2011

The L.E.A.D. Project: Leading educational achievement through dialogue 2010

Michael O'Neill
University of Notre Dame Australia, Michael.ONEILL@nd.edu.au

Anne Coffey
University of Notre Dame Australia, anne.coffey@nd.edu.au

Shane D. Lavery
University of Notre Dame Australia, Shane.Lavery@nd.edu.au

Jennifer Oaten
University of Notre Dame Australia, Jennifer.Oaten@nd.edu.au

Lou Thompson
University of Notre Dame Australia, Lou.Thompson@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/edu_article

This technical report was originally published as:

This technical report is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/edu_article/57. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.
THE L.E.A.D. PROJECT

LEADING EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH DIALOGUE 2010

THE REPORT OF THE RESEARCH TEAM, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

Michael O’Neill, Dr Anne Coffey, Assoc. Prof. Shane Lavery, Jennifer Oaten, Lou Thompson
CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2

PRINCIPAL FOCUS GROUPS 12

DEPUTY PRINCIPAL FOCUS GROUPS 19

HEADS OF LEARNING AREA FOCUS GROUPS 24

TEACHER FOCUS GROUPS 28

STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS 33

PARENT FOCUS GROUPS 39

REFERENCES 43

APPENDIX (A) LIKERT SURVEY 45

APPENDIX (B) LIKERT SURVEY MEAN SCORES 46
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE LEAD PROJECT – LEADING EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH DIALOGUE 2010 is the report of the research team from the University of Notre Dame Australia funded by the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program. It is a multi-site case study which gathered data on high performing secondary schools in the Catholic system of Western Australia.

The data was gathered from 9 secondary schools in the Catholic system. All Principals and Deputy Principals (Curriculum) were interviewed for the study. Focus groups of Heads of Learning were interviewed, in total 32 Heads of Learning participated. Focus groups of teachers were interviewed, in total 38 teachers participated in the interviews. Focus groups of recent past students were interviewed, in total 26 past students participated in the interviews. Focus groups of parents were interviewed, in total 28 parents participated.

In addition a 21 item Likert scale survey was used to gather data from all teachers in the 9 schools in the study, a total of 447 teachers responded to the Likert scale (Appendix A).

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

In mid-2010 the School of Education at the University of Notre Dame Australia was approached by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, to partner them in an Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme to investigate the characteristics of schools achieving high results in the Tertiary Entrance Examinations (TEE) in the Catholic school system. Using systemic data from the Catholic Education Office (CEO) the research aimed to:

- Identify characteristics of successful teaching in the tertiary entrance exam context
- Identify cultural characteristics of successful schools
- Identify characteristics of leaders in successful schools
- Gain evidence and use findings to inform whole school improvement plans in other Catholic schools
- Build on the literature in the field

From an analysis of data provided by the Catholic Education Office from 2009, as well as longitudinal data from 2004 to 2009, schools with consistently high Median ATAR scores were identified. Similarly a number of schools were also chosen because they had a critical mass of subjects that were the highest performing in the system in the 2009 WACE exams. In addition schools with consistently high ‘value added’ scores, that is, those schools with median ATAR scores in excess of what their socio economic index figure would have predicted were also identified. In total 9 schools in the Catholic Education system in WA were selected. Principals, Deputy Principals, focus groups of Heads of Learning Areas and focus groups of teachers were interviewed in every school.

The research team also interviewed focus groups of students and parents from seven schools in the study in order to gain their perspective on the characteristics of effective
teachers in their school, the influence of the leadership team, influence of the culture of the school, parent school partnerships and the role of the student body.

The OECD (2008) *Improving School Leadership* report notes that school leadership contributes to improved student learning. Research on school leadership effects has revealed a number of leadership roles and responsibilities that are particularly conducive to student learning, (Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Marzano et al, 2005; Robinson, 2007; Waters et al, 2003). This study seeks to build on this body of research examining characteristics of identified executive leaders and middle managers in schools in the Catholic system of schools in WA.

Hattie (2009) and Dinham (2008) both argue that the greatest effect on student achievement is the quality of the teacher and the quality of teaching they receive. Dinham’s study of teachers and leaders in NSW schools which had very high HSC results in 1999 found that school culture, faculty teams, teachers personal knowledge and relationships with students, their engagement with professional development and the strategies they adopted all contributed greatly to student success. This study focused on similar features of teachers work in the context of Western Australian schools ten years on. Hattie (2009) examined 800 meta-analyses relating to the influence on achievement in school students. His study highlights the relational aspect of quality teaching, the importance of quality feedback and quality instruction. His study focuses on the subtle differences between expert and experienced teachers finding that expert teachers use and organize subject content differently, are more spontaneous in their ability to relate what is happening in the classroom to deeper principles and detect and concentrate more on content that has instructional significance. Our study endeavours to examine the instructional qualities of identified teachers in this Western Australian context and interpret them in the light of current evidence and literature.

OECD (2008) and Hopkins (2007) both highlight the importance of schools and leaders forming collaborative partnerships and ‘communities of schools’ to share ‘conversations’ in best practice, this study hopes to facilitate such an aim.

The following report provides a summary of the findings from semi-structured interviews across each of the categories; Principals, Deputy Principals, Heads of Learning Areas, Teachers, Parents and Students, in the nine schools that formed the study. In addition a summary of findings from the “Likert” survey instrument (Appendix B) across the nine schools is also provided.
KEY FINDINGS

The following are the key findings from all nine schools in the study, which in one way or another were identified as schools who had achieved outstanding success in the Tertiary Entrance Exam context.

1. The role of the Principal and leadership team in achieving academic success

It was clear from the analysis of the data that Principals accepted their responsibility as ‘head teachers’ and that they understood their role was, as one Principal put it, “crucial in setting a vision about where you can go with your students.” Every other focus group in the study confirmed this. Parents described the Principal’s role as “pivotal.” Teachers in both the interviews and the survey confirmed this view strongly. The literature Dinham (2008), Fullan (2005), Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) Hargreaves & Fink (2006) supports the view.

Principals in the study were very conversant with the data on student performance in their school and used the data to inform strategic direction in terms of teaching and learning and whole school improvement. They were proactive in addressing deficits when the data showed them and never hesitated to seek outside external support. They were very aware of benchmarking their performance against ‘like’ schools both within and outside their system.

The Principals in the study were very outward looking and that approach was mirrored in their strong support of professional development of their staff. They understood that their teachers needed to be connected to wider networks outside of their school in order to have a true sense of state wide standards and in order to access quality professional development. In addition they promoted and encouraged reflective practice within their school.

While Principals were immersed in the data and very cognisant of TEE results they would not argue that they were ‘results focused’ instead they maintained they were ‘student focused’ which allowed the cohort who were striving for success in this area to be supported and at the same time, provided strong alternative pathways for students with a VET goal. Principals were careful to stress that for them success was and should be measured in broader terms. All of the schools in the study had a vibrant vocational education pathway.

The schools in this study were characterised by a strong team focus among the leadership team that filtered through the school to all levels. Principals did not rush to take personal claim for the success of their school; they acknowledged the role of their Deputies, Heads of Learning and the wider teaching staff. In particular they acknowledged the complex work of the Deputy Principals responsible for curriculum and their leadership of teaching and learning in the school. There was a strong alignment...
and shared vision between the Principals and their Deputies and a great deal of mutual respect.

Principals acknowledged the role of their Heads of Learning as key middle managers and leaders in their own right. As one Principal put it “they are evangelists for their discipline.” Another Principal noted that “they have the capacity to create a culture where going the extra mile becomes the way we operate.” As Brown et al (2000) argue, maximising effective teaching and learning can be enhanced through the identification of the cultures of their departments and of the leadership styles which they exercise. Heads of Departments’ passion and enthusiasm for the discipline, for learning and for the provision of extra support was a strong feature of the conversations with all Principals.

Principals in the study recognised the importance of developing a culture where academic success was recognised and affirmed. A number of schools in the study had not always had a history of strong academic success but they had moved their schools from unacceptable positions where a ‘lasses faire’ culture had prevailed, to one that emphasised excellence and the attainment of students’ personal best. They would not entertain complacency. Teaching and learning was given a central focus in these schools and Principals recognised that it had to be their central focus, even though it was easy to be “pulled away” by other administrative duties.

A striking feature of the interviews with the Principals in this study was the palpable pride with which they spoke of their school, their staff and their students’ achievements. It was a pride that was infectious and had a great impact on the students in this study.

2. The role of teachers and their teaching

An outstanding feature of the study was the exceptionally high regard in which teachers were held by their Principals, Deputy Principals, Heads of Learning and most importantly by parents and students. As one parent commented “the teacher is everything; the teacher can make or break a child.”

The study concludes that there is a subtle dual quality to the role of the teacher, the ‘person’ who creates and invites the ‘relationship’ with their students and the ‘master teacher’ comfortable and confident in their craft. The study supports the views of Hattie (2009) and Dinham (2008) that the quality of the teacher and the quality of teaching has the greatest effect on student achievement. All participants in the study confirmed this view and in particular the voices of students spoke most loudly.

A significant finding of the study was the emphasis placed on the relational domain of teaching by students. In particular students spoke of the importance of a teacher’s “availability and approachability.” When asked to expand on what was meant by the meaning of approachability one student remarked “they invite you to ask questions, it is nice to be encouraged to ask questions.” Another student said “they related really well to you, I could feel relaxed around them, I could ask them questions and not feel like an idiot.”
Feeling comfortable in a relationship with a teacher was a prominent desire of students and one that produced tangible results. It created a learning environment which was conducive to high personal achievement. To sum up the importance of relationship we need do no more than quote from one student’s comment, “You actually like the teachers; you hated the thought of disappointing them.”

The following key teaching attributes were ascribed to the most effective teachers in the 9 schools in the study:

- The importance of **deep content knowledge** was acknowledged by all participating focus groups. It was also rated very highly on the survey of teaching staff, with a mean score of 4.68 on a scale of 1-5.
- On many occasions, participants, particularly students and teachers themselves, spoke of the coupling of content knowledge with **enthusiasm or passion** for the subject. This item was the highest rating item on the likert survey with a mean score of 4.69 on a scale of 1-5.
- Making the subject **relevant and meaningful** was a constant in the practice of the most effective teachers. Taking the subject to the lives of their students or finding the subject in the lives of their students was recognised as a powerful skill.
- A strong familiarity with the syllabus and the capacity to provide **specific, clear advice** in relation to the syllabus and examination techniques. “Good teachers made it clear that certain things were important to be done.”
- Students spoke of the need for a variety of pedagogical approaches from whole class discussion, direct instruction and collaborative group work. Teachers themselves supported the notion of **balance** in approaches.
- Students spoke of the way in which ‘better teachers’ were ‘highly organised’. “Their planning was meticulous, lesson by lesson, step by step, you knew where you were going because they did.”
- All participants spoke of the crucial role of **timely, detailed feedback** for high student achievement. In particular students and parents spoke of this element as a major feature of the most effective teachers. An interesting sub-theme of feedback was the impact of **affirmation**, a large number of students spoke of the powerful influence of teachers who were **positive, encouraging and optimistic**.
- Students, parents and teachers themselves commented on the significant influence of teachers setting **high yet realistic expectations**. In addition it must be noted that Principals and Deputy Principals had also spoken of the need to create a culture of excellence which supported the setting of high expectations informed by a clear understanding of state wide standards.
- There was a strong emphasis on **scaffolded curriculum with clear scope and sequence** from year 7 to year 12 designed to develop both skills and knowledge required at the ‘end point’ of year 12.
- Good teachers were adept at helping students learn, they were able to provide insightful strategies for **study skills in the context of specific subjects**.
- A major feature of most schools in the study was their recognition that without **orderly, focused, purposeful classrooms** learning would not take place. These schools put a great deal of time and effort into creating such classrooms. In a
similar study of 8 Victorian schools Zbar et al (2009) support the necessity for an orderly learning environment as a pre-condition for success.

• It is important to mention again the degree of approachability and availability of teachers in this study. Across all nine schools the generosity of the teaching staff in making themselves available to students was remarkable. Teachers were available before school, at lunchtimes and after school. Some teachers even provided seminars for students on weekends and school holidays.

3. Counselling

A striking feature of this study was the importance afforded to counselling of students. It was commented on as a significant influence on student achievement by Principals, Deputy Principals, Heads of Learning and teachers. In particular Deputy Principals spoke passionately about a thorough and rigorous program of counselling to enable students to maximise their potential and achieve their personal best.

All schools in the study had invested a great deal of time into the development of careful policies and processes to support students in appropriate subject selection. Schools that had moved from a history of poor or mediocre performance in the tertiary entrance exams had reviewed their counselling approaches and designated far more time and energy to individualised counselling of students. Item 18 in the Likert survey ‘counselling of students in subject choice is important’ received a very high mean score of 4.60 among the 447 teachers who responded.

A major contribution to student success was the quality of counselling. Processes where students are interviewed 1:1 by senior staff, tracked and then interviewed again where necessary, were common. Counselling was informed by detailed statistics on performance history in the schools. These statistics were used to show students what might be expected if you attained a certain grade in year 10 or year 11 based on the school’s ‘in-house’ longitudinal data. Aligned to the use of data was the development and application of desired pre-requisites for individual subjects. These pre-requisites were rigorously applied although many Deputies did make the comment that ultimately we do ‘give students a go”. Thus efforts to gain good results were not achieved by denying students opportunities. “We want the ‘person’ to do their best; we are not focused on getting into the West Australian.”

Counselling was also defined broadly and not just focused on subject choices or subject specific advice. Many Deputies spoke of the integral role of careers counsellors who helped students set goals and ‘end point’ directions.

In addition to the above, the role of pastoral counselling available through Heads of Year, Heads of House and the social and emotional support available through school psychologists was a significant factor in many conversations centred on student well-being. “The more we can do to support the ‘well-being’ of the student the better. Good results come if you are ‘looking after’ the student, good teaching and good curriculum is a given.”
4. Culture, relationships and community

A major theme in the study was the central influence of the culture of the schools, the emphasis placed within that culture on the development of authentic relationships and the resultant sense of community which positively influenced student achievement.

At the heart of the dynamic above, was the pervasive ethos of Catholic schools, an ethos which is Christ centred and thus promotes welcoming communities and quality interpersonal relationships. The researchers found schools that were inclusive, safe and fostered a strong sense of wellbeing among students and staff. The following provides some key aspects of such a culture:

- As has been mentioned previously a dominant theme was the quality of relationships between teachers and students. There was genuine sense of love in the work being done in these schools as evidenced by the very high quality of pastoral care afforded to students. The culture was dominated by a focus on care, as might be expected given the nature of the Catholic system of schools. “God is calling people into relationship today...students need to feel loved by their teachers and by other school staff, just as his disciples felt loved by Jesus.” Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of WA (2009).

- On a broader level, what characterised many of these conversations was the discussion around the significance of community. Of course, where there are strong relationships, there is community. One interview centred around the focus on ‘community’ in the school and the enormous contribution of the religious order that founded the school. That order’s charism was singularly defined by a tradition of ‘hospitality’; the school had to be a ‘welcoming place’, a place of support. As the Deputy commented, “they (students) will always study and do well when they feel they belong.”

- Students did feel this sense of belonging and it was evident in the way they spoke about relationships with their teachers. “Mrs___ was a mentor for me, she would always say ‘you will do good things in your life’”, was the type of comment that gave voice to this belief. This comment was compounded by the number of students who expressed that they felt they had teachers “who believed in me.” Another student took this theme a little further and in a nuanced way it emphasised earlier references to the need for social and emotional support. Speaking about times when they may have been struggling in a personal sense; one student commented, “Mrs ___ noticed you. Normally it’s your friends that notice you, but she noticed you, she was always there.” The sense of teachers being ‘present’ to their students took the notion of ‘availability’ to a new, layered level.

- One school spoke of their work in surveying students in order to give them a voice and be heard. This allowed the school and teaching staff to gain feedback on what they were doing well and where they could improve. This was particularly useful in their work in the first few years of the new Courses of Study. In addition it reflected a lack of complacency that was a characteristic of all schools in the study.

- Teachers were significant contributors to the development of culture and community in their schools. Their voices were notable. Teachers talked about the more “affective” aspects of their lives as teachers. “We are not just about the attainment of results we are about developing the person.”
One suspects though, that it was precisely their attention to the development of the person that might also have contributed to the attainment of results. These were teachers who knew their students, those ‘at risk’ and those who were ‘exceptional’ and whatever category a student fell into, they aimed to help them achieve as well as they could. “The students know you care about them and when they know that, they will work for you.” Another teacher expressed it as “interest in the kids is just as important as interest in the subject.”

- Again, a key theme was the commentary around community and the sense of belonging that teachers sensed, students felt. “Boys here feel they belong, that engages them as a human person, and it inspires them.”
- A sense of community was not just something experienced by students it was felt by staff and indeed modelled by them. “Kids see the rapport between staff and it flows on to teacher student relationships.” Another teacher commented on the overall culture of his school which reflected his sense of belonging “this school has been built on the three C’s, communication, collaboration and consultation; it is part of the fabric. Staff have a sense that they have input to change and are listened to.”
- Finally on a more pragmatic level the schools in the study were marked by their strong focus on teaching and learning and the extraordinary commitment of their teaching staff.

5. Students

There is no doubt that the quality of a student cohort will have a great influence on academic achievement in a school, and particularly tertiary entrance exam results. What a school does with its students however; has undoubtedly been proven to have a dramatic influence on student performance as evidenced by the earlier findings presented here and the full report that follows, as well as the literature Hattie (2003, 2008) Dinham (2008). It could be argued that this is no more evident than in schools that have high value added figures. The student commentary on teachers and the leadership in the school has been reported but some additional findings need to be noted.

- The ‘micro culture’ of the student body was seen to be a significant influence on student achievement in the schools that participated in the study.
- A feature of that micro culture was the development of a supportive and encouraging climate in the peer to peer relationships. Schools actively promoted this, “they spoke to us about the need to be encouraging of each other.” This may have been the reason that one student was able to so easily say, “it was great to share your happiness when you did well and you knew someone would be there when you did not go well.”
- While teaching staff and parents spoke of a healthy competition among the students there was a strong focus on shared knowledge. “It was so important to have a cohort where people share knowledge and are willing to teach each other. I never felt frightened to ask a silly question.”
- Peer study groups after hours were a vibrant part of school life in many of the schools in this study. They were the product of programs that were implemented as part of a process to encourage the development of student leadership but had other
tangible benefits and developed a life of their own. Teachers often visited such groups after school to provide further assistance.

- An important aspect of the culture of every school in the study was the theme that it was acceptable to achieve academically. In fact, in one school, students remarked that it was almost unacceptable among their peers not to strive to achieve academically.
- Having noted the finding above it was nicely tempered by the following comment from another student “It was OK to be academically successful but it was always about you as a person. It was always about achieving your personal best. The motto of the school was ‘Love in Action’ and they certainly lived out their motto.”
- The last notable finding was the significant high degree of congruence or validation of the commentary of leadership teams and teachers in the school by the students.

6. Parents

An important contribution to the academic achievement of students was their home environment and the influence of their parents. As one Principal put it, “good staff and engaged parents is a recipe for success.” Parents were seen as integral partners in their children’s education by the schools and the parent focus groups across all schools in the study recognised their own important role. In a similar fashion to students, parents also validated much of the commentary from staff in the schools.

- Students spoke of the significant influence of parents on their success. Supportive, encouraging and patient captured the way many students described their parents’ role.
- One parent described the role of ‘parents as partners’ in a powerful description. “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.”
- Clearly parents valued education in these homes and it was even more heightened in some families. One student from a disadvantaged socio-economic background described his parents’ view of education as “the way out.” Education had an aspirational quality and it was valued highly.
- The power of the parent-school partnership was interestingly noted by students. “Teachers were prepared to talk to our parents. You felt that the parents and teachers worked together for you.” Clearly the school parent partnership was significantly alive.
- A significant finding was the parents’ confirmation of commentary around the ‘culture’ of the schools. When asked if they felt the culture of the school played a part in its success, parents focused on the sense of community and belonging, almost in one single voice, perhaps best captured by the parent who said, “it is a warm, welcoming community, it is a school with a great ambience.” This beautifully echoed and confirmed the comments of students and teachers in previous focus groups.
- An even more acute observation came from another parent, “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’.”
7. No one simple fix

At the outset of this study, one aim that had been identified was an intention to use the data gathered to inform professional development within the system and allow insights into those schools identified as high achieving schools within the context of the tertiary entrance exams. It is clear there is no one simple, quick fix solution, for underperforming schools to adopt.

The factors that influence student achievement in successful schools are complex and multi layered. Schools must attend to a great number of areas and it is evident that this process must be done diligently and in a sustained period over time.

It might be argued that the poor to average teacher is so, because of a ‘disconnect’, or lack of fit with their subject matter, their students, or the culture of the school. This study has unearthed a significant finding, that is, across all 9 schools in the study there was an ‘alignment’, a ‘connectedness’ or ‘interconnectedness’ between effective teachers and their leadership, between effective teachers and their school’s culture, mission, purpose and community. Above all there was a connectedness between the teachers and their subjects, as Parker Palmer (2007) has argued “their subjects had found them” (p. 26) and lastly and most profoundly effective teachers were connected with their students.

Another feature of the study is the contextual variance of the 9 schools, with 2 boys schools, 2 girls schools, 5 co-ed schools, variation in ICSEA status from the very high to the very low and one country school. No school need be defined by their context. They have the capacity to achieve well when there is strong strategic leadership, informed use of data, a critical mass of expert teachers and a culture that nurtures relationships between teachers and students as well as parents and the school. This ‘perfect storm’ can produce a ‘tsunami’ like force for good, or as John Ruskin has said “when love and skill work together, expect a masterpiece.”
PRINCIPAL FOCUS GROUPS

THE ROLE
The role of the Principal “is crucial in setting a vision about where you can go with your students”.

This was a comment from the first Principal interviewed for this project and captures a key common finding. Principals do see their role as crucial in the development and maintenance of a school culture that fosters academic success. The degree of influence is nuanced and varies slightly between Principals and schools however; there is no doubt that as a group they are collectively conscious of their responsibility to provide the best academic programs they can for all students. Their role was also significant in the eyes of their teaching staff with a mean score across the 9 schools of 4.31 on the likert survey item statement “Our executive leadership team strongly promotes academic success.” Subtle differences emerged around the definition of ‘success’ and ‘successful schools.’ So while this research specifically defined success in the context of the Tertiary Entrance Exam results, Principals were keen to emphasize that for them, success was and should be, measured in broader terms.

USE OF DATA

A number of Principals spoke of the need to acknowledge the large amount of data at their fingertips. This ranged from NAPLAN data through to detailed data on TEE performance provided by the Catholic Education Office of W.A. (CEO). They spoke of the need for close analysis of such data at the executive leadership level with their Deputies in the first instance, with Heads of Learning Areas focusing on specific subjects and at staff meetings addressing whole of school performance with all teachers. Principals of composite schools even spoke about the need to examine PIPS data on entry to the early years as the first step in tracking student performance. As one Principal put it “you cannot ignore data, you must answer it.”

In addition to the data on TEE performance provided by the CEO, a number of schools had been compiling their own internal longitudinal data on performance of year 10’s and year 11’s to provide indicative predictions of performance at year 12 and to guide methodical counselling of students from year 10 into year 11 and year 11 into year 12. The schools’ own internal data then complemented systemic data from the CEO. Data informed thorough counselling of students. Principals in these schools were more often very focused and knowledgeable about their own school’s data, keenly involved in its analysis and used the data to inform decision making around curriculum offerings and subject counselling. Internal data was often used to make some tough decisions on who would be allowed entry into certain subjects. One school had even made a decision that unless students achieved a C grade average in year 10 they would have to repeat year 10 altogether. All Principals spoke of the need to be firm about setting pre-requisites for students entering specific subjects and the need to again make strong decisions in regard to those students who do not meet them. Some principals did comment that ultimately they may allow students ‘the right to fail’.
Most importantly schools used data to work with individual teachers whose students did not achieve as well as could be expected. Principals spoke of the need to provide these teachers with external mentoring, visiting other teachers in the system that were regarded as expert in the area, “we need to look at how other schools do things”. They provided them with access to appropriate professional development and if necessary bringing in external supplementary support for students after school with extra tuition delivered by highly qualified and experienced teachers who may have recently retired.

The collection and use of data was done in a highly sophisticated manner. Principals acknowledged the work of the CEO in providing very detailed information about the system as a whole and individual school performance against ‘like schools’ within the system and outside of the system.

Principals of these identified successful schools were immersed in the data. They used data to lead strategic approaches to school improvement, to set goals, to benchmark performance against ‘like’ schools, to counsel, monitor and ‘track’ individual and cohort performance and to develop an aspirational culture. A number expressed the view that they were not overtly ‘results focused’ rather they were ‘student focused’ and that student focus meant that data about student performance was critical to help students improve and reach their potential. Elmore (2004) speaks of the notion of “routinized accountability” and “tight instructional focus” as principles required for large scale school improvement. These principles were clearly evident in the conversations with the Principals across the 9 schools in this study. A school culture supportive of academic success was also seen as vital by the 447 respondents in the likert survey as item 19 received a mean score of 4.54 one of the highest mean scores in the survey.

**WIDER CURRICULUM OFFERINGS**

All Principals made the point that while their schools had achieved success in the Tertiary Entrance Exams, that success was partly due to the fact that they had offered equally beneficial vocational pathways for students who would not ordinarily be suited to the suite of offerings under the umbrella of a University bound course. Many schools had introduced certificate I, certificate II and certificate III courses and very strong workplace training programs. Some schools had even introduced Certificate IV programs that could be finished during year 12.

Principals consistently made the point that these programs had increased credibility as an alternate pathway amongst students and aided the counselling process between year 10, year 11 and year 12. They gave students the opportunity to experience success.

**TEAM FOCUS**

A characteristic of most Principals in this study is that they were team oriented they worked with their Deputy Principals very closely and were fulsome in their praise of their Deputies’ work. They did not take personal credit for the success of the school they always focused on success as ‘a whole of school’ achievement. The success of year 12 students was attributed to the collective work of teachers who had participated in the students’ learning from year 8
through to year 12 or in the case of composite schools from k – year 12. While acknowledging a team approach Principals made a number of observations about the role of Deputy Principals, Heads of Learning and teachers.

ROLE OF DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

Principals of these identified schools sought to appoint Deputies who were “creative, dynamic and broadly experienced”. They spoke of the need for their Deputies to be very collegial and collaborative. A number of them spoke of the importance of a Deputy of Curriculum having to have a track record as an outstanding teacher and Head of Learning Area as these are the very people they have to lead and work with. In a similar vein these Principals saw their own role as being a ‘head teacher’ which explains the importance they attached to a track record of outstanding teaching for their Deputies.

Deputies had to have an “intimate” knowledge of data and the capacity to analyse it thoughtfully. One Principal commented about his Deputy’s innovation in using ‘maze’ (a learning management system) to bring up data about students ‘at a point in time’ that could be accessed electronically from home by parents, to track their sons or daughters progress.

Many Principals also commented that their Deputies could not be exclusively focused on academics that there was a broader pastoral role in their work and they looked for candidates who could do both equally well.

As much as these Principals were strong leaders they were unafraid to empower their Deputies. A number spoke of appointing Deputies who were their equal if not in some areas their better. They saw their Deputies as future Principals. Most importantly they spoke of the need for a synergy between the two roles and the need for a shared vision.

ROLE OF HEADS OF LEARNING

The role of Heads of Learning could not be underestimated in the eyes of most Principals interviewed. They were the key to the establishment of strongly performing Departments. In the words of one Principal they were “evangelists” for their discipline and the best absolutely loved their subject. They needed to be passionate about results and in these schools most were. They have the capacity to create a culture “where going the extra mile becomes the way we operate”.

One Principal commented on the need to find the time to informally communicate with his Heads of Learning. “I am always talking with my Heads of Learning walking around the school and popping into their offices”. A number of Principals talked about the need to be in a position to use these conversations to find out how they can support their middle managers and resource their departments appropriately. Hargreaves (2009) speaks of such ‘collaborative’ cultures and their very real impact on student achievement.

Principals required Heads of Learning to develop chemistry and camaraderie in their departments, to allow robust debate but respect each other as colleagues. They also acknowledged the role of Heads of Learning in providing mentoring to young teachers.
A requirement of the role touched on by a number of Principals was the maintenance of standards, appropriate assessment items and knowledge of standards at a state wide level. They spoke of their need to be involved in professional forums, subject associations, Curriculum Council of WA meetings, as TEE markers, constantly looking outside the cloisters of their own school.

**ROLE OF TEACHERS**

There were a number of common themes around Principals perceptions of their teaching staff. Most Principals spoke of the need for careful selection processes of new staff to get the right “cultural fit”. In addition they also looked for strong subject knowledge, passion for the subject and capacity to relate with students. “They know their subject inside and out, they have very high expectations of their students and their programs are engaging. This is complemented by great rapport.”

A number of Principals commented on the need to get a balance right between young enthusiastic staff and more experienced teachers who have the capacity to mentor them.

Many spoke of the emphasis they placed on professional learning. They encouraged their staff to participate in as much professional development as practical, both outside of the school and ‘in-house’. One school in particular placed a strong emphasis on staff presenting to each other in relation to recent professional development they had undertaken or innovations within their own department. Researchers could get a sense of genuine ‘learning communities’ working in these schools. Hargreaves (2009) talks of such schools as having living communities and lively cultures.

Principals encouraged staff to be creative and not be tied to formulaic approaches, they fostered experimentation. In a number of these schools, Principals encouraged staff to spend time with students beyond the classroom, building relationships and in most of the schools in the study this was a key characteristic of the teaching staff. “Our staff have a great work ethic – long hours, huge commitment.”

Another common thread in interviews with Principals was the need for teachers to be ‘focused’ on teaching and learning; time on task was essential. In a number of schools, time tables were refined to maximise teaching for year 11 and 12 teachers. Interestingly very few Principals strongly advocated one teaching style over another, but many commented on the need for **focus on the task at hand**.

A number of Principals spoke of the need for teaching staff to teach within their discipline not outside it and also to teach across years 7 – 12.

A large number of Principals had high expectations of their staff in terms of communication with parents. “I want parents to be informed of their sons and daughters progress, they should never get a surprise when their child is not making satisfactory progress.” The same applied to students, all Principals required their staff to give appropriate and timely feedback to students.
PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Most of the Principals surveyed commented on how important it was to communicate with and engage parents. “Good staff and engaged parents is a recipe for success.” A number of Principals spoke of the need to constantly use every forum possible to communicate with parents and articulate the expectations the school has of them in relation to the partnership they share in the education of their children. “It is so important to get parents on side.” One of the Principals made a salient comment that it was important to offer ‘quality’ parent information evenings or forums, which were carefully devised and not overly long.

A key theme was the obvious strong support from the parent body that valued education, had high expectations of their children and were broadly aspirational. Only one school with a relatively low ICSEA index had comparatively low parent participation in the school. Most Principals spoke of a “culture of involvement”.

Aside from the usual information evenings related to course counselling many schools commented on the development of community through parent participation in sporting clubs, Fathers day, Mothers day and Grandparents day functions as well as numerous cultural occasions. These occasions developed relationships in an informal context.

STUDENT INFLUENCE

As this project is principally focused on successful schools in the TEE context most discussions revolved around senior students in years 10 – 12 but many Principals also talked about their students at both the senior and middle school level.

One theme that came out strongly was the knowledge that Principals had of their senior school cohorts. A number of them taught these students and they were very conscious of how they had been progressing as a cohort from years 10 through to year 12. “Students know, I know, how they are going.”

In a number of schools, Principals talked about the strength of peer support programs eliciting academically strong students to work with and support those who may need extra help. In addition, a variety of leadership programs were in place that complemented peer support programs. One Principal spoke about the senior students staying back after school working in academic groupings until 6pm or even 7pm “this was normal.”

An overriding comment was that in these schools it was “cool” to be academically successful or to spend time on study during lunch hours, before school and after school. Most importantly teachers were very willing to make themselves available to students at these times. Another support was the use of IT and intranet facilities where staff responded to questions from students, out of school hours.

Across the board, all Principals spoke of the need to constantly affirm student academic success at whole of school assemblies, at year assemblies and through parent newsletters. “Success breeds success, our students are proud of their achievements.”
One school talked about the use of surveys with their students to get a constant stream of information and feedback on how they could improve programs.

Principals commented on the need to not only provide first class curriculum programs but also first class pastoral care programs. Many commented on the importance of sound career counselling, learning support programs and psychological support. A number of Principals noted the very difficult home life of students and the requirement to provide as much support as possible at school to ‘enable’ them in their study. These needs were well identified and exceptionally well met in most schools in the study.

**CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL**

Undoubtedly the strongest theme coming through all interviews with Principals was their recognition of the importance of developing a ‘culture’ that supported a climate where teaching and learning was seen as ‘core business’, where academic success was applauded and affirmed, where staff were appointed according to their cultural fit and where the vision of the Principal was shared by all concerned.

It could be said that this group of Principals were anything but insular. They constantly encouraged their staff to engage with professional development outside of the school. They wanted to be benchmarked against external measures and used such benchmarking processes to ‘reflect’ on their practice. They not only wanted to compare themselves with other schools in the system but right across the state. They did not scorn comparisons but rather welcomed them.

Some schools in this study had periods in their history where their results were poor but they used data, sought outside external advice, brought in staff from other schools and the CEO and then set about to strategically plan and improve the educational outcomes for their students. Having done so, they reaped rewards but these rewards came from systematic plans and targeted approaches. One Principal commented, “we have moved the school from a ‘laissez faire’ culture to one that emphasises personal best and excellence, OK is not OK or good enough.” This in some ways captured a prevailing attitude which was; “how can we do better?” Complacency was not in their vocabulary.

Principals commented on the many important and pressing administrative responsibilities that caused them to be “pulled away” from the essentials of teaching and learning. All of the Principals spoke of the need to constantly resist that pull. “It takes a lot of effort and you can let it go, but you cannot afford to.”

Principals exhibited a fierce pride in their school and an abiding respect for the efforts of their staff. It could be easily seen that this pride was infectious and as we will discuss later had a big impact on students.

Another feature was the synergy within leadership teams, the relationships between the Principal and Deputy Principal charged with responsibility for Curriculum was exceptionally strong and this filtered down to middle management positions. The dialogue around
teaching and learning was common in these schools as evidenced by a typical comment from a Deputy Principal “We are constantly in conversations around what does it mean to learn.” The researchers had a sense that they were often talking with a teacher rather than a manager although clearly some were exceptional managers as evidenced by the comments of their staff, the organisational structures in place in their schools and the strategic way in which they had managed change.

Leithwood et al (2006) speak of 4 major domains of leadership that have an impact on student learning:

- Setting direction
- Managing teaching and learning
- Developing people
- Developing the organisation to create evidence based schools

It could be argued that there was clear evidence that all 4 domains were well accounted for in the interviews with the Principals in this study.
DEPUTY PRINCIPAL FOCUS GROUPS

Of the nine Deputies interviewed, their breadth of experience across a number of schools in the Catholic system was evident and certainly played a role in the knowledge they brought to their current position. Predominantly most had attained their position having previously been a Head of a Learning Area and were thus steeped in a background of managing curriculum. They had all spent many years teaching TEE subjects and some still were. A number were currently teaching year 12’s. A number also had experience in public as well as catholic education.

The major themes derived from these interviews were: the importance of counselling, knowledge and use of data, relationships with students, relationships with parents, strategic planning and the importance of the development of an appropriate culture.

COUNSELLING OF STUDENTS

Counselling was the dominant theme in all interviews with Deputy Principals and one that cannot be underestimated. This could be attributed to the fact that most Deputies managed counselling and subject / pathway choices from year 10 to year 11 and from year 11 to year 12 and they all argued unanimously that it was a crucial factor in the success of the students in their schools.

As was mentioned in the report on interviews with Principals, a major contribution to student success was the quality of counselling. Processes where students are interviewed 1:1 by senior staff, tracked and then interviewed again where necessary, were common. Counselling was informed by detailed statistics on performance history in the schools used to show students what might be expected if you attained a certain grade in year 10 or year 11 based on the school’s ‘in-house’ longitudinal data. Aligned to the use of data was the development and application of desired pre-requisites for individual subjects. These pre-requisites were rigorously applied although many Deputies did make the comment that ultimately we do ‘give students a go’. Thus efforts to gain good results were not achieved by denying students opportunities. “We want the ‘person’ to do their best; we are not focused on getting into the West Australian”.

Counselling was defined broadly by many Deputies and did not just refer to ‘subject” or ‘pathways’ counselling. Many Deputies spoke of the integral role of careers counsellors in their schools who helped students identify goals and “end point” directions, this was crucial in enabling decision making. Careers counsellors worked very closely with Deputies in a support role in the whole counselling process. While not in the ambit of this research study it would be very useful to do additional research at a later date examining the role, influence and level of resourcing in this area and its impact on students.

While it did not dominate discussions, the role of psychological counselling and the issue of student social and emotional well being was raised by some Deputies. “The more we can do to support the ‘well being’ of the student the better. Good results come if you are ‘looking after’ the student, good teaching and good curriculum is a given.” This comment is something that subtly comes through in a number of conversations and needs recognition.
When students are happy, feel safe and comfortable and are able to work in an environment conducive to personal well being, they are potentially able to perform at their best. As a result it was noticeable that a number of Deputy Principals commented on the need for sound behaviour management programs and policies in their schools, they knew that orderly focused learning environments are critical and said so often. “Kids need to feel good about being at school and have ‘opportunities’ to achieve satisfaction or achievement in something, then you do not get behavioural problems.”

This is a theme that comes out strongly in interviews conducted with parents who see the development of resilience and optimism as important factors in their sons’ and daughters’ education. Academic performance was very important for them, but not exclusively so. One of the schools in the study had recognised this and has started to explore in more depth the contribution of the field of positive psychology and the work of Martin Seligman (2000), exploring ways to implement their research findings within school practice.

Adding weight to the above commentary was the observation by another Deputy that increasingly “we are being a little overwhelmed by the number of students presenting with social and emotional issues”. In another school a Deputy also commented on the amount of time spent dealing with personal issues of students that stemmed back to an alarming level of dysfunction in the home, thus the need for a great deal of time spent working with families. All of this, points to the multi layered work of contemporary schooling. If anything, the predominant focus in successful schools is the building of relationships and from that all things come.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships took on an almost ‘mantra’ like quality in this study and in some ways it should have been predictable given the emphasis of the Catholic school system. “God is calling people into relationship today...students need to feel loved by their teachers and by other school staff, just as his disciples felt loved by Jesus.” Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of WA (2009).

As such, relationships and community featured very strongly in interviews with the Deputy Principals. The personal generosity of teachers with respect to the time they gave to students over and above normal teaching hours was striking, in fact it could be said that the ‘norm’ started to take on a completely new dimension. Repeatedly Deputies across all schools spoke of the hours undertaken before school, at lunchtime and after school to provide students with extra support. One school ran after school tutorials on a Friday afternoon and it was not unusual to see up to three classrooms full of students gladly staying behind. The same school also had teachers running seminars on Saturdays, all of this was completely voluntary on the part of the teachers, the school had never requested it. As such, this spirit of ‘service’ had a great impact on students as will be seen in the summary of student interviews and it helped build ‘authentic’ relationships.

Before we place too much stock on ‘after hours’ work and extra-curricular activities; it should be noted that the classroom was the first setting for the creation of relationships. As one Deputy put it, “among a number of things relationships is what makes a good teacher,
but they are not only developed in social settings, it is done “with and through the subject”. He went on to describe those ‘moments’ in teaching where teachers take the subject matter back to the lives of their students, making learning relevant, giving it sense and purpose and even providing anecdotes from their own life experience. He might have captured that concept of the passionate teacher bringing students into the life of the relationship she or he has with their subject and thus inspiring a similar love. Another Deputy characterised the relationship in the classroom as a process where “our better teachers work to get to know students and ensure they are teaching for understanding” getting to know students thus takes on a double dimension here, where teachers not only know the person but what the person knows or does not know!

On a broader level, what characterised many of these conversations was the discussion around the significance of community. Of course, where there are strong relationships, there is community. One interview centred around the focus on ‘community’ in the school and the enormous contribution of the religious order that founded the school. That order’s charism was singularly defined by a tradition of ‘hospitality’. The school had to be a ‘welcoming place’, a place of support. As the Deputy commented, “they (students) will always study and do well when they feel they belong.” He would be heartened to know that the work of William Glasser (1998) confirms this. Glasser, building on the work of Maslow argued that we have five basic needs: survival, power, freedom, fun and the most fundamental, love and belonging.

On a structural level a few Deputies spoke of the benefit of having form classes or house groups taken through year by year with one staff member so they developed an intimate pastoral knowledge of the group and individuals within the group.

On a more formal level one Deputy spoke of the school’s work in surveying students. “I survey students about their study habits; I survey them about their course experiences.” The student voice was being heard here. This added to teachers’ reflections about the strengths and weaknesses of the new courses of study they were teaching. There was a highly reflective approach to teaching. “What works, what doesn’t, how can we improve? What can the students tell us?”

The relationship with parents was a strong theme in all conversations with the Deputies. Almost to a person, they emphasised the need to have strong lines of communication with parents regarding academic progress. A partnership with parents was fundamental in achieving academic success in these schools. It was fascinating to hear almost every Deputy say a parent should never get a ‘surprise” on their child’s report. As mentioned in the summary on Principals perceptions, one Deputy had developed a tool on ‘Maze’ (a learning management system) for parents to access their child’s mark book from home. Across all of the schools, parents were supportive partners in the education of their children with outstanding attendance at all school information and communication forums.

CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL

In a similar vein to the Principals, Deputy Principals spoke of the culture of the school as a major contributing factor in its academic success. In fact, what was clear to the researchers
in terms of culture was the synergy between Principal and Deputy. There was undoubtedly a shared vision.

A major theme among the Deputies was the centrality of teaching and learning as a focus in the school and the development of a reflective culture around practice. It was mentioned that to be a ‘Catholic’ school requires that we are a ‘good’ school and as a consequence academic results are **high on the agenda**. As mentioned above, the use of data to inform practice was important. In addition, some schools had really created learning communities. One school had set up a group to research quality teaching and quality teachers, “we started to create a culture of conversations around teaching and examined the literature on teacher designed schools.”

This school was engaged in the research literature and reflecting on their teaching. The school brought in visiting academics to run professional development programs with staff. In particular they used the work of Ken Tobin, Barry Fraser, Bill Martin and John Edwards to generate dialogue around teaching practice and to open up each other’s classrooms for peer evaluation of their teaching.

A similar comment was made by another school. A number of years ago the school had extremely poor academic results. It made a number of structural changes, in particular moving away from an approach that organised teaching around an integrated studies program to a more subject based focus, with expert teachers in the subject, teaching within their discipline not outside it. The school gave more prominence to the role of Heads of Learning and in particular targeted behaviour management for improvement.

They brought in Principals from other schools that had been successful in their TEE results and looked at the strategies they employed. This models another principle of Elmore (2004) who suggests that if there is to be large scale improvement schools must “reduce isolation and open practice up to direct observation, analysis, and criticism.”

The current Deputy Principal joined the school just after this particularly poor year and had come from a school with a strong academic record. He introduced strategies to improve the overall academic and behavioural tone. The school set about focussing on relationships between staff and students, academic and behavioural expectations and absenteeism. Absenteeism had been “astronomically” high. This was immediately rectified with very tight scrutiny of attendance and immediate follow up being instigated. Time on task became crucial for success.

The Deputy spoke of constantly walking around the school, “putting out fires before they started”. He would literally walk around the campus five or six times a day, “I had to be a presence”. The school also had undergone a building program that opened classrooms with glass walls so people could see each other teach. A very rigid policy of using a student organiser to gain permission to walk around the school outside of the classroom was brought into effect.” Previously kids had roamed aimlessly.” The Deputy spoke about the fact that whenever he bumped into students he would always bring up their study, how they were tracking on their targeted goals, homework, assignments. Senior teachers with
the Deputy followed up students who were missing school or missing assessment tasks. They used every means possible to celebrate success whenever they could.

As a consequence, for the last three years the school has received a 100% Graduation rate. Its value added index has been extremely high and the overall tone of the school has improved enormously.

A number of Deputies often used the word excellence. They were striving to attain excellence on a number of fronts, excellence in teaching, assessment practice, fostering an attitude amongst their students to strive for excellence. In doing so they often echoed the commentary of the Principals they worked with, because as good as the strategic plans they had implemented for school improvement were, they wanted to review them and search for more ways to fine tune what they were doing, to get better and better “to move from good to great.”

Again, like their Principals, Deputies were extremely ‘outward’ looking, constantly searching to see how others approached a problem, looking for external advice and expertise. They were highly focused, and wanted their students and staff to be highly focused, as one Deputy commented “we have business to do here.”

In terms of culture, an inescapable theme throughout was the context of Catholic faith and values. It permeated the way Deputies spoke about relationships, “I aim to treat staff and students well” as simple as that. “People treat each other well here, we are known for it.” As one researcher put it whose entire career had been spent in another sector, “I cannot get over the level of ‘care’ that is so evident in these schools, there is a culture of care.”
HEADS OF LEARNING AREA (HOLA) FOCUS GROUPS

Heads of Learning play a pivotal role in the design and implementation of curriculum, they sit in a space between Deputy Principals and teachers in middle management roles. They have often been selected for these roles because they are ‘master’ teachers and have the potential to lead. The Heads of Learning interviewed in this study ranged right across the broad spectrum of all learning areas including Religious Education.

Discussions revolved around the ‘role’ of the Head of Learning, issues related to teaching, assessment, planning and programming, the culture of the school, executive leadership, parents and students.

THE ROLE

A common theme among most Heads of Learning was the fact that they viewed their role as not just an administrative one; it was also a transformational role. “Being a good Head of Learning is not just about being a good administrator, but also about building relationships. Affirming staff is crucial, being available to support people.” There was a strong sense of ‘leadership as service’ in many of the conversations and while organisational skills were often relegated to a second tier in terms of importance, their necessity was acknowledged. The “busyness” of many schools required the HOLA to be highly organised in order to support their staff and continue to ‘serve’ them appropriately. Interestingly their job in these schools was made easier by the very competent Deputies they worked with, who were often meticulous in their planning, organisation and communication.

Heads of Learning talked of the need to work on relationships, “we are a team”. Teamwork was a key theme woven through many conversations. “We use the strengths of different individuals to drive particular areas of the curriculum, working strongly as a team, and working on weaknesses.” Team teaching, cross marking, strong comparability measures and a culture of sharing were common features. “We work as a team and plan as a team, I facilitate the planning and communication and bring everyone on board.” Heads of Learning saw themselves as “builders”, building relationships, building teamwork and the obvious benefits that spring from it. “When you have a strong team you find it really creates focus.” Across the 9 schools the mean score on the likert survey to item 12 ‘our department works as a close knit team’ was 4.09.

There was also acknowledgement that Heads of Learning required a generosity of spirit, as many leaders do; “accept praise, but acknowledge the team and when things go wrong, take a hit for the team.”

Another key feature of the leadership styles was the notion that it was imperative to lead by example, “from the way I talk on the phone, write programs or get marking back.” These were women and men who were acutely conscious of their responsibilities and wanted to foster that same sense of accountability and responsibility within their staff.

In a number of the interviews, the subject of communication came up as a central characteristic of strongly functioning departments. “Having everyone in an office together
is really conducive to conversations around curriculum.” The built environment was a key feature around the theme of communication, having staff together in a central office space was seen as the ideal and where schools could not provide such a space it was seen as a limiting factor. Heads of Learning who were not sharing offices with their staff spoke of the disadvantages and a sense of isolation.

A number of Heads of Learning commented on the need for open lines of communication in their departments, the need for robust debate and the requirement that staff, reflect with and listen to each other in respectful dialogue. In addition one HOLA noted that “I have to make time to talk to people individually, find out their needs and take time to affirm them.”

While we take it for granted, many staff commented on the use of ICT as a medium for communication in their role; sharing resources on a common drive as a repository, knowledge of ICT resources in particular learning areas and the ease with which we can now use technology to send resources to each other in an instant.

**PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING**

As has been mentioned already in this study, planning and programming is strongly characterised by a collaborative, team approach in these schools. Wherever possible individual strengths of particular staff members are employed, teachers share responsibilities for programming at different year levels and Heads of Learning ensure that standards and attention to detail required by school policy is applied.

Many schools commented on the need for lower school programming to provide scaffolding towards skills and knowledge required in upper school. There was a great need to be conscious of scope and sequence in programs, developing and building skills at each year level without also creating repetition and duplication.

A number of schools spoke about the relative freedom to be fairly creative and experimental in lower school programs. “We experiment a lot in our programming, we are relatively creative, open to change but not “obsessed” by it.” So while there was an acknowledgement that traditional skills were very important, attainment of those skills in lower school was not sacrificed at the expense of imaginative and creative programming.

A number of Heads of Learning spoke of their need to teach across lower secondary and upper secondary to get “a helicopter view” of curriculum and a more nuanced appreciation of scope and sequence. Many also demanded that their teachers teach across the full range from Year 7 – Year 12. Learning area meetings were often used to develop conversations around the scope and sequence of the curriculum; year 11 and year 12 teachers talking about skills that might be deficient in students so that those in lower secondary might be a little more focused on these areas. “We spend a lot of time auditing the year 11 and 12 programs to inform programming in yrs 7-10 in order to achieve targeted outcomes in years 11 and 12.”
An interesting feature of the research was the variance in streaming into ability groups. While some schools did stream in English and Mathematics from year 8 onwards a larger number did not stream until year 10. Year 10 was certainly the stage where streaming became common rather than the exception. Clearly year 10 was seen in many schools as a preparatory year for the year 11 and 12 courses of study and a year where significant counselling took place for students who may wish to pursue alternative VET pathways.

ASSESSMENT

In a number of interviews, conversations around assessment practices dominated discussion, as might be expected given the nature of this group. Heads of Learning spoke passionately about the need for well developed assessment policy and practice. “90% of our time is spent writing assessments in mathematics, we pore over them to ensure it is a quality assessment, looking for flaws or how to make it better.” Thus assessment is not seen as a “bolt on” product it is “an instrument for learning.” “We spend a great deal of time developing assessments, we take great pride in our work – yeah it is about pride in the work”.

Conversations about assessment did not just take place around the departmental table it was part and parcel of whole school staff meetings with common whole school templates for assessment and planning.

A balanced approach to frequency of assessment was the generally accepted view. It was important to have regular assessments to develop and refine skills, to monitor learning and to provide feedback but having too many assessments could then mean that quality feedback was difficult.

Quality feedback was a central feature of the conversations about assessment. “I say to my teachers, I want to be able to go to your students’ files and see your writing all over their work.” Having commented about detailed feedback, the same HOLA also commented on the need for timely feedback noting that immediacy of feedback was also essential.

Common assessment tasks were considered very important in terms of achievement of comparability across a cohort of students. “Assessments need to be uniform and comparable.” Many Heads of Learning talked about the need in year 11 and 12 to use assessment types that replicated exam questions and developed exam taking skills. One HOLA spoke of the need to build up ‘resilience to test taking and exams” as students (particularly girls) became overly anxious about tests and exams.

“Consensus marking” meetings were regarded as essential to get a sense of the standards required. A number of schools also used external markers for some assessments in order to have their students benchmarked against a state wide standard. Tools for feedback were also discussed such as well designed rubrics, marking keys linked to the syllabus, use of student exemplars and engaging students in self evaluation. “I like to get students to write reflections on the feedback they have been given, it ensures they have read it and may act on it.” Thus the loop is closed.
Mathematics Heads talked about the need for mathematics teachers to ‘model solutions’ often taking a whole period to go over a test with students “line by line modelling the answers and how to get there.”

Affirmation was repeatedly mentioned in relation to assessments and feedback. In particular Heads of Learning in the all boys schools spoke about the impact of positive affirmation with boys and the need to use every opportunity and medium to provide it, recognising that it must be authentic, otherwise we demean the success attained and the affirmation given.

**SELECTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS**

The final significant theme in the interviews with HOLA’s centred on the selection and development of their teaching staff. That is, what did they look for when they were recruiting new staff to their department and what did they see as necessary in the professional development of their staff in order to achieve the success they had attained and maintain high standards into the future?

Undoubtedly, many Heads of Learning spoke of the need for new staff to be expert in their discipline, both in content knowledge and pedagogy but time and time again they talked about the need for staff to “fit in, both to our department and to the mission of the school.” One HOLA described that cultural fit in terms of the charism of the religious order, “they have to be people who “look for the good in others.”

If, as we have seen, teamwork is such an essential ingredient of the culture and general success of these schools, then clearly maintaining that collegial chemistry was a great priority. Another spoke of the need to select staff who are willing to contribute generously to the work of the team and to the students they teach. “Everyone pitches in and helps here, we spend hours after school and even on weekends or holidays.” Interestingly also, as an adjunct to the long hours and commitment required, a common theme was the need for a sense of humour!

One HOLA described his staff this way, “they are passionate, they care and connect, and they love them (students).” Clearly the affective qualities were those he sought in new staff.

In terms of professional development, all Heads of Learning spoke strongly about the need for their teaching staff to access high quality professional development. In particular, many spoke of the benefits of TEE marking and working on subject curriculum panels at the Curriculum Council of WA. Gaining experience as TEE markers was seen by many as the very best professional development a year 11 and year 12 teacher could access. Networking with colleagues through professional associations was also highly valued.
TEACHER FOCUS GROUPS

As would be expected, there was a great deal of congruence between perceptions of Heads of Learning who by their very nature were “expert” teachers and those experienced year 11 and year 12 teachers selected by their schools for the focus interviews. The interviews explored questions around the influence of content knowledge, teaching strategies, planning assessment and feedback and affective qualities of expert teachers. In addition it was fascinating to see the depth of responses concerning the ‘culture’ of the school. Time and again teachers in the classroom added yet another layer of commentary about the importance of cultural factors that contributed to the academic tone of the school and the success it achieved.

CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

There is no doubt that a major contributor to successful teaching in the perceptions of those interviewed was innate, deep, content knowledge. “I know my stuff, and I therefore teach by instinct...if we don’t (know content) students don’t respect us.” Another teacher expressed it this way, “You have to have knowledge of the content. They (students) have to have confidence in you, but that also comes with the relationship.” Teachers commented that “you have to show your understanding, you cannot give them basic answers, give them the bigger picture, apply information.” Many teachers remarked that the depth of their knowledge was elicited in moments they were providing informal feedback, not just in instructive moments. The link between subject knowledge and feedback will be discussed later but a number of teachers reflected on the need for deep instinctual understanding as they used questioning techniques in whole of class discussion, feeding back to students and helping them refine their own responses. “You have to understand, issues, events and trends rather than filling their heads with facts”. All teachers were deeply conscious of the need for higher order understandings of analysis and synthesis.

A number of teachers across quite a few schools reflected on the need to make the subject matter relevant, “I give them real world examples.” A number of teachers noted the importance of using a wide variety of resources to meet the various interests of different students. Another commented, “make your subject seem important, help them to see its value. You open the door and they enter with their stories.”

This point was nicely picked up again in the voice of another teacher from who made an important distinction, “What do you teach? Physics? Chemistry? No you don’t, you teach kids, you teach people, and you teach them about physics.”

This reflects the research of Hattie (2003). Experts possess knowledge that is more integrated, in that they combine new subject matter content knowledge with prior knowledge; can relate current lesson content to other subjects in the curriculum; and make lessons uniquely their own by changing, combining, and adding to them according to their students’ needs and their own goals.
Because of these deeper representations expert teachers:

- can spontaneously relate what is happening to these deeper sets of principles
- can quickly recognize sequences of events occurring in the classroom which in some way affect the learning and teaching of a topic. (p. 5)

Many teachers interviewed discussed the requirement of an intricate knowledge of the syllabus and how they used that knowledge to maximize teaching time to ensure what they were doing was also relevant to syllabus requirements. As one teacher put it, “content knowledge can be complemented by methodical, careful, effective focus on the syllabus.”

To reinforce comments made by other interviewees, teachers strongly advocated the experience of TEE marking as the best type of professional development to enhance their understanding of the syllabus and provide the maximum benefit to their students. One teacher spoke about how his experience had even given him ‘practical’ ideas about how students could ‘lay out’ their responses in the exam context so that they were able to be easily read by examiners marking many hundreds of papers.

Another teacher spoke of how TEE marking gave a clearer understanding of standards so that internal assessment in the school was accurate and students were not disadvantaged in scaling and moderation. Attending Curriculum Council assessment and moderation meetings was also seen as essential.

A discussion took place with teachers in one school who were working with students focused on international curriculum, one applying to Oxford and another applying to the Ivy League universities in the USA. Helping these students come to terms with demanding entrance exams in the international arena was an educative professional development experience for those involved. The researcher was taken aback by the many hours spent after school working with these students to help them reach their goal. One student is now studying at St Andrews University in Scotland while another is studying at Columbia University in New York having been offered a place at Princeton as well. The work on this international syllabus was done in addition to the teacher’s high quality work on the local syllabus. This was yet another example of teachers willing to go the extra mile for their students. These teachers were animated as they discussed the need to challenge and work with their brightest students to excel and reach their potential.

ENTHUSIASM

While a great majority of teachers spoke of the need for content knowledge they also equally spoke about the need for enthusiasm and passion. Not only did they ‘know’ their subject but they ‘loved’ it and they wanted to convey that love of the subject to their students. A caveat though, was that enthusiasm and passion could not make up for a ‘lack’ of knowledge. While many teachers spoke about their own enthusiasm and love of their subject, a number also spoke about the need to engender a love of learning in their students. This love of learning was modelled in a number of classrooms, as one teacher said when asked to describe himself as a teacher, “I just love it; it is the best job in the world!”
TEACHING STRATEGIES

Teachers were asked to reflect on the various strategies and approaches they used with their year 11 and year 12 classes. For those concentrated in upper school a greater emphasis on direct instruction and teacher lead discussion was favoured over collaborative learning approaches although there was arguably a real attempt to use a wide variety of strategies. In lower school, where the curriculum allowed a greater degree of flexibility there was an increased use of collaborative group work and a very strong focus on the development of skills. In upper school, whole class discussion was a key feature of teaching strategies.

Many teachers spoke of the opportunities that present themselves in whole class discussion; teaching moments where there is recognition that the discussion is priceless and highly relevant to a major aspect of the syllabus or the exam. “At moments in these discussions we have to stop and write points down, you show them the relevance to the course and the exam.”

Another teacher commented on how his school had introduced a study journal devoted to the compilation of relevant notes to help their students in preparation for tests and exams they will be taking. In this school, a great emphasis was placed on developing students’ study and organisational skills. This was a school with a very low socio economic cohort where parent support with study skills and homework was minimal.

Mathematics was clearly an area where a greater dominance of direct instruction occurred followed by students working individually after they had engaged with teachers modelling approaches to particular problems.

A number of year 11 and 12 teachers spoke of the need to focus on ‘how to learn’ strategies. “What do I need to know and how can I learn it?” Meta cognitive strategies were deemed important but they were very contextually based around the particular needs of individual subjects.

PLANNING, ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Echoing earlier comments from all other focus groups; teachers placed great store in the importance of thorough organised planning and they reiterated earlier comments on the need for years 7-10 to be clear building blocks, or scaffolded years, for the development of essential skills.

These successful teachers were outwardly focused with strong external networks. Many were highly engaged in professional development in TEE marking, examination panels, assessment and moderation groups and curriculum writing for the Curriculum Council. These experiences were used to feed into their planning and assessment and they also allowed others in their departments to gain from the experience. “I learned from the way Dave had designed his course and applied those principles to mine.” This teacher had been heavily involved in the writing and design of a new Course of Study and teachers in other departments knew about his work, were engaged in conversations with him and learned
from his experience. Dave’s students were the highest performing cohort in the Catholic system and one of the ten highest performing schools in the State.

Assessment types were largely dictated by assessment structures in the syllabus and wherever possible teachers talked of a responsibility to replicate assessment types that would appear in the external exams. “It would be irresponsible of me to give multi choice tests just because they may be easy to mark when that assessment type does not appear in the exam, it would be a waste of time for my students.”

Many teachers spoke of their efforts to improve literacy in their subject, as well as whole school efforts to improve literacy levels across the curriculum. In particular, writing skills of students were high on the agenda as they needed to meet the demands of sophisticated questions in TEE papers requiring well developed analytical skills and expository writing. This was a very strong focus in the two boys’ schools that took part in the study. “Boys need to write first then articulate, then go back to their writing.”

All teachers reinforced that regular assessment and timely feedback was crucial. “I’m the feedback queen... I model answers in class and then save them for students to access any time.” The same teacher commented “I am very transparent with assessments; students know where every mark has come from.” A number of teachers spoke of the use of exemplary answers from students (with their permission) and how useful they were in helping peers learn from each other. Equally, others spoke with great enthusiasm about self evaluation techniques and their role in learning. It was a tool that complemented feedback and a number of teachers spoke about the need to use it to get ‘student feedback’ about their own teaching.

Students were hungry for feedback. “At this school if you have a test in period 1 students want feedback by recess!” One teacher commented on the need for regular assessment and feedback pointing out that “if you did not assess boys would not learn ... you do assessment for learning, it is a very effective teaching strategy.”

Another type of ‘feedback’ was the ‘awareness’ of data. Teachers were conscious of the data in their schools and used it as a feedback mechanism to inform their teaching. They were adamant that they were not obsessed with it but rather ‘conscious’ of it. When asked a more nuanced question about whether they were ‘results focused’ there was a divergence in responses. Some teachers did not like the term at all and clearly expressed that they were not, others unashamedly said they were. “If I train a sporting team I train them to get a result, the same applies to my teaching.”

CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL

A by-product of many conversations with teachers in the focus groups was certainly the theme of culture. On many levels whether the discussion was centred on subject specific knowledge, pedagogy or planning and assessment, there were constant references to the context of culture and relationships. Clearly, there was so much more to the success of these ‘expert’ teachers than just their mastery and execution of the technical requirements of their craft.
Teachers talked about the more “affective” aspects of their lives as teachers. “We are not just about the attainment of results we are about developing the person.” One suspects though, that it is precisely their attention to the development of the person that might also be contributing to the attainment of results. These were teachers who knew their students, those ‘at risk’ and those who were ‘exceptional’ and whatever category a student fell into, they aimed to help them achieve as well as they could. “The students know you care about them and when they know that, they will work for you.” Another teacher expressed it as “interest in the kids is just as important as interest in the subject.”

Again, a key theme was the commentary around community and the sense of belonging that teachers sensed students felt. “Boys here feel they belong, that engages them as a human person, it inspires them.” There is a sense of true mission in the work of these teachers. Many spoke of the need to be approachable, thus implying that the invitation to relate, to be open to others is an integral part of their professional outlook. This ethos applied to their students, their colleagues and the parents of their students. “Kids see the rapport between staff and it flows on to teacher student relationships.” A number of the teacher focus groups commented on the general sense of mutual respect teachers had for each other both within specific departments and across the school as whole. While some secondary schools are at times criticised for creating “silos” in departments this was not the case in the experiences of these teachers.

There was acuity in their understanding of the ‘place’ in which they worked, a fine appreciation of its depth and what it had to offer its students. “You are allowed to be excellent here, but you are also required to be a man for others, it provides a great balance. We could dominate academic results but it would be at the expense of so many other areas.”

Many teachers spoke about the need for a safe classroom environment and similarly a whole school environment where students felt safe and you could get down to the business of learning. Purposeful, organised, well structured classrooms were the order of the day. “This school has an extraordinary level of appropriate behaviour. It has been built into the culture of the school over a period of time.”

Another factor was the appreciation of the work of those in leadership roles from Heads of Learning to Deputies and Principals. “Our HOLA generates conversations around learning.” Another teacher commented, “this school has been built on the three C’s communication, collaboration and consultation, it is part of the fabric. Staff have a sense that they have input to change and are listened to.”

A quite unique observation was provided about the culture of one school that had a charism from a religious order of nuns. The teacher commented that “the very presence of the Sisters is amazing. They can walk in, wave as they go by. They are incredibly encouraging; they make you feel as though you are the most important person in the world!” Other teachers in that focus group completely confirmed this observation and there was unanimous agreement about the impact affirmation makes in our working lives as well as an animated discussion about the remarkable legacy of the religious orders in the Catholic school system. This will be reiterated in the summaries on student and parent perceptions.
STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

A significant number of ex students were interviewed (26) across 7 of the nine schools. Two schools were not able to organise past students for the interview. Researchers were interested to hear students’ perceptions about leadership in their school, effective teaching and the influence of peers and family. In addition, the research team were also interested to see if students’ perceptions validated the commentary of staff in the school or might it contest such commentary?

It must be said at the outset, that due to the purposive sampling of students who had achieved highly in their ATAR it might be predicted that they would speak positively about their school experience and the teaching they received, however the research team were overwhelmed by the articulate and animated way these students expressed themselves and surprised at the palpable passion and pride they had for their school. It might be argued that of all the ‘voices’ heard in this research, this is the group that should be listened to most attentively.

TEACHERS AND RELATIONSHIPS

There was no doubt, that apart from the home environment, teachers were the most powerful influence on these students. The students’ commentary validated all that had been said in respect of the importance teachers gave to relationships. As one student commented, “you are able to learn more when the relationship is strong.” Another student from the same school replied that equally, “if you do not have a relationship with the teacher you cannot learn, it puts you off.”

One common factor that came through nearly every student focus group was the notion of approachability and availability. The best teachers were approachable. When asked to drill down into the meaning of approachability one student remarked, ‘they invite you to ask questions, it is nice to be encouraged to ask questions.” Another student said “they related really well to you, I could feel relaxed around them, I could ask them questions and not feel like an idiot.”

Feeling comfortable in a relationship with a teacher was a prominent desire of students and one that definitely produced tangible results. It created a learning environment which was conducive to high personal achievement. To sum up the importance of relationship we need do no more than quote from one student’s comment, “You actually like the teachers; you hated the thought of disappointing them.”

In every school in the study the ‘availability’ of teachers was commented on by every single focus group and this was completely validated by the students. They were enormously appreciative of the time teachers gave them, before school, after school, at lunchtimes and not uncommonly during school holidays. This appreciation developed a desire to do well for their teachers not just for themselves. A student noted, “the fact that they were always willing to help was significant.” This willingness to provide support was repeatedly mentioned by all students across all schools in the study, it was not taken for granted, as
clearly, there were some teachers in their experience who had been less than enthusiastic and the contrast was marked.

**TEACHERS’ CONTENT KNOWLEDGE**

Enthusiasm and content knowledge was another major theme that came through the interviews with students. There was almost a unanimous recognition that the enthusiasm of a teacher was infectious and helped motivate students, it was mentioned by nearly every student involved in the study.

At the same time, many students also commented on the fact that their teachers’ expertise in their subject knowledge, was obviously equally essential. In particular, students spoke about the deep familiarity many of their teacher’s had with the syllabus and the highly ‘specific’ nature of advice that related to the breadth of the syllabus and examination technique. Students knew the teachers who had examination marking experience and commented on how useful that experience was in their preparation. This specificity in terms of teaching was often borne out of experience both as a teacher and as a marker at the examination level.

Many of the students reiterated that while they practised many past papers and exam questions, this was not a “skill and drill” or “teach to the test” mentality. They commented about the way their teachers employed a diverse range of resources, were people who were clearly widely read and who made the discussions in their classrooms, or the work they were doing, relevant to the world they lived in. One student captured this well. “Her (teacher’s) feedback was pertinent, she always brought in a wide range of resources, she was really up to date and relevant and you knew she was widely read.”

Another student spoke of her Chemistry teacher who went outside of the syllabus to use books from the UK curriculum to provide another perspective and complement what they were doing in the Western Australian curriculum. In the same school, a student spoke of her Economics teacher who seemed to “know exactly what would be in the exam. He picked up all the current trends in economics that we might find in the exam.”

In summary, a teacher who was not on top of their subject content was seen as a clear impediment to student’s success. “Their knowledge is important; it is very frustrating if they do not know an answer, very frustrating when you knew they were confused.”

**TEACHER STRATEGIES**

Picking up on the comments above, a student in School B spoke about the way in which very good teachers were able to communicate with clarity and prioritise what was important as they went about the business of teaching and learning. “The teacher’s ability to make learning relevant is a key. Good teachers made it clear that certain things were important to be done.”

Another student in the same school made the following observation. “The best teachers were able to absolutely show what was really important to know. I had a 40 year veteran
and a first year teacher. The veteran just knew what was the key. The new teacher was more hung up on closely adhering to the syllabus.”

Students spoke of the need for balance in teaching strategies. They commented that the more effective teachers used a wide range of strategies from direct instruction, to whole class discussion and group work. Many commented on the more creative things some individual teachers do. For example, in one history class the teacher put the students in pairs and they made a film where they interviewed the historical figures from their history text and kept the filmed interviews as resources. This brought figures from history alive, encouraged thorough research and provided a rich and diverse range of resources for the students.

Another student spoke of his teacher who required students to teach certain topics to the class in paired presentations during the semester. Again this strategy devolved responsibility to students and when done well was a memorable learning experience for them.

A student spoke of the importance of helping students with study skills and this was reiterated across all of the schools in the study. The more effective teachers were able to teach students “how to study, using very good focus questions that applied to most subjects.”

A simple technique, like re-capping from past lessons, as you moved on to new lessons, was an obvious but effective tool. Hands on approaches in the classroom were also commonly spoken of in the sciences, as an extremely effective approach. One student spoke about how such a simple exercise as holding onto a rope to simulate the energy of a wave in Physics, helped her appreciate a theoretical concept. Time and again, students spoke of obvious but necessary strategies that aided their understanding. As teachers we need to be reminded of the obvious.

Organisation was commented on by a number of students as being a quality portrayed by better teachers. Their planning was meticulous, ‘lesson by lesson step by step, you knew where you were going because they did’.

Feedback was a key to student learning and many students commented on both the importance of timeliness and detail required for ‘feeding forward’. The student’s commentary here strongly reinforced the literature (Hattie 2003, 2009) and the other interviews with leaders and teachers. A very strong theme in discussions about feedback was the effect of affirmation. Over and again, students spoke of the importance of affirmation. One student said, “teachers need to be encouraging, so if a class does not do well the teacher should not dwell on the negatives.” Many students spoke of the impact of teachers who were positive, encouraging and optimistic in their approach with students. We cannot underestimate the power of affirmation; it was consistently referred to by students as a major influence in terms of their motivation to succeed. Constructive, timely, detailed feedback has a powerful effect on student learning.

In the process of providing feedback, many students commented on the way in which good teachers set high expectations and that those expectations were informed by a very
thorough knowledge of State wide standards. This meant that when they sat external exams they were prepared for the standard and could cope exceptionally well. They also commented that the standards; while high were realistic and generally attainable, setting unrealistic standards was self defeating.

**LEADERSHIP OF THE SCHOOL**

While teachers and their quality teaching had the most impact on student achievement; students did not devalue the role of the leadership teams in their schools. They spoke of the personal touch of Principals who knew them as individuals and the powerful impact of a Principal, who could strike up a conversation with a student in the school yard, know them by name and know how they were progressing academically. Some three years after leaving school one student participant could **vividly** remember such a conversation and the influence it had on her.

Students spoke of the number of one-on-one meetings they would have with key staff, Deputy Principals, Heads of Year and counsellors. These were people who were ‘tracking our progress’ and providing ‘encouragement’ advice and practical support.

In particular students spoke of the very useful avenue of Year group meetings where the Principal and Deputy would speak to them as a group encouraging them to achieve their personal best. “Mrs _ had a “strive for excellence” motto and the teachers backed it and we could relate to it.” Clearly leadership was shared here!

**CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL**

It could easily be argued that across all the interviews with students from each school one of the most powerful themes was the concept of culture. Even without prompting, it would come out in the way students spoke of their Principals, Deputy Principals and their teachers. Unequivocally they spoke so proudly of their schools; the sense of school pride was tangible.

Such pride was a product of the complex student – teacher relationships that existed in these schools as we have discussed in each sub group of this report. It was a product of a deep seated authentic sense of belonging, of ‘being’ in community. There is no doubt in the minds of the researchers that in some intangible manner this has had a profound influence on student achievement. Students quoted a staff member saying “Mrs___ was a mentor for me, she would always say ‘you will do good things in your life’”, was the type of comment that gave voice to this belief. This comment was compounded by the number of students who expressed that they felt they had teachers “who believed in me.”

Another student took this theme a little further and in a nuanced way it emphasised earlier references to the need for social and emotional support. Speaking about times when they may have been struggling in a personal sense; one student commented, “Mrs ____ noticed you. Normally it’s your friends that notice you, but she noticed you, she was always there.” The sense of teachers being ‘present’ to their students took the notion of ‘availability’ to a new, layered level.
An important aspect of the culture of every school in the study was the theme that it was acceptable to achieve academically. In fact, in one school, students remarked that it was almost unacceptable among their peers not to strive to achieve academically. They also confirmed the attempts of staff to formally recognise academic achievement and how useful that was at whole school assemblies and year group assemblies. Many students spoke of the presence of a healthy academic competitiveness among their peers that pushed them to excel. That healthy academic competitiveness was best expressed by a student comment, “It was OK to be academically successful but it was always about you as a person. It was always about achieving your personal best. The motto of the school was ‘Love in Action’ and they certainly lived out their motto.”

Students also reflected that while they had very strong relationships with their teachers, and that many classrooms were ‘fun’ to be in due to the good natured humour of the staff, there was also a business like tone in the classroom. You were here to get things done! Needless to say behaviour management was not an issue in these schools, there was a sense of purpose, organisation and engaging learning taking place.

**PEER INFLUENCE**

As can be seen from the previous discussion the ‘peer culture’ is an important contributing dynamic to academic achievement and the development of a culture of success. Students from all seven schools spoke about the supportive nature of their peers, healthy competition, the role of peer study groups after school and the fact that as a cohort they generally shared resources with each other very well. “It was so important to have a cohort where people share knowledge and are willing to teach each other. I never felt frightened to ask a silly question.”

Another student commented, “We knew one girl was spending hours studying ineffectively and she ended up getting a lot of support from other students.”

Other students reinforced this notion of peer support, “if you couldn’t find a teacher you could always rely on a mate.”

In addition students also spoke about the fact that leaders and teachers fostered this culture of peer support, “they spoke to us about the need to be encouraging of each other.” This may have been the reason that one student was able to say so easily, “it was great to share your happiness when you did well and you knew someone would be there when you did not go well.”

**PARENTAL INFLUENCE**

All students spoke about the important role of parents and their influence on academic success. They spoke of a ‘subtle’ restrained support. Parents obviously had hopes and expectations for their sons and daughters and wanted them to do their best and had expressed as much. However, in the words of one student, it was not “effusive”.
In another conversation with a student from a fairly low socio- economic background, his parents had placed a great emphasis on education. In his ethnic community, education “was the way out.”

Supportive, encouraging and patient parents were significant factors for many students. The capacity of parents to help their sons and daughters during moments of anxiety was also seen as necessary by a number of students, “just being there for me, mum would bring me a cup of tea.”

Another interesting comment from a student highlighted the teacher/school - parent communication. “Teachers were prepared to talk to our parents. You felt that the parents and teachers worked together for you.” Clearly the school parent partnership was significantly alive.
PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

Parents were asked to comment on the influence of the leadership team, teachers and their practice, peer groups, the overall culture of the school and its effectiveness in communicating with parents. Seven out of the nine schools in the study were able to organise parent focus groups. In total 32 parents took part in the focus group interviews across the seven schools.

LEADERSHIP OF THE SCHOOL

Nearly all parents spoke of the importance of leadership in the school as a factor in their strong academic results. 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.” Having noted some difference in approach every focus group of parents appreciated that the role of the Principal was “pivotal” and some said so in a very emphatic tone.

A number of parents commented that leadership was very much shared and they spoke of the individual roles of many Deputy Principals and Heads of Year who had a more visible and hands on involvement with their sons and daughters.

While the leadership teams in schools had commented on their need to be cognisant of ‘the data’, parents were mixed in their observations when asked if schools should be results-focused. One parent said “that is the reality; schools have no choice these days.” This was reiterated by another parent, “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.”

Comments were tempered by a number of observations that while results in the tertiary entrance exams were important and these schools had achieved very good results, most parents were looking for much more. As one parent commented, “they need to focus on everything, not just the academics, the whole person.” It was at this point that another parent made a very telling observation, “they also focus on life-skills here, for some kids just getting through the week is an achievement.” This notion was very much reflected in the parents’ reflections about the culture of their schools.

CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL

When asked if they felt the culture of the school played a part in its success, parents focused on the sense of community and belonging, almost in one single voice, perhaps best captured by the parent who said, “it is a warm, welcoming community, it is a school with a great ambience.” This beautifully echoed and confirmed the comments of students and teachers in previous focus groups.

An even more acute observation came from another parent, “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’.”
Many parents spoke about the need for students to have opportunities to “find a niche” to “participate” and thus to belong. They commented on the importance of a broad, sporting and cultural program in their schools and they way it enhanced commitment and school pride. This reinforced comments made by students.

Another 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.” Parents commented on the need for a disciplined, safe environment that enhanced learning and enabled students to be focused, rather than distracted by other students acting out. In general, they felt this was an obvious strength in their respective schools, greatly contributing to academic success.

Arguably the strongest theme in all discussions around the culture of the schools was the quality of relationships between teachers and students and within the student cohort.

Parents recognised that teachers had in many cases quite extraordinarily authentic relationships with their sons and daughters. Teachers knew them as individuals, the relationship was characterised by mutual respect and trust and as a consequence student learning was enhanced. Parents confirmed the earlier stories 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.

**TEACHERS**

There was little doubt that of all the ingredients in the mix of 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.” This confirms Caldwell (2008) and Dinham (2008) who both in their own way argue that the quality of a school will always be determined by the quality of its teachers.

This was a dominant theme from parents; the student teacher relationship was a very powerful influence in student learning. Teachers “were always there for our kids.”

Parents spoke from personal experience, about the extraordinary lengths that teachers went to, in order to provide extra support for their sons and daughters. This was common across all schools and supported the commentary of all other focus groups in the study. “I cannot believe the extra help my daughter has received, the teachers go the extra mile.”

Parents spoke of the enormous importance of communication between the school and parents; it was very high on their agenda. They wanted a strong partnership and expected it. In most schools this was provided and in fact, in speaking about communication one parent summed it up as ‘they deliver’ on their promises of strong communication. It must also be said that some parents noted that while many teachers were strong in this area it was very frustrating when a teacher did not deliver and failed to communicate with them. Earlier
comments from Principals and Deputy Principals on the importance of communication were certainly reinforced by parents.

Again to reiterate and confirm observations from other focus groups, parents spoke about the role of feedback quite passionately when asked to comment on the subject. They spoke about the absolute necessity of ‘timely’ feedback and the wasted opportunity when feedback was provided too many weeks after the assessment. They also confirmed the need for detailed feedback that guided their children on “what to do next and how or where to go from here”.

In addition 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.”

Parents of boys in particular, spoke of how much their sons had benefited from positive affirmation and that while they might not be prepared to openly speak about it at school they often proudly brought home certificates of merit and even stickers of encouragement in lower school to show their parents. Parents commended the schools on how they acknowledged academic success at formal whole school assemblies, year assemblies and in school newsletters.

Parents spoke of the important personal qualities of the most effective teachers their sons and daughters had. They reinforced the need for qualities of patience, being genuine strong listeners, passion for their subject, organisation, encouraging, approachable and willing to ‘follow up’. A sense of humour was mentioned often.

In addition to the above qualities all parents in the study spoke of the need for the teacher to be a master of their subject matter, “kids see straight through them otherwise.”

**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 most well placed group of all to make such an observation. They spoke of the tone within the student cohort as almost a ‘micro environment’ within the school, characterised by respect, support and care.

A major theme that characterised responses was the recognition of cohorts that were roundly supportive and encouraging of each other, where study groups flourished after school and where healthy competition was evident. “The peer group is a huge influence, these kids push each other, support each other, ring each other about their study, email each other, meet with each other and it helps produce the results they achieve.”

Another parent described the influence of the peer group as ‘pervasive’. He went on to note the respect for individual difference among the students and that the Dux of the VET program was as highly regarded for her achievement as the Dux of the TEE pathway.
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.

PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Parents had an acute sense of their own importance and capacity to influence their children in academic endeavour. One parent made an interesting comment and it is worth quoting in detail. “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.”

Another parent said, “this school is a huge part of our life, we live here, we are so involved.” The parents in these schools were clearly engaged and supportive, the partnership between school and parents was beautifully aligned, these parents knew they should support the work of the teachers in the classroom and be supportive of the culture of the school. The focus groups only highlighted how much more difficult the task is when you do not have parents who can “fill the gaps” or indeed when the gaps are caused by the complete absence of parents or the presence of dysfunctional homes.
REFERENCES


# APPENDIX A

## TEACHER SURVEY

Age (Optional):  
Gender (Optional):  

The following statements have been designed to measure the role of key indicators in achieving successful tertiary entrance results in your school. Please respond to each statement using the scale provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Thorough subject content knowledge on the part of the teacher is essential in helping students achieve success.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Direct instruction is more important than group work.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Passion and enthusiasm for your subject is vital for student success.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Building relationships with students is necessary.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Further study and PD is necessary for successful teaching.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Careful assessment design cannot be underestimated as a teaching tool.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Timely, detailed feedback is important.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Regular feedback to students is necessary.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Working with colleagues on collaborative programming enhances my teaching.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. ICT as an important teaching tool and should be integrated into teaching methods.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Being results focused is important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Our department works as a close knit team</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Our department values the academic success of its students and therefore it is results focused</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Our department has a strong developmental sequence in programming from Year 7-12 designed to maximize TCE results.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Our department engages in meaningful moderation and cross marking exercises.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Our department engages regularly in professional conversations.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Members of our department engage in professional conversations with staff in other departments</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Counseling of students in subject choice is important.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. A school culture supportive of academic success is vital.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. A key role of the Head of Department is to promote and celebrate success of students and teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Our executive leadership team strongly promotes academic success.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Item Mean Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4.82 3.18 4.71 4.66 3.97 4.16 4.13 4.50 4.43 4.01 3.25 4.21 3.59 3.83 3.89 4.28 3.91 4.61 4.43 4.21 4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>4.38 3.32 4.68 4.47 3.62 4.15 4.03 4.44 4.24 3.68 2.79 4.09 2.68 3.68 3.68 4.06 3.97 4.68 4.29 4.00 4.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Item Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4.82 3.18 4.71 4.66 3.97 4.16 4.13 4.50 4.43 4.01 3.25 4.21 3.59 3.83 3.89 4.28 3.91 4.61 4.43 4.21 4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>4.38 3.32 4.68 4.47 3.62 4.15 4.03 4.44 4.24 3.68 2.79 4.09 2.68 3.68 3.68 4.06 3.97 4.68 4.29 4.00 4.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Item Mean Scores**

- **Series 1:** Item Mean Scores