with gentle encouragement. This was particularly relevant given the high levels of anxiety that are sometimes experienced by students in their final year of school. Students also commented on a perceived alignment between parents and the school in terms of values and communication. Speaking of her father, one student noted “it was never an option for me that I would not try, and that same attitude was fostered by the school” (Student, School F). Another student noted that “teachers were prepared to talk to our parents, you felt that teachers and parents worked together for you” (Student, School F). The current study confirms Simon’s (2009) findings that even in the last few years of the educational journey students report a positive impact on their academic achievement when family and school are perceived to have a flourishing partnership.

#### **8.6.7 Students’ perceptions: Summary and recommendations**

A significant body of research has argued that students are capable of insightful reflections concerning their experiences of learning in the classroom (Beresford, 2003; Flutter, 2006; Pedder and McIntyre, 2006; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Ruddock, 2006; Watts and Youens, 2007). More recently, there is even an increasing call to actually put structures in place that formally facilitate student feedback on teaching performance (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2011; Jensen and Reichl, 2011; Nous Group, NILS, MGSE, 2011). The current study would concur with this view.

In summary, and based on the findings pertaining to students, the following conclusions and recommendations can be made:

- Students were emphatic in their confirmation of the importance that leaders and teachers gave to the primacy of the teacher-student relationship as an attribute of their effective practice. Teachers must never lose sight of this and be cognizant that their approachability, availability as well as enthusiasm and passion for their subject can enhance the teacher-student relationship. Leaders need to nurture teachers’ capacity to sustain these qualities through affirmation and access to professional development.
- Students noted that teachers’ content knowledge, both breadth and depth was an essential feature of their best teachers’ practice. It is recommended that teachers seek subject-specific professional development that enhances

content knowledge and that formal post-graduate study may also be an option facilitating this. Leaders should seek avenues to support teachers in this endeavour.

- Teaching skills and strategies such as clarity and specificity around what was important to know, varied teaching styles and the utilisation of note taking and study skills were valued by students and should clearly be covered by teachers.
- Teacher organisation that provided a sense of direction and a narrative from one lesson to another was a skill valued by students and is strongly recommended. Such a finding emphasises the need for teachers to remain cognizant of Ausubel's (1960, 1968) injunction of "cognitive scaffolding" via the use of "advance organizers" which supports students reflections that new knowledge is better understood under broader earlier cognitive structures. Ausubel (1960), referred to this sequencing as progressive differentiation and student's confirmation of its benefits has implications for macro-curricula design as well as teacher lesson sequencing.
- Students required timely, detailed feedback. They strongly supported the use of student exemplars or 'best answer' models. Students spoke favourably about opportunities to be allowed to hand in drafts of responses to assessment before final submission and appreciated teachers who gave them feedback at this point in time. Self-assessment opportunities were deemed valuable by students and allowed them to reflect on their learning. All of these assessment practices are recommended for adoption by teachers. There is considerable merit in professional development for teachers on the topic of student self-assessment and the use of student exemplars.
- Students noted that those principals and deputy principals who took the time to get to know students as individuals had a motivating influence on their achievement. Leaders need to utilize opportunities for one-on-one conversations with students that provide acknowledgement, affirmation, counselling and direction. Leaders can utilize more formal mechanisms such as year group assemblies to address significant cultural values such as academic excellence and personal excellence, as students reported these experiences as influential.
- Broader pastoral mechanisms such as "house" systems were valued by students and helped to promote opportunities for participation and connection in the wider life of the school. Such structures enhanced a

personalised educational experience which was conducive to increased academic achievement. Opportunities for sporting, cultural and service activities enhanced a sense of community and belonging, which in turn appeared to enhance academic achievement. Schools would be wise to acknowledge that an emphasis on extra-curricular activities can co-exist, complement and facilitate academic excellence.

- Students supported leaders' and teachers' observations concerning the powerful influence of the pro-academic peer culture. Structured study groups in after-school settings are avenues that may be used to enhance student capacity to socially navigate their way into productive, positive peer relationships.
- Students provided accounts that answered Harris and Goodall's (2008) statement that parents "need to know they matter" (p. 286). This was true on two distinct levels, the provision of structures in the home that facilitated learning and the provision of emotional capital (Reay, 2000). Parental support in homework and study habits from a young age at home and engaging in reading with their children, were memories that eighteen year old students found to be influential in their academic achievement.
- Subtle emotional support and encouragement by parents was seen by the majority of students as an attributable influence in their success. It is recommended that schools encourage parental engagement with their children's studies at home over the course of their children's learning journey. Parents need to know that their sons and daughters benefit from their (parents) 'being there'. Schools would do well to provide parents with information/training programs addressing the perceptions of their sons' and daughters' that engagement and support in their learning, working with the school in partnership and providing an emotional safety-net matters in relation to their well being and academic achievement.
- Schools need to do everything in their power to work with students who, for a variety of reasons, do not have the necessary parental support at home. Such support can often compensate for the lack of emotional capital in students' lives and improve their psychosocial functioning in school.
- Schools should consider processes that allow them to regularly gather student perceptions of learning and teaching in their classroom. Such data can be utilized as a useful tool in teacher formation and school improvement and directly benefit student learning.

- Above all, teachers should never lose sight of the powerful impact of expressions of care: “you want to prove to them that they were right to care” (Student, School F).

Conclusions and recommendations arising out of findings related to parental perceptions are presented below.

## **8.7 Perceptions of Parents: Conclusions and recommendations**

Parents perceptions centred on the following overarching themes. The ‘pivotal’ role of broadly distributed leadership, teachers who played the most significant role in their child’s academic achievement, relational trust between teachers and the school, insights on the influence of the peer culture and reflections on their own capacity to enhance the educational experience of their child.

### **8.7.1 Leadership is pivotal**

Parents viewed the role of leadership in the school as ‘pivotal’. This was particularly true of the role of the principal. The majority of parents confirmed the view of leaders, teachers and students that leadership ought to be widely distributed in order to utilise all the skills and abilities parents had witnessed at differing levels of leadership roles. The role of deputy principals and middle managers, such as heads of year or heads of subject departments, played a significant role in the provision of academic guidance and pastoral care as perceived by parents. Parents also saw leaders as key champions of school cultural values, for example, providing care, encouraging participation and accomplishment, promoting personal excellence and modelling interpersonal relationships where students were known as individuals. Leaders were seen as key drivers of an academic culture but were able to balance that with an equal emphasis on the arts, sports and the development of spiritual growth. In the eyes of parents, the leadership team in the schools was knowledgeable about data on academic performance. Parents added the caveat that although school academic performance data was necessary, they also valued an emphasis on the development of the whole person.

### **8.7.2 The teacher is everything**

While leadership was ‘pivotal’, for parents the teacher was ‘everything’, “Each year is only as good as the teacher” (Parent, School F). Parents viewed the teacher-

student relationship as the most important among a number of elements in teacher effectiveness. In particular, parents argued that the capacity of a teacher to be invitational, to be accessible and available was crucial and confirmed that this was clearly evident in their children's experience of schooling. Passion and enthusiasm aligned with strong content knowledge was also regarded by parents as a significant feature of teacher effectiveness.

Parents also suggested that teachers played a key role in the development of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) between themselves and the school. This was particularly evident in parents' praise of teachers who 'followed up' on their sons' and daughters' progress and persisted with offers of support. Teachers who do not follow through with offers to provide support, risk damaging the social capital of relational trust as a parent in School B had noted, "I must admit that I did get disappointed that things were not followed up". Relational trust was also found in the teachers' and schools' capacity to provide consistent communication and feedback on student academic performance. It might be said that parent-school communication was an area where there was some dissonance between parents and the school. Leaders and teachers had felt that levels of communication were high but parents were not in total agreement with such an opinion, suggesting that communication from teachers with particular reference to their child's academic progress could be more consistent. It was clear that parents had a prodigious appetite for communication. It is recommended that schools review their communication protocols with parents and that in doing so they consult parents themselves, with regard to communication type, quality and frequency. Such an approach has been found in the literature to be efficacious (Epstein, 2010). The current study concurs with this view and notes that parents, viewed regular, clear, feedback on student performance as the most important form of communication. Parents appreciated policies that required them to sign teachers' commentary on assessments, as this gave them opportunities to engage in conversation with their children about their progress. Parents found that student diaries, where teachers wrote quick notes about student progress, provided an informal medium of communication over and above parent-teacher meetings and formal reports.

### **8.7.3 The pervasive peer culture**

The peer culture was regarded by parents as 'pervasive' in its influence on academic achievement and was clearly a 'micro-culture' that needed to be understood by the school. Parents supported leaders, teachers and students themselves in describing the peer culture in their schools as an overwhelmingly pro-academic culture. In the eyes of parents, students were respectful of individual difference, supportive and collaborative as well as pushing each other to achieve in healthy competition. Parents valued the role of the school in providing avenues for peer support and collaboration through lunch-time and after school study groups. Parents also reported the benefit of providing opportunities for students to take up leadership roles in service programs and pastoral care groups such as the 'house system'.

### **8.7.4 Parental reflections on their own influence: Emotional support and aligned values**

Confirming the commentary of students in the current study, parents viewed their own role as overtly supporting the social and emotional needs of their children. There was strong support of Epstein's (2010) typology of effective parental involvement in parent commentary in the current study. Parents' reflections confirmed that the quality of their parenting, communication with the school, supporting learning at home and volunteering at the school all contributed in a positive manner to their child's academic achievement and well-being. Parents valued connections with other parents that offered mutual support and there was evidence that this facilitated peer associations that might benefit their children. Parents also expressed a willingness to be more involved with and supportive of their children's study at home but required advice from the school on how best to do this particularly with regard to study skills and homework. Stewart (2008) found that parent-child discussions about student experiences at school influenced student achievement. It is recommended that schools provide workshops and seminars to facilitate such discussions and to enable parents to understand the discourse of contemporary learning.

The capacity to play a role as a partner in their children's education was acknowledged, particularly in their obligation to support and affirm the values of the school. The affirmation of school values was evidenced in parental reflections on the importance of the religious education their children received and the heritage of the

religious orders in seven of the nine schools in the study. Parents attached a particular significance to the culture of the school as a key influence in their child's academic success. While recognising the importance of academic results, parents sought more from a school. Parents wanted a holistic focus on their child's development. They valued the sense of community that they observed in their children's experience and felt that it contributed to their success. Parents reported being welcomed in the school which facilitated their engagement and consequently their support. Parents' own values were comfortably aligned with the schools' and were enhanced by the religious setting which they strongly endorsed, particularly the *charism* of the religious orders when present. While recognising that facilities were important, values and community relationships were regarded as far more valuable in the eyes of parents.

#### **8.7.5 Parents perceptions summary and recommendations**

In summary, and based on the findings pertaining to parents, the following conclusions and recommendations can be made:

- Parents require leaders to be champions of the cultural values within the school.
- Parents viewed all three levels of leadership: principals, deputy principals and middle management (Heads of Year and Heads of Departments) as central to the provision of pastoral care. Principals who engaged with students in a personalized manner had a strong influence on both students and parents, facilitating relational trust.
- Structures that allowed a pastoral leader such as a head of year or dean of studies to move with the group from one year to the next were viewed very favourably by parents. Such structures should be considered in all secondary schools.
- Parents viewed leaders' knowledge of data on student academic performance and its communication to the parent body as significant. Parents also perceived leaders as having a key role in the promotion of academic excellence but equally they argued leaders must be involved in the development of their sons and daughters in a holistic sense. Leaders in schools should not lose sight of such parental expectations.
- Parents argued that teachers were clearly the most powerful influence in their child's academic achievement. The development of the teacher-student

relationship was again confirmed as central to student motivation and performance, supporting leaders', teachers' and students' perceptions.

- Parents confirmed teachers' extraordinary availability and accessibility in after-hours contexts and the influence it had on their child's achievement. Parents also acknowledged the impact of teachers' content knowledge, passion and enthusiasm and capacity to provide quality feedback as key attributes of teacher effectiveness, supporting leaders', teachers' and students' observations.
- Parents placed great importance on quality communication between the school and home. In particular, parents placed great store in teachers providing clear, 'jargon-free' advice on student performance in a timely manner. Teachers cannot underestimate the importance of their communications with parents and its capacity to develop relational trust. Teachers and schools need to recognize that parents have a prodigious appetite for communication and communication practices should be reviewed regularly. Surveying parents about the quality and quantity of communication between the school and the home is recommended.
- Parents viewed the influence of the peer group as pervasive. In the high performing secondary schools in the current study, parents observed a pro-academic culture within the peer cohort as an attribute of student achievement.
- Parents supported earlier observations that students were supportive and collaborative in their relationships with each other, as well as benefitting from healthy competition.
- The evidence of supportive and collaborative relationships that facilitate a pro-academic culture confirms earlier recommendations for schools to provide opportunities for student engagement in lunchtime and after-school peer support and study groups.
- Parents' gratitude for the leadership opportunities provided to their children, also attests to the fact that peer mentoring and pastoral mechanisms such as "House" structures can enable leadership and develop a supportive peer culture. The provision of quality programs in the area of peer support and pastoral care is worthy of further investigation by secondary schools.
- Parents viewed their own role as predominantly residing in the social and emotional domain. Parents confirmed the view of Reay (2000) who argued that parents have the capacity to provide emotional capital for their children.

Schools must be able to identify those children who for many reasons come from homes devoid of emotional capital and work toward providing compensatory mechanisms through strong pastoral care structures. Parents across all schools in the study were highly engaged and interested in their child's experience of school. However, such engagement and interest was weakened by feelings of inadequacy in participating in discussion related to their child's homework and supporting them in advice on study skills. Schools would do well to provide parents with informative workshops on study skills, so that they might be better equipped to support their sons and daughters through the final years of schooling. De-mystifying contemporary jargon used in education would be welcomed by parents.

- Parents valued opportunities to connect with other parents and on occasions also used this as an agency to facilitate peer associations with other families that shared similar values. Parents commentary on how welcomed they felt in the school community on both formal and informal occasions reminds schools of the enormous benefits that are derived from making parents feel 'at home' in their school. Esteemed parents are a powerful force in the promotion of social capital in a school.
- Parents within the current study were aligned to and strongly supportive of the schools' religious and cultural values. It is suggested that this alignment and support may have helped their children find a 'fit' with the school's values which enhanced the sense of belonging and pride that students reported. Catholic schools are reminded that this alignment and support is productive and should be nurtured. Where leaders perceive a lack of parental alignment with the school's values, a deliberate effort must be made to impress upon parents that such support can enhance their children's achievement and connectedness to the school.

### **8.8 Concluding Statement**

The researcher has sought to present not just the singular roles of each stakeholder group but also explore that role within the context of the role of others. In doing so, the researcher has attempted to triangulate the data in a way that would provide a *gestalt* of these school communities, an organized whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts. It is the attempt to provide a '**gestalt**' of all of the key stakeholders in each community of the nine schools involved in the study that provides a unique contribution to the research on effective schools. Far too often studies focus on leaders' and / or teachers' contributions to school effectiveness but

rarely do studies focus on all four stakeholders, viz, connecting leaders', teachers', students' and parents' contributions to the performance of an effective school.

In the earlier methodology chapter the researcher referred to Denzin and Lincoln (2003) who described the qualitative researcher as *a bricoleur* or maker of quilts, seeking in the current study to stitch together the perceptions of leaders, teachers, parents and students to create a quilt of views on effective schools. To take the language of the visual arts further, the study has endeavoured to provide a portrait, 'a speaking likeness', of the inter-connectedness of these key agents, leaders, teachers, students and parents, highlighting their singular and combined impact on student achievement. It has been argued that the palette of an interpretative phenomenological analysis has enhanced the portrait of the phenomenon under investigation.

Another distinguishing feature of the study is that this is the first time that a detailed investigation of high performing secondary schools in the Catholic education system of Western Australia has been carried out. The study has the potential to provide significant feedback to schools, and the system itself, on strategies and processes that enhance performance within the context of the tertiary entrance exams and more broadly across the lower secondary classes in general. It might be argued that it adds further evidence to the work of other Australian studies (Mulford, 2007; Mulford & Silins, 2010, 2011; Reid et al, 2010) that the non-cognitive outcomes of schooling such as the fostering of student social development need to be investigated and reported.

What remains is to distil the 'essence' of the study and answer the main research question framing the investigation, namely, *What are the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the success of their schools in the tertiary examination context?* To assist in this endeavour the following points of agreement across all stake holders is provided. Reference to such evidence-based information may be of value to schools wishing to improve student academic performance within the provision of a supportive environment.

- Leadership teams within the schools viewed teaching and learning as 'core business' and fostered a culture of academic excellence which was supported by students and parents.

- The pursuit of academic excellence was enhanced by a holistic focus on personal well being provided through a variety of mechanisms (alluded to earlier) affording high levels of pastoral care.
- The work of teachers was seen by all stake holders as fundamental to the school's success. The teacher-student relationship was a major influence on academic achievement, characterized by consistent availability and accessibility. Such relationships nurtured trust, which in turn created 'social capital' that gave purpose to learning.
- Teachers' innovative curriculum, attention to instructional strategies particularly personalized feedback, deep content knowledge, passion and enthusiasm nurtured student engagement and had a motivating influence on student achievement.
- Teachers' engagement in current, relevant, subject based professional development enhanced professional learning communities and impacted strongly on student achievement.
- The student body across all schools in the study was characterized by a pro-social and pro-academic peer culture arguably modeled and witnessed by the teaching staff within each school. Students were proud of 'their' school.
- Parental provision of 'social' and 'emotional' capital had a significant influence on student achievement and well being.
- Parents and students alike, 'felt at home' in the school. All parties reported flourishing communities with high levels of connectedness and a deep sense of belonging.
- Love, care and a 'personalized' educational experience were integral features of the school's Catholic identity.
- More broadly, 'networks' of purposeful positive relationships supported individual student accomplishment founded in a communal identity aligned to a moral purpose that all parties supported. Simon, Lopez and Pedrottie (2011) argued that where attachment, love, and purposeful positive relationships exist, relationships will be sustained and ultimately flourish. As such, the current study suggests these schools were flourishing in the finest sense of the word.

Although the present work has been comprehensive, to keep it manageable, its scope has been deliberately limited. As the work progressed, spheres for further

investigation presented themselves. Accordingly, in terms of future directions, the current research may springboard into areas such as:

- Conducting a similar investigation in public and non-Catholic independent secondary schools.
- Further exploring the impact of Catholic identity on leadership with a view to determining whether the outcomes reported in this research project are a direct result of excellent leadership or influenced by the context of the faith based schools in which leaders operate (Bednall, 2006a).
- Investigating whether leaders, teachers and parents in other non-Catholic 'church' schools regard their religious identity as having an impact on student wellbeing and achievement.
- Further researching the impact of deputy principals and middle managers such as heads of subject departments and even heads of year as leaders in overall school improvement.
- Given the impact of student connectedness and wellbeing on academic achievement in the current study, an investigation of formal programs that seek to enhance connectedness and well-being may benefit further consideration. In this vein, further investigation into the application of 'positive psychology' programs in schools is warranted.
- While the current study included a broad representation of co-educational and single sex schools, further investigation of student perceptions based on gender may be useful.

For now, the following might be said: Good schools are places where students are known and found. The culture of a school unequivocally matters. Care and love of students are not qualities to be ascribed to the early years alone, they are equally essential at the end of the school continuum. When the roles of all stakeholders: leaders, teachers, students and parents are collectively well executed, much can be contributed to the common good, or as astutely put by Putnam & Feldstein (2003) "we are better together" (p. 1).