1-12-2017

# Parents: Active partners in the educational achievement of their children

Michael O'Neill
*University of Notre Dame Australia*, michael.oneill@nd.edu.au

Shane Lavery
*University of Notre Dame Australia*, shane.lavery@nd.edu.au

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

THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

# Parents: Active partners in the educational achievement of their children!

## Introduction

The presence of parents in the social relationships of schooling is of paramount importance to school systems. Hill and Tyson (2009) concluded that, in the absence of effective parental involvement in education, "adolescents' opportunities often foreclosed, leading to lost potential, unrealized talent, diminished educational and vocational attainment, and widening demographic gaps in achievement" (p. 760). Central to this study is the role of parents as partners in the education of their children. The literature confirms the presence (both overtly and covertly) of parents in the social relationships of the school and importantly for this study, their potential to positively influence academic achievement and culture (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993; Epstein, 2009, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Spera, Wentzel & Matto, 2009; Simon, 2009; Stewart, 2008). Notwithstanding, the literature on school effectiveness has largely focused on leadership and the impact of quality teaching in high performing schools but the role of parents in this context deserves more attention. Yet, as Fullan (2005) observed, "in all of our work with schools and districts, the question of how best to relate to parents and the community is right up there with changing school cultures on the scale of difficulty" (p. 60). Parents can be a powerful force for good, or a force that can promote indifference at best and subversion at worst.

## Conceptual Framework

This research explored parental perceptions of the role of school leaders, teachers, school and peer culture, as well as parents' own role in the academic performance of students in high academically performing Catholic Schools in Western Australia. Three theoretical constructs underpinned the conceptual framework that informed the study. These three constructs include the notion of relational trust, the concept of parental involvement in their child's schooling and the culture of Catholic schools. The notion of relational trust helps all parties to understand and appreciate the interconnected web of key roles that impact on the learning and psycho-social experience of students. The concept of parental involvement provides insights into types of'caring' behaviours (Epstein, 2009, 2010). An integral aspect of parental involvement is the notion of parent voice, which focuses on the need for schools to harness parental opinion. In so doing, parents may be engaged in inclusive and constructive dialogue that builds community and raises student achievement. The final construct concentrates on the culture of the Catholic school, whereby parents are acknowledged "as

the primary and principal educators" (Gravissimum Educationis, 1965, para 9) of their children. This construct is examined through the focus of Catholic Church documents on parents as partners and the call for the creation of a caring and invitational culture in Catholic schools.

**Relational Trust**

Understanding the constituent elements of relational trust allows school to appreciate the benefits of a positive relationship with parents. For Bryk and Schneider (2002), relational trust is comprised of "the distinctive qualities of interpersonal social exchanges in school communities" (p.12). These authors cited the following as qualities integral to relational trust: respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity. Bryk and Schneider (2002) stated that respect, in the context of schooling, "involves recognition of the important role each person plays in a child's education and the mutual dependencies that exist among various parties in this activity. Key in this regard is how conversation takes place within a school community" (p. 23). Parents desire and deserve communication about their children's progress. Conversely, teachers and schools, in general, need to be affirmed for the valuable work that they do. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argued that:

> ...good teaching touches the soul of those who practice it...Thus, for instrumental reasons regarding effective instruction and for teachers to derive psychic rewards from their personal interactions with students, teachers remain quite dependent on parental support to feel good about their work (pp. 27-28).

This observation captures the interdependent nature of human relationships that drive social relationships and builds what the authors refer to as social capital. Bryk and Schneider (2002) drawing on the work of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) argued "that civic engagement depends on the nature of social ties among community members, in particular their levels of interpersonal trust" (p. 13). In turn, these social ties create what Coleman (1988) defined as social capital. Coleman argued that positive social capital is evidenced by high levels of interconnectedness and, as a consequence, greater levels of communication, understanding and appreciation of mutual obligation, which produces trustworthiness. More recently researchers (Day & Gu, 2014; Gu &and Li, 2013; Le Cornu, 2013, Mansfield et al., 2016) have argued that trusting relationships sustain resilience, commitment and effectiveness in teachers. Ainscow (2016) suggested that the challenge for schools is to mobilise social capital, "school improvement is a social process that involves practitioners in learning from one another, from their students, and from others involved in the lives of the young people they teach" (p. 171). The involvement of parents is perhaps the preeminent priority of schools.

Because of the value ascribed to community in catholic schools, these schools have the potential to leverage the power of interconnectedness. Bryk and Schneider (2002) posited that this theory of interconnectedness allows individuals "to define themselves as connected to that person or organisation (for example, these are *my friends, my school, my community*) and undertake subsequent actions because this identification is meaningful to them" (p. 15). Putnam's work in the context of American society has challenged all involved in social organisations to reflect on the decline of connectedness or social capital. Putnam (2004) noted declines in "ties to family, friends, civic associations, political parties, labour unions, religious groups and so on.... many people in other countries feel that a similar decay in community and family bonds has occurred there too" (p. 15). Reflecting on this proposition, it might be argued that schools as Bryk and Schneider (2002) allude to above, have the capacity to address the deficit of connectedness precisely because they are an "intrinsically social enterprise" (p. 19). However, if schools are to do so, they must be inclusive and draw on the potential of the parent body as an equally valid source of both social and emotional capital. Catholic schools are called to recognise their unique partnership with parents as expressed in such documents as the Bishop's Mandate produced by the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia  (CECWA, 2009) and the Archbishop's Charter (Sydney Catholic Schools, 2014). Catholic schools are often supported by systemic frameworks to promote pastoral care. Examples include the Framework for the Development of Pastoral Care in Catholic Schools (CEOWA, 2007) and Guidelines for Pastoral Care in Schools (CEC, 2003). These documents remind Catholic schools that they are innately spiritual institutions. It might be argued that Catholic schools have the capacity to address disconnectedness precisely because they are intrinsically spiritual institutions (not sure how this comment follows).

The second integral feature of Bryk and Schneider's (2002) concept of interpersonal trust is competence, an aspect of an individual's formal role responsibility. As an example, parents have the right to expect that teachers are capable of managing a class and providing adequate instruction. In return, the school has the right to expect that parents are supportive of school leaders, teachers and the school's mission. Incompetence on the side of either party can damage trust and the relationship is likely to falter.

Personal regard for others is the third key ingredient in relational trust. Bryk and Schneider (2002) define personal regard as "any actions taken by a member of a role set to reduce another's sense of vulnerability … such actions are typically interpreted as an expression of benevolent intentions" (p. 25). Parents may be considered to be among the most vulnerable groups in school communities, sitting as they do in the grandstand of the everyday enactment of schooling; they are rarely invited onto the field of play. More often than not, and more particularly with secondary schools, they are rarely even at the stadium,

relying on a wide variety of reports from their children and living their child's experience vicariously. The most vulnerable of parents are often those with the least confidence to enter into a relationship because of prior lack of education themselves, migrants with language impediments, or a self-consciousness based on socio-economic difference (Jeynes, 2005).

Attempts to reduce this vulnerability translates as an expression of care; principals caring for teachers, teachers caring for students and teachers willing and caring enough to meet with parents outside of school hours and at wider local community events. Such actions invite reciprocation and intensify relationships, and as a consequence, Putnam's (2004) perceived deficit of social capital is addressed and members of the community may begin to experience a higher degree of social affiliation or involvement.

The fourth and final feature of Bryk and Schneider's portrait of interpersonal trust is the concept of integrity. The authors defined integrity as consistency in what people say and do. In an institutional sense, this would be evidenced in the way a school lives its mission and attempts to meet the competing needs of its constituents, particularly evidenced in the context of this paper by its capability to authentically recognise parents as partners in their children's education.

**Parental Involvement**

The perennial challenge for schools is to create an invitational environment where parental involvement is encouraged and supported. Jeynes' (2007) defines parental involvement as "parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children" (p. 83) and found that the influence of parental involvement significantly affected academic achievement for secondary school students. Jeynes found that parental involvement affected all the academic variables under investigation, namely, "academic achievement, combined grades, standardised tests, and other measures that generally included teacher rating scales and indices of academic attitudes and behaviours" (p. 82). Research continues to indicate that parental involvement in their child's education can influence the academic achievement of their children (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009). In similar manner, Stewart (2008) observed that parent-child discussion was significantly associated with academic achievement and argued that such discussion could be used as an effective tool to raise student achievement. Furthermore, Simon (2009) found that family partnerships positively influenced academic achievement in the final years of schooling and that schools which reached out to parents facilitated this influence.

In an earlier study of Catholic urban high schools, Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) described the enhancement of parental involvement as an expression of care and suggested that it significantly improved relational connections between parents and the school. This expression of care is aligned with the work of Epstein (2010) who argued that if schools can

put what are termed as 'types' of family and community involvement in schools into practice, that a number of "caring" behaviours emerge:

> Synonyms for "caring" match the six types of involvement: Type 1, parenting: supporting, nurturing, and rearing; Type 2, communicating: relating, reviewing, and overseeing; Type 3, volunteering: supervising and fostering; Type 4, learning at home: managing, recognizing, and rewarding; Type 5, decision making: contributing, considering, and judging; and Type 6, collaborating with the community: sharing and giving. (p. 710)

Epstein's (2010) model supports the claim that behaviours that build relational trust are in essence caring behaviours. While schools have a pastoral responsibility to care for students, there is an argument that suggests such care should also be extended to parents. The researchers in the current study sought to investigate whether there was evidence of a significant level of care in the nine identified Catholic secondary schools.

**Catholic Schools**

In the context of Catholic schools, social capital is found in the lived expression of the religious values often articulated by Catholic school systems at state or national level in pastoral care frameworks or Bishops' mandates or charters. These values are also evident in the legacy of religious orders that founded the majority of the schools in this present study. This legacy is best expressed in the school's defined charism and the quality of relationships within it (Cook, 2013). Church documents expressly manifest the attention paid to the relationship between the school and those parents who have chosen it for their child's education. The National Catholic Education Commission of Australia (NCEC, 2011) suggested that "Catholic schools embrace the parent-school partnership and endeavour to offer formal and informal environments where parents' involvement and engagement are encouraged and welcomed through high quality parent-teacher relationships, parent associations and school boards" (p.14). The NCEC argued such emphases are prime examples of the residual 'value add' for Catholic schools, apparent after all student-level and school-level influences on performance (that are more readily subject to quantitative analysis) are considered. Marks' (2009) study, which examined university admission scores across different school sectors, reinforced this view.

The Catholic school system in Western Australia is directed by the Bishops of Western Australia to be true to an articulated ethos and purpose, stressing its responsibilities to students and parents (CECWA, 2009). The applicable document, known as the Mandate, acknowledges that parents are the first educators of their child, challenges parents to support their child's faith journey and value the Catholic school's identity and ethos (CECWA, 2009). In return, the Mandate recognises that parents expect their child's

educational needs are met through educational excellence and an acknowledgement of the unique gifts of the individual and that pastoral care of their child is a priority (CECWA, 2009).

The Mandate, while emphasising the important role that parents play in the education of their children, equally and very subtly notes that there is a reciprocal responsibility in the school-parent relationship (CECWA, 2009). The Mandate reminds the schools in the Catholic system that if they are to have the integrity that Bryk and Schneider (2002) refer to, they must live such a mission in their everyday interaction with parents and conversely, parents are invited to work with and support the schools in this endeavour. The current study sought to ascertain to what degree the nine identified schools in the Catholic system exhibited the qualities that build interpersonal trust; respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity that Bryk and Schneider argued for.

## The Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this investigation was twofold. First, it was to explore parental perceptions of the role of school leaders, teachers and school culture on the achievement of students in high performing Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia. Second, it was to make visible parents' views of their own role and possible contribution to their children's high academic achievement.  In the light of the purpose there was one research question: What are the perceptions of parents concerning their role, and the role of school leaders, teachers and students in the success of their child's school in their tertiary entrance examinations?

## Context

The current study was situated in the relatively homogenous context of nine high academically performing secondary schools in the Western Australian Catholic school system. These nine schools were selected because of their consistent high performance in the tertiary entrance examinations over a number of years when compared to 'like schools' in relation to socio economic background.  This purposive sample included a broad range of schools from a total of forty-nine in the Catholic secondary school system in Western Australia. Five schools were coeducational and four were single gender (two boys schools and two girls schools).  Eight of the nine schools were located in the metropolitan region and one school in the sample was a rural school. The schools' socio-economic backgrounds ranged from one of the lowest in the system to one of the highest. Schools varied in size from 900 to 1200 students.

## Participants

The principal, in conjunction with the deputy principal of each school, was asked to invite interested parents to participate in a focus group interview, at the same time

endeavouring to achieve a balance of parents active in the school community and those less so.  A total of 40 parents volunteered.  The size of the respective focus groups varied from three to five participants per school.

## Methodology

Ary et al. (2002) argued that a qualitative approach that respected context was an appropriate methodological choice, where human behaviour is "context-bound" (p. 424). Given the precise and explicit context of this study, the epistemology underpinning this research was qualitative in nature. Specifically, the investigation used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its theoretical perspective. Smith (2004) argued that IPA has three characteristic features, it is idiographic, inductive and interrogative, all of which form a neat alliterative model. IPA is idiographic because it situates "participants in their particular contexts, exploring personal perspectives … before moving on to more general claims" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.32). It is inductive since, consistent with most qualitative research, IPA utilises techniques that result in a flexibility, which can produce data that may not have been foreseen at the outset of the study. Finally, IPA is an interrogative endeavour wherein its integrity lies in a capacity to take the analysis of the subject in question and discuss it in relation to the extant literature while at the same time 'bracketing', or attempting to remove, researcher bias from the interpretation of data.  This last process is aided by revisiting transcriptions of data, revisiting researchers' journaling at interviews and other field notes.  Consistent with an IPA perspective, this current study allowed the researchers to examine the personal perspectives and experiences of parents within a specific context while being conscious of their own potential biases and preconceptions.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection entailed nine semi-structured focus group interviews conducted with parents – one focus group interview per school. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and took place on site at each school. The semi-structured format allowed the researchers to move flexibly between questions based on the participants' responses. Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010) suggest this approach enables IPA researchers to deal with "some of the synergistic effects of working with groups and to permit both the experiential and interactional elements of focus group data to be explored side by side" (p. 101).  The interview questions focused on a range of themes including: perceptions of the influence of leadership and culture in the school; influence of teachers, both pedagogical practice and affective dispositions; influence of the peer group and finally questions concerning their own influence on their sons and daughters academic achievement.

Interviews were digitally recorded, providing the researchers with the freedom to focus on the responses of the participants and to probe responses for depth or clarity rather than concentrate simply on documenting participant responses. The researchers were therefore afforded the opportunity to take broad field notes for reflective journaling. Interviews were transcribed at the semantic level and then coded for sub-themes. Transcripts were repeatedly revisited to check for accuracy of the thematic coding. Following this process, any bracketed information, written in the researchers' journals, was also considered. Reviewing the bracketed information was an attempt to keep researcher bias removed as all three researchers had extensive experience working in secondary schools.

## Findings

Parents' perceptions centred on five overarching themes. These were: the place of school leadership; the significant role of teachers in their child's academic achievement; teachers knowing the students; the influence of school culture; and reflections on their own capacity to enhance the educational experience of their child.

## Leadership is pivotal

Parents viewed the role of leadership in the school as 'pivotal'. This was particularly true of the role of the principal. In School A, parents reflected on how the principal and the broader leadership team focused on key pillars, "culture (the arts), sport, spiritual and academic" (Parent, School A). Within that focus was a concerted effort to help students find something that they were good at, thus enabling accomplishment, as the following discussion illustrates:

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

Parents also commented on the influence of the principal in terms of the development of relationships. The following interchange illustrates how the principal's behaviour modelled and shaped a culture defined by relationships.

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

The responses concerning the principal reveal and confirm dominant themes of love, care and knowledge of students fundamentally aligned with the Mandate for Catholic Schools provided by the Bishops of Western Australia (CECWA, 2009).

The majority of parents reflected on a layered leadership, comprising deputy principals and middle managers, such as heads of year or heads of subject departments who played a significant role in the provision of academic guidance and pastoral care. Parents commented that leadership was very much shared. Parents spoke of the individual roles of deputy principals, heads of year and heads of departments who had a visible and hands-on involvement with their sons and daughters. "The Head of Year is a very important role – they become a big part of the girls' lives" (Parent, School E).  Further parents' observations of effective layered leadership are provided below:

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

Parents appreciated a school environment where their children felt comfortable in talking with a particular school leader. Parents also saw leaders as key champions of school cultural values. Such values include providing care, encouraging participation and accomplishment, promoting personal excellence and modelling interpersonal relationships where students were known as individuals. These findings support Epstein's (2010) types of caring behaviours. Leaders were seen as key drivers of an academic culture but were able to

balance that with an equal emphasis on the arts, sports and the development of spiritual growth.

**The teacher is everything**

While leadership was 'pivotal', for parents the teacher was 'everything' "Each year is only as good as the teacher" (Parent, School F). Parents viewed the teacher-student relationship as the most important among a number of elements in teacher effectiveness. In particular, parents argued that the capacity of a teacher to be invitational, to be accessible and available was crucial. They confirmed that such characteristics were clearly evident in their children's experience of schooling. Parents also regarded passion and enthusiasm, strong content knowledge and timely explicit feedback as a significant feature of teacher effectiveness.

Parents acknowledged that teachers played a key role in the development of relational trust between themselves and the school. This understanding was particularly evident in parents' praise of teachers who 'followed up' on their sons' and daughters' academic progress and persisted with offers of support.

> **Parent**: In my case I had a particular staff member really push my son along. He sort of got half way through year 12 and fell apart and they didn't let him go, they just kept at him. That kept him going and getting him through. So I think they are a huge …
>
> **Interviewer**: So when you say they kept at him what were they doing? (Laughter from other parents)
>
> **Parent**: They'd go up and talk to him, pull him aside during the day and get him to come to them at lunchtime and make sure that he did. They wouldn't say meet me at this time and not follow it up, they would follow it up and make sure he was there and if he wasn't, they'd approach him on the school ground and say come on let's go.

Teachers who do not follow through with an offer to provide support risk damaging the social capital of relational trust. As a parent in School B had noted: "I must admit that I did get disappointed that things were not followed up". Relational trust was also found in the teachers' and schools' capacity to provide consistent communication and feedback on student academic performance. It was clear that parents had a prodigious appetite for communication. Hargreaves (2012) claimed that keeping parents informed and engaged in developments in schools reduces anxiety and "helps parents and others to align their focus and to support schools" (p.12).

**Teachers knowing the students**

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST, 2014) underline what is important for teachers to be able to know, do and value. The very first standard, 'Know

students and how they learn' highlights the need for teachers to have knowledge of the physical, social and intellectual needs of students. Parents expressed that their sons and daughters were 'known' in their schools:

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

Parents recollected student comments reflecting on pastoral structures such as 'House' systems, which promoted participation in sporting, cultural and service-oriented activities. Such organisational structures heightened attachment to the school. This attachment was exemplified in the following recollection:

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

It was evident that these Catholic secondary schools had created a certain culture that enhanced learning and was aligned with Catholic principles of pastoral care synonymous with the metaphor of the 'good shepherd' (Sydney Catholic Schools, 2014) where students are found because they are known and feel a sense of place, attachment, and community.

**Parents' perceptions of culture**

When asked whether the culture of the school played a part in its success, parents focused on the sense of community and belonging, well captured in the following comment: "It is a warm, welcoming community, it is a school with a great ambience" (Parent, School (B). This statement echoed Bryk, Lee and Holland's seminal work where the authors argued that the special character of Catholic schools is defined as "we are community" (1993, p. 127). Further confirmation came from other parents**:**

> It is about community here, everyone does care about everyone, the pastoral is the strength. It is as if they are saying, if you come, we can help... the kids see it (Parent, School G).

> We brought our daughter from School "Z". It was a school that had everything in terms of facilities but no sense of community, no parent participation (Parent, School F).

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

> My daughter is very much an atypical kid, but she found a place. They accept difference here (Parent, School A).

> When you find a niche it impacts on all other areas (Parent, School E).

> It is a very supportive culture. Kids are encouraged to have a go (Parent, School F).

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

Set against the theme of personal relationships was the Catholic context of the schools and the unsolicited observations about the heritage of the religious orders that had established them. The researchers noted the observations of parents in School F who had chosen the school for their daughters based on its 'Mercy' heritage and the values stemming from the religious order of the Sisters of Mercy. Schools, G and C were also schools that had a 'Mercy' heritage where compassion, respect, excellence, hospitality and justice were core values of the religious order's charism and alluded to by parents. Parents from School F, when asked to make some summative observations at the end of the interview, all spoke of the powerful influence of the presence of nuns on the campus who resided in the convent but had no formal teaching role.

> **Parent 1**: The sisters tell them that every day we will pray for you for the rest of your life. Well you know we'll take all the help we can get but how wonderful is that thought?

> **Parent 2**: And when the kids are teary the first thing they say is where is Sr Mary?

> **Parent 3**: Yes but where is the next Sr Mary?

The authors argue that parents had answered that very question themselves in their observations of the values-laden culture of the schools their sons and daughters were inhabiting. Lay leaders and teachers who had taken the place of the religious orders in these schools were preserving their values, their "charism".

Parents also regarded the peer culture as 'pervasive' in its influence on academic achievement. It was clearly a 'micro-culture' that needed to be understood by the school.

Parents described the peer culture in their schools as an overwhelmingly pro-academic culture. In the eyes of parents, students were respectful of individual difference, supportive and collaborative as well as pushing each other to achieve in healthy competition. Parents valued the role of the school in providing avenues for peer support and collaboration through lunchtime and after school study groups. Parents also reported the benefit of providing opportunities for students to take up leadership roles in service programs and pastoral care groups such as the 'house system'.

**Parental reflections on their own influence: Emotional capital and aligned values**

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

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

Parental support was defined in the context of providing a home environment where learning was valued, where expectations were balanced and most importantly, when academic success was not always attained, encouragement was provided. When parents reflected on their role in the educational life of their children the instinctive response was to comment on the provision of social and emotional support. Epstein's (2010) model of six types of parental involvement would categorise these responses under Type 1 "supporting, nurturing and rearing" (p. 94). The following commentary from parents is illustrative of this social and emotional dimension of parental influence:

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

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

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

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

The current study underscores Simon's (2009) findings that even in the last few years of the educational journey students report a positive impact on their academic achievement when family and school are perceived to have a successful partnership. The majority of parents spoke of flourishing partnerships being built through welcoming

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

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

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

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Parents require leaders to be champions of the cultural values within the school. As evidenced in this study, parents viewed all three levels of leadership: principals, deputy principals and middle management (Heads of Year and Heads of Departments) as central to the provision of pastoral care. This pastoral care was evident in the personalized interactions between leaders and students with the result that their children felt 'known'. Structures that allowed a pastoral leader such as a head-of-year or dean of studies to move with the group from one year to the next were viewed very favourably by parents and contributed to the degree of familiarity that developed between student and leader. Such structures are conducive to the development of positive relationships and might be considered by schools looking to enhance pastoral care. Parents also perceived leaders as having a key role in the promotion of academic excellence but equally they argued leaders must be involved in the development of their sons and daughters in a holistic sense. Leaders in schools should not lose sight of such parental expectations.

Parents argued that teachers were clearly the most powerful influence in their child's academic achievement. The development of the teacher-student relationship was confirmed as central to student motivation and performance. Parents reported teachers' extraordinary availability and accessibility in after-hours contexts and the influence it had on their child's achievement. Parents also acknowledged the impact of teachers' content knowledge, passion, enthusiasm and capacity to provide quality feedback as key attributes of teacher effectiveness. Parents placed great importance on consistent communication between the school and home. Teachers cannot underestimate the importance of their communication with parents and its capacity to develop relational trust. Teachers and schools need to recognize that parents have a prodigious appetite for communication and communication practices should be reviewed regularly, such an approach has been found in the literature to be efficacious (Epstein, 2010; Hargreaves, 2012).

Parents regarded the influence of the peer group as pervasive. Parents observed a pro-academic culture within the peer cohort as an attribute of student achievement. Peer relationships were viewed as supportive and collaborative enabled by peer mentoring. Such relationships and healthy competition were not mutually exclusive. Pastoral structures such as peer mentoring can enable student leadership, develop a supportive peer culture and should be facilitated in secondary schools.

Four recommendations are proposed in line with the findings of this research. First, that schools continue to explore ways to promote and involve parents actively as co-partners in the education of their children. Second, school leaders should not assume that parents have enough school-based communication. It is recommended that school leaders review and ensure parents receive regular jargon-free school communication, especially pertaining to their son or daughter. Third, school leaders have a key role in ensuring that the values of the school are inherent in every aspect of school practice. Such practices secure alignment between what a school says and what a school does which is key to building relational trust. It is therefore recommended that school leaders periodically review school processes to confirm parental alignment with the school's cultural values. Finally, it is recommended that further research be conducted to investigate programs in secondary schools that would enable parents in the emotional support of their sons and daughters.

**References**

Ainscow, M. (2016). Collaboration as a strategy for promoting equity in education: possibilities and barriers. *Journal of Professional capital and Community, (1)*2, 159-172.

Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Razavieh, A., & Sorensen, C. (2006). *Introduction to research in education.* CA, USA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2014). *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* Retrieved from www.aitsli.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers/standards/list

Bryk, A. S., Lee, V. E., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Bussing, A., Foller-Mancini, A., Gidley, J., & Heusser, P. (2010). Aspects of spirituality in adolescents. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 15*(1) 25-44.

Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (2009). *Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009-2015.* Retrieved from https://internet.ceo.wa.edu.au/AboutUs/Documents/Bishops%20Mandate%202009-2015.pdf

Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (2007). *Framework for the Development of Pastoral Care in Catholic Schools.* Retrieved from http://internet.ceo.wa.edu.au/ReligiousEducationCurriculum/Documents/Framework%20for%20the%20Development%20of%20Pastoral%20Care%20in%20Catholic%20Schools.pdf

Catholic Education Office, Sydney. (2015). *Archbishop's Charter for Catholic Schools.* Sydney, NSW.

Coleman, J., Campbell, E., Hobson, C., McPartland, J., Mood, A., & Weinfield, F. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

Congregation for Catholic Education. (1977). *The Catholic School.* Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html

Congregation for Catholic Education. (1997). *The Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium.* Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html

Congregation for Catholic Education. (2014). *Educating for today and tomorrow: A renewing passion.* Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20140407_educare-oggi-e-domani_en.html

Cook, T. J., & Simmonds, T. A. (2013). The charism of 21st-century Catholic schools: Building a culture of relationships. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice, 14*(3), 319-333.

Day, C. & Gu, Q. (2014). *Resilient teachers and resilient schools: Building and sustaining quality in testing times.* OXON, UK, Routledge.

Epstein, J. L. (2009). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action.* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

Epstein, J. L. (2010). School/family/community/partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan, 92*(3), 81-96.

Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 13*(1),1-22.

Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action.* Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Gu, Q., & Li, Q. (2013) Sustaining resilience in times of change: Stories from Chinese teachers. *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 41*(3) 288-303

Hargreaves, A. (2012). *Singapore: The fourth way in action? Educational Research Policy and Practice, (11),* 7-17.

Harris, A., & Goodall, J. (2008). Do parents know they matter? Engaging all parents in learning. *Educational Research, 50*(3), 277-289.

Hill, J.E. & Tyson, D.F. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology, 45*(3), 740-763.

Jeynes, W. H. (2005). A meta-analysis of the relationship of parental involvement to urban elementary school student academic achievement. *Urban Education, 40*(3), 237-269.

Jeynes, W.H. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Urban Education, 42*(82), 82-110.

Le Cornu, R. (2009). Building early-career teacher resilience: The role of relationships*. Australian Journal of Teacher Education. 38*(4), 1-16.

Mansfield, C., Beltman, S., Broadley, T., & Weatherby-Fell, N.L. (2016). Building resilience in teacher education: An evidence informed framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 54, 77-87*.

Marks, G. (2009). Accounting for school sector differences in university performance. *Australian Journal of Education, 53*(1), 19-38.

Paul VI. (October, 1965). *Declaration on Christian Education, Gravissimum Educationis*. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. London: Simon & Schuster.

Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish*. North Sydney: NSW: Random House Australia.

Simon, B. S. (2009). Predictors and effects of family Involvement in High Schools. In J.L. Epstein (Ed.). *School family and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, 211-219*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Spera, C., Wentzel, K. R., & Matto, H. C. (2009). Parental aspirations for their children's educational attainment: Relations to ethnicity, parental education, children's academic performance, and parental perceptions of school climate. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 38*(8), 1140-1152.

Stewart, E. B. (2008). School structural characteristics, student effort, peer associations and parental involvement: The influence of school-and individual-level factors on academic achievement. *Education and Urban Society, 40*(2), 179-204.