Principal Leadership for Outstanding Schooling Outcomes in Junior Secondary Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of principals' leadership in producing outstanding education outcomes in Years 7-10 in New South Wales government schools. The study sites were of two types: subject departments or faculties responsible for teaching certain subjects, and teams or groupings responsible for cross-school programs.

In the case of both subject departments and teams responsible for cross-school programs, leadership was found to be a key factor in the achievement of outstanding educational outcomes. Often, this leadership was exercised by the Principal, but additional key personnel included Head Teachers (heads of faculties/departments), Deputy Principals, and teachers playing leading roles in faculties and programs. In many cases, the outcomes under study were found to be significantly attributable to the appointment of a key person, although the 'seeds for success' may have been present or nascent. In other cases, antecedents for current success were attributable to a series of leaders, or groups of people, influential over time, with success building to the current level.

Analysis of data has revealed certain attributes and practices of the Principals of these schools, which are explored in the paper, central to which is a focus on students and their learning.

Introduction

ÆSOP (An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project), an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded investigation involving the University of New England, the University of Western Sydney and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET), investigated processes leading to outstanding educational outcomes in Years 7-10 (junior secondary education) in NSW government (public) schools.

Outstanding educational achievement was defined using the rubric of the three, interrelated domains or principles outlined in The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for [Australian] Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (MCEETYA, 1999), i.e., that schools should:

1. ‘develop fully the talents of all students’,
2. attain ‘high standards of knowledge, skills and understanding through a comprehensive and balanced curriculum’, and
3. be ‘socially just’.

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Research sites were of two types: subject departments or faculties responsible for teaching certain subjects in Years 7-10, and teams or groupings responsible for cross-school programs in Years 7-10. In total, 50 sites were studied in 38 secondary schools (see ÆSOP, references).

The methodology employed with the project involved teams of four educators visiting each site identified as possibly achieving outstanding educational outcomes (some schools had more than one site/area identified, e.g., Mathematics and Student Welfare, and thus the teams were larger).\textsuperscript{1} Visits were typically for four days with lesson observations, interviews with teachers, the Principal, other Executive staff, students and community members, and other forms of data gathering such as document analysis and observation (see How ÆSOP Data Were Obtained and Analysed, below).

Leadership, both positional (Principals, other school Executive) and distributed (classroom teachers and others), has been found in this study to be a major factor in the outstanding outcomes achieved by students, teachers and schools as a whole.

It should be noted that while the vast majority of sites were confirmed to be achieving outstanding educational outcomes as defined in the project, some were not. In the latter case, some aspects pertaining to leadership identified in the outstanding sites were not evident or were lacking to some degree. In other words, there were qualitative differences in leadership and leadership effectiveness in the ‘outstanding’ and ‘non-outstanding sites’.

However, a powerful composite view of leadership has emerged from the visits to and reports from the ‘outstanding’ sites.\textsuperscript{2,3}

**Leadership For Effective and Successful Schools: A Brief Review**

There can be little doubt from an examination of numerous research findings and more informal observations that leadership is vitally important in developing effective, innovative schools and in facilitating quality teaching and learning, although as Sergiovanni has pointed out with respect to the Principal, ‘their mere presence does not automatically result in the required leadership being provided’ (1995: 83). This view comes from a growing realisation that it is not just the ‘traditional’, technical or administrative aspects of leadership that make the difference, but more the ‘human’, ‘symbolic’, ‘educational’, ‘cultural’, ‘adaptive’, ‘transformational and ‘moral’ dimensions of the role.

Leadership has increasingly been seen as a ‘group function: it occurs only when two or more people interact’ – leaders thus ‘intentionally seek to influence the behaviour of other people’ (Owens, 2004: 259) rather than merely command, the latter being dependent upon obedience and compliance. Recent research has shown that rather than being ‘strong’ and decisive, effective leadership is intensely interpersonal, involving working with individuals and teams to ‘transform’ teaching and learning. Leaders’ relationships with their ‘followers’ have thus assumed greater importance than the more technical aspects of administration, management,

\textsuperscript{1} There were 40 districts in NSW public education at the time of the study, although restructuring has since occurred to dispense with districts and introduce 10 regions.

\textsuperscript{2} This paper concentrates on Principal Leadership only. Later work will examine the leadership of Head Teachers (faculty heads), Deputy Principals, other school Executive and distributed (teacher) leadership.

\textsuperscript{3} It is interesting and possibly significant that the findings from ÆSOP regarding leadership were broadly confirmed in the course of visits – in which I participated as part of the Review Committee - to selected ‘outstanding’ primary and secondary schools conducted as part of the recent Commonwealth Review of Teaching and Teacher Education (2003) in Australia.
decision-making and command. It has been recognised that leaders need a better understanding of human nature if they are to lead effectively. This is particularly the case in education where so much of what happens depends on collaboration, commitment and common purpose. Thus, involvement of stakeholders, particularly teachers, is seen as a vital aspect of the educational leadership process. Notions such as ‘common vision’, ‘mission’, ‘empowerment’, ‘beliefs’, ‘values’, ‘engagement’, ‘commitment’, ‘learning community’ and ‘ownership’ have been increasingly recognised as essential factors in educational leadership effectiveness, thereby leading to educational improvement and success.

The role of leadership has been found to be particularly important in creating positive, innovative and productive learning cultures and the facilitation of quality teaching and learning (Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003: xxiv). It has been recognised that a positive school culture can take years to develop, with there being powerful, yet hard to discern deeply rooted causes and manifestations of school culture. Leadership is highly influential in the development of such cultures (see Schein, 1985). However, leadership succession is also a key issue. Hargreaves and Fink (2004) note how highly successful and dynamic schools can quickly slide backwards with the departure of a successful leader. They also note that deeper, more lasting change is preferable to brief, temporary ‘flurries of change’ (2004: 8) in building the foundation for more lasting improvement.

Research in a number of countries has demonstrated that leadership is also a key factor influencing teachers’ occupational satisfaction (Dinham & Scott, 2000), in turn a powerful determinant of teachers’ professional learning and the quality of teaching and learning in a school.

Finally, the earlier concentration on the Principal has been broadened to include other leaders such as deputy Principals, faculty or department heads and teachers themselves (Bush & Harris, 2000; Ayres, Dinham & Sawyer, 2000). The focus of attention has moved from leaders to leadership with the importance of delegation, trust and empowerment being increasingly recognised. There has been a realisation that leadership has both formal and ‘distributive’ aspects, with every teacher a potential leader.

The Importance of Defining Success

It is important when considering educational improvement to define what is actually meant by success or successful teaching. Teachers, school leaders and others need to carefully consider the dimensions of success or achievement and the criteria for evaluating this ‘success’ in each case. This consideration needs to be grounded in a thorough understanding of the local context and history of the school, student body, and community, as well as the educational system where relevant, and its past, current and future priorities. Key targets for improvement need to be identified and where necessary prioritised, and benchmarks for achievement set, rather than employing a ‘scattergun’ approach or attempting to generally lift achievement through exhortation or general pressure on teachers and students to ‘do better’.

Personal experience of working with schools undertaking school improvement programs has shown that the identification of between one and four priority areas with resultant strategies, resources and staff development is more effective in ‘kick-starting’ improvement than an ambitious ‘blanket’ approach targeting a multiplicity of areas. Stronger positive outcomes from fewer programs make later priorities and programs more likely to succeed.

When considering the ‘success’ of a school, frequently only academic criteria are considered important, e.g., the number of students who score in the top few per cent at public or standardised examinations. A more important consideration is the ‘spread’ of success. Lifting the ‘bottom’ and ‘middle’ bands of students can represent a greater achievement in many cases than improving the performance of the ‘top’. Further, what might be considered poor
performance in one school could be considered outstanding achievement in other schools. Recognition of context is thus very important. Finally, these ‘traditional’ concepts of success frequently overlook the ‘personal’ and ‘social’ aspects of achievement, i.e., the first and third ‘Adelaide Goals’.

With these caveats in mind, success could be seen to be achievement and/or improvement (i.e., ‘value adding’) in any of the following, either singly or in combination. As suggested, academic achievement should be considered across all levels or ‘bands’ of students, and not just the ‘top’. As noted, if a large number of areas are identified, it would probably be wise to prioritise and to think of how the achievement of some might flow through to the success of others, both laterally through ‘spill over’ effects across the school and longitudinally over time.

Some Possible Dimensions of Success:

- External examinations and standardised tests
- Post-compulsory retention
- Post-school employment (rates, destinations)
- Tertiary entrance (scores, courses entered)
- Internally assessed academic performance
- School attendance
- School suspensions/expulsions
- Pupil behaviour and social cohesion
- Student-teacher relationships
- School-home relationships
- Pupil health
- Achievement of certain targeted groups
- Community involvement and support
- Involvement by certain targeted community groups
- School reputation
- Satisfaction (student, teacher, parent-community)
- Enrolment demand (local, ‘out of area’)
- Other dimensions identified by the school community.

**Innovation in Schooling**

If teachers and school leaders desire improvement and increased success, one way is to do the standard, accepted things as effectively as possible, something that many teachers and school leaders do superbly. Another way is to seek new solutions and approaches to existing challenges, and to anticipate new challenges and canvass their possible solution in creative and novel ways. This latter approach could be broadly described as innovation.

A factor holding back both improvement and innovation in education is the fact that teachers tend to be isolated in their classrooms, schools and systems, with much ‘re-inventing of wheels’, ‘trial and error’ learning and duplication of effort. Once teachers begin teaching, they rarely have the opportunity either to receive feedback on their performance from colleagues, or to observe or teach with other teachers. Many teachers spend long periods at the one school, with negative effects on career satisfaction and professional learning (Dinham & Scott, 2002). Some have commented how the inherent conservatism of teachers and schools acts to limit change. And yet, when activities such as observation of and by others and visiting other teachers and schools do occur, and teachers have the means and time for reflection, powerful learning and renewed motivation can result (Dinham & Scott, 2003).

The present concentration on ‘quality teaching’, pedagogy and innovation has arisen in part from a desire to give all teachers the opportunity, skills and understandings necessary for
improvement in their professional practice. Cumming and Owen (2001: 2) profiled eight ‘accomplished educators’ in Australia and identified ‘three points worthy of note’:

1) … those who have been profiled can be described as ordinary teachers doing extraordinary things in creative ways.
2) … they have managed to sustain their level of innovativeness over an extended period.
3) … they make innovative teaching look easy … [while] their work appears effortless; it actually represents quite a sophisticated technology that has taken some time and a great deal of hard work to refine to its current standard.

The recent national Review of Teaching and Teacher Education in Australia (2003) was also concerned with innovation and with fostering a culture of innovation in schools. In addition to its own deliberations, representations from various parties, and visits to schools, the Review Committee received 241 submissions from educational, government, community and business stakeholders across the nation.

Although the central thrust of the Review was on ‘strengthening science, mathematics and technology education’ the Review Committee noted that ‘all teachers across all subjects, and all our students should become partners in a learning society that underpins innovation and a high standard of living’ (2003: xv).

The Review found some of the ‘key factors in bringing about school improvement’ to be:

- Outstanding leadership, from formally designated staff, notably the school Principal, and from the teaching staff and students;
- A clear vision and sense of purpose together with the capability to manage and orchestrate institutional change;
- A commitment by the whole school community, including parents, to this vision and to sustain it in all facets of school life;
- Highly competent teachers dedicated to achieving excellent learning outcomes for all students and to maintaining the highest standards of professionalism and professional learning; and
- Strong system and employer-led strategic planning, resourcing and support (2003: xxiv).

In respect of leadership, the Review found that:

In order to energise schooling for innovation, a very high quality of educational leadership is required. Competent leaders who have a strong, clear vision, are determined and have a capacity to inspire and move things forward will be in great demand. They need freedom and authority to steer, manage and orchestrate what are very often large, complex organisations (2003: xxv).

An emerging key issue is that of leadership succession, with so many educational leaders, particularly Principals, due to retire over the next decade. This will provide the opportunity and indeed imperative for generational change and a reconceptualisation of the role of the teacher, school leader and school itself (Dinham & Scott, 1998). Attracting, selecting, preparing and supporting the new generation of educational leaders will assume vital proportions, particularly since it currently appears increasingly difficult to fill leadership positions in Australian schools. Renewing, valuing and supporting the present generation of educational leaders are equally essential.

The Key Role of the Individual Teacher
Notwithstanding all of the above, however, it is the individual teacher who makes the most difference to student achievement. While school leaders and teams can create an environment in which student achievement can occur, it is the classroom teacher who adds most to student learning, with the exception of the ability that the individual student ‘brings to the table’ (Hattie, 2002, 2003; Rowe, 2003). Hattie and his colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of over 500,000 studies and found that students account for about 50 percent of the variance in students’ achievement. Homes account for 5-10 percent, schools 5-10 percent, peers 5-10 percent, whilst principals influence school climate and other school factors. Teachers, however, account for about 30 percent of the variance in student achievement (Hattie, 2003, pp. 1-2).

Hattie and his colleagues identified ‘five major dimensions of excellent teachers’. Expert teachers can:

- identify essential representations of their subject;
- guide learning through classroom interactions;
- monitor learning and provide feedback;
- attend to affective attributes, and
- influence student outcomes. (2003, p.5)

Thus, while there has been ongoing interest in effective schools and effective school leadership, in recent times there has been major emphasis upon researching and facilitating quality teaching in schools because of the growing recognition, supported by empirical studies, that teachers make the major difference to student achievement, apart from students’ individual capacities.

ÆSOP: How the Sites Were Selected

As noted previously, ÆSOP stands for ‘An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project’ and was undertaken by a research team from the University of New England, the University of Western Sydney and the NSW DET. The project focused on an under-represented area in educational research, that of junior secondary education, in this case, Years 7-10 in NSW government (public) schools.

The project employed a case study approach whereby quantitative (e.g., public examination performance, ‘value adding’) and qualitative data (e.g., nomination from parent groups, Principals, DET officers) were used to select a sample of sites where schools appeared to be achieving outstanding educational outcomes, either within faculty based subject areas or with cross-school programs, over at least a four year period. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative selection data occurred with sites selected to provide a sample of socio-economic types, rural-urban distribution, size of school, and spread of subject areas and programs. Use of the ‘Adelaide Goals’ mentioned previously played an important role in the selection process. Eventually, 50 sites were selected for study at 38 secondary schools, with some schools being selected for potentially outstanding educational achievement in a combination of academic areas and/or cross-school programs.


How ÆSOP Data Were Obtained and Analysed

The overall aim of the project was:
To identify and analyse processes in NSW public schooling, Years 7-10, producing outstanding educational outcomes to assist national renewal in junior secondary education.

The following study questions were developed in respect of the above aim:

1. What are the variables and processes leading to outstanding educational outcomes – in the possible areas of personal identity, academic success and social attainment - in the study site(s)?
2. Is it possible to identify the relationship(s), if any, between ‘academic success’, ‘personal identity’ and ‘social attainment’ as achieved through subject departments and/or other formal groups and special programs and initiatives?
3. What organisational and institutional factors – NSW DET, District, School, Leadership, Community, Faculty, other groups and individuals - contribute to and constrain this success?
4. To what degree and through what means, if any, are the outstanding educational outcomes of the sites shared or shareable with others within and beyond the school?

For sites selected, the methodology for site visit teams’ investigations was guided by the following questions:

1. Overall - following the completion of the case study - is the selection of the site valid/warranted?
2. Are there differing views held (staff, students, parents, other) on the merit of the outcomes in Years 7-10 [subject area/program] achieved by the school?
3. What evidence best illustrates the school’s success in achieving the outcomes in Years 7-10 [subject area/program]?
4. Is this achievement a recent phenomenon? Has achievement/performance in this area changed (say, within the past 5 years)?
5. What broad factors/variables have led/currently give rise to this achievement?
6. Who are/have been the key people/groups chiefly responsible for this achievement? What has been/is their role?
7. What was/is the process leading up to the current level of achievement?
8. Is the school continuing to improve achievement in this area?
9. What factors/forces/influences, if any, act to limit further improvement/achievement in the area? Are these being addressed/overcome? How?
10. Are there current/future initiatives/goals for further improvement in the area concerned?
11. Who has benefited most from this achievement? Has success in the area concerned ‘spilled over’ to influence other areas/outcomes?
12. Have there been any negative outcomes associated with this success?
13. Has this success been shared with others? Why/why not? If yes, how?
14. Is the success transferable to other schools and contexts?

Participation on the part of schools was voluntary – several schools/faculties declined – and individuals at each school also had the option of voluntary participation. As noted, each site visit typically took place over four consecutive days. Site visit teams consisted of an university academic who acted as leader, another academic with expertise in the area under investigation, a Head Teacher (faculty head) from another school in the District with expertise in the area under investigation, and the Chief Education Officer (School Improvement) from the local District. Additional academics and Head Teachers were included in multi-site visits.

Site teams were expected to undertake the following:
• Interview the Principal about the outstanding faculty/program,
• Interview the Head Teacher of the outstanding faculty/program,
• With classroom teacher approval, visit classes to observe students at work, and discuss pedagogy and related matters with those teachers,
• Hold a Faculty forum (Staff meeting),
• Conduct student fora in 2-year groups Years 7 & 8, Years 9 & 10,
• Conduct a parent forum,
• Team leader may need to organise additional discussions with the Principal and perhaps the Head Teacher,
• Team will investigate any documents that are held and used by the faculty/program. Policy documents, newsletters, management plans, programs etc, and
• Provide verbal feedback to the faculty/program staff and Principal on last day.

Site visit teams used a booklet and protocols prepared for the purpose to record data and observations and were required to submit a report in electronic format. Full site reports were not provided to schools for reasons of confidentiality and concerns over the use of report data but Principals and relevant staff were provided with a verbal briefing of the broad findings on the final day of the visit.

Electronic reports were imported in to the qualitative data analysis software program NUD*IST (QSR, 2002) and coded according to the conceptual framework developed by the team. Team members responsible for writing reports on aspects of the project were then able to undertake additional analysis of data using the facilities of NUD*IST.

Grounded theory techniques (open coding, axial coding, selective coding) as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were utilised to analyse qualitative data.

ÆSOP Findings: How does Principal leadership contribute to outstanding educational outcomes in Junior Secondary Schooling?

As noted, leadership, particularly but not exclusively that of the Principal, has been previously found to be a key contributor to educational success, innovation and quality teaching and learning.

Using data entered into NUD*IST from 38 ÆSOP school reports on 50 sites, analysis using the grounded theory technique of open coding revealed more than 300 concepts relating to aspects of Principals’ leadership. The grounded theory techniques of axial and selective coding resulted in these concepts being grouped into seven categories – a core category and six contributing categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Approximately equal numbers of male and female Principals were represented in the sites confirmed as achieving outstanding educational outcomes in Years 7-10. No discernable differences between ‘male’ and ‘female’ leadership styles or attributes were observed, but there were qualitative differences overall between these Principals and others leading schools where outcomes were being achieved at lesser levels.

Figure 1 following this discussion illustrates the seven broad categories. The model recognises that other factors and people apart from the Principal also influence the achievement of outstanding education outcomes at the sites studied, e.g., Faculties and Faculty leadership, programs, resources, practices, and most importantly, individual teachers. An important consideration arising from the project findings is that of context: the attributes and actions below should not be construed as prescriptive or as an easily transferable ‘recipe’ for success. They need to be adapted, and not just adopted, if meaningful and lasting change is to occur.
From analysis of data on the Principalship, a composite set of Principal leadership attributes and practices contributing to outstanding educational outcomes are discussed below using the framework of the seven categories, with the core category being discussed last.

Further publications will explore the leadership of Deputy Principals, Head Teachers (faculty heads), other school Executive and others in formal and informal leadership roles in the schools under study.

The following broad commonalities were thus observed and reported by site teams in respect of Principals’ contributions to Faculty and cross-school program success.

1. External Awareness and Engagement

Principals of schools where outstanding sites were identified exhibited a keen awareness and understanding of the wider environment and a positive attitude towards engaging with it.

At a time when so much is imposed on schools and many teachers and Executive feel overwhelmed by change, defensive and disempowered (see Dinham & Scott, 2000), it was apparent from research at the outstanding sites that effective leaders in these schools have an open and positive attitude towards change. Rather than change being seen as a threat, these leaders are open to the opportunities offered by change and enthusiastically engage with it. Even when something is mandated, Principals (and others) look for how they can adapt what they are already doing to meet new requirements. They consider ways in which their school might benefit from such change. As one site report for a school identified for Student Welfare programs noted:

> Even with mandated requirements, the Principal doesn’t resort to line management, but draws out the positive aspects for the school of whatever is being required and ‘sells’ the change. What others would see as a problem, he sees as an opportunity. This positive mind-set is contagious. As the Principal noted: ‘We do what we have to, but we do it with gusto if we see that it helps’.

At the time of the study, many NSW secondary schools were coming to grips with major changes to the Higher School Certificate\(^4\) and School Certificate courses\(^5\), changes that many teachers considered an onerous imposition. However, the site report for one school where outstanding outcomes in Years 7-10 English were identified noted:

> The Principal is prominent in the English teaching profession and she has a strong commitment to English teaching and learning. She views the new HSC English Syllabus not as a threat or a ‘problem’, but as a wonderful opportunity to advance the quality of English teaching and learning in her school.

Rather than attempting to keep change at bay and shielding staff, these Principals consciously expose the school and staff to both the opportunities and pressures brought by change. Rather than being inward looking, they constantly consider and are aware of the wider environment, including other schools and systems, the community, society, business and government. As part of their outward looking approach, they seek out, foster, and utilise external networks and resources that might be available to assist with change. Leaders are quick to sum up and grasp such opportunity. At one school, it was observed that the school participated in ‘every trial and pilot program’ because of the benefits accruing from being in the vanguard of change.

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\(^4\) The major public examination marking the end of secondary schooling in NSW usually undertaken in Year 12.

\(^5\) Year 10 public examinations marking the end of junior secondary education in NSW.
As noted, these leaders actively seek to establish mutually beneficial external alliances. They take the initiative to build productive relationships inside and outside the school and educational system. These links can be at the local community through to the international level. These leaders are entrepreneurial in obtaining financial and in-kind support from the system, government, community and the corporate sector. They skilfully utilise such support and resources to realise their vision for the school. One site report for a school identified for ICT\(^6\) across the curriculum noted:

Personal networking [by the Principal] has been core to developing community perceptions of ---- as a school displaying excellence in ICT across the curriculum. This has been fundamental in [the school] achieving and maintaining Apple Distinguished School status as well as opening up opportunities to trial DET ICT initiatives such as broadband communications.

It was apparent that these leaders placed a high priority on establishing and maintaining good communications and relationships with external stakeholders. In schools with high proportions of non-English speaking background parents and community members, an emphasis was placed on the use of interpreters, translators and community liaison officers. Representatives of various disadvantaged groups spoke positively of the respect shown to them by the Principal and the school. They felt informed, valued and listened to, with the school open to them and their concerns.

These leaders are also prepared to seek outside assistance when they cannot solve problems internally. They are not afraid to ‘put their hand up’ for help and see this as positive rather than feeling a sense of failure or shame. An example of preparedness to seek outside help was provided in the site report for one school. The Principal has earned considerable respect for his handling of a crisis, in mid-2001, created by a small group of, in his words, ‘angry, aggressive … students’. At that time he was handling up to 20 ‘serious incident’ reports each year and concluded that:

When I reflected on it I thought that perhaps the way we were managing some of these situations was contributing to them. The other situation was that basically whenever there was a problem they looked for me or [the Deputy Principal] and sometimes that took 5 or 10 minutes. … [The Principal took the issue to District Office] I put my hand up and said ‘I’m going under!’. And I’ll be honest with you, there are several elements to this. By the time I came here I had been a Principal for three years, but the enormity of this task was [too much] … Dealing day-to-day with crises and nothing else took its toll and I was really afraid we were going to have a death. If it wasn’t me it’d be someone else. By that stage I’d been spat on, chased with …[tape indistinct] … I nearly had a brick through my head … people were looking to me for leadership, and I honestly didn’t have the answers. So, my response was to … change our practices …[but] It was bigger than I could handle. At that stage I thought I was on my own … [but the District Office training program and assistance] has been able to facilitate my growth and the School’s growth.

Shortly after the training program there was a critical incident that invoked the processes adopted by the school ‘for real’. With some satisfaction the Principal said that:

People [now] know the language of how to deal with kids in certain situations. … body language … we no longer go in singly, we go in twos, we know how to separate fights, we know how to do a whole range of things. The feedback from

\(^6\) Information and Communication Technologies.
my Executive is the best feedback that I’ve got, and that’s something that has changed the culture of the school.

Allied to openness to change and opportunity, these effective leaders have positive attitudes that tend to be contagious. They realise that negativity can be self-handicapping and attempt to discourage or drive it out. Their positive approach acts to motivate others and acts as a form of organisational energy. Their consistent positive thinking and approach helps to keep the school moving and improving. This positive orientation is not blind unthinking optimism, but is based upon a realistic appraisal of the situation. Their positive approach is seen by others as authentic rather than a mechanism for manipulation or control.

2. A Bias Towards Innovation and Action

Three broad approaches could be discerned in the behaviours and actions of the Principals of schools where outstanding sites were identified. Firstly, these Principals tend to use their discretionary powers and the rules and boundaries of the ‘system’ creatively. Secondly, they exhibit a bias towards experimentation and risk taking. Thirdly, they exhibit strength, consistency, yet flexibility in decision making and the application of policy and procedures.

To elaborate, the schools designated as having outstanding sites tended to have a strong Executive structure with clear, well understood responsibilities. Rather than being seen as dictatorial or autocratic, Principals were seen to use these structures and responsibilities responsibly and effectively.

These leaders use the discretion and power available to them and push against administrative and systemic constraints when necessary. At times, they tend to be ahead of the system and profession and act as ‘ground breakers’ for others. As noted previously, they are frequently in the vanguard of change. They have gained a certain amount of credibility with system officials who tend to give special dispensation, support or approval to new approaches, even ‘turning a blind eye’ on occasion. These leaders are prepared to creatively use the resources at their disposal to support innovative programs, policies and procedures. Some leaders even appear to operate on the principle that ‘it is easier to gain forgiveness than permission’. They encourage and support staff to leave their ‘comfort zones’ and ‘push the system’. One site report noted:

The Principal could be described as an excellent financial manager. She is aware of how to maximise her global budget to support the infusion of ICT. She uses surplus funds generated through a school-operated canteen ($40,000 in the last school year) to support the leasing of additional hardware.

Another site team reported:

[The Principal] has created the position of HT\(^7\) Curriculum, among whose duties are organising and monitoring new arrivals. A number of initiatives like this have freed up the time of the Year Advisers\(^8\) very strongly and they have run with it. In effect, he has changed the role of the Year Adviser by removing all associated administration to the Curriculum Co-ordinator.

Leaders in the schools achieving outstanding educational outcomes were found to be informed risk takers. When an opportunity or problem arises, or even if things appear to be

\(^7\) Head Teacher or faculty head.

\(^8\) A teacher is usually allocated to each year with responsibility for pastoral care, communication, coordination and administration. This position usually attracts a time and sometimes monetary allowance depending on the year concerned and size of school.
going well, they are prepared to experiment and to offer support to those proposing a new
initiative or change. Such leaders are prepared to risk time, money and possible failure, and
empower others to do the same. These leaders don’t say ‘yes’ to every request, but they do
use the saying of ‘yes’ to empower and recognise others (lesser Principals were observed in
this and other studies to use ‘no’ as a means of controlling staff). A good idea is not
dismissed because it is not theirs. They are not threatened by confident, talented staff. Their
attitude can be summarised as ‘Let’s give it a go’, although this is based on a rapid yet full
consideration of the issue under deliberation. One site report noted:

The Principal’s leadership style is a critical precursor to the process being
undertaken at [the school]. She is a risk taker and is prepared to ‘work the system’
to achieve her goals.

Another site report noted:

Leadership at the school is outstanding. The Principal cultivates the trust of his
staff by showing support for them to take risks and they return that trust by a
willingness to improve processes that will benefit students. The Principal takes a
strong role in selection of staff.

As noted, not only are these leaders risk takers. They are also prepared to let others take
risks. A Principal commented: ‘People are allowed to make mistakes here’. Another report
noted:

The senior Executive of the school, and in particular the Principal, are held in high
regard. The Principal is described [by staff] as a leader who provides subtle
guidance and direction and allows people to try new ideas if they will improve
students’ learning.

Principals were seen to have a major influence on the development and consistent application
of policy. Some leaders and staff characterised this as ‘zero tolerance’, but in reality this is
more a case of having clear guidelines, highly effective communication and consistent
application, with everyone knowing where he or she ‘stands’. In this respect, the simple and
standard things are done very well. One report noted:

The Principal describes her own leadership as being about fair and just decisions;
taking hard decisions; having expectations; modelling for staff: ‘I was always very
keen that there not be favourites - I refuse to have divisions’. [The study team
were] often told too that the high expectations that characterise the work here
come also from the Principal.

However, this is not to imply rigidity, with Principals prepared to consider every case on its
merits and to exercise discretion and compassion when needed. These leaders are able to
sustain such flexibility and innovation in the face of increasing standardisation (Hargreaves &
Fink, 2004). Students know what to do and who to seek help from when any problem arises
and often this understanding begins in primary ‘feeder’ schools with visits from key
secondary staff and orientation visits to the secondary school playing an important role in
easing the Years 6-7 transition.

3. Personal Qualities and Relationships

Principals at the outstanding sites were seen to possess and utilise high-level interpersonal
skills and are liked and respected, often but not always by all. Their motives and actions tend
to be trusted by those around them. They use peoples’ names when ‘out and about’ in the
school and show personal and professional interest in what others are doing. They
demonstrate empathy and compassion and are available at short notice when and where needed. They epitomise the notion of the ‘servant leader’, while being unmistakably in control. They are seen to work for the school rather than for themselves and model ‘do as I do’, rather than ‘do as I say’. Students, staff and community members spoke positively of Principals who were ‘open’, ‘honest’, ‘fair’, ‘friendly’ and approachable. Above all, they valued the fact that the Principal would ‘listen’ to them and hear what they were saying, thus showing them respect.

A Head Teacher at one school noted:

[The Principal] has attracted creative people in the past five years. He is very supportive of staff, a great mentor. He creates a strong learning culture at the school. He knows the system and works well at District level … He is highly visible in the school. Everyone feels they are special, and valued as people. He sets a very positive tone in the school.

A School Counsellor at the same school commented:

[The Principal] is one of the best I have worked with. Students know they can speak to him. He is highly approachable. He can speak in a nice tone to staff, parents and students. He is not authoritarian but he does set parameters. He is a good listener, supportive and encouraging. He will not contradict any proposal you present for his consideration but may suggest ideas to build on your proposal. He leads and guides rather than dictates.

A site report noted the perceived importance of the Principal being accessible and visible in the school:

The school Principal is relatively new, having arrived about three years ago. He makes a concerted effort to get out of his office and has a very high profile around the school. He is seen as a very strong and capable leader by both the staff and the students. He is widely seen as having made the school a safer environment.

One Year 11 student at another school spoke positively of the personal qualities of her Principal: ‘The Principal is a nice guy. He talks to us. He even knows our name. You often see him out walking around in the playground.’ The site report also noted: ‘Parents, too, spoke about ‘his open door policy’ commenting that they felt comfortable phoning the Principal to discuss issues relating to their own children or the school.’

A site report from another school noted:

The school Principal has a genuine concern for the well-being of the students and an excellent rapport with both staff and students. He appears to make a considerable effort to get out of his office and has a high profile around the school.

The leaders of schools producing outstanding educational outcomes were seen to possess and exhibit the characteristics they expect of others such as honesty, fairness, compassion, commitment, reliability, hard work, trustworthiness and professionalism. In short, they provide a ‘good example’ to others. They also tend to have a social justice agenda, believing in education for social good and the importance of putting students first.

A site report noted:

The Principal creates a school culture in which recognition of differences is central. She sees herself as having a vocation of social justice that permeates
much of the school. She believes in the dignity of humanity, has a sense of social justice and is able to translate this into effective action.

Another site report noted:

[The Principal] sets a very positive tone at the school. He is not a ‘micro-manager’, and gives staff ‘space’ and discretion to develop initiatives. He is seen as a person who can influence and role model rather than demand compliance. He is not defensive, not authoritarian and gives a measure of autonomy while overseeing effectively. He puts the focus on the enterprise, rather than on himself and … models openness and self-evaluation. He cultivates a climate of trust. He places great trust in his staff and strongly supports them in any initiatives. The trust he places in his staff is returned, as indicated by a willingness to participate in process improvement and innovative problem solving.

A research team at another school reported on the importance of interpersonal qualities and what has been termed ‘moral leadership’:

An important part of the success of this school, as with any school, is attributable to the role of the Principal. The Principal … models quality interpersonal relationships and has an established presence and role in the management of student welfare programs. The professional and interpersonal dynamics which he nurtures and encourages in the faculties of the school leads to constant concern and productive dialogue about welfare and curriculum areas. During his interview the Principal articulated his drive to develop ‘programs that are fair to kids’. In her interview, the School Counsellor described the Principal’s approach to his staff in some detail. She observed that: ‘Principal support is absolutely essential. Our boss recognises people wanting to have a go. He pens personal letters to thank staff members when they do a good job. He’s a wonderful bloke to work with. Supportive but not afraid to take it on. He has a nice way of dealing with people and works hard to have people pleased to be at his school. Bloody fantastic school!’.

Intellectual capacity is an ‘X-factor’ frequently overlooked in discussions on successful leadership and quality teaching. These Principals were seen to possess a high degree of intelligence and imagination. They are good judges of individuals, astute, and are able to balance ‘big picture’ issues with finer detail. They have good recall of a multitude of issues, facts and problems and can pick up the threads of previous, often truncated conversations. They can deal with many issues concurrently and know when to consult and to build consensus and when to be decisive and to act alone. They have the courage to make unpopular decisions when these are in the best interests of the school, e.g., making a staff member a ‘nominated transfer’, or taking responsibility from one group and giving this to another which is more likely to achieve and ‘deliver’.

These leaders are good communicators and listeners and provide prompt feedback and appropriate recognition to staff. Their support for staff was frequently noted in site visit reports. They make themselves available and are prepared to ‘drop everything’ and ‘roll their sleeves up’ to assist when and where necessary. One site report noted: ‘The English staff, in particular, was very grateful for the support of the senior Executive in 2001, when a sudden [staff] death occurred’. Such personal support is seen by others as equally important to the professional support mentioned elsewhere.

4. Vision, Expectations and a Culture of Success
The Principals of schools where outstanding faculties and programs were identified did not attempt to ‘build Rome in a day’. They realised the imperative for change and improvement but also realised that over burdened and at times dispirited staff could not be given more than they could reasonably be expected to handle. However, this did not preclude them from being decisive from ‘day one’ where considered necessary.

Thus, these leaders possess a long-term agenda and vision and are prepared to work towards this. They realise success does not occur overnight and set meaningful, achievable goals rather than short term targets. Perhaps surprisingly, the norm for Principals was 6-7 years in their current school, and when they had not been in their position for this length of time, they had often served in the same school as a Deputy Principal or faculty head, helping them to ‘know the territory’. The implication here is that ‘quick fixes’ or ‘flurries of change’ (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004) are unlikely to be successful. It takes time to break existing patterns of thought, behaviour and practice and to achieve meaningful, effective and lasting change. It should be noted that in a number of sites, the schools concerned had been in decline prior to the appointment of the Principal, suffering a fall in reputation and losing students, staff and resources. It had taken time and much effort, but things had ‘turned around’ to the extent that some of these schools are now full to capacity with the Principal having to deal with the politics of not being able to accommodate all requests for enrolment. In some cases, this demand has led to de facto selective status, with the school ‘picking and choosing’ whom to admit, a further factor in maintaining and improving success.

Allied to the above, these leaders identify and nurture the ‘seeds’ for change and school improvement. They use what has been achieved or what exists as a platform for further school improvement and in so doing, release latent ‘organisational energy’ and potential. They recognise and value the history of the organisation and do not ‘start from scratch’, thus ignoring the past. In speaking to these leaders and other staff, it was apparent that frequently the ‘seeds’ for success were nascent or dormant until recognised and mobilised by the Principal.

The site report for one school identified for ICT which had previously been in decline and was now ‘bursting at the seems’, noted:

> The current educational outcomes have their antecedents in the appointment of the current Principal in 1996. Staff universally point to her leadership, as well as the influence of others, on the school achieving outstanding educational outcomes since her appointment. A number of staff, including the Principal, made the comment that the previous Principal had seen technology, i.e., defined as computers, as being an adjunct of administration or the traditional curriculum, e.g., computing studies, rather than being truly across the curriculum.

However, the present Principal had a clear vision of the value of achieving ICT across the curriculum as an aid to learning, and not just administration. The report went on to state:

> Clearly, the process is being driven from the top. The Principal has championed the infusion of ICT since her arrival at [the school]. She is aware of the potential of ICT as a tool for learning and discovery.

An aspect of the vision demonstrated by Principals at outstanding school sites was the ability to see the ‘big picture’ and to communicate this to staff. A site report team noted:

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9 A minority of secondary schools in NSW are ‘selective’, with entry subject to competitive examination.
The Principal’s leadership provides key input on critical issues, supports the positive culture of the school and helps to establish ‘big picture issues’ as priorities. Under the current Principal, [the school] has a commitment to student welfare, with an emphasis on continual improvement and ensuring quality communication with parents.

Articulation and acceptance of the Principal’s vision is important, and one way that this vision is communicated and becomes reality is through the expectations of the Principal. It was observed that these leaders have high and clearly understood expectations of others, and themselves, and do not easily accept ‘second best’. As noted by one member of staff: ‘The Principal has expectations and standards which are passed on and these things happen’. The Principal of the school concerned stated: ‘if you don’t have someone shaking the tree you can get the same lessons for the 20th time’.

Another Principal commented: ‘I talk about performance all the time, give credit to teachers, ensure they know I am pleased’. This was confirmed by the site report for the school, which noted: ‘[The Principal] is up-front and clear on expectations’.

It was apparent that a clear and constant message from the Principal as to his or her expectations and vision for the school was an important factor in school success. The report mentioned above noted:

Strong and clear leadership was evident across the school. The Principal articulates the school’s vision and models the characteristics of community which are ascribed to by all stakeholders.

A Deputy Principal from another school reported:

We are here to develop clear policies and a safe and secure environment. We want to remove inconsistency faster so that everything runs smoothly. We need ways of doing things that are agreed on. There is a clear expectation that you do your job the best you can - a structure is in place and an agreed upon way of doing things. ... Part of it is to supervise and help teachers set priorities so we all actively engage in a cycle of improvement and development ... What is most important is dogged persistence. Following the same procedures is important. Having documents and policies is common sense but many schools don’t do it.

The Principal from the above school concurred, the research team noting:

To [the Principal], the key to running a successful school is ‘commitment and high expectations, particularly of the Head Teachers. Kids don’t want to be patronised. They want a disciplined place with rules and consequences. Over the years a school loses energy. ... All schools need good structures and systems in place. Teachers should have the belief that kids can learn’.

Another site report noted:

A key factor in the success of ESL[10] [at the school] is the vision of the Principal … The Principal has a strong ESL background. She has been a strong representative of ATESOL[11] for many years and currently represents ATESOL on the PEC[12]. There is much discussion with the Principal on ESL issues. The ESL Faculty

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[10] English as a Second Language  
[11] Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages  
[12] Public Education Council
recognise strong support from senior Executive and from the Principal in particular … The Principal encourages the highest possible standards … [the Head Teacher] sees herself as gaining mentoring from the Principal.

Another feature noted in the outstanding sites was how the Principal had ‘hand-picked’ staff to assist in the fulfilment of his or her vision. As one report noted:

As much as possible, [the Principal] has selected key staff and surrounded herself with a core group of teachers (e.g., HT VET\textsuperscript{13}) who are prepared to adopt the vision, and have the skills to create the desired outcomes. The Principal is passionate about making the curriculum relevant and sees ICT as a big part of the answer.

It has been noted that the Principals of schools where outstanding sites had been identified had very high expectations of professionalism from themselves and others. These leaders are aware of the importance and value of providing professional, pleasant facilities and of treating staff professionally, expecting a high standard of professionalism in return. In effect, these leaders model professionalism in their own approach and actions. This is part of an overall climate of high expectations and mutual respect in the school.

Allied to the above, these leaders place a high priority on school cleanliness and a pleasant environment. Graffiti and mess are dealt with promptly, with gardens, seating and shade areas improved and maintained. Staffrooms, classrooms and other spaces are clean and pleasant, with resources diverted for improved furniture and fittings. These leaders realise the importance of school pride, identification with the school and its reputation in the community. Students and staff respond to this and speak in positive terms of the school. Even in the large, urban secondary schools visited by the research team, it was rare to see any rubbish or evidence of vandalism.

One school encapsulated much of the above. The school was well over 100 years old and had a mixture of building styles reflecting this. The school site was a fairly cramped one in a highly urbanised area. Prior to the appointment of the present Principal the school had been feeling the effects of competition from other schools and systems and had been in decline. However, this had been turned around and there was now pressure on facilities. The Principal had instigated refurbishment of the staff common room with new furniture. The staff now referred to this as the ‘Qantas Club’ and they could be seen socialising and working in the new pleasant surroundings. A cappuccino machine was installed. The old open canteen had been walled in, floor coverings laid over the bare concrete, and aluminium café tables and chairs installed. Pot plants had been provided and older internet-linked computers arranged around one wall. The canteen was now in effect an internet café and senior common room. A roster system ensured that students without home internet access had priority use of the computers. Students responded positively to this and graffiti and damage were minimal. Despite its large student population, the site visit team was impressed with the cleanliness of the school. The effect of all of this had been to lift both pride and expectations at the school.

A further way that vision and high expectations for the school are communicated is through recognition of staff and student achievement. As a result, a climate of success is developed. These leaders see teaching and learning as the most important functions of the school (see Focus on Students, Learning and Teaching below) and were observed to take every opportunity to provide recognition of student and staff achievement and to ‘talk up the school’. They utilise a variety of media including assemblies, newsletters, announcements, awards, letters, personal approaches, visits to classrooms and the local press. They purposefully create a positive school climate of high expectations and success. They find

\textsuperscript{13} Vocational Education and Training
ways for every student to feel and be successful and for every teacher to receive appropriate recognition. Such public recognition is perceived by students and staff as authentic, warranted and is received in good humour, often with the comment ‘here she/he goes again …’. Like water wearing away stone, this recognition eventually makes an impact and an upward cycle is set in motion. One site report noted:

When he arrived in 2000, the Principal was struck by the extent to which [School] assemblies were occasions for berating students rather than celebrating meritorious achievements. He set about reviewing the welfare policy K-10 (it has been reviewed three times in the last 10 years) to emphasise more of the positive aspects of the school and its students’ achievements.

The Principal of the above school commented:

What we’ve now got in place is a welfare policy that addresses the whole school needs that the community has had input to, and when you read the document, it is overwhelmingly positive. I think that has been a major change in getting people back on task. The ‘woe is me’ side of things is starting to change. … I noticed in my first year that the main focus of the assembly … was to berate. … Even at the end of the year, we only had about five to nine kids achieving Gold levels [for good behaviour] … even the [School] Captains didn’t achieve it, so I set about turning that around and last year we had 120 on gold and we had a big celebration.

Another site team reported:

The school holds timetabled assemblies of recognition for rewarding behaviour and achievement, while the Principal holds presentation BBQs at which every student who has not been referred under the discipline system is presented with a Certificate of Appreciation. This is an innovation of the current Principal.

‘Talking up’ the school also took place beyond the school. One site report noted:

The Principal … takes every opportunity to promote the work of the teachers, citing occasions where she has shown English units at meetings of teachers held at country centres.

It was striking how frequently these leaders were given credit by staff, students and community members yet how they usually attempted to deflect such praise to others, refusing to accept any credit for themselves. The site report of one school commented:

The Principal was full of praise for her ‘impressive Executive’ and the Head Teachers with whom she works. She said, ‘I dread them going’. In fact, they said the same about her.

Such generosity and lack of professional jealousy is another aspect of moral leadership and was seen to influence in a positive way the climate and culture of the school. As noted, these Principals seem to delight in saying ‘yes’ and ‘well done’, which they see both as motivation and recognition for staff, while lesser leaders seem to use ‘saying no’ as a control mechanism and a means to restrict the amount of credit given to others.

5. Teacher Learning, Responsibility and Trust

Principals of schools where outstanding outcomes were being achieved were found to place a high value on teacher learning and are prepared to fund staff development inside and outside the school. They find ways to release staff to engage in professional development activities.
In turn, they are prepared to bring teachers and others into the school to provide assistance. In the words of several Principals, they ‘never’ turn down a legitimate and reasonable request for teacher development assistance. They also model teacher learning through their own actions, being prepared to learn from teachers, students and others.

A report for a school identified for achieving outstanding outcomes in ICT across the curriculum noted:

The Principal uses ICT, stays up-to-date with current developments in ICT and its use in the classroom through reading, networking and attending conferences. … The Principal uses staff development opportunities to build confidence in teachers’ capacity to use ICT. The [annual] off-campus training weekend provides quality time for teachers to engage in ICT learning tasks. In addition, each year the school uses funds to enable up to five teachers to attend the 4-day Wollongong University Apple ITSC [Effective Teaching with Technology] conference. In return, those teachers serve as trainers and role models for other teachers in the use of classroom based ICT.

As noted, these Principals are prepared to invest school funds in teachers’ professional learning. This connects with a whole school focus on students and learning mentioned later. A site report team noted:

Professional development is considered to be an important component in improving the skills and knowledge of all school staff. The Principal has increased the budget for training and development across the school by more than $13,000 to $16,000 to ensure that many more teachers can be offered a chance to improve their teaching.

The research team at another site reported:

The Principal gives considerable encouragement to staff to participate in professional development and several people commented on how adept she was at identifying and utilising sources of funding to enable staff to participate in professional development activity. The majority of the professional development activity which the TAS\(^4\) faculty members have engaged in has been related specifically to their work within the faculty. However, there are two particular examples of school-wide professional development which are noteworthy. The Principal has actively promoted the 4MAT System Model of learning theory and lesson planning within the school and has provided professional development in this model for all staff members. The TAS faculty appears to have enthusiastically adopted the model and integrated it into their work.

An emphasis on and utilisation of whole school professional learning was also observed in other schools having outstanding sites. One site report noted:

The support of the Principal, at whose initiative the [Head Teacher] Support position was created as additional to the designated Executive positions within the school, and who has been insistent upon the whole-school nature of professional development, has also been important. School Development Days, for instance, are whole school affairs, rather than occasions where faculties meet to address their own needs. Subject-specific programs, like Count Me In Too and even programs like Linkages, have been hard to implement, according to the Principal,

\(^4\) Technological and Applied Studies
because they don’t readily fit into the philosophy of whole-school involvement in all professional development.

As noted previously, these Principals rarely say no to any reasonable request for professional development. However, there is an expectation that those taking up these opportunities fulfil their responsibility of in-servicing staff so that the benefits and outcomes are maximised. Staff development days and meetings are thus often given over to teaching staff new skills and knowledge and giving them the confidence to try new approaches in their teaching.

Through empowering, encouraging and supporting teachers to become learners, there is an inherent requirement for delegation, shared responsibility and trust. In this way, these leaders acknowledge and foster the leadership of others. They respect and recognise others’ capacities and achievements. They identify talent and potential and encourage, ‘coach’ and support these people, sometimes at the risk of being accused of favouritism. They recognise that if change and improvement are to ‘take root’ in the school culture and be maintained, they need to ‘spread’ or distribute responsibility and leadership capacity throughout the school and to trust people. Such sharing of responsibility – as opposed to delegation - also assists in the matter of leadership succession, without being the only solution to this issue.

One site report at a school identified for success with literacy across the curriculum noted:

The Principal has created the context in which these programs operate. There is widespread agreement that the Principal ‘allows’ people to take the lead with ideas. [a staff member] said, ‘We are given ‘permission to play here’ by the Principal - always encouraged to try things out’. One English teacher told us that ‘the Principal does a lot of allowing’ and she saw the Principal as having created the ‘productive environment’ for her to grow as a teacher.

Another site report commented:

[---- Central School] has a supportive Principal who encourages and supports his staff to take leadership roles in each of their particular teaching areas. The [secondary] Design and Technology teacher has not only leadership in her own teaching area but she has a school leadership role as well. In this role she has been able to build up a culture of design and an understanding of the design process within the Primary school.

The issue of trust and giving people ‘space’ was seen as an important factor in teacher professional development and growth. A site report for a school, identified for outstanding outcomes in ESL noted:

The Principal is very supportive in that he is a good leader but he knows we are doing our job, he doesn’t interfere, but he’s always there if need be. The last Principal was terrific too.

Another aspect of trust and shared responsibility is that of ‘blame’ when something goes wrong. These Principals showed a propensity to give and share credit, but to also shoulder blame and take overall responsibility.

6. Student Support, Common Purpose and Collaboration

As noted previously, some sites were selected as being potentially outstanding in various curriculum areas such as Mathematics and Science, while others were selected for across

\[15\] Combined primary and secondary schools usually found in country areas.
school programs such as ICT.

However regardless of whether the focus of the site visit was on a curriculum area and/or a program, it was apparent that student support in all its guises was central to the outstanding outcomes achieved at schools with outstanding sites.

In a high percentage of schools - both ‘faculty’ and ‘program’ sites - it was observed that Principals often identify and utilise a central focus, e.g., ICT, assessment, literacy, pedagogy, Student Welfare. This priority area has resources diverted to it and is part of the Principal providing direction to the school. Often, a ‘champion’ for this area and a small supporting team are empowered. Programs to support and develop such areas serve to bring members and parts of the school together and break down the compartmentalisation of the secondary school, leading to better understanding and commitment and improved efficiencies and outcomes. This can have the effect of convincing staff they all contribute and have a responsibility towards the area concerned. It also tends to cut across existing power groupings such as departments and informal cliques. As one Principal commented: ‘My goal with this school has been to try and have the technology working across the curriculum and not just being a computing school that teaches computing’.

However, these leaders are pragmatic realists. They know that it is impossible to gain unanimous support, approval and commitment from staff. Rather than attempting to ‘move’ all staff simultaneously, leaders concentrate on those who are talented and committed and provide them with support (encouragement, time, resources, professional development). These ‘pockets’ of staff may be within faculties or across the school. They are empowered and encouraged by the leader, who may facilitate bringing like-minded staff together. There is a danger in this, which leaders recognise, that some staff may be ‘left behind’ or be resentful and obstructive. As part of their risk taking approach, Principals believe that the ‘contagion effects’ of committed staff and demonstrated success will bring some - but probably not all - negative or reluctant people ‘on-side’ eventually. One site report where the English faculty had been the focus noted:

The Principal had offered support to all faculties for HSC planning, but English was the first to take it up and made most use of it. As a result, the Principal openly supported this Faculty in its efforts to meet the demands of the ‘new’ HSC.

As noted, there can be negative effects from ‘sponsoring’ particular groups in this way. In one school where ICT across the curriculum had been the focus, the research team had noted how the TAS Faculty – where ICT often has its ‘home’ and strongest supporters – was ‘not generally engaging in the ICT ‘push’. [There was] Rubbish on floors in TAS work spaces. Home Economics areas [were] devoid of resources and posters etc. … No evidence of CAD in tech drawing’.

In another school, the central focus identified by the Principal and key staff to move the school forward was ESL. The report noted:

---- came in as Principal from 1995, with [there then being] 0.8 of an ESL teacher [at the school]. In 1996, she and [the former IEC HT] carried out an ESL survey. This was a pivotal decision to consciously change the direction of school and also to encourage retention into [the school] from the IEC. At this time, the school also underwent a review under the guidance of [an external consultant]. [The consultant’s] notes from that review reveal a divided staff with low morale.

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Intensive English Centre
The result of the review and the choice to change direction was [to have] 3 full ESL positions by 1997. The Principal was lucky to be able to tap into existing staff, i.e., ---- from the IEC and was able to use the IEC staff as mentors. There was also a deliberate strategy by [the former IEC HT] to empower the fledgling ESL Faculty. The Principal prepared the potential for growth by strategic recruitment and by holding strong expectations of existing staff. If the members of staff didn’t develop/grow, they were literally by-passed.

In another school, the site team reported how the Principal, with a background in PDHPE\(^{17}\), had ‘sponsored’ and supported that area within the school:

The current Principal took over leadership of the school in 1999. He has continued to support both the school’s sports program and the timetabling approach based upon parity of esteem [i.e., no curriculum area favoured over another]. The Head Teacher PDHPE asserts that the current Principal is supportive of the PDHPE faculty. He will generally ‘back-up’ matters relating to student discipline, supports curriculum initiatives (e.g., new lifesaving unit), and is willing to provide capital expenditure when justified. In short, he is seen to be fair in all his dealings with the PDHPE staff and programs. Additionally, he is willing to publicise all the school’s sporting achievements through school newsletters, assemblies, and awards presentations. This has the effect of maintaining the profile of sport across the school.

As noted above, student support/welfare policies and procedures appeared to be central rather than peripheral in a large majority of the outstanding school sites visited. Student support is seen as broader than the formal school Welfare and Discipline policies and programs and is seen as every teacher’s responsibility. Student support was found to have a predominantly academic focus of ‘getting students back into learning’, rather than being about ‘warm fuzzies’, or ‘enhancing self-concept’, to use the words of a number of teachers interviewed.

Principals do not see student support and academic achievement as being mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing. One site report team noted:

Although the Principal expressed a great deal of satisfaction overall with how [the school] was progressing, he stated that he was ‘not happy’ with provisions made to date for high-achieving students. He also commented that he saw a need to pay more attention to issues related to students’ transition from primary to secondary school and the importance of adolescence and the middle years of school. With more students who have special needs and behaviour problems likely to attend [the school] over the next few years, the Principal also expressed a desire to cultivate a coordinated approach to managing students’ behaviour, particularly in relation to ‘how the staff talk to kids, and don’t back them into corners’. He said his aim is to encourage a ‘consistency of philosophy and approach among teachers’ in the school.

Another site report noted:

The Principal has … enthusiastically promoted an approach to student welfare and behaviour management entitled Choice Theory and Reality Therapy (CTRT) and the school’s welfare policy is built around this theoretical perspective. At the present time all members of the school Executive and the school welfare team have completed a four-day course in this approach and it is the Principal’s intention to extend this to all staff members in the future.

\(^{17}\) Personal Development/Health/Physical Education
Principals and other leaders facilitate the centrality of student welfare through supporting welfare teams and ensuring a common approach and commitment. Students understand and support the student welfare policies and procedures and perceive student welfare as something done for them rather than to them. Clear communication, understanding and application lie at the heart of the success of school welfare programs and procedures.

One site team noted:

In terms of the alignment between the Adelaide Goals, welfare is seen as the basis of everything in the school. ‘Welfare allows learning to happen [Principal]. There is a lot of PD on welfare, behaviour management/ welfare systems. For many of the kids, we are the family and we talk about that considerably’. Thus, [the role of] Student Adviser is an esteemed position in the school. It goes to interview [for selection] and gets a lot of kudos. 70% of [the Principal’s] time is welfare, though much is picked up by the 2 DPs. The background of the kids is often horrific – e.g., teachers have recently supplied heaters and mattresses for a family whose income and savings were gambled away. Every kid is valued, [the Principal] emphasises and THAT drives the emphasis on literacy, welfare, numeracy, ICT. Her ‘core philosophy’ is that ‘the needs of the kids drive the curriculum’ and not the other way around.

At a school where Student Welfare was selected and confirmed as being outstanding in Years 7-10, the research team noted the centrality of student support to the overall success of the school, with the Principal playing a major advocacy and leadership role:

It seemed clear to members of the ÆSOP Team that the student welfare policies at ---- High School and procedures work because policies were valued and properly employed. The student welfare policies operated within a whole school culture that values the contributions of individuals. Examples of this could be found in regular comments from the Principal in the weekly [newsletter], thanking staff members who had made contributions to the school in one way or another. Acknowledgment, tangible and symbolic, was also made of the work of the Year Advisers. By making a commitment at the school level to support two Year Advisers [each] for grades 7 to 10 (beyond the contribution of one per grade made within the DET staffing allocation), the Principal was indicating the support of the school for the work done by those who occupied those positions. Having volunteered to be a Year Adviser and been interviewed for suitability by the Principal, Year Advisers were supported by having time made available for their work. These Year Advisers did no playground duty nor sport supervision but instead were able to undertake Year Adviser duties in that time. … Deliberate acknowledgment of the work of these teachers provided a sense of worth to individuals but also indicated the school’s commitment to the area of Student Welfare. … The leadership of the Principal … was an important factor in the achievement of exceptional outcomes in Student Welfare. She appeared to be instrumental in the maintenance of a school culture in which student welfare might thrive. She was a shrewd promoter of her school, keen to capitalise on opportunities to make public the achievements of students in sporting, academic, and cultural areas. In her enthusiastic description of students as ‘fabulous’, ‘beautiful kids’, ‘a gorgeous boy’ she gave some indication of her positive attitudes towards individuals. Her contributions to the weekly [newsletter] usually involved profuse thanks to her staff for their various efforts. [e.g.] ‘sincere thanks to the Welfare Team’, ‘How lucky are our kids to have such committed teachers’.

While these schools are not Utopian and are not free of discipline and behaviour problems, a
common view from staff, students and community members was that these aspects had improved over time, with commensurate positive effects on school success and reputation. The view was commonly held that students cannot learn until their welfare needs have been met, and that improved student discipline creates an environment where learning can occur. Thus, student welfare and academic success are not seen as mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing in these schools.

7. The Core Category: Focus on Students, Learning and Teaching

There is one final theme or attribute emerging from the analysis of data pertaining to leadership in the schools where outstanding outcomes were found to be occurring in Years 7-10. This theme – in effect, the core category - underpins each of the six examined to this point and virtually every policy, action, decision and initiative that occurs in the school. This is the belief that the central purpose and focus of the school is teaching and learning. These schools recognise that every effort must be made to provide an environment where each student can achieve and experience success and academic, personal and social growth. Even where schools had been identified for success in cross-school programs such as Student Welfare, it was apparent that these programs had a central focus on assisting and equipping the individual student so that he or she could succeed in school.

A site team noted:

The Head Teacher English mentioned the support for teaching and learning provided by the Executive when she was asked why she thought ---- High School was selected for the ÆSOP project. She considered that an important factor was having a ‘Principal who values core business and is enthusiastic about it’.

This was confirmed by the site visit team:

The current Principal has headed [the school] for two and a half years. She taught English briefly at [the school] in 1975 during which time she indicated she ‘didn’t like the feel of the school’ because the ‘social attitudes of the students [were] a concern’. As Principal … she has been concerned with putting ‘good structures and systems’ in place to support the ‘core business of learning and teaching’ in the classroom. The Principal reflected that she has been able to take her ‘eye off the curriculum’ and put in place ‘frameworks for systems, so teachers are able to meet the demands of learning and teaching’.

A site report from another school noted:

The arrival of the current Principal in 1998 resulted in improvements in the school’s success. Since 1998 there has been a school wide focus on teaching and learning. The Principal has undoubtedly contributed to a revival of the school’s reputation and an increased focus on academic achievement. This focus has been adopted by the Executive (particularly at the upper management level – the Principal and two Deputy Principals). There has been engagement of the Executive with pedagogical issues, especially clear and explicit assessment criteria and scaffolding student understanding of assessment procedures through sample answers. This has contributed to a culture of building on previous success. [A Deputy Principal at the school commented]: ‘In my time here with [the Principal’s] emphasis on teaching and learning and quality teaching, it’s been picked up by most faculties but particularly Social Science and History’. ... [A parent said]: ‘My daughter was in Year 6 the year [the current Principal] came. We were thinking about not sending the kids here. But in just that 12 month
period that the Principal was here he bought higher standards. They are here for what [the Principal] has done in the school’.

Principals of the schools where ‘outstanding’ outcomes were being achieved were seen to be relentless in their quest for enhanced student achievement, allowing nothing to get in the way. They do not allow themselves to become distracted and ‘bogged down’ by the administrative demands of the Principalship, finding ways to concentrate their energies on educational leadership. They constantly remind students, staff and the community of the core purpose of the school.

Their external awareness and engagement, their bias towards innovation and action, their personal qualities and relationships, their vision and expectations and the climate of success that results from this, their emphasis on teacher learning and their trust of staff, and their focus on student support, common purpose and collaboration, are all geared to the facilitation of student achievement. Their focus on students, their welfare and learning acts as a filter, touchstone or lens for all that happens in the school.

In schools of lower socio-economic background it was observed that Principals and others placed a high priority on the ‘personal’ and social’ aspects of education with a view to creating an environment where students could experience academic success.

Finally, it is acknowledged that Principals are not solely responsible for the outstanding educational outcomes that were observed, but they have been found in the AESOP sites to be a critical factor in producing the environment where this can occur.

**A Model of Principal Leadership for Outstanding Educational Outcomes in Junior Secondary Education**

Figure 1 below attempts to relate and illustrate the major influences, actions and attributes of the principal which were found to influence the achievement of outstanding educational outcomes in the AESOP study sites. It has been noted how the Principal’s and school’s focus on and concern with students and their learning acts as a filter or lens through which everything else is viewed. The influences labelled Other Factors are addressed by other aspects of the project and include those emanating from teachers, faculties, programs, and so forth. There is little doubt from a large amount of recent research that the individual teacher is the major in-school influence on student achievement (see Hattie, 2002, 2003; Rowe, 2003). However, in this study, the Principal has been found to have a key role and influence in creating a climate and foundation for both students and teachers to succeed.

**Figure 1: A Model of Principal Leadership for Outstanding Educational Outcomes in Junior Secondary Education**
Conclusion

The reader might be excused for thinking that the above series of qualities, approaches and actions are idealistic or prescriptive. There is a danger with such lists in that the context producing them is not sufficiently recognised and they can be regarded as ‘quick fixes’ or recipes for success easily transferred to other contexts. The fact that some of the leaders and their teams had spent years reaching the present level of achievement refutes that view. The worrying point with this is that without adequate leadership succession, these hard fought for gains can be quickly dissipated (see Hargreaves & Fink, 2004).

Further, the attributes, actions or qualities outlined in this paper need to be considered as both product (output) and process (input) variables, in that they contribute to further change and improvement. In many of the outstanding sites, it was clear that further improvement was taking place in the context of an ‘upward cycle’ of success.

From analysis of data, it can be confirmed that these qualities and approaches were highly evident and prevalent in the outstanding sites visited as part of the ÆSOP project. Together, under the influence of school leaders, they have been seen to produce positive and productive school environments.

Finally, the degree of influence of the Principal was somewhat surprising, given that the project aim was to identify and research faculties and teams producing outstanding educational outcomes in Years 7-10, rather than effective schools as a whole or effective Principals. This finding could partly call into question the current concentration on the individual teacher as the major within school factor in student accomplishment. While there is little doubt as to the importance of the individual teacher, based on these findings, Principals can play key roles in providing the conditions and climate where teachers can operate effectively. However, these findings on Principal leadership need to be considered in the context of the overall findings of ÆSOP.

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ÆSOP: fehps.une.edu.au/Education/CRiLT/AESOP.html
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