STUDENT PERCEPTIONS
OF
EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING

By

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AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

I. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Education Degree
II. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
III. the thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree
IV. no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree
V. this thesis meets the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly the Australian educational environment in which schools find themselves is one where schools are expected to achieve successes for their students and furthermore allow their successes or lack thereof to be compared with ‘transparency’ against the successes of other schools. The overriding principle expected from the politicians and society in general is one of providing parents with the best information possible on which they will be able to base their decision as to which school will be the best for their children. This notion is noble and honourable, one at which little criticism can be levelled. However, as researchers in the ‘Effective Schools’ and ‘Improving Schools’ research fields have discussed for decades, measuring the effectiveness of schools is not an easily achievable goal. It is far too easy to fall into the trap of using simplistic and narrow measures that supposedly allow easy comparisons.

This study takes the view, as does most research to date, that univariable measures of school effectiveness are fatally flawed. The current trend in many western nations to simply compare the academic success of schools, however that might be measured, does little to measure the effectiveness of schools. What is most concerning is the growing trend of creating league tables of comparison and in some educational systems to use such tables to determine school funding.

Equally disturbing is the amount of research that seeks to examine what students consider important in an effective school. There is a great deal of research on what characteristics parents, teachers, politicians and other key stakeholders consider an effective school to have but extraordinarily there is comparably very little research on what students consider important.

This study seeks to somewhat address this inadequacy by measuring what students in their senior years of schooling in a single independent school in New South Wales, Australia perceive to be appropriate and useful measures of effective schooling. In so doing this research also examined if in the students’ minds their current school is effective and most significantly examines why students hold the views they have concerning effective schools.
In order to achieve this aim, this study took a qualitative research approach to discover Student Perceptions of Effective Schooling. The theoretical orientation adopted was to both verify current theory of effective schooling as well as suggest possible developments, modifications and improvements to current theory in light of the students’ perceptions. As such both inductive and deductive analysis of the data took place. The data was collected using a range of methods from traditionally quantitative research tools, such as surveys, through to the qualitative research tool of focus groups.

The results of this study demonstrated that while the current research has developed a good multivariable approach to measuring school effectiveness there were significant areas the students believed needed greater or lesser emphasis. The importance of technically good teachers, separate from the need for good and caring teachers, as well as the need for schools to be safe places were all important measures of effective schools. The ability of the school to engage students outside the classroom and provide a relevant and diverse academic curriculum was also considered essential for effective schooling.
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CHAPTER ONE – RESEARCH CONTEXT AND ORIENTATION

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Education throughout the ages has attempted to provide society with children who are prepared for the life that awaits them as young adults. In modern society, it is schools that have taken on this role. With increased choice in the educational marketplace the demand on schools has increased significantly and as such schools are required to prove their effectiveness. In addition to these expectations the growing demands on schools to improve is “unlikely to recede over the next few years” (Harris & Bennett, 2005, p. 1). The increased effectiveness and continual improvement demanded of schools comes from a range of core groups within society. Governments through policy and budgeting have demanded a great deal more of schools and teachers, as has the community in general, employers, universities and parents, all of whom demand particular and often different outcomes. While all these interest groups are undoubtedly permitted to expect improvements in effectiveness, little attention has been paid to the demands of the students.

This lack of attention on students does not deny the focus of schools on a “child-centred philosophy of education [that comes from] the work of Neil (1962), Dewey (1938), Rogers (1969) and Rousseau (1762) . . . Brandes and Ginnis (1986), Button (1971, 1982) and Stenhouse (1967, 1985)” (Tew, 2007, p. 1). However, few researchers have translated this broad principle into the focus of their research. As Tew (2007) goes on to admit in her discussion of why student based research is undervalued and often overlooked:

If I thought about it at all, I would have said that the most active agents in education were the policymakers, the curriculum designers, the lesson planners and so on. In other words, agency lay in the hands of the adults of the education system. The students were actively engaged in their own learning, but only as directed by the adult world. I don’t think I ever stopped to think about what went on in the hearts and minds of the young people in front of me as I taught (Tew, 2007, p. 2).

Apart from a pleasing growing trend over the past few years to take student voice into account, school effectiveness research and the accompanying literature has spent only a modicum of time examining what students perceive effective education to be (Harris, 2002).
There is, however, some comfort in the fact that over recent years there has been a steady growth in research that addresses the voice and role of students in effective schools (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Katyal & Evers, 2005; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). The school improvement movement has been more understanding of students needs and has reinforced the necessity to focus on student levels of improvement and improving teaching and learning (Harris, 2005). This research project is rooted in the effective schooling literature and endeavours to examine the perceptions of students in relation to what they believe to be important in an effective school. The research will go further by comparing this to the reality experienced within the students’ current school. This project has as its aim to both evaluate current theory regarding effective schooling in general as well as determine considerations not yet explored but nevertheless important to students. It is felt important to both test current effective schools theory as well as gauging from the students areas of further theory development or refinement that might be needed.

The elements used in this research to test current theory have been developed from those readily recognisable and accepted factors discussed throughout the literature as key elements in effective schools. Elements have been selected which are applicable both across contexts as well as recognising the need to understand and measure school specific elements. Care has been taken not to fall into the trap of creating a blueprint for effective schools or to produce research that is simplistic and adds little to the debate. As Fidler (2005) states:

Although it would be convenient to believe that research could identify clear recipes for improving the performance of schools, I believe that this will always be a chimera. This is not to suggest that research cannot provide valuable ideas but rather to suggest that jejune research, although it might appeal to funders who like quick results, is simply a distraction (Fidler, 2005, p. 47).

Nonetheless, frameworks can be helpful in making sense of a very complex research field. As the report on the Effective Schools Improvement (ESI) project (Creemers, Stoll, & Reezigt, 2007) demonstrates, a comprehensive framework can be established to assist practitioners, researchers and policy makers alike. It is worth labouring the point that care always needs to be taken to ensure that any framework “can never be used as a recipe for effective school improvement or as a ready-made toolbox for the implementation of improvement in schools” (Townsend, 2007b, p.6). With this in mind, this study was designed to gauge the students’ perceptions of the importance of each selected element and then measure their perceptions of
the effectiveness of their school. In order to achieve this objective a qualitative research approach was adopted. Having said that, elements of quantitative research have been employed. An initial survey was administered to the students measuring their perceptions of the ten key elements chosen. The results of this survey were used to inform the direction of further research conducted through a number of focus groups. Analysis of the data was both inductive and deductive in its approach as it explored elements considered appropriate in the literature but also sought to explore new themes considered important by the students.

The success or otherwise of schools has always been a concern within society and the success of schools has over time been viewed through a range of research perspectives; namely ‘school improvement’, ‘school development’ and ‘school effectiveness’. Although all three are clearly independent research fields, they are not mutually exclusive as each addresses how schooling may be enhanced. In the early stages of these various research paradigms, the approach taken by each paradigm engaged the research from a different perspective and had largely gone their separate ways (Harris & Bennett, 2005). Initially, school improvement has been viewed as having an impact at the system level while school effectiveness impacts at the school and individual level. There has, however, been a trend in the 1990s within the literature that both school effectiveness and school improvement can operate at the system level as well as the individual school level (Dimmock, 1993). In the last five years there has been a growing consensus that both research fields aim to achieve the same outcomes although from slightly different perspectives. In essence researchers have sought answers to two fundamental questions as outlined by Harris (2005), namely “What do effective schools look like?” and “How do schools improve and become more effective?” (Harris, 2005, p. 7). Harris goes on to argue that school effectiveness research focuses on the first of these questions while the second is more of a concern for the school improvement fields and the two essentially remain differentiated fields of research. This research aims to close this divide by looking at both questions and thereby establish a more “synergetic relationship” as sought by Stoll (Stoll & Fink, 1996) and Harris (2005).

The growing convergence in views is no more evident than in the establishment of The International Congress of School Effectiveness and School Improvement that has been bringing together in a concerted way these two previously different schools of research. This annual conference has sought to make, with varying degrees of success, one research field
from the previous two recognising the different approaches yet focusing on essentially the same outcomes for schools and their students.

**Contribution of this Research**

It appears somewhat deficient that as more and more research into school improvement and effectiveness is conducted there remains a limited body of research focusing on students. While it is acknowledged that it is difficult for students to inform discussion because of limited experience within education, it is hard to argue against their needs being considered and taken into account when examining what makes an effective school. Students’ possess experiences and even expertise in areas of teaching and learning, the fundamental purpose of schooling, which others are not as well equipped to comment upon. The European Union funded Sustainability in European Primary Schools (SEEPS) Project argued that “young people do have a lot of physical and ideological contributions to make that can better improve their own learning environments” (Russell & Byrom, 2007, p. 4). Students can also inform much about school improvement beyond what takes place in the classroom. Their experiences, while in many researchers’ minds are limited, are far more grounded in the reality of schools than those of other stakeholders, all of whom are adults. Through their multitude of interactions with teachers, administrators, parents and other adults, “students have firsthand experiences that affect their learning and their thinking” (Martin-Kniep, 2008, p. 88). They have the faculties available to them to develop perceptions about their world and how it impacts on them. They live school, teaching and learning daily and their opinions must matter. While there is a growing trend to take seriously the views and opinions of students it is important to acknowledge that young peoples’ voices are no more ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ than other stakeholders and findings from such studies must not be over emphasised (Arnot & Reay, 2007). Notwithstanding this, it is important to acknowledge that pupil voices have not “hitherto been given the same sort of prominence and influence afforded to ‘adult’ voices” (Frost & Holden, 2008, p. 85).

As young people become increasingly aware of their position within society and the burden of the future being on their shoulders, increasingly they are becoming interested in demonstrating and articulating their needs and wants for schooling. Students are more than capable of informing researchers about what they consider important and what it is they wish to achieve from school. This research draws on previous research that gauges whether the
factors evident in the research are also perceived by students to be important in effective schools and then compares and contrasts this to what they are experiencing in their current school. This research aims to have students explain why they consider particular elements important and others less so and what other elements they perceive to be important as yet not identified in current research and literature.

As stated, while there is a growing body of research tapping into students as a resource, there remains a relatively small amount and limited focus in research focussing on student opinions. The student focussed research that is predominant tends to focus only on the academic elements of schooling. Nevertheless there is a growing trend to engage students in genuine school improvement discourses, and even more pleasing the flow onto their role in decision making and educational outcomes (Russell & Byrom, 2007). Indeed there is a growing body of academic research which testifies to the importance of student voice in school improvement, while at the same time “a series of policy initiatives have underscored the pivotal role young people could and should play in making decisions about matters that affect them” (Frost & Holden, 2008).

Acknowledging the discussion that occurred earlier concerning the caution needed in developing key elements that researchers consider essential in effective schools, the school effectiveness and improvement research areas have made great strides in this endeavour. It is evident from the research to date that certain elements have developed as fundamentally important and measurable in determining effective schools (Banks, 1993; Brandsma & Knuver, 1992; Creemers, 1997; Creemers, Stoll, & Reezigt, 2007; Gable, Hall, & Murphy, 1986; Harris, 2002; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992; Mulford, 1987; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002; Scheerens, 1992). Of course the debate continues. This research will consider the current research findings and use them to inform and direct the elements to be measured in this particular research.

**Aims**

As intimated earlier, it is an intention of this research to make a contribution to the increasing need to draw even closer together the fields of school improvement and school effectiveness. This project aims to do more than describe certain variables for school success in neatly
measurable terms (Townsend, 2007b), it also has accent on the process, that is examining, describing and explaining all the variables measured as well as the additional elements derived from the respondents. Both approaches, school improvement and school effectiveness need each other (Townsend, 2007b). More specifically the aims of this research are to discover what students within one particular school perceived important as appropriate elements of effectiveness and then relate these perceptions to their actual experiences within their school. There was a general intention to determine whether the students consider their current school to be effective. This project aims to identify a broad range of elements drawn from the literature and considered as important in effective schools ranging from academic achievement to engagement in non-academic curricula activities through to the delivery of pastoral care and an environment that is conducive to learning.

The research also aims to investigate the reasons why students have responded the way they have. This became an important focus of this research because of the employment of the researcher at the research site. The researcher is a teacher within the school and has been employed there for the past seven years. The desire to have student voice heard, or at least be considered more in decision making, as well as to drive improvement decisions within the school became an area of interest and motivation.

In more specific terms, this research has a fourfold objective:

1. To discover whether students perceive a range of elements considered within the literature as important in determining effective schools to be appropriate and good measures of effectiveness.
2. To discover if there are any additional themes the students consider important in determining effective schools that are not covered by the literature sourced themes.
3. To discover if students perceive the school they attend to be effective using the themes as well as the inductively derived themes that emerge.
4. To investigate the reasons why students hold the views they do.

If current theory is to be adequately tested as far as its applicability to students is concerned then the reasons behind the perceptions of the students becomes fundamental and essential to analyse. The overall design of this research required a dynamic approach to the development of the research objectives and it was important to fit this approach into a robust theoretical
orientation as articulated a little later in this chapter. While each of the objectives listed earlier formed the basis of a research question, further questions were formulated as the initial phase of the research produced data. Analysis of this data determined the research questions for the next phase, namely the focus groups.

The School

The school that was used as the site study for this research is an independent co-educational Kindergarten to Year 12 (K-12) school on the rural urban fringe of Sydney, Australia. It was established in 1984 and is affiliated with one of the major global Christian Church organisations. It is governed by School Council and managed by the appointment of an Executive Head who acts as the Chief Executive Officer of the School Council. The student population is approximately 1000 students K-12, comprising approximately 450 students in the primary years (K-6) and approximately 550 students in the secondary Years (7-12). It employs approximately 120 full time equivalent (FTE) staff of which approximately 90 are FTE teaching staff.

The school is very much a community school, that is, it operates with an open enrolment policy with no exclusions based on religious criteria. While the school is overtly Christian in its philosophy and practise, it welcomes all enrolments that are willing to work within the Christian frameworks as articulated. The school does have an enrolment policy favouring siblings and provides sibling fee discounts as it values the relationships with families. The school receives both State Government and Federal Government funding as well as charging parents moderate fees. The fees are very close to the median monetary value charged by independent schools across the Sydney metropolitan area.

It is not a selective school in that enrolment is not based on academic ability. A clearly stated aim of the school is to be academically focused and the school markets itself as an academically focused school and provides academic and music scholarships. The school has developed a very strong music and performing arts focus and is highly regarded in these areas and provides considerable support to the local community through its music programme.
**THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

Understanding the theoretical drive of any research is particularly important in establishing the context and reason for conducting the research. This research, or any research for that matter, could have one or more intentions behind it. These intentions can be either inductive or deductive in nature. Where the purpose of a project is to describe or discover, to find meaning, or to explore, then the theoretical drive will be inductive. The method that best suits this sort of purpose is a qualitative study and the outcome will be rich in its methodology for exploratory purposes with an inductive theoretical drive. This approach has been referred to as taking “fishing trips” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The alternative approach is to have a study that aims to test a hypothesis or a theory and in these cases the theoretical drive would be deductive. While there are distinct differences between these approaches they are not mutually exclusive.

The analytical approach of this study is both inductive and deductive and as such relies on a number of methodologies within a qualitative paradigm. It is deductive in that it aims to gauge how well key elements of effective schools, as born out in the literature, apply to a single school through the eyes of the students. This is done through the first phase of the research by way of a survey instrument. The second phase of the project is inductive in that it aims to discover the meaning behind the trends shown in the first phase and endeavours to discover new and additional elements of effective schools. The second phase is interested in exploring why the students have responded in the way they have. This is done through the focus groups as well as using the open ended questions from the survey.

The type of investigation throughout this project is both confirmatory and exploratory which means it involves drawing conclusions from previous research, developing a point of view, and formulating research questions. The analysis of the data is necessarily different for the different phases of the research because the theoretical drive behind each phase is different. It will involve summary of information, determining the importance of the results as well as drawing conclusions.

Based on previous research of what makes an effective school, the formulation of focus questions was developed early on in the project’s conception. Following on from the data collected, further research questions were formulated that were exploratory in their nature for
examination during the focus group phase of the project. These questions were deductive in their approach in that they sought to examine pre-existing themes. However, a significant part of the focus groups allowed the students to express their opinions on effective schools beyond the measurable themes with particular focus on their school’s effectiveness. This data was analysed using an inductive approach seeking to confirm or modify the current theory regarding effective schools. The research questions developed so far have determined the development of this study. This research approach has come to be referred to as ‘the dictatorship of the research question’ (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) and fits well with the broad intention of this research. The need to examine current theory as well as explore theory development means a flexible approach to the research questions is essential.

**Theoretical Models of Effective Schooling**

To date, several models of school effectiveness have emerged that are worth examining. An early model of note was the standards model as used by Gray and Hannon (in Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1997) which can be best described as the basic league table model. This model attempts to grade the performance of schools against some external norm or standard. In its simplest form, a single measure of effectiveness was used, in particular test scores (Aitkin & Zuzovsky, 1994). Later, a more sophisticated measure was used focusing on issues such as cost effectiveness and educational equity. This model is based on the average performance of all pupils in the system and as such is a single outcome measure. It is fundamentally inadequate as a tool for assessing the effectiveness of schools because of its failure to take into account the intake characteristics of the pupils in schools (Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992). It makes no attempt to assess student abilities before they enrol in school and worse still makes no attempt to relate prior ability to their ability when exiting school. The standards model is a system wide measurement and fails to consider the gains made by each pupil in each school after taking their backgrounds and prior attainment at the point of entry into the school into account. It also fails to take into consideration any variables, which are not easily measured and tallied but nonetheless essential in fostering a positive environment in which students can succeed. The failure to include these “psychological variables” is considered a major deficiency in this model (Aitkin & Zuzovsky, 1994).
A later model of effectiveness took into consideration the intake ability of the students and was referred to as the School-Level Intake-Adjusted Model (Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992). In this model the effectiveness of individual schools was measured by the degree to which they were “under- or over-performing after adjusting for the average social and prior attainment composition of their pupil intake” (Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992, p. 78). As research has developed this model too is now regarded as oversimplified. It groups all students in the one school together and prescribes them the mean score of the school. It treats all students as having the same ability within a school. Schools are then measured according to the system. Individual schools can be plotted on a graph as being above or below the average of the system. It has subsequently been found that schools with a below average intake composition may still be effective. In this model, however, effectiveness is less likely to be demonstrated because of the positive correlation between the average school intake and average performance of the pupils (Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992, p. 79). Schools with below average intake composition are more likely to be below the system average in performance. This model is not appropriate because it interprets effectiveness as a direct measure of the prior attainment of pupils at the time of intake into the school. However, it has been strongly argued that “In examining educational effectiveness, we must take into account the students’ background …” (Creemers, 1997, p. 215).

This ‘input-output’ paradigm recognises that different levels of structure occur within schools and three blocks of variables were included in the studies: student background, school type and learning conditions. These three structures were studied consecutively. This approach is not so different from the concept of value added in industry where each level adds to the value of the former. The ‘process-product’ framework closely followed the ‘input-output’ paradigm. The ‘process-product’ framework viewed effectiveness not only as measurable outputs but also the organisational processes that maximise outputs, that is, the ability to use the resources effectively (Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992). The variables used in this framework not only included those of the ‘input-output’ paradigm, but also processes such as instruction techniques and management plans. There was much debate within this field regarding which of the hierarchical levels was the most important and therefore needed to be analysed first. This is a major flaw in the framework and laid the base for the organisational framework to evolve.
The Pupil-Level Intake-Adjusted Model followed and was developed in the early 1990s (Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992) and attempts to account for the different levels of attainment within schools, based on the different background characteristics of the pupils. It takes cognitive as well as non-cognitive measures into account realising that schools teach more than just the academic curriculum. Taking this into account, one can calculate a gradient in performance along a continuum that measures both academic and non-academic elements, that is, within school variables. This measurement within a particular school is a development from the earlier models that had as a primary focus ‘between school’ variables. It used two measures of effectiveness, which have been labelled as ‘equity and quality’ (Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992, p. 80). While a school may provide a greater quality of education than others it may discriminate between disadvantaged and advantaged students. In such a school, disadvantaged students will do worse than other students within their cohort. With this in mind, it is essential to examine what factors outside as well as inside schools have an impact on school effectiveness because every child has the right to the best possible education (Stoll & Myers, 1998). It has been further argued that differences in school culture and the background social culture of the students begs the “equally important question of whether some cultures are more effective with certain kinds of teachers and certain kinds of students” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 38). The essential element in these studies is the acknowledgement of the abilities and backgrounds of the students prior to their entry into a school. To ignore this is to ignore an essential element in the measurement of school effectiveness. While the Pupil-Level Intake-Adjusted Model was a vast improvement on earlier models it too was narrow in its consideration of effectiveness measures.

It is essential for any model of school effectiveness to take into account not only student achievement, however broadly that is to be measured, but also the organisation in its entirety (Aitkin & Zuzovsky, 1994). In response to these concerns the ‘Organisational Framework Paradigm’ was developed, which calls attention to the importance of organisational and structural features of a school that shape functioning. The principle of hierarchy is central, viewing schools as having a variety of levels that affect effective schooling. This ranges from the system based structures, to school structures, to class structures and finally learning/teaching structures and the processes that occur within the classroom. The relationship and influence of one level on and by another is referred to as ‘interactions’ and is considered essential to schools being effective (Aitkin & Zuzovsky, 1994, p. 48). This model
emphasises the need for multi-level statistical methods in research that allow for different hierarchies to be represented simultaneously. It is crucial not to view each level of the hierarchy as a unit to which the concept of value added could be applied, as it is far more interactive between levels than this. Rather, it should be viewed as a product of processes that may be consistently effective for all types of children. It depends on the particular combination of the pupil’s home background, his or her general ability, the teaching style and other characteristics of the teacher, the class, and the school context in which the pupil learns (Aitkin & Zuzovsky, 1994, p. 50). Decisions and effects that come into play impacting on schooling occur at a variety of levels from the student to the system administrators and:

“… although two teachers may go to school each day in the same high school, the resources available to them for instruction and the amount of satisfaction they derive from their work may vary quite dramatically as a function of the kinds of students and the kinds of subjects they teach. Moreover, the extent of such internal differentiation is hypothesized to vary across schools. It follows that differences between schools in their effects on children will be manifest not only in different mean levels of achievement. Rather, the differential functioning of schools will lead to a different distribution of achievement within each school. Multi-level statistical models are crucial for guiding guarentative [sic] inquiry into this multilevel process” (Raudenbush, 1992, p. 722).

Each dimension or level in the hierarchy is made richer by viewing it in relation to the others and it can be said that, “the whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts” (Lezotte, 1992, p. 824). The research to this point in time has focused on school systems and students as a product in a process. Very little time has been spent in looking at students within a context of the whole school and indeed the wider community. It is a concern that:

“In process-product models of teaching and input-output models of school effects, students are conceived as the objects of educational treatments rather than contexts that shape teaching practice” (McLaughlan & Talbot (1993) in Thrupp, 1999, p. 221).

This concern is taken even further when it is stated that not only should consideration be given to the students’ backgrounds before they arrive at the school but also what their expectation for the future might be (Hexall & Mahony (1998) in Thrupp, 1999). Greater emphasis should be given to “where students come from, their life experiences [and] their prospective destinations” (Thrupp, 1999, p. 131). The role of the teacher within effective schools is often overlooked as are the students themselves as well as the relationship between teachers and students.
One of the most prolific researchers and writers in the field of school effectiveness and school improvement is Bert Creemers. His work over time, along with many co-workers, has moved the debate forward in many ways. He has been keen to establish a theoretical framework for the research of effectiveness as well as generate a model of effectiveness. His model, first developed in 1994 is arguably the most comprehensive in that it recognises, clearer than other models, the role of different levels that can be affected by improvement, students’ ability prior to intake and the need for a range of both universal and contextual measures (Creemers, 1994).

As stated, this model which is diagrammatically represented in Figure 1, like most others recognises contextual school level improvement but has a significant advantage in that it also focuses far more directly on students. It goes even further by recognising characteristics of students, such as academic ability, social background and relationships with peers, as having a significant impact on achievement. Again caution is needed to ensure that student achievement is viewed as far more than just academic success.
A more current debate within the school effectiveness research is that between context specific factors of effectiveness as opposed to factors that are able to be cross contextual. The importance of contextual factors of effectiveness cannot be underestimated (Harris, 2002). While there has been a great deal of difference in opinion and much healthy debate, one factor is certain. No matter how school effectiveness and improvement is to be researched, a broad base of factors or elements must be considered at a variety of scales and must take into account the school context. Schools that are focused on improving the educational outcomes and life chances of its students must be realistic about what can be expected in regard to school improvement. Further it must recognise the importance of context-specific improvement approaches (Harris & Chapman, 2002).

While context specific factors are important, it is essential to accept that there are some elements of effectiveness that are ‘universal’ while others are ‘specific’ (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002). Reynolds, Hopkins et al. (2002) argue that a change in philosophical approach is needed when considering the difference between contextual specific and universal factors. Of the ‘universal’ elements it is the ‘what’ that is the constant not the ‘how’. This is explained by way of arguing that the role of the principal or head teacher is important in all effective schools across nations. However, it is the way the role functions that is different (De Maeyer, Rymenana, Van Petegem, van den Bergh, & Rijlaarsdam, 2007). In the United States and the United Kingdom it is a top down leadership while in Norway it is lateral in nature (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002). The universality of the principal is constant across all schools but in each circumstance it is how the principal relates to the school that has the greatest impact on school effectiveness.

Neither is necessarily weaker in approach but the impact of leadership, while universal, can be applied differently in different contexts (De Maeyer, Rymenana, Van Petegem, van den Bergh, & Rijlaarsdam, 2007). The same can be said even within similar contexts of the one educational precinct as in the case of this school. The school is located in New South Wales, one of the largest educational systems in the world. Within this large system the role of head of school is quite different from the government schools to the systemic private schools to the independent schools. This multi-dimensional construct of a particular element is not constrained to that of educational leadership but can be applied to all elements of effective
schools. Considering effective measures as multi-dimensional constructs not only provides a better picture of what makes schools effective at a generic level but also helps develop more specific strategies for improving educational practice in situ (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2006; Kyriakides, 2007).

The most recent work to be done on models of effective education has been the work exploring both the generic and differentiated models of educational effectiveness (Kyriakides, 2007). This work focuses on the need to have models that can be applied across contexts as well as context specific. While generic models are important it is essential to be aware of their consequence that a “one size fits all model, in which the assumption is that effective teachers and schools are effective with all students, in all contexts, in all aspects of their subjects and so on” is created (Kyriakides, 2007, p. 41). A differentiated model of effectiveness must take into account and indeed implies that schools may be more effective with some groups of students and less with others. Therefore models of effectiveness need to be multi-level (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000) and differentiated (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2006). That is they need to look at classroom level measures as well as school wide measures and be prepared to measure effectiveness in different ways for different contexts, even to the extent of different student groups within the one school.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report has been structured in such a way that allows for the efficient communication of the background to the research, the theoretical and methodological consideration and the findings. The chapters that follow begin with a review of the literature and then move into a discussion of the findings. It was decided to combine the findings and discussion into the one chapter allowing for a greater integration of the data. The findings rely heavily on the responses of the students in the focus groups and as such direct quotations are used throughout. A chapter containing recommendations for both further research and for school improvement ideas follow.

CONCLUSION

While it has been important to examine models of effectiveness that have developed over time, it is also essential to examine what factors are used when measuring effectiveness. The research has evolved considerably in this regard, moving away from simplistic univariable
approaches to far more complex approaches that are multivariable in nature (Kyriakides, 2005). The need to include affective and social outcome measures in school effectiveness research has been stressed in every major review of the field since the early 1980s (eg. Creemers, Stoll, & Reezigt, 2007; Good & Brophy, 1986; Rutter, 1983; Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995; Scheerens, 1992; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Townsend, 2007b).

Over the past two decades it has been refreshing to see the significant advancements that have been made in the development of theories, models of effectiveness and the methodological approaches of the research. While there will no doubt be further developments in these areas the conceptual framework that surrounds school effectiveness research is stable and there is much agreement among researchers as to the appropriateness of current approaches. The continuing convergence of the school effectiveness and improvement fields has significantly advanced the debate and allowed a greater depth of consideration to occur.

Having briefly considered the context of this research, it is necessary to review the development of theory and research into effective schools by way of a review of current literature. The following chapter explores the many and varied research projects and the associated literature with the intention of distilling the most appropriate measures of school effectiveness.
CHAPTER TWO – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

Research must, as a matter of course establish itself within a broad framework of other research in the same field. With this in mind, this review of the literature aims to further lay the framework in which this research is based. This research project examines what students perceive effective education to be. It examines student views on a range of factors including teaching and learning as well as the role of activities that have traditionally been referred to as extra-curricular or co-curricular elements within schools. This review focuses on the effective education research to date, including the early research that aimed to establish key elements of effectiveness, through to the current literature that sees the continuing convergence of the Effective Schools and Improving Schools research fields. The latter part of the review focuses on research that examines students and their role in and perceptions of effective education.

A GENERATIONAL APPROACH

Generation One – before the 1980s

School effectiveness has been debated over a much longer period overseas than in Australia. In the United States of America, the movement began in the 1970s, although it was not until the 1980s that in Britain a similar interest emerged (Lezotte, 1992). In the United States The Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966) began the school improvement debate by concluding that schools had little or no impact on the life chances of students when the effects of the family and other background factors were taken into account. In the United Kingdom, the work of Reynolds in 1976 (Reynolds, 1985) and the Fifteen Thousand Hours Study (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979) kick started the effective schools movement. In its infancy, the early focus of the research was on students’ achievement alone. An effective school was viewed simply as one in which the end product of achievement was excellent when compared to other schools.

Generation Two – Mid 1980s to Mid 1990s

The inadequacy of such an approach resulted in the second generation of school effectiveness research taking far more into consideration than just academic results by researching the
“medico-social environment … showing differences in delinquency rates between schools … and child guidance referral rates” (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002, p. 121). Other studies measured school effectiveness using a number of outcomes as well as considering intake data of the students (Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1997; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). In the early 1980s, the findings of the school effectiveness research manifested itself in policy by the British educational authorities attempting to improve the school system and make it more accountable by giving schools greater financial control over school based budgets (Beresford, Mortimore, MacGilchrist, & Savage, 1992). School effectiveness, under these broad concepts of ‘financial independence and global budgeting’, was perceived in fiscal terms as efficiency or at the very least some easily quantifiable measure such as academic achievement that could be viewed in a value added sense (Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1997). At this early stage, school effectiveness was understood to be a linear model that expected increases in funding to have direct and quantifiable increases in student learning outcomes. This narrow perspective continued until the late 1980s when two studies examined a number of outcomes in measuring school effectiveness (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988; D. Smith & Tomlinson, 1989). The outcomes measured included such elements as results in mathematics, reading, writing, attendance, behaviour and attitude to school. Further attention was drawn to large variations within school departments (Smith & Tomlinson, 1989). For example, it was demonstrated in one study that out of 18 schools, the school that was ranked first for Mathematics was fifteenth for English (Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1997).

The major studies published after the 1980s in the United Kingdom (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988) and in the United States (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993) were predominantly focused on primary schools as they were expected to have the greatest influence on educational outcomes of students even into their secondary years (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002). It was about the same time that effectiveness studies in the Netherlands, Hong Kong and Norway began in earnest.

These studies of the late 1980s encouraged a more holistic approach. A review of the early research (Beresford, Mortimore, MacGilchrist, & Savage, 1992) outlined the findings concluding that schools do make a difference and the factors contributing to effectiveness are
numerous and importantly can be identified (Reynolds, 1985). Several studies drew the same conclusions (Goldstein (1993); Sammons (1993); Gray (1995) and Thomas (1995) in Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1997) and illustrated that certain key elements of effective education can be used in measuring school effectiveness across contexts. They recognised that the research until then was far too limiting in the elements being measured and too simplistic in the methodologies used. It was argued that the need to use a wider range of factors in measuring effectiveness was essential as was the need to establish a rigorous theory of research (Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1997).

The effective schools movement in the 1990s has been summarised by stating that until that point in time, “research reviews outnumbered the total empirical investigations” (Creemers, 1992, p. 689). It was recognised that much more research based on empirical data was required rather than studies that analysed the results of previous research data. In response, the 1990s saw a considerable body of empirical research emerging that used significantly better theoretical and methodological approaches than in the past, providing better data on which to draw conclusions. This was further enforced when it was argued that there was a continuing need to further the advancements made in research development, particularly methodology and theory development (Bosker & Scheerens, 1992, p. 750). In fact it was stated that “school effective research [had] indeed come of age” (Creemers & Scheerens, 1992, p. 689). It was argued that over the past 20 years several models of effectiveness had emerged of which only one has yielded valid estimates of effectiveness after taking into account the nature of school intakes. These models showed a clear progression within the school effectiveness and school improvement movements to improve the usefulness of the data collected and, therefore, the analyses that can occur.

**Generation Three – The Mid 1990s Onwards**

The third generation of effectiveness studies has seen two significant changes. The first was the focus on contextual variation (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002) and the multi-dimensional aspect of effectiveness measures (Kyriakides, 2007). The second important development has seen the continued coming together of two formally distinct lines of inquiry, namely the Effective Schools and School Improvement research domains. The research into the contextual variation and the need for elements to reflect differences across contexts and even within contexts also made the debate far more international (Townsend, 2007b).
A number of studies (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Thrupp, Lupton, & Brown, 2007; Virgilio, Teddlie, & Oescher, 1991; Wimpelberg, Teddlie, & Stringfield, 1989) examined the effects of different socio-economic contexts, urban/rural differences and governance factors such as public/private schools as well as the social justice implications of school improvement (Kyriakides, 2007). These studies began to explore how contextual variation played an important part in student achievement. However, there is much more research needed in this area. In fact, the emergence of the contextual variation within effective school research, in many ways has:

“plateaued intellectually because of the increasing official sponsorship of the effectiveness community and the promotion of the simplistic five-, seven- or thirteen factor models by governments and policy makers in some countries” (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002, p. 13).

The late 1990s also saw the emergence of a significant volume of criticism of this oversimplification of effective education similar in strength to the criticisms of the early school effectiveness debates (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002). This prompted the International School Effectiveness Research Project (ISERP) that evolved from discussions with researchers from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. Other studies from Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, the Republic of Ireland, Norway and Taiwan were later included in the ISERP (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002). Up until this point effectiveness research was very much ethnocentric recognising the need for contextual changes but failed to deliver research that reflected this (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002). The ISERP was the first project to clearly focus on both context specific and universal factors of effectiveness.

The last decade has also seen a convergence of the two distinct lines of inquiry namely, Effective Schools and School Improvement. The role of the annual International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) and the associated journal School Effectiveness and School Improvement has played a significant role in the internationalisation and convergence processes. As the research in these fields has matured, there has been an increase in the number of empirical research projects that have added much to the debate in terms of data, improved research methodologies as well as theoretical underpinnings. While school effectiveness and improving schools came to the debate from different perspectives,
they essentially focus on how schools can better the life chances of students. It is this focus that is now driving the research and debate.

Substantial progress has been made since the early five factor model of school effectiveness measuring leadership, instructional focus, climate conducive to learning, high expectations and consistent measurement of pupil achievement (Townsend, 2007b). It is now common place to acknowledge that the effectiveness of any school must be considered within the context in which it operates “rather than simply on ‘ingredients’ that help make up the school operations” (Townsend, 2007b, p. 4).

Several reflections on the current research and literature to date, The International Handbook of School Effectiveness Research (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), Improving Schools and Educational Systems: International Perspectives (Harris & Chrispeels, 2006), and the International Handbook of School Effectiveness and Improvement (Townsend, 2007b) provide excellent evidence for the continuing interest in and development of theory and understanding of the international perspective of school effectiveness and school improvement.

**KEY FACTORS OF EFFECTIVE AND IMPROVING SCHOOLS**

While it is no longer a moot point that a range of criteria to measure effective schools is appropriate, there has been much debate about what these factors might be and how important it is not to simply accept a recipe of factors without considering the individual context. In the mid 1980s, a number of studies began to establish categories and measures of key elements of effective schools (Purkey & Smith, 1983). Purkey and Smith (1983) examined a number of case studies numbering 159 schools, and emerged with what they considered to be a clear list of effective characteristics for schools. Again methodological concerns can be raised, but there appears to be a consensus on the importance of some factors. Table 1 illustrates Purkey and Smith’s (1983) list and the number of studies they reported mentioned each factor.
Element | Number of Reports
---|---
Strong leadership | 4
Orderly climate | 3
High expectations | 6
Frequent evaluation | 3
Achievement orientated policy | 4
Co-operative atmosphere | 3
Clear goals for basic skills | 2
In-service training | 2
Time on task | 3
Reinforcement | 2
Streaming | 2

**Table 1: Keys to Effectiveness (Adapted from Purkey & Smith, 1983).**

A meta-analysis study and subsequent summary of the school effectiveness literature (Mulford, 1987) determined that ten factors were consistent across the range of studies, both Australian and international. Another study at about the same time (Gable, Hall, & Murphy, 1986) showed strong similarities in six of the factors as shown in Table 2.

While methodological concerns can be expressed concerning each of these research projects it is apparent that there was a growing consensus developing that effective schools did have a number of common characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mulford’s Categories (Mulford, 1987)</th>
<th>Gable, Hall et al., Categories (Gable, Hall, &amp; Murphy, 1986)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of mission</td>
<td>Clear School Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great expectations</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on Academic Performance</td>
<td>Frequent monitoring of student progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscious attention to climate</td>
<td>Safe and orderly environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative leadership</td>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>School community relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Mulford and Gable’s Categories (Gable, Hall, & Murphy, 1986; Mulford, 1987)**

Scheeren’s (1992) research has also seen the emergence of a number of key elements of effective schools (Table 3) as well as stressing the need to measure school effectiveness by measuring student attainment taking into account student intake characteristics before using statistical methods (Scheerens, 1992, p. 79).
Essential Elements of Effective Education

- Teacher’s experience
- Changes in staff
- Private/State education
- Achievement orientated policy
- Teacher co-operation/consensus
- Child-centred approach
- Opportunity to learn
- Structured teaching
- Leadership
- Secure and orderly school climate
- Emphasis on acquiring basic skills
- High expectations of student achievement
- Frequent assessment of pupils progress

**TABLE 3: SCHEEREN’S KEY EFFECTIVENESS CHARACTERISTICS (SCHEERENS, 1992)**

Two other international studies were considered formative in the effective schools research. The first of these studies was conducted in the USA (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992) and had as a clear aim “to detect whether between school differences in progress scores exist and to what extent these between school differences can be explained by school related organisational factors” (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992, p. 777). This study focused on the differences between specific subjects, namely arithmetic and language, and as a result their findings are subject specific. While this is not a flaw in the research it must be considered before generalisations across the wider school can be made. After taking into account the pupil-adjusted intake of schools, it was observed that there were major school differences using the variables measured (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992). The between school differences noted were firstly the quality issues, which were considered to be important in effective education, as well as equity issues. The balancing of effectiveness for both equity and quality still exist as a difficulty in current research (Kyriakides, 2007). Brandsma and Knuver’s findings (1992) revealed small-scale equity differences, concluding that they “do not seem to have an empirical base” (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992, p. 783). These findings suggest that the socio-economic status of the pupils still has a “rather large significant effect on student achievement and cannot be compensated for by schools” (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992, p. 787). Pupil achievement levels, taking into account the intake characteristics, have significant impacts on
the outcomes experienced by schools. Several years on this view is still supported and there continues to be a recognition that schools must consider their student base and develop reasonable approaches to school effectiveness if they are to succeed (Harris, 2002).

A third significant factor in school differences is the distinction between school and classroom organisational factors (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992, p. 787). This study uses 14 variables to examine classroom factors, while 15 were used for organisational factors. It fails, however, to itemise these variables although they do list several factors (Table 4) that had the largest positive and negative influence on effective education (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992). It is worth noting here the inclusion of classroom factors, as it has only been since this study that the fields of school effectiveness and instructional effectiveness studies have worked together (Scheerens & Creemers, 1992). Increasingly it is recognised that school effectiveness often succeeds or fails at the classroom level (Harris & Chapman, 2002). While school effectiveness plans can be implemented throughout a school, the improvement outcomes rely significantly on the successful implementation of the plans by the teacher at the point of contact with the students. Greater associations between these fields of research need to continue in order to gain “a better understanding of the key factors in school effectiveness” (Harris & Chapman, 2002, p. 74).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Organisation</th>
<th>Classroom Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cito-School Testing*</td>
<td>Homework for all pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of staff meetings</td>
<td>Amount of teacher-student feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of new innovations in early stage of development</td>
<td>Planning of lessons and following rosters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent on school policy making</td>
<td>Types of curriculum in use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support agent’s time in school</td>
<td>Rule setting by teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*an independent cross school test

**TABLE 4: BRANDSMA & KNUVER’S 14 VARIABLES (BRANDSMA & KNUVER, 1992)**

A study of United Kingdom schools had as its explicit aim to determine whether schools in the UK made a difference and what elements were responsible for these differences (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992, p. 753). The study found that there were marked differences between the ability of students when they enter a school (Mortimore,
This study used far more complex measures than previous studies by using a number of variables rather than only standardised tests in arithmetic and language (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992). These measures included reading ability, mathematics, writing skills, a measure of student behaviour, as well as attendance (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992). It was noted that when students were assessed later in reading ability, mathematics and writing skills, they were able to improve more markedly in writing than both reading and mathematics. It is important to consider that the findings demonstrated that if improvements were being made in one element, there was more likely to be improvement in all elements. The reverse was also observed. A significant finding was that “[f]or each student, therefore, the school she or he joins at age seven can have highly significant impacts upon future progress or development” (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992, p. 762). The findings go further and state:

“The impact of schools upon their students appears to be cumulative. This suggests to us that factors related both to school and to class processes have an influence upon the effectiveness or otherwise of schools in promoting outcomes” (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992, p. 763).

The equity question was also addressed in the successful schools for the success of one group was also demonstrated for other groups. Examples of this included gender, social class and ethnicity. They concluded from their study that schools do make a difference and are equally effective in the measures of equity and quality. The school and class processes referred to above are similar in nature to the factors discussed in other studies (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992). These factors of effectiveness have been referred to as “mechanisms for effectiveness or key elements” (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992, p. 763) and are listed in Table 5.
Purposeful leadership - Leader understands the needs of the school and is actively involved in the work.

Involvement of deputy head - Involvement in areas such as allocating staff to classes.

Involvement of teachers - Teachers to be involved in curriculum planning and developing guidelines.

Consistency among teachers - Continuity of staff and consistency in approach.

Structured sessions - An organised framework within which students could work.

Intellectually challenging teaching – Students’ needs to be challenged and stimulated and teacher needs to be interested.

Work-centred environment - Teachers concentrating on content of work rather than routine matters.

Limited focus within sessions - One curriculum area as focus in a session.

Maximum communication - Teachers to spend as much time as possible relating to the students.

Record keeping - Official records of students’ work was important to the children.

Parental involvement – Classroom help, educational visits, teacher interviews.

Positive climate – Less emphasis on punishment, more on rewards. Needed to be firm.

(Adapted from Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992)

TABLE 5: MECHANISMS FOR EFFECTIVENESS

It is important to note the precautionary statement at the end of this paper that these 12 factors do not “guarantee success” but are a set of factors based in empirical research (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992). In both studies (Brandsma & Knuver, 1992; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992) the factors identified as having a positive influence, all seemed to have small effect sizes. In a review of meta-analysis studies it was demonstrated that the average effect size for all factors over all these studies was small, approximately 0.2 or 0.4 standard deviations (Fraser, 1992). The findings of this study go on to state:

“This finding provides a timely reminder that we should not be too hasty in dismissing educational treatments just because their effects are relatively small … what the educational productivity research reported here highlights is that we should not expect any single factor to have an enormous impact on student learning; rather the key to improving student learning and enhancing school effectiveness lies in simultaneously optimizing differential factors each of which bears a modest relationship to achievement” (Fraser, 1992, p. 718).
In a later review of literature (Creemers, 1997), a number of studies were used to provide a list of summarised factors that make a difference between effective and less-effective schools (Creemers, 1992; Creemers & Knuver, 1989; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Reynolds, 1988, 1991, 1992; Scheerens, 1990, 1992; Stringfield & Teddlie, 1991). It has been argued that the most informative of all studies (Creemers, 1997) produced a list of effective school correlates based on 400 studies of school effectiveness in the United States (Levine & Lezotte, 1990). These factors are illustrated in Table 6 below. Once again there appear to be a number of consistencies between this study and previously discussed studies concerning essential elements of effective education.

- Productive school climate and culture
- Focus on students’ acquisition of central learning skills
- Appropriate monitoring of student progress
- Practice-orientated staff development at the school site
- Outstanding leadership
- Salient parent involvement
- Effective instructional arrangements and implementations
- High operationalised expectations and requirements for students
- Other possible correlates

(Adapted from Creemers, 1997)

**Table 6: Effectiveness Correlates from United States Schools**

One of the most informative sources for an Australian perspective of effective schools is contained in the ACER publication edited by McGaw, Piper, Banks & Evans, namely Making Schools More Effective (1993). This report draws a conclusion from the research that narrow views of effectiveness, especially focusing on academic performance was no longer satisfactory. As it states:

“School effectiveness is about a great deal more than maximizing academic achievement. Learning and the love of learning; personal development and self-esteem; life skills, problem solving and learning how to learn; the development of independent thinkers and well rounded confident individuals; all rank as highly or more highly as the outcomes of effective schooling as success in a narrow range of academic disciplines” (McGaw, Piper, Banks, & Evans, 1993, p. 174).

It is clear from the findings of the Effective Schools Project that the elements which do show through as having an influence on effective schools can seldom, if ever, be disentangled from each other in order to create generalisations (Banks, 1993, p. 19). It was noted that the respondents to the Effective Schools Project understood and recognised the complexities of
the issues involved. Banks’ nine themes are listed from the fifteen response categories of the Effective Schools Project (Banks, 1993, p. 21) and are shown in Table 7.

- Teachers and Curriculum
- Ethos
- Resources
- Equity
- Parents
- Shared Vision
- Shared Responsibility
- Outcomes
- Response to change

| Table 7: Banks’ Elements of Effective Schools in Australia (Banks, 1993) |

One of the more well known reviews of the literature (Creemers, 1997) emphasises the need to use different factors of school effectiveness depending on which level of education is being studied. In line with his 1994 model, this study examined the student level, classroom level, school level and contextual level. As this current project takes the form of a single school case study, it is worth examining the key elements that are considered most important at the school level in particular. This further develops the group of factors outlined earlier by focusing attention on the individual school. Table 8 shows a synthesis of the key elements of effective education using all the research to date with a particular focus on individual schools (Creemers, 1997).

- Child-centred Education
- Consistency of Teachers
- Co-operative atmosphere
- Equity
- Frequent assessment
- High expectations for achievement
- Leadership
- Parental involvement
- Responsiveness to change
- Secure and safe school climate
- Shared vision and responsibility
- Structured learning
- Culture supporting effectiveness

| Table 8: Key Elements of Effective Education (Creemers, 1997) |
A study that predominantly focused on students and teachers found yet more factors specifically orientated to students and generated yet another list of elements as illustrated in Table 9 below (Riddell & Brown (1991) in Harris, 2002).

- Pupil control system
- Environmental factors for pupils
- Involvement of pupils
- Academic development of pupils
- Behaviour of teachers
- Management within the classroom
- School management structure
- High level of pupil involvement
- Low level of institutional controls
- Low concentration on punishment
- High expectations of what students can achieve


Notwithstanding the similarities in many of these lists, it remains difficult to consolidate the key elements to effective schooling. The many different methodological approaches and focuses within the studies make it problematic to draw together many of the research findings. What can be said from all these studies is that they “show there is reason to believe that the set of significant effectiveness predictors will vary across contexts” (Scheerens, Vermeulen, & Pelgrum, 1992, p. 790). They also recognise that some school organisational factors are constant across contexts and therefore become valuable effectiveness predictors.

As the new millennium arrived a new debate within the effectiveness research developed. One school of thought has emphasised a move away from preparing a list of key elements. It has been argued that research will continue missing the mark if it remains solely focused on establishing a list of elements that effective schools have or should aim to have. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a need to move away from thinking that effective schools provide a knowledge base for students and by necessity must move towards equipping students to know how to construct knowledge with others (Watkins & Carnell, 2002). This is of ever increasing importance as we move into a future where change is rapid and where we are not even aware of what skills and knowledge jobs of the future will require.
Skills rather than knowledge must become the new focus for effectively preparing students for the future.

Harris, in her book “School Improvement: What’s in it for schools?” (Harris, 2002), provides a summary of views on contextual elements of effective schools. She states that “schools require strategies for improvement that match their particular context, circumstances and developmental needs” (Harris, 2002, p. 7). The notion that one strategy for school improvement can be applied to a range of schools fundamentally misunderstands the process of school and classroom-level change. Kyriakides (2007) shares similar concerns when he argues the need to have elements of school effectiveness viewed as multidirectional, that is, meaning different things for schools across contexts and at different levels within the one organisation.

It can also be argued that while reform varies due to the combinations of a wide range of factors, there appear to be a number of larger reforms that are common (Hopkins & Levine, 2000). These reforms have focused on curriculum, accountability, governance, market forces and status of teachers. Further, it has been argued that school improvement must also take into account the developmental stage of schools (Hopkins, 2001). Different strategies of improvement are needed depending on the ‘growth state’ or culture of a particular school. Three growth states or ‘types’ of schools have been recognised as being in existence (Harris, 2002). ‘Type 1’ schools are those that are failing and wish to become moderately effective. Such schools it is argued “cannot improve themselves” (Harris, 2002, p. 27) and require external intervention and support. ‘Type 2’ schools are those that are moderately effective and wish to become more effective. In these schools the improvement initiatives are far more school-initiated and rely very little on external help. Typically ‘Type 3’ schools are those that are effective and wish to remain so. These schools often welcome external support but do not rely on it and are comfortable and capable of examining their practices; discussing them and making changes that are considered necessary on a regular basis.

This being the case, schools need to be increasingly discerning in selecting school improvement strategies that will work in each context. The impact of this view on systemic school improvement approaches is significant as it involves each school developing its own scheme. There is a sense of reinventing the wheel and a degree of blindness to research
findings described previously that recognises effective schools across a wide range of countries and contexts do seem to have some elements at least that are common.

As demonstrated there have been a number of significant research projects that have determined a degree of contextual overlap in measurements of effectiveness. There is evidence to suggest certain factors are valuable predictors of effectiveness across contexts (Scheerens, Vermeulen, & Pelgrum, 1992). One of the principal and most recent large-scale studies of effective schools around the world has been The International School Effectiveness Research project ISERP (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002).

The ISERP is a study of considerable size stretching across many different nations. It is unique in its approach on a number of levels. First, it is a longitudinal study paralleled in several different countries. Further it used both qualitative and quantitative approaches in theory, methods design and analysis, something that has not been attempted before. The Louisiana Schools Project (LSP) was similar in many respects although the ISERP, most importantly, had an international focus and therefore the results can be easier to generalise across other contexts.

The ISERP developed 10 dimensions of effective schools that it used to determine the effectiveness of a school as can be found in Table 10.

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<td>Teachers’ teaching style</td>
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<td>The influence of parents</td>
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<td>The principal</td>
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<td>School expectations of students</td>
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<td>School goals</td>
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Table 10: ISERP Dimensions of Effectiveness (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002)
As individual schools begin the process of improving there must be recognition by those implementing the changes of the concepts of change management. Basic intervention in the classroom will not necessarily result in sustained change unless the school has developed a capacity to change. It is stated that, “The crucial point is that in terms of school development, neither external nor internal strategies will impact upon the process of students unless the strategy itself impacts at the same time on the internal conditions or change capacity of the school” (Hopkins, 2001, p. 36). Capacity for change can best be viewed as the ability of a school to encourage students to improve by providing opportunities for students to do things together (Harris, 2002). It also related to a culture within schools where staff works together collegially to improve and support one another (Hargreaves, 1994).

Increasingly the role of educational leadership is being recognised as having a far greater influence on the effectiveness of schools than ever before. However, the leadership that is being discussed is not that of top-down leadership but rather the leadership provided to students from all teachers when given the opportunity by the head of the school to appropriately lead the students. The concept of teacher leadership presupposes that teachers have the capacity to exercise leadership, a concept that has been referred to as a “radical” notion (Durrant, 2004). By “radical” Durrant (2004) refers to the ability of teachers to shape school structures, cultures and policies by:

“teachers encouraging leadership in their colleagues, so that shared or distributed leadership is not dispersed by the principal, used as an implementation tool or represented by a list of roles and tasks, but becomes a value underpinning the way in which schools work” (Durrant, 2004, p. 27).

This view of teacher leadership as being radical and having a significant impact on the effectiveness of schools is supported by a increasingly growing number of research findings (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Frost & Durrant, 2003; Frost & Harris, 2003; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Kyriakides, 2007; Youitt, 2004). There appears to be a growing body of literature that emphasises the important role of teachers, particularly in respect to their leadership of students in creating effective schools.

There is also a view within recent literature that researchers should not be looking at what elements make a school effective but rather the philosophy or culture that is shared by effective schools (Harris, 2002). While school improvement programmes have varied in what
they have measured and how, they all seem to reflect a similar ‘philosophy’. Essentially this philosophy underpins the school as the agent for change, the teacher as the catalyst for the change and the students as the beneficiaries.

Recognising that students are the beneficiaries of effective schooling reforms it is now time for research into effective and improving schools to focus much more clearly and directly on data gathered from the students themselves. Most school development initiatives until present have emphasised school-level and system-level improvements rather than student-level orientation to schooling and student perceptions of desirable school environments. Considering that students are the final consumers of the educational service it is peculiar that their views have been so seldom sought. In fact:

“the most compelling reasons for schools to reconsider their approach to the provision of education are the views and behaviour of their key clients – the students” (Healey & Shimeld, 2002, p. 19).

While there has been a relatively small number of studies focusing on students that have attempted to gauge their contribution to school improvement, a great deal more needs to be done in this area (Tew, 2007). The role that students can play in further research is being increasingly recognised with “… students [having] a huge potential contribution to make to school improvement” (Harris, 2002, p. 62). The important question of why students have been overlooked in research is another research area worthy of due consideration. This view was so clearly expressed by a Dutch student who presented a paper following on from a Finnish Head of school who claimed to know everything about his own school by saying “I see things you could never see” (Beresford, 2003). When pupil voice is given tokenistic attention and they tend to provide answers teachers want (Robinson & Taylor, 2007) then there is unlikely to be any substantial gain but when pupils are genuinely engaged with the research process that “pupil voice will lead to changes which will enhance pupils’ experiences of schooling” (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 14).

This suggests that school improvement policies or initiatives that aim to facilitate independent learning, nurture students’ affinity to teachers, and provide favourable “learning opportunities should also positively and overtly consider students’ views” with an aim to assist them to become lifelong learners (Wong & Yeung, 2002, p. 2). While this is true, the concept of learning must be broadened from the traditional view of academic performance, as solely
measured by test scores or performance, to include learning skills that will support them in the future. This includes the ability for students to be put in situations that challenge them including non-academic curriculum experiences such as ‘adventure’ challenges or involvement in activities that promote students’ engagement (Deed, 2008). It is often said that the world is changing and developing so rapidly at the moment that we do not know what knowledge the future will require. However, what we do know is that employment will require students to be adaptable, apply learning to new situations and have the ability to work with others (Healey & Shimeld, 2002; Watkins & Carnell, 2002).

The affinity of students to teachers is increasingly being recognised as an important factor in improving schools because the way students and teachers interact has a direct impact on students’ behaviour and achievement outcomes (Beresford, 2003; Hopkins, Harris, & Jackson, 1997). If students get on well with their teachers and if the teachers are found to be helpful, encouraging and approachable the school is more likely to be more effective (Wong & Yeung, 2002). It is widely accepted that students learn in a variety of ways and under a variety of conditions making the concept of a wide teaching and learning repertoire important if all students are to benefit in effective schools (Kyriakides, 2007). This is something that is further enhanced by the staff-student relationship that must be developed if a school is to be considered effective.

This positive staff-student relationship is even more important when one considers that while schools may have the favourable characteristics required of an effective school, the students often bring to the school a negativity which clouds their perceptions of the positive characteristics (Wong & Yeung, 2002). The danger of students disengaging from school can be catastrophic on their learning opportunities and the effectiveness of school for them (Deed, 2008). Likewise positive influences that are not curriculum orientated are important to students’ positive perceptions. For example, can a school that has students who enjoy themselves because of positive peer relations or friendships call itself effective? While this is a moot point, it can be said that students who do not have the motivation to do well in their academics and who do not feel good about their learning are unlikely to perceive any positive characteristics of an effective school (Wong & Yeung, 2002). Therefore a principle focus for effective schools should concern what motivates students to achieve academically.
Unfortunately, ineffective schools are often filled with unmotivated students who are unwilling to invest their effort in academic work (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).

Further to this is the negativity created by what students perceive to be the restrictive nature of school rules or expectations. Schools, particularly secondary schools, are often places where traditional standards are enforced and indoctrinated usually in the face of social change driven by adolescent subculture. This inevitably creates conflict between the students and the school’s expectation or rules regardless of parental support of these rules. This rejection of the school and family standards are manifest in the students “persistent and disruptive behaviour in the class room” (Deed, 2008, p. 206). Many students, however, appreciate the consistencies created by rules and student complaints about rules are not usually the rules themselves but rather the inconsistent application of the rules (Beresford, 2003). Many students appreciate the boundaries set by rules as it provides a predictable, stable and safe environment in which to learn. This is yet another example of how it is increasingly being considered that more than academics is essential in making an effective school and certainly, as a minimum, must include those elements of a school’s curriculum that engages students.

Fostering of a positive school culture and the enjoyment students gain from attending and participation in the life of the school is frequently cited in literature as a significant contributor to effective schools (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). The literature concerning school culture is as voluminous as that for effective schools and can cover a diverse range of factors that contribute to school climate and culture. There is considerable debate about what it is and how to generate a positive school culture. The ISERP (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002) consolidated the concept of school culture into providing a common school vision that is easy to articulate, understand and that is shared, an environment that is orderly and provides safety from harm, both physically and emotionally as well as a place that values and encourages positive reinforcement. There is a view that school culture must have a reference to a values system (McMahon, 2005) and while this might be a slippery concept it is important to consider it in the context of this research as the school in which the participants for this study are enrolled is based on the values of the Christian church.
Further to this is the importance that schools place on their systems for rewarding students who achieve well academically and are positive contributors to the school community by being ‘good citizens’ (Beresford, 2003). Schools that reward students through a merit or awards system provide an environment where the positive contributions of students are acclaimed and therefore provide a culture that recognised and rewards a positive outlook to schooling.

Student satisfaction of school is also considerably dependant on the interaction students have with their peers.

“The general interaction between peers, in particular their level of conversations, shared hobbies, books and out-of-class activities, raises the overall academic performance” (Harker & Tymms, 2004, p. 179).

Any reading of the current press within Australia and in other OECD nations shows that higher test scores consistently dominate public opinion and therefore government response and policy formation. While academic success is an essential and fundamental part of schooling, it is not the only one, and in some surveys not the most important. As reported by Katyal & Evers (2005), a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll sought from respondents whether a variety of school outcomes were important as ways to measure school effectiveness (Katyal & Evers, 2005). The results showed the following: 82% said the percentage of students who graduate from high school was a “very important” measure; 79% said the percentage of graduates practising good citizenship was “very important”. Further to this, 87% of Americans felt that sex education should be included in high school curricula and only 50% said standardised test scores were a “very important” way to measure school effectiveness. The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallop Poll reported also found that 60% of respondents, if forced to choose, would prefer their children to receive C grades and be active in extra-curricular activities, rather than have A grades and not be involved in extra-curricular activities (Katyal & Evers, 2005).

The realisation that students’ grades are positively influenced by their engagement in schooling is continuing to develop. Students who develop a sense of belonging and commitment to school are those that have maximised their involvement (Katyal & Evers, 2005). There is considerable discussion as to what is meant by engagement and as yet a common definition has not been reached. Suffice it to say that it is essentially a willingness of
students to participate in their school beyond the classroom and build up relationships with staff and peers in areas other than the formal teaching of the curriculum.

“Terms such as belonging, participation, identification and school membership describe aspects of engagement and illustrate social and emotional factors relevant to academic learning . . . Student participants believed that they were engaged with their schooling in a sense of the word ‘engaged’ that meant more than merely turning up. They participated in school activities, both formally and informally and both students and teachers acknowledged this participation in many cases was as a result of the influence and help given by teachers” (Katyal & Evers, 2005, pp. 42-43).

**KEY ELEMENTS CHosen FOR USE IN THIS RESEARCH**

While the literature is far from unequivocal concerning what elements are essential to measure in effective schools, it does recognise certain elements that have been determined as universally important to effective and improving schools. It is also important to recognise that other elements must be school specific to reflect the contextual nature of schooling and student success. The expectations of all stakeholders or interest groups vary from country to country and just as much from locality to locality. The survey developed and used in this research measures those elements considered throughout the literature to be appropriate across contexts as well as those that might be context specific. The context specific nature of the elements have been determined by the researcher’s intimate knowledge of the school being a full time employee and fully immersed in the teaching and learning programmes for the past five years. It was also expected that the research itself would determine contextually specific elements that were important to the students as an outcome of the project.

For the purpose of this research ten key elements have been selected to reflect those elements that are most consistently determined as appropriate across the various studies and as the ISERP have shown to be applicable across contexts. The selection of appropriate elements has also taken into account those elements that the researcher regards as contextually specific for the research site. The 10 elements used in the initial phase of this research project are listed in Table 11.
A close examination of this list illustrates many of the factors that have been shown to be important through the various studies discussed in the literature review. The themes chosen have all been adapted from the wide range of studies found throughout the research and often reflect the combined views of many.

In this study Educational Leadership is used to describe the role of the Head of school and other senior staff in communicating the mission of the school to staff, students and parents (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992; Scheerens, 1992; Creemers, 1997). It also encompasses the effectiveness of the Head and other senior staff to apply the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional programmes within the school (Gable, Hall, & Murphy, 1986).

The all important concepts of teaching and learning were dealt with through different themes. Focus on Appropriate Teaching Methodologies refers to the ability of the teacher to plan and deliver a well constructed lesson that caters for the learning needs of the students and engages the students in effective learning (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992; Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002) while a Pervasive Focus on Learning relates to the underlying culture of the school that encourages students to focus on their own learning (Scheerens, 1992). The concept of culture is of course far deeper and more complex with
much debate concerning the exact nature of what constitutes school culture. This project has taken Positive School Culture to refer to the underlying sense of contentment and the feeling of satisfaction that life in school is ‘right’, that is, it is consistent with a person’s positive expectations and/or beliefs of school (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992; Creemers, 1997; McMahon, 2005). It manifests itself in a willingness by both staff and students to become involved in the general life of the school. It is where staff members feel they work together collegially to improve and support one another and where students feel valued, cared for and have a basic enjoyment of school (Hargreaves, 1994).

Another factor that is considered to play an important part in a students’ sense of belonging to a school community, is the Engagement of Students across the School. This refers to the ability of a school to motivate students to learn by increasing their sense of belonging and therefore involvement with academic work through encouraging participation with other students across a range of activities outside the classroom (Riddell & Brown, 1991; Katyal & Evers, 2005). While student engagement is important it will never be significant if students do not have a sense of safety and being cared for. A Safe and Supportive Environment for all describes the surroundings that is created through school policy, implementation of that policy and the relational ability of staff with students that results in students feeling they are in a safe place that protects and cares for them (Gable, Hall, & Murphy, 1986; Creemers, 1997; Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2002).

Having High Expectations and appropriate expectations for all in this project focuses on setting standards that challenge both students and staff to achieve their best, not only academically but in terms of their interactions with others and involvement in the broader life of the school (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Gable, Hall, & Murphy, 1986; Scheerens, 1992; Creemers, 1997). At their most basic schools are places of learning and in order to determine the development of knowledge and skills it is important that student achievement across academic and non-academic indicators is regularly assessed. Regular Monitoring of Student Progress principally focuses on the need to assess both, formal and informal, student achievement as well as other more general aspects of educational development (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Scheerens, 1992; Creemers, 1997).
The final two themes examine quite different factors. *Development of Staff Skills* focuses on the skills acquisition of teachers as they develop professionally so that they are able to improve their teaching and the learning of their students (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Creemers, 1997). The final factor, *Parental and Community Connection* measures the engagement of the school with its local community, particularly its parents (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1992; Gable, Hall, & Murphy, 1986; Creemers, 1997; Banks 1993). It does not assume parental involvement in the classroom but rather parental involvement in wider school activities and the school’s ability to communicate its mission, policies and student progress.

In terms of the research context, there are no single elements that can be considered to be applicable to the research site alone. The contextual nature of the elements comes about in the way the elements are measured within the school context. This approach corresponds to the views, as discussed in the literature review, concerning the philosophical approach or culture in each research context (Harris, 2002) and how elements may be the same across contexts but measured or viewed in different ways (De Maeyer, Rymenana, Van Petegem, van den Bergh, & Rijlaarsdam, 2007). An example of this is the *Focus on Appropriate Teaching Methodologies*, which in the particular school being studied refers to a commitment to the differentiated curriculum and teaching to the individual learning styles of students. A further manifestation of this will be in the *Positive School Culture*, which in this particular study includes an overtly Christian perspective that clearly does not apply to a majority of schools in Australia, let alone the world.

**CONCLUSION**

There has been a great deal of work done by a range of researchers using a variety of methods that have allowed conclusions to be drawn in relation to key elements of effective schools. It is undoubtedly true and fully accepted by this research that it is a futile exercise to try and develop a definitive list of key factors. This research has not and does not wish to be perceived as having attempted to do this. However, it does recognise that in order to measure effective schools a set of criteria that is diverse and includes both universal factors applied locally as well as context specific factors must be developed. Using the literature as a base and an intimate knowledge of the research context, as well as using the professional educators at the site, a comprehensive and appropriate set of criteria has been developed and used.
CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this chapter is to provide a detailed outline of the methodological approach taken beginning with the theoretical design and implementation of the project followed by an examination of the analysis of data and a justification of the approach adopted in this study.

Explanations of the underpinning theoretical approaches will be followed by an explanation of the analytical tools used as well as the procedures for collecting the data. Consideration is given to the use of the questionnaire designed and implemented and the focus group phase of the research.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Methodological Design - Theory Verification or Formulation

Traditionally researchers have used qualitative and quantitative studies to answer different types of questions. For example, quantitative methodologies have been considered most useful in answering questions that are confirmatory while qualitative approaches are better suited to exploratory questions. This simplistic view has been challenged by a number of authors who refer to this position as a “Cinderella position” (Erzberger & Prein, 1997, p. 143). An alternative view is one where the use of mixed methods using quantitative and qualitative research can be used for theory generation as well as verification (Punch, 1998). This position is held by a number of others and its benefits are best summarised as:

“A major advantage in mixed methods research is that it enables the researcher to simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploratory questions and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 19).

While this project accepts that theory verification and formulation can occur hand in hand it does not have as its fundamental aim theory development. As discussed in the previous section, considerable work by others has produced a very solid theoretical framework for the effective schools domain. Rather, this research intends to both verify this theory and also to provide opportunity to add to or modify current theory. This approach has been taken in part
to address criticisms of research that simply measures predetermined arbitrary lists of elements observed in schools (Fidler, 2005, p. 55).

This project was divided into a number of phases. The first phase following the development of the questionnaire was to administer the questionnaire to those students who volunteered to be participants and whose parents gave consent. The questionnaire (Appendix B) comprised a majority of closed questions with the latter questions seeking more open ended responses. The second phase involved conducting the four focus groups. While the general direction of the questions were determined at the time of developing the research (Appendix C), the questioning that took place was significantly influenced by the findings of phase one.

**Information Types and Sources of Data**

This research uses a number of different types of information obtained from a number of sources. First, the current literature in the effective school and improving schools paradigms is a source of information as outlined by the literature review in Chapter 2. The literature has been used to determine which factors of schooling are most commonly considered to be accurate indicators of effective schools across contexts. From the literature a range of factors has been determined as evident in Table 12. These factors were used in the development of a questionnaire instrument. Both cross-contextual factors as well as those considered as being important and specific to the school environment of the study site were taken into account.

![Table 12: Key elements chosen for use in this research](image)
Further to the information gained from the review of the literature, data were collected through the use of the questionnaire administered to students. The questionnaire measured two factors concurrently. Students were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale how they rated the importance of a range of elements in effective schools. They were also asked to indicate on a second five-point Likert scale how well their particular school rated in these elements.

The questionnaire also had an open-ended section that set out to discover any factors that students perceived as important but not measured through the questionnaire. Further to the questionnaire the research involved a number of focus groups that were used to provide additional data and an explanation for the trends that have emerged from the questionnaire. These focus groups were established using existing student groupings within the school. The information was gained solely from students enrolled in one independent school within the Sydney metropolitan area. The parents of students in Years 10 and 12 were asked to give permission for their children to participate in the study.

*Appropriate use of Thematic Coding*

The focus group phase of the research employed a methodological approach traditionally used in grounded theory studies, where new theory is developed, namely thematic coding. This approach of allowing the data to direct the analytical approach was found to be a useful way of approaching the analysis of data collected in the focus group phase of the research. While methodological tools based in grounded theory have been used it is important to underscore that this project does not attempt to generate new theory.

The use of the thematic coding was to allow the students’ responses during the open ended research phases to draw their own conclusions as to appropriate measures of effective schools over and above the elements taken from the research outlined above. However, it is felt important that a detailed explanation of Grounded Theory be incorporated in this chapter to explain the reasons behind using thematic coding as an analytical tool and at the same time justifying why this project does not attempt to be a Grounded Theory project.

There is a growing acceptance of using coding to analyse both inductively and deductively as well as using a hybrid of the two approaches in research (Patton, 2002) and as such it is
appropriate to consider its usefulness in a study like this. Considering inductive analysis, and in particular coding of textual data as an analytical tool, had its beginnings in grounded theory it is important to have an understanding of the grounded theory framework and to be cognisant of the development of coding as an analytical tool. A brief discussion of grounded theory follows by way of contextualising the use of its analytical tools yet recognising, as stated before, that this study does not base itself in the broader grounded theory approach.

Grounded theory was initially presented in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It began as a method of research that offered a rationale for a theory that is grounded, that is, generated from data collected during research studies. As well as the initial exposé of grounded theory there was included a logic and guidelines for the method. It aimed to provide a method that assisted the legitimisation of carefully executed qualitative research. Qualitative research in the 1960s had low status, especially in the United States and attracted strong criticism as being incapable of substantiation and verification (Strauss & Corbin, 1999, p. 75).

Grounded theory is a general method of research and is an alternative approach to the previously popular methods of developing theories that were not explicitly linked to the field of the actual research (Woods, 1992). Hence the term grounded theory was attributed to a general method for developing theory that is grounded in data, systematically gathered and analysed, a distinctive feature of which is ‘a general method of constant comparative analysis’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. vii). It was developed as applicable to both quantitative and qualitative studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 117) and was unique in that it included guidelines for its application as a research method. Though its emphasis on the development of theory is unique, recent refinements/reformulations of grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) still resemble a positivist paradigm but within them phenomenology is more easily identifiable.

Despite the general acceptance of the most recent representations of grounded theory, it was said to be a departure from the original focus on the essential nature of the data in a research process (Glaser, 1994). A number of theorists have continued to be critical of the more detailed codified procedures introduced for novice researchers (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is critiqued because it deviated from the original approach to grounded theory and because the
reformulated version has become the standard introduction to grounded theory replacing the original volume co-authored by Glaser and Strauss (Dey, 1999, p. 14).

From the original concept of coding data in order to develop theory about the phenomenon being studied, a distinction between substantive and theoretical coding was determined (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was indicated that a range of possibilities for the analytical nature of coding and its relationship to the development of theory existed (Dey, 1999, p. 10).

Grounded theory does not begin with the theory and attempt to verify it but commences with a topic for study and follows procedures that enable constructs to emerge from the analysis in the data as interplay continually occurs between data and theory developments (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is for this reason that grounded theory was not used as the theoretical background for this research. However, as stated earlier, its single-mindedness as an approach to be driven by the data was attractive and used as an analytical tool in the focus group phase of the project.

As a theoretical approach, grounded theory has been received and adapted by a range of research fields and used across diverse practitioner groups. Its high level of acceptance is influenced by the way its practitioners can use the method and make responses as needed with changes in time and circumstances (Strauss & Corbin, 1999, p. 77). This adaptability to various research fields and study designs enabled the methods used by grounded theory to be adapted and used in this study in spite of the project’s theory verification focus.

Grounded theory is inductively derived by the phenomenon being studied and its data analysis tools enable the researcher to explore ways in which simple and symbolic interactions give meaning to the reality of the study. Inductive theory construction lends itself to observing aspects of the phenomenon being studied and then identifying patterns that highlight relationships to more universal factors (Woods, 1992). The methodology has sufficient structure to get to the heart of the study yet sufficient flexibility for research to proceed supported by its processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). The inductive analytical approach used in grounded theory made it ideally suited to the analysis sought in the focus group phase of this research.
In grounded theory the concept of researcher and practitioner means that research is an interactive process shaped by the history, biography, gender, race and social class of the researcher as well as the participants in the research. The result of the research is a dense, reflective creation that represents the researcher’s images, understandings and interpretations of the phenomenon studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a, p. 4). While grounded theory bears resemblance to other qualitative methods of social research, its distinguishing characteristics identified in the reformulated version have given it uniqueness and effectiveness (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As well as the constant making of comparisons, the distinctive features include “systematic asking of generative and concept relating questions, theoretical sampling, systematic coding procedures, suggested guidelines for obtaining conceptual [not merely descriptive] density, variation and conceptual integration” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 161).

As this research had no intention of formulating new theory but rather to verify current theory and perhaps modify current effective schools theory, a grounded theory approach was not appropriate. However, the analytical tools used in grounded theory research, namely inductive thematic coding were attractive as a way of analysing the data collected in the focus groups. While current theory provided a context and framework for this study the intention was for the students to provide their perceptions of effective schools and for this data to determine themes important to them. This was considered important as very few, if any studies have focused on the views of students and current theories have developed without real consideration of students’ perception of what makes an effective school (Frost & Holden, 2008).

Analysis of Data – Inductive, Deductive or Hybrid

The decision of what approach to adopt for the analysis of qualitative data needs careful consideration and is an area of any project that requires much discussion and debate. However, one detail is certain, that is, there are no recipes for design or implementation (Patton, 2002). It is true that there are guidelines and accepted protocols but it is generally accepted that there are “few agreed upon cannons of qualitative data analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 16). Essentially the decision for the appropriate approach of analysis needs to be established in the very conception of the project to be determined by the question at hand and the theoretical orientation of the research. It is not possible to take a
predetermined design off the shelf, it requires modification and refinement as one proceeds (Fielding & Lee, 1998). The most fundamental question to ask remains; is the study a test of current theories and hypothesis derived from the theory and/or pre-existing research or is it to be a study that aims to formulate new theory emerging from the data? The latter approach is of course a grounded theory approach while the aforementioned aims to verify and perhaps modify current theory. It is important again to underscore a commonly held misconception that while grounded theory must undoubtedly use an inductive approach, essentially grounded in the data, research that tests theory must be deductive in its design and analytical approach.

It is far too simplistic to have such a clear-cut dichotomy. While it is easy to accept that grounded theory by its very nature must be inductive in its data analysis, inductive and deductive approaches can sit well together in research that has as its aim the investigation of a pre-existing theory. Essentially inductive analysis is not the sole domain of grounded theory studies and many of the analytical tools used by grounded theorists are appropriate to use in studies that are examining pre-existing theories but wish to do so by allowing the data to drive the analysis.

Those researchers firmly entrenched in the approaches of grounded theory would no doubt have issues with using an inductive approach to analysis while testing theory. It is true to say that in its purest form grounded theory would expect the researcher to bring to the data no preconceived notions of what the data will reveal once analysis begins. Analysis of the data must be solely driven by what emerges from the data and then from that develops a theory. While there is much written about the need for the researcher to ‘unbaggage’ him or herself from pre-existing theory there is also considerable argument that this is not entirely possible. In fact some criticism of this approach states that no research can be totally devoid of or ignore current theory and often the study’s strict adherence to the demands of true grounded theory are “watered down to suit the circumstances” (Bryman, 2001, p. 396).

There is considerable opinion within the qualitative data analysis literature that says while an inductive approach is entirely appropriate in grounded theory there is room for inductive analysis strategies “that includes examining preconceived hypothesis, that is, without the pretence of the mental blank slate advocated in pure forms of phenomenological inquiry and
grounded theory” (Patton, 2002, p. 493). Such an approach has been referred to as ‘modified analytical induction’ (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Such approaches do well in reminding us that:

“qualitative inquiry can do more than discover emergent concepts and generate new theory. A mainstay of science has always been examining and re-examining and re-examining yet again those propositions that have become the dominant belief or explanatory paradigm within a discipline or group of practitioners. Modified analytic induction provides a name and guidance for undertaking such qualitative inquiry and analysis.” (Patton, 2002, p. 494)

This notion of qualitative research being used to test and retest theory and then perhaps even adding to or modifying current theory is more widely accepted in practice than acknowledged and is argued that in fact its growing recognition is a maturing of qualitative research (Silverman, 1993). The use of either deductive or inductive approaches both lead to “anticipatory data reduction” (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 30) out of which emerge the explanatory stages of the analysis.

The greatest challenge for qualitative researchers in terms of data analysis is the sheer volume of data collected with no ‘neat and constant’ statistical formulas that can be applied to the data. The challenge therefore is to find a way to identify how to segment the data into smaller manageable parts for analysis (Hennink, 2007). The volume of data and the need to analyse it in a way that must be responsive to the context of the study and the data collected is the reason it has been referred to as an ‘attractive nuisance’ (Miles, 1979). The desire to analyse and explain the rich data collected through qualitative studies requires approaches that while allowing for a rigorous analysis does not over codify the data (Bryman & Burgess, 1994) making it more like a set of quantifiable data than providing rich descriptions of people and their interactions in natural settings (Bryman, 2001).

While not wishing to over codify data, qualitative research analysis that wishes to be accepted as robust and sound must have “a framework that is meant to guide the analysis of data” (Bryman, 2001, p. 389) and ensure quality research outputs (Hennink, 2007). Coding as first used by grounded theorists, with minor adaptations provides a useful tool for the analysis of data regardless of whether the coding is inductive from data or deductive from theory or a combination of both (Boyatzis, 1998; Fielding & Lee, 1998). It has been argued (Boyatzis, 1998) that these different uses of coding fit along the one continuum of theory development. This may be generating entirely new theory, as in grounded theory, or it may be modifying
existing theory or in fact confirming existing theory. Coding can be appropriately used in all these instances as an analytical tool and may indeed use both inductive and deductive approaches of analysis to achieve the aims. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the theoretical approach and the analytical approach and the appropriateness to use an inductive analytical approach when using it to confirm or explain prior data or theory.

While it is generally accepted that coding or thematic analysis can be used as part of a deductive analysis design it does have an inherent weakness, that is, codes developed from theory alone can lack reliability as they depend too much on the perceptions of the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998). However, it must also be said that having a starting set of codes (Fielding & Lee, 1998) provides direction for the research and orientates the researcher. Care must be taken, however, that this start list must never be so fixed that it cannot be changed or modified.

Criticism of the other extremity of the continuum has also been levelled as outlined above (Bryman, 2001). It is not therefore inconceivable to have a research methodology that has as a theoretical approach to confirm and add to current theory by using an inductive analytical approach. In fact there are distinct advantages in using coding, whether it be a deductive or inductive analytical approach using prior data or theories. Such an approach allows the research to progress without having to reinvent the wheel (Boyatzis, 1998).

As analysis is an interactive and cyclical process (Hennink, 2007) it involves both inductive and deductive approaches when developing themes and then subsequent codes (Fielding &

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**Figure 2: Diagrammatic Explanation of the Relationship between Theory Development and Analytical Approach Adapted from (Boyatzis, 1998)**

![Diagram](image-url)
Lee, 1998). The application of a hybrid approach using both inductive and deductive analytical approaches is particularly useful where two conditions exist. First, where only one organisational structure is used as the research site, as is the case in this study where the source of data is restricted to one school. Second, where there has not been a significant amount of research conducted for a particular phenomenon, which is the case for student perception of effective schools. When these two elements are present in a study the need to compare themes across what is commonly called ‘subsamples’ is eliminated. ‘Subsamples’ in this context refer to discreet data collection sets, such as data collected from a number of sites, as there is “no evident or desirable criterion variable” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 52). It is explained further:

“Neither the dependent variable, or consequences of the phenomenon, nor the independent variables constitute an appropriate criterion split for code development” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 52)

As this study is limited in its context, that is examining only one school, it has no ‘subsamples’. Further this study examines a particular phenomenon of effective schools, namely student perceptions, that to date has had little direct research. Therefore as Boyatziz (1998) argues it lends itself ideally to using coding in its hybrid form of both inductive and deductive analysis.

**Coding as an Analytical Tool**

Coding as a word to describe data analysis began to increase in usage during the 1950’s and rose to greatest prominence in the *Boys in White Project* of 1956 (Fielding & Lee, 1998). At this time the predominant approach in research was quantitative research and as such coding needed to substantiate beyond doubt what the data was saying to withstand the criticism this approach was receiving.

There is much debate about the method of coding and subtle but important differences have emerged in methodological approaches. It is therefore important to understand the process involved when using coding as a way of thematic analysis. The hybrid approach to analysis fits well with the general principles of data analysis as outlined by Huberman and Miles (1994). In précis their approach has three linked phases as outlined below.
Phase I: Data reduction – the initial process by which material is selected and condensed on the basis of an emerging conceptual framework.

Phase II: Data Display – “organised, compressed assembly of information” (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 429), that is, data already reduced is rearranged in ways which make it easier for the analyst to identify, focus on, and select potential interpretations of the data.

Phase III: Conclusion and verification – drawing broad but substantiated interpretations from the displayed data.

Fielding and Lee (1998) take the approach that coding can be done in two stages. The first level of coding is a simple classification and naming of the themes as evidenced in the data while the second level is in fact a ‘meta coding’ (Fielding & Lee, 1998, p. 69). This meta coding aims to generate ‘pattern codes’ which look for and describe underlying themes. Both these approaches use a combination of inductive and deductive analysis and argue the importance of using coding for both theory development as well as theory verification and modification. With the aforementioned discussion in mind, it was considered appropriate that this research use an analytical model that is a hybrid of inductive and deductive analysis. More precisely this study will use an adapted model based on the work of Boyatzis (1998) which contains three stages and several steps within each stage. Figure 3 illustrates the analytical model of coding used adapted from the work of Boyatzis (1998).

**HYBRID APPROACH**

**STAGE I**
Decide on sampling and design issues.

**STAGE II**
1. Reduce the raw information
2. Identify themes
   a. From raw information
   b. From prior data or theory
3. Create codes
4. Determine the reliability

**STAGE III**
1. Apply the codes to the remaining raw information
2. Determine validity
3. Interpret results

*Figure 3: Analytical Model of Coding Adapted from Boyatzis (1998)*
The fundamental difference between this hybrid model and the data-driven inductive model in its purest form as used in grounded theory approaches is the removal of the steps that focus on subsamples as outlined earlier. This approach therefore removes the need to compare themes across subsamples. When developing theory, this stage is essential as the need to compare the data across subsamples is fundamental if the theory is to be generalised across contexts. Without the requirement to generalise new theory, this step has been excluded from this study. Figure 3 above outlines the theoretical framework in which the analysis of data using coding will take place. The precise methodology to be used is outlined in far more detail in the following chapter which deals with the methodological approaches adopted by this research.

Considerations of the Methodological Approach Adopted

As is evident from the type of information to be collected and the sources of the information, this research will employ a qualitative approach in the collection of data and will use a number of methods. Strictly speaking a questionnaire employing a Likert scale is used as a quantitative measure. Having said this, the research methodology used in this project is qualitative and uses the findings of the questionnaire not as an end in themselves but rather a means of informing the development of focus group discussions. The study can then be viewed as collecting data in two phases. Phase one is a questionnaire followed by the second phase that involves a focus group element.

There are many researchers working within the school effectiveness field who consider themselves primarily as either quantitative or qualitative orientated researchers. However, some researchers still consider themselves as either ‘scientists’ (quantitatively orientated) or ‘humanists’ (qualitatively orientated) and appear to still be involved in the paradigm war between these approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Gage, 1989; Guba, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; J. K. Smith & Heshusius, 1986; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). As a result of this ongoing debate this research project aims to nullify the argument between the paradigms by adopting a pragmatist orientation (Howe, 1988) and focuses on providing the most complete answers to the research questions regardless of the type of data being collected.

Essentially this study uses a qualitative methodology, although it also uses elements that have traditionally been the domain of the quantitative research methodologies or at least mixed
methods approaches. It is generally well accepted and recognised that mixed methods research is still in its adolescence in that there continues to be some discrepancies amongst those who write about it and use it particularly in some of the typologies used and categorisation of data types (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 4). Mixed methods as a legitimate and appropriate research design emerged after the ‘modernist or Golden Age’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), which occurred during the 1950s-1970s. Positivism eventually gave way to post-positivism which focused on the:

“value-ladeness of inquiry (research is influenced by the values of investigators), theory-ladenness of facts (research is influenced by the theory that an investigator uses), and the nature of reality (our understanding of reality as constructed).” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 19).

The phrase “triangulation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), which involved using different data sources to study the same phenomenon was not only used to validate data but also methodology. As such, a study that used mixed methods including both qualitative and quantitative data sources has the potential to be more robust in its findings because of the breadth of data and techniques. Triangulation allows for the weaknesses of one method to be offset by the strengths of another method and is referred to as ‘across methods triangulation’ (Jick, 1979 referred to in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

It is important to understand the subtleties between studies that use a variety of approaches. Table 13 provides a précis (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) of the main ways of conceptualising studies that use a variety of studies and ascribed particular terms so that clarity can be had when referring to particular mixed approach designs.

The underlying question that needs to be addressed in considering a mixed methods design is what does it offer that traditional qualitative or quantitative methods alone cannot? It is argued that the mixed methods approach is better suited in that it allows for evaluation called “the goodness of their answers” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). By this it is meant that mixed methods allows a study to establish better and stronger inferences and presents a greater diversity of divergent views as well as allowing a diversity of research questions to be answered. A clear goal of this project was to compare the views contained in the literature as important elements of evaluating effective schools and measuring those against the perceptions of students regarding their current school.
Terminology | Characteristics | Example. A study …
--- | --- | ---
Multi-method research | Two or more data collection procedures or research methods from QUAL or QUANT tradition | Using both observations and oral histories or case studies and ethnography
Mixed-methods (plural research) | Uses both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques in either parallel or sequential phases | Using both inventory and focus groups or ethnography and a field experiment
Mixed-method research | Mixed in many or all stages of the study including focus questions, methods, data collection and analysis | That has multiple questions rooted in different paradigms and makes different inferences from the data corresponding to different worldviews

**TABLE 13: PRÉCIS OF MIXED APPROACHES TO RESEARCH PROJECTS (TASHAKKORI & TEDDLIE, 2003)**

It is argued that the fundamental reason for choosing a mixed methods approach can be distilled down to it offsetting the disadvantages of the certain methods have by themselves (Johnson & Turner, 2003). “Methods should be mixed in a way that has complementary strengths and non overlapping weaknesses” (Johnson & Turner, 2003, p. 300). While this is undoubtedly true, the same can be said for using a range of research methods within a qualitative research paradigm. Further, the use of different methods within the same paradigm allows the researcher to look in greater detail and to ask ‘why’ from the data collected and “if we are serious about the study of school effectiveness there is a clear need for … involving qualitative and quantitative methods that look deeper” (Harker & Tymms, 2004, p. 197).

Even considering the now increasing acceptance of the mixed methods approach this study is for all intents and purposes a study using qualitative methodology. Although it has elements of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies the quantitative elements of this study were simply analysed and used to inform the development of the qualitative phase of the study. The approach as chosen in this project is believed to have the potential to achieve this deeper exploration of data as outlined in the discussion.

**A Source of Rich Data**

Conscious that the study required an in-depth understanding of meanings elicited by the students the researcher adopted a qualitative research approach for the final phase of the
project. Qualitative research in this project enabled recognition of the impact of human actions by allowing for the exploration of the significance of reasons behind the students’ perceptions, and in this instance a study that explored a range of experiences and elicited meanings attributed to the perceptions held by the students.

Qualitative research confronts the credibility given to the generalisations drawn from data as it enables ambiguities between the general and the particular to be addressed and acknowledged (Dey, 1999). Qualitative methodology enabled the researcher to allow the students to discover differing dimensions about student perceptions of effective schools and view these against the current theoretical framework.

It is not uncommon for research approaches to build on the ‘independence of theoretical and observational languages’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 199). Qualitative research has subsequently established the inter-dependence between theories and facts. It is generally held that facts are only facts within a particular framework therefore questioning the notion of objectivity. Qualitative research has established the variations that exist between deduction and induction by identifying what is known as the induction problem. ‘Not only are facts determined by the theory window through which one looks for them but different theory windows might be equally well supported by the same set of facts’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 199).

In the same way the value free perspective of quantitative approaches is brought into doubt by emerging connections between theory and values. In quantitative research the enquirer is seen as objective to the research process while observing phenomena and recording them. Qualitative research on the other hand, as found in the social sciences research, differs in that it contends that findings are created through an interaction between the enquirer, the phenomenon and the context in which the topic is being researched (Bryman, 2001; Vidich & Lyman, 1998). For the focus group stage of this research positivism was viewed as less than suitable in studying student perceptions because it essentially deals with numbers. Qualitative data, however, deals with meanings that are mediated through language and actions. Concepts are constructed in terms of inter-subjective language that allows new meanings to be merged (Sayer, 1992). The qualitative methodology that engaged this researcher in
discovery of participant’s perceptions about effective schools was determined as most appropriate.

**Exploration of Qualitative Methodological Approaches**

The focus of this study, student perceptions of effective schooling, is one about which there is little research and it was critical for this researcher that the study might enable new meanings to emerge about effective schools. Following the decision to work in the qualitative domain an extensive exploration for the most suitable methodological approach was undertaken.

This study deals with an educational topic that generates a great deal of anecdotal comment from the usual stakeholders, that is, educationalists, parents and students. The complexity of the competing perspectives generated by these groups helped to inform the research methodology (Gage, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Basic understandings that define the enquiry were contextualised within both ontological and epistemological paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b, p. 23). The researcher recognised the reality (ontological paradigm) that as a teacher within the school with an interest in the effective schools debate there was potential to influence participants within the focus groups who might be reserved or reticent about disclosing their real perceptions of the school’s effectiveness (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 207).

The research interest and questions (epistemological paradigm) was fundamentally that of the researcher. It was hoped that in collaboration with the participants, the researcher might discover data that contributes further understanding to the effective schools research community and debate. With consideration of the context and ethics of such a study the researcher proceeded to adopt a methodology that highlights the meanings that participants bring to their perceptions of effective schools (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b, p. 24).

As thinking continued to progress regarding methodology it became evident that such an approach positioned the study in a post positivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 203) and that current theories of effective schools provided an appropriate conceptual framework for the study. The researcher proceeded to establish systematic processes to research the phenomenon of students’ perceptions of effective schools.
By using elements derived from grounded theory methodology, this study was able to explore participant’s experiences and perceptions of effective schools in general and their school in particular. Its processes provided what the researcher sought, namely the possibility of interacting with students to access their understandings and perceptions of the educational reality surrounding them. It provided a tool for discussion through the focus group process involving persons already familiar with each other, both participants and researcher.

Focus groups were considered the most appropriate approach as they did not depersonalise the process (Janesick, 1998). Researching student perceptions of effective schools required “passion for people, passion for communication and passion for understanding people” (Janesick, 1998, p. 51) which, allowed the researcher to discover insights, realities and meanings. This study involved exploring how students have come to an understanding of effective schools. It has enabled the students to have a voice, which until now has been unheard.

Perception is all about an individual’s or group’s interpretation and understanding of an event or situation in which they find themselves. Human perception must be understood as more than observing, ‘that it involves the human mental inside the head process that have come to be identified as subjectivism, idealism, perspectivism and relativism’ (Hamilton, 1998, p. 117). Epistemology asserts that the relationship between perception and its objects is an active process in determining experience. By gathering and examining data about participants’ perceptions of effective schools the researcher recognised ‘that human consciousness actively constitutes the objects of experience’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998, p. 138) and that each participant’s consciousness constitutes varying perspectives of reality.

By drawing on participants’ knowledge and perception of effective schools, factors such as stereotypes, prejudices, pre-conceptions and projections have the potential of distorting the data and need to be considered and taken into account during the interpretive analysis (Hamilton, 1998; Sayer, 1992). Therefore, while there exists epistemological unease with perceptions it must be accepted that the participants’ views are a factual description of their lived experiences over time and in many different contexts. In essence it is their history. The researcher accepts that the students’ perception present a reliable source of data about effective schools. Data about individual sets of meanings, the way students interpret reality
and the way students interpret their educational world provided the framework from which analysis was undertaken and compared to existing theories concerning effective schools.

**Procedures for Collecting and Interpreting Data**

One of the primary aims of this project was to resolve if in the students’ opinion, the ten elements of effective schools as identified in the literature were indeed appropriate characteristics of effective schools. As this was simply a measure of their opinions gauged against a set of predetermined criteria, a questionnaire was considered the most appropriate methodology. In using such an instrument it was recognised that this was a tool that did not allow the researcher to explore why the students perceived things that way. Notwithstanding these limitations the amount of data that was able to be collected to establish a trend was considered important. The data then provided the trends that were explored in far more detail through the qualitative approaches to research (Hennink, 2007). Often these different methodological aspects of study are conducted sequentially where “the group discussions may be held after the completion of the survey to seek explanations for the quantitative findings” (Hennink, 2007, p. 247). Such an approach provides for both inductive and deductive analytical approaches to be adopted (Boyatzis, 1998) providing the explanations of the data collected through questionnaires.

A similar situation arose when measuring whether the students perceived their school to be effective using the same ten criteria. Again, understanding the limitations, a survey was considered the most appropriate tool to use.

The questionnaire used in the initial stage of this project consisted of several sections. Part A collected data about the biographical details of the respondents and served only to allow analysis to occur in subgroups. Part B formed the bulk of the questionnaire consisting of 60 questions. These 60 questions were divided up to measure each of the ten themes, allowing six questions per theme. The table 14 below indicates which questions measured which themes.
Respondents were asked to answer twice for each question using two separate Likert Scales as demonstrated in Figure 4 and found in Appendix B. On the left-hand side of the questionnaire a scale was provided measuring how important the content of the question was to effective schools in general. On the right hand side a second scale was provided measuring how well the students ranked their current school for the contents of each question.

In addition there were two open-ended questions, Questions 61 and 62, seeking responses concerning what elements had been left out that were considered important and whether the respondents measured the school to be effective or otherwise and the reasons for their opinion.

The final section of the Questionnaire, Part C was entirely open-ended and required the respondents to put in rank order their five most important elements of an effective school.
The range and complex interplay of the key stakeholders in this research required careful consideration to be given to the development of the questionnaire. Much care was taken to create a questionnaire that measured the ten themes as well as reflected the individuality of the particular research context. As such a set of questions for each theme were developed that were considered appropriate for measuring both scales of the questionnaire. A draft set of questionnaires was provided to the Headmaster of the school and his senior executive. After some discussion a second draft list of questions were developed. As the questionnaire was to be administered to students, it was felt important to gauge if the questions were suitably phrased for the target respondent group. The trial group of 15 Year 12 students was chosen to test the draft questionnaire. These students were in a cohort one year older than the final respondents and as such it was felt they would not compromise the data collected from the students who participated in the research.

The trial group were briefed as to the purpose of the questionnaire and informed that their responses would not be included in the results of the study but would be used to determine the appropriateness of the questions and assist with the final writing of the questionnaire. After administering the draft questionnaire and discussing it with the trial group, minor changes to the phrasing of a number of questions took place. It became apparent that while the questions measured the themes, some of the phrasing was a little too sophisticated and some editing took place.

The trial group also provided interesting comments regarding the open ended questions and again minor rewording took place to take into account the age of the students who would become the respondents in this research.

The final version of the questionnaire was again shown to the Headmaster who approved its use. Following that approval, the questionnaire became part of the Thesis Proposal process and the Ethics Committee approval process, both of which approved its use as part of this research project.

Before the trial of the questionnaire took place, much consideration of how the responses would be measured took place. A significant factor in determining the final scale took into account the fact that the final questionnaire was never intended to provided data for
quantitative analysis but provide data to be used in developing the direction of the focus group phase of the research. Nonetheless there were a number of scales that were considered. A three point scale, simply measuring either side of the median was one option but it was determined that it would be too limiting in the responses it provided. A scale such as this did not allow the students to make a value judgement other than the extremes. It was decided that it was important to measure smaller variations than a three-point scale could measure if more insightful focus group questions were to be developed. Due to the lack of options, a three-point scale was also considered inappropriate, as it would generate far too many ‘Undecided’ responses limiting the data usefulness.

The other option that was considered was a seven-point scale. It was felt that this would be too cumbersome especially considering that the most important data analysis did not rely on statistical calculations. Considering the options available the scale of measurement that was finally used was a five-point Likert Scale based on the work of Fisher and Fraser (1990), Stoll and Fink (1988) and Ewington (1993).

Fisher and Fraser (1990), Stoll and Fink (1988) and Ewington (1993) all used a five-point scale although how they had the respondents answer the questionnaire varied. In Ewington’s case (1993), the left hand side of the questionnaire measured “Should apply to this school” while the right hand side measured “Does apply to this school”. This approach was considered the most appropriate in this study and as such a similar questionnaire design was adopted.

While the surveys would provide a good deal of numerical data, the research questions posed by this study were more interested in the reasons for the views of the students as well as explanations as to why the factors were considered important or not. A further aim was to determine whether students identified any other factors that the literature had overlooked. To achieve this rich descriptive and explanatory data it was felt that focus groups would be the most suitable methodology as quantitative approaches cannot provide the necessary richness of data needed to make these inferences. By using a questionnaire within a qualitative framework questions could be formulated for the qualitative research based on the evident trends in the quantitative data collected (Green, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). While general focus group questions were developed early in the planning of this research and included in
the process of gaining approval through the ethics processes, the need to frame questions after analysing the survey instrument was always acknowledged. The need to find out why the students thought the way they did drove the need to formulate more questions well into the data collection and analysis process.

**Focus Group Approach**

As described above, the findings of the survey conducted as part of the methodological approach of this study were used to inform the design and development of the focus groups phase. Both the methodology used during the focus groups and the development of the questions asked during this phase of the research were substantially informed by the results of the survey. However, before a discussion of how the focus group questions were formulated, it is considered essential to give consideration as to why focus groups were used over and above other forms of qualitative methodologies such as interviews.

For the qualitative phase of the study, individual interviews and focus groups were considered as appropriate methods to gather the rich and in-depth data that was sought after. However, in the particular context of this study, where high school students are the respondents, individual interviewing as a method was not considered as appropriate as using focus groups. The largest advantage of focus groups over individual interview is the freedom it allows for a greater number of respondents to be included in the study. Focus groups allow the researcher to gather the perceptions of many more students and therefore allow the findings to be more representative than a few interviews would have allowed. Focus groups also allow for students who may find the experience of an individual interview uneasy. Belonging in a group of their peers affords them a degree of comfort that encourages responses (Janesick, 1998). The focus groups sessions were electronically audio recorded and then transcribed allowing an appropriate depth of analysis to take place.

One of the more significant consideration in choosing focus groups over individual interviews were the ethical issues that arose from individual interviews considering the researcher is a teacher in the school. The authority figure and perceptions of possible intimidation were significant factors to counter and it was felt more appropriate to allow students to feel more willing to answer honestly or indeed not to make comment at all if they were part of a group as opposed to being the sole interviewee. Focus groups are particularly useful in studies.
where ‘power’ differences between the participants and professionals exist. Undoubtedly in a research context where the researcher is a teacher at the school the participants attend there is a certain power conflict that must be managed. This power differential is best managed by allowing the respondents to express their views in a group context best provided by focus groups (Gibbs, 1997).

Other ethical considerations surrounding child protection matters as they relate to the laws in New South Wales were also another compelling factor in the decision to use focus groups instead of individual interviews.

Compared to individual interviews, which aim to obtain individual attitudes, beliefs and feelings, focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group which provides a far greater depth and richness in the data context (Gibbs, 1997). The richness in data is significantly contributed to the fact that the results are greater than might be obtained by interviewing the respondents individually because they add to and build on each other’s comments. Interaction is the key to successful focus groups where participants draw each other out, sparking new ideas and building on each other to come to a variety of views that no one individual would have articulated on their own.

Focus groups are also particularly helpful when one wants to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993). Further to this, focus groups allow the researcher to explore why an issue is salient as well as what is salient about it (Morgan, 1988). It is this, which provides the depth, and richness of data the project was endeavouring to obtain. Focus group discussion brings out insights and understandings in ways which simple questionnaires may not be able to tap. It is tapping the emotional and unconscious motivations that is not amenable to the structured interview or conventional surveys that focus groups are best suited to (Morgan, 1988).

It is evident that for this study focus groups are well suited to the data to be collected and the questions being asked. However, like all research methodologies, focus groups have their limitations. Some, such as any power differential between respondents and researcher, can be overcome with planning; others are inherent in the methodology and therefore unavoidable.
Some of the limitations are also the reasons why focus groups can provide such a richness of data. For example, the lack of control over the data produced (Morgan, 1988) is a limitation, however, when examining what is real to the respondent this freedom allows a greater freedom of expression. The researcher has to be prepared to allow the respondents to express opinions and doubts as well as asking questions while “having very little control over the interaction other than to generally keeping participants focused on the topic” (Gibbs, 1997, p. 4). By its nature, focus group research is open ended and cannot be entirely predetermined.

Another consideration to take into account when analysing focus group data is that it cannot necessarily be assumed that the views expressed are those of the individual participant. Rather it is often a consensus view albeit that there is some disagreement. It must be acknowledged that respondents are speaking within a context that may make it difficult for the researcher to clearly identify the individual message (Gibbs, 1997). It is for that reason that careful consideration must be given to the process of analysis to be applied to the data.

The ethical considerations of anonymity and confidentiality within focus groups are impossible to overcome because of the group nature of the methodology, however, as long as the appropriate permission and disclosures have been made this poses little issue.

Notwithstanding these limitations it was considered that the best qualitative approach to adopt in this study was that of focus groups. The focus group technique was selected because fundamentally it is

“based on the assumption that group members have information and can formulate and express their opinions, feelings and behaviours in words, but that they need the researcher and the group context to extract this information” (Flores & Alonso, 1995, p. 86).

What then are focus groups exactly? While they are a form of group interviewing it is important to distinguish between the two. Group interviewing involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and participants. Focus groups, however, rely on the participants interacting with each other and in so doing “drawing out respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods, for example observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys” (Gibbs, 1997, p. 2)
There is no definitive definition of a focus group in the literature but there is a general consensus that it has features such as ‘organised discussion’ (Kitzinger, 1994), ‘collective activity’ (Powell, Single, & Lloyd, 1996), ‘social event’ (Goss & Leinbach, 1996), and ‘interactions’ (Kitzinger, 1995).

For the purpose of this research the definition of a focus group used is: “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Powell & Single, 1996, p. 499) and relies on “the interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher” (Morgan, 1997, p. 12).

**Focus Group Question Development**

Once it had been determined that the second phase of the research would make use of the focus group methodology, it was essential to give consideration to the type and style of question to be asked during this phase of the research. The questions and the way they were asked was essential to the success of the focus groups as the data was to be analysed both inductively and deductively. This being the case it was important that the questions did not limit the usefulness of the inductive analysis. In the early stage of the research development a set of questions as found in Appendix C were developed based on the ten themes. However, it was important to acknowledge that one of the most important purposes of the focus groups was to listen to and analyse the students' reasons behind their survey responses. As such the questions that would form the basis of the focus groups were essentially developed post the analysis of the survey results.

Once the survey had been completed and the results collated and analysed the trends that became evident as outlined in the Chapter Four – Findings and Discussion became the focus for the development of questions to be put to the focus groups. Firstly and of greatest interest was those themes where the survey results indicated a difference to that found in the literature. In *Educational Leadership* for example, the literature is almost unanimous in emphasising its importance in effective schools, yet the survey results indicated that the
students saw this theme as far from being their most important consideration of a school’s effectiveness.

Conversely in themes such as Safe and Supportive Environment where the survey results indicate a much greater importance than the literature, it was important to seek clarification from the focus groups as to why this might be the case.

In both instances where the survey results seemed at odds with the trends found in the literature, it was considered important to ask questions that sought to clarify these differences. It was, however, important to do so in a way that did not infer that the students’ views expressed in the survey were ‘odd’ or ‘wrong’ in any way. The approach taken was to commence the focus group sessions with questions that related directly to each theme, and allow the discussion to determine the direction of further questioning. When appropriate, questions that sought to clarify a particular trend in a theme were asked and follow up questions as needed were asked to try to gain that rich data that was sought after. In order not to limit the analysis, it was felt important not to have questions that were too structured or limited in their responsiveness to the directions of the focus group discussions. Therefore the researcher took into the focus groups the questions as outlined in Appendix C and a set of notes developed from the survey results analysis simply as a guide to the discussions.

In essence the focus groups were conducted in an unstructured way allowing the student responses to determine the flow of the conversation. In taking this approach the data collected could be analysed in a way that was not restricted by their categorisation into the surveyed themes. This was considered important if the analysis was to be truly inductive and if the data was going to be provide the rich data and insight into any additional or revised themes of effectiveness as a result of the students’ perceptions.

Focus Group Data Collection

A further important consideration in the focus group methodology was to determine how many focus groups to have and how the groups were to be chosen and constituted. The school used as the context of this study uses a system of dividing students in each year group into one of six Houses. This is the basis for pastoral care, sporting and other activities across the school.
Four focus groups were used as part of this study, two from each of the Year 10 and Year 12 cohorts. Each focus group was made up of participants from one of the cohorts who completed the survey. The selection process for the focus groups was based on the student’s Houses. For the Year 10 cohort four houses were randomly selected providing two Focus Groups totalling 27 students, 13 in one focus group and 14 in the other. Students in Year 12 who participated in the focus groups were selected in the same way with some houses being the same and others different. The two Year 12 focus groups had 9 and 10 students respectively.

The precise number of students in each focus group was necessarily out of the researcher’s control. However, when selecting the Houses from each cohort to participate in the focus groups the only real determining factor was ensuring that the groups ended up as suitable sizes. The generally accepted size of a focus group is approximately ten (Gibbs, 1997), although some researchers accept that up to fifteen people (Goss & Leinbach, 1996) and as few as four (Kitzinger, 1995) are appropriate too. Taking these generally accepted guidelines into account, the sizes of the focus groups were considered acceptable as they all fell within the range.

An important element of the focus group design as outlined above is the lack of structured questions. The groups were guided in their discussion using questions developed from the trends evidenced in the results of the survey administered earlier in the project. Appendix C lists the questions used as a guide in the focus groups. These indicative questions were purposefully set to be general and non-specific. One question was developed for each theme, however, it was never intended that all questions be asked precisely as they appear or even at all. In addition it is important to recognise that the focus group questions could not be predetermined as the direction was essentially driven by the responses in the questionnaire phase of the research. The majority of discussion in each of the focus groups was aimed at seeking clarification as to the general trends shown in the questionnaire and seek explanations for this data. A substantial amount of time was set aside in each focus group for the students to discuss what an effective school was to them regardless of the themes and as such predetermined questions were not considered appropriate. This was indeed the case and the direction of the discussion was determined by the group responses. In some instances
additional questions were asked if it was felt by the researcher that a particular line of discussion warranted further exploration.

_Focus Group Data Analysis_

In order to present the findings of the focus groups it was important to settle on a method of collecting and analysing the data.

The analysis of the findings was conducted by using a widely accepted system of coding results which has its roots in grounded theory methodology (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach has been described as being a most useful and appropriate method albeit having no claim to be “a flawless procedure but [is] systematic” (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderj, 1984, p. 8). Using this approach provides for interesting links between this analysis methodology and Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle of understanding, that is, the whole is interpreted as the sum of the parts and is open to further interpretation by those that read the results. Such methodology never closes the analysis of the coded text and indeed assumes that others will further analyse and make interpretations of the results in their own deliberations.

It is a most useful model in that it allows inclusions of findings from individual participants that seem to have particular importance to the study (known as Variations) that do not manifest themselves in the results of the whole. The steps of the phenomenological process of analysis (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were further modified (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderj, 1984) and are summarised in Figure 5.

- The analysis begins with the researcher’s careful reading of each text, taking from each the language used by the participants, items that reveal the important elements of the experience.
- A second reading involves selecting and noting those “moments that seemed to be at the centre of the event.” Those moments that present as significant to the experience. In the reading of each text, the researcher attempts to read the description of each participant with “new eyes,” allowing the text to speak for itself. A list of the moments is then made. This is the first transformation.
- Themes of experience (Common Forms) are then identified as they emerge from the data. These themes are then compared, and constituted as they reflect relationships between themes and are listed as shared meanings. As some elements emerge as unique to the individual, and can be shown to highlight...
common forms and to enrich understanding of the themes, they are retained and listed separately as Variations.

- The researcher may then approach the participant for further comment on accuracy and provide further insights into the analysis where the aim is to reach mutual agreement of the interpretation.
- The research then transforms the understanding and conceptual categories into meaningful account, suitable in structure for presentation to public and professional public, and open to scrutiny.
- The readers, who create their own understanding by clarifying understandings, interpreting the data or asking new questions about the experiences, will conduct the final transformation.

**Figure 5: Modified Phenomenological Process of Analysis (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderj, 1984)**

Taking into account the nature of this research which uses focus groups rather than individual interviews, a further minor modification to the model of textual analysis (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderj, 1984) was necessary. The major elements and approaches of the model were retained including the reflective interpretation of the text (transcripts), identification of major elements (Forms) and conceptualisation of shared meanings (Themes). Further conceptualisation revealed specific features of themes (Sub-themes) and identification of important elements unique to individuals (Variations).

The precise methodological approach taken in this study is summarised below:

**Step 1:** In the first reading each transcript was read carefully, specifically to validate the accuracy and clarity of the transcript of recorded interviews. In this reading no attempt was made to reflect on meaning or to spell out themes.

**Step 2:** Each transcript was then reread in an attempt to first isolate specific statements and phrases, which point to an aspect of the phenomenon, to find statements that seem to be essential or revealing about the experience. In this step the intention was to capture what is described as those “moments of experience” (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderj, 1984, p. 6). As the moments appear in the transcripts they are highlighted and a list of themes for each group is generated.

**Step 3:** The next step was to read the transcript more closely, seeing the Form Statement in context, clarifying the accuracy of the Form Statement and putting it in the context of the experience. This reading required switching between the transcripts.
and individual Form Statements as well as constantly referring to the electronic recordings of the focus groups for clarity and intention of verbal meaning not captured in the transcript. The goal was to interpret the essential meaning of the Form Statement, one that could be expressed as a theme. This was a very long process, however, it produced rich data.

**Step 4:** Using the Form Statements a number of themes were identified. Themes for all focus groups were combined in one document and then, where appropriate, Form Statements were coded into the Theme categories. In this study five Themes emerged: Extra-curricular Choices; Caring and Supportive Teachers; Good and Appropriate Teaching; Academic Success and Flexibility; and Safe and Supportive Environment.

**Step 5:** The Form Statements were examined again, this time searching for those that did not fit one of the Themes but referred to unique experiences that seemed important to the understanding of the experience of an individual. These Variations as they are called were considered important for the individual’s experience but may not, for a variety of reasons, have been considered important for other participants across the four focus groups.

Using this methodological approach for the analysis of the data provided a very rich source of information and succeeded in providing the quality of data that was felt necessary. The findings and analysis of the data is provided in the following chapter.

**CONCLUSION**

The methodological approach of any research project is a complex one worthy of much consideration. This chapter has sought to provide detailed discussion surrounding the methodological issues considered when designing this project. The considerations given to the theoretical approach of the research design and implementation as well as the analysis have shown that the approach taken is appropriate and robust. The use of both inductive and deductive analytical tools from a range of theoretical paradigms has been considered appropriate in light of the evidence in the literature. The project’s methodological approach provided the rich data it sought and allowed the in-depth analysis considered so important. The findings of the research and detailed discussions of them follow in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the findings of the research as well as the analysis and the interpretation of the data. The approach taken by dealing with these sections together has been adopted in response to the methodological design of this project whereby the data gathered and analysed early in the project using deductive approaches informed the latter inductive phase of the project. Following a brief description of the participants’ biographical details (obtained by way of Part A of the questionnaire) the findings and interpretations will be presented in a way that allows greatest consideration of the richness of the data. Each of the themes derived from the literature will be addressed in turn with an appraisal of each theme in light of the students’ responses. Revisions to themes or additional themes proposed as necessary will also be discussed. In using such an approach, both the inductively and deductively obtained findings are presented and discussed concurrently.

As with all studies, the structure and content of this report was determined by the purpose of the study. It is consistently recognised that focus group research produces a large amount of information and the challenge is to determine what needs to be reported following the data analysis (Barbour, 2005; Freeman, 2006; Hennink, 2007; Morgan, 1997). The structure and use of data extracts are also matters for consideration when determining what is to be reported and the format it will take. Essentially, reporting the findings of focus group research involves identifying the core findings from the data and developing a communication style appropriate for the audience (Hennink, 2007, p. 197). The challenge was to develop a narrative that both integrates the central findings and provides depth and context for the issues being reported.

One of the traditions of reporting qualitative research is to use data extracts when reporting the study findings, and in the case of focus groups to include quotations from the participants. By incorporating direct quotations of participants into the discussion this report provides “direct and vivid links between the reader and the issues of the study population” (Hennink, 2007, p. 236). This approach was considered important because in order to understand research findings “we first have to think about how people make sense of their world” (Tew, 2007, p. 2).
This project essentially addresses four research questions that evolved from the broad objectives stated earlier.

1. Do the perceptions of students concerning key elements of effective schools concur with what current literature consider important?
2. What other elements of schools, if any, do students perceive to be important in effective schools?
3. Why are some elements perceived as more important measures of school effectiveness than others?
4. Do students consider their current school to be effective and what are the reasons they have formed this view?

These questions will not be answered one by one but rather they will be addressed holistically through the presentation and interpretation of the data. The sections that follow seek to address each of these research questions and will present findings and interpretations that answer these questions and address the broader objectives behind them as discussed earlier.

Respondent’s Biographical Profile and Post Schooling Aspirations

One of the fundamental aims of this research was to establish student perceptions of effective schools in general and their own school in particular. The respondents came from two separate cohorts in the one school, Year 10 and Year 12. For the Year 10 cohort, while some of the students may have been old enough to leave school, it has been assumed from the researcher’s knowledge of the school, that they were essentially still enrolled at school due to their parents’ desire that they stay at school until the completion of their School Certificate examinations which traditionally marks the end of the compulsory schooling in New South Wales. The School Certificate is examined at the end of Year 10. Some students who have decided that university is not an avenue they wish to pursue take the opportunity after the School Certificate to leave formal education to enter the workforce or attend a trade college. The school used in this report has few students leave at this point and as such it is viewed as a preliminary qualification that will assist them prepare for the two years that culminate in the Higher School Certificate. The students in Year 12 were in the non-compulsory years of secondary schooling although their decision to leave school would have been limited by their parents’ wishes, expectations and demands and also their future plans.
Permission to be involved in this research was sought from all parents with children in Year 10 and Year 12 at the time. In total this included 73 Year 10 students and 84 Year 12 students. Nineteen Year 12 students (22.6% of the cohort) finally participated in the study while 31 Year 10 students participated (42.4% of the cohort). While the Year 12 participation was a little less than anticipated, the response from the Year 10 cohort was above expectation. The academic focus of Year 12 restricted the availability of Year 12 students resulting in slightly fewer participants than expected. In spite of this, the number of participants in both cohorts was sufficient to allow trends to be gauged and provided enough respondents for the focus group phase of the research.

In total 52% of the respondents were male (26 in total - 16 Year 10 students, 10 Year 12 students) while 48% were female (24 in total - 15 Year 10 students, 9 Year 12 students). There was an even spread of students from across the Houses in each year group. These Houses were used as the basis for the Focus Groups in the second phase of the research. Table 15 outlines the biographical data of the respondents in far greater detail showing the percentage breakdown for each category.

| Students by Gender |  |  |  |
|--------------------|------------------| 52% |
|                    | Females          | 48% |
| Students by Age    |  |  |  |
| 15 Years and under | 18% |
| 16 Years old       | 45% |
| 17 years old       | 21% |
| 18 years and older | 16% |
| Students by Cohort |  |  |  |
| Year 10 Students   | 62% |
| Year 12 Students   | 38% |
| Students by School House |  |  |  |
| House A            | 14% |
| House B            | 18% |
| House C            | 12% |
| House D            | 20% |
| House E            | 26% |
| House F            | 10% |

Table 15: Biographical detail of respondents

The questions concerning biographical details also gathered information about the educational aspirations of the students. The vast majority of students who participated indicated their intention to complete further study with 84% aiming for a place at university while 24% were
intending to study at a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) College or another tertiary institution. A number of students expressed the intention to enter the workforce immediately after Year 10 (6% of Year 10’s) while 44% of students intended entering the workforce after the Higher School Certificate (HSC). Students were able to, and chose to, indicate several options if appropriate describing their educational aspirations. The options given were not mutually exclusive and it was recognised that some students may have had different options open to them that they were interested in pursuing. Table 16 summarises this information by way of presenting raw percentage responses for each option available.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Aspirations</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary College</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce after School Certificate (Year 10)</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce after HSC (Year 12)</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16: Post Schooling Aspirations of the Students as Percentages by Category

**FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The source of the data gathered and analysed deductively comes from a number of methodological approaches. One of the fundamental intentions of this project was to validate currently held theories concerning commonly accepted elements of effective schooling. From the study of the literature, ten themes were deemed the most commonly accepted measures of effective schools and it was these elements that were used as the basis for the deductive data collection and analysis.

As outlined in previous chapters, the survey was structured, through Part B, to primarily measure these ten themes. There was some opportunity for students to give open-ended responses in Questions 61 and 62 as well as Part C, which allowed the students to comment on the ten themes or alternatively provide their own views of important measures of effectiveness not used in the survey thus far. The focus groups that followed the questionnaire was the primary source of data exploring the reasons the participants answered the
questionnaires as they did and were used to further explore the trends and comments that emerged from the survey. The data from the project will essentially be reported and discussed using the themes that have been adopted and developed through this research as key elements of effective schools. In line with the data collection and analysis methodology, each theme will be dealt with in turn using data from all sources of the project.

The quantitative data collected has not been subjected to complex statistical procedures and analysis. As the quantitative data was used to assist in the development of the focus group questions, the necessary comparisons were carried out using simple statistical calculations such as means, standard deviations and percentages. In order to allow these comparisons to occur the data was entered into a spreadsheet programme that adequately allowed for the statistical procedures required.

While it is entirely possible to analyse the data question by question there is a significant danger of having the broad generalisations lost in the detail. As such a broader approach has been adopted examining the themes in general rather than question by question. In this way an overview of student perceptions is possible without being tied down to statistical calculations and analysis. The tables and graphs included in these findings show the mean and standard deviation of each question relating to a specific theme as well as providing the percentages of respondents choosing each measure on the 5 point Likert scale for both the ‘Importance’ measure and the ‘Effectiveness’ measure.

The means were calculated by using the numerical value of each scale chosen by each respondent between 1 and 5 for each question. As a measure of general school effectiveness, the value 1 referred to the issue as being of ‘No Importance’ while a value of 5 indicated it was ‘Very Important’. When measuring how well the student’s school measured up to the relevant elements, the value 1 referred to ‘Very Poor’ and 5 ‘Very Well’.

Further, for each question the standard deviation was calculated. SD is best defined as the average variance from the overall mean in the students; responses for each question. It is a useful measure as it can be used, as it has in this research, to portray the degree of ‘dissenting views and ‘discrepancies’ of the responses.
Two important variations were being measured by using the standard deviations. First, it indicates the degree of discrepancy between respondents for each question. That is, the greater the standard deviation, the greater the dissenting range of views of the students for the question. It can be said, this being the case, that students held differing perceptions in regards to the theme being measured by that question. Second, it indicates a discrepancy in what is being measured between one question and another within the one theme. A larger standard deviation implies that a question is not a good measure of the theme it is intending to measure. A larger standard deviation indicates a greater dispersion of responses from the mean. For the purposes of this study a standard deviation of 1.5 or less indicated that the question was a reasonable measure of the theme in general and that respondents interpreted it that way.

All ten themes used in this project had a high overall mean recorded for both the ‘Importance’ measure of the element and the ‘Effectiveness’ measure. The standard deviations across all themes indicate the validity of each question to the theme used in this study.

Another comparison of interest is whether there is any difference in perceptions between the Year 10 and Year 12 cohorts. For a number of the themes the differences between the Year 10 and Year 12 cohorts is worth reporting and for others they are very similar. Where a comment is warranted concerning such differences this has occurred.

Using the survey instrument it was also possible to examine differences, if any, between the male and female respondents. For the vast majority of themes there was no discernable difference, however, in a number of themes there were differences worthy of note. The themes of Educational Leadership, Safe and Supportive Environment and Parent and Community Connections all had variations in results between male and female responses. These are outlined in greater detail in the relevant sections that follow. The focus group phase of the research did not attempt to find any gender differences and as such the focus groups were mixed gender.

**Elements used by students to distinguish effective schools**

While there has been excellent work by so many researchers across a wide range of countries and contexts, the elements used to measure effective schools have seldom attempted to take
note of what students think. What, given the choice, would students use to measure an effective school? Each of the themes measured in this research will be addressed in turn and opportunities to critique these elements and redefine them will be taken once the views and perceptions of the students are considered. In general, the themes measured were perceived by the students as good indicators, however, there are subtle differences that became apparent and will be explored. There is no doubt that future research is needed to consider the views of students when determining how to measure school effectiveness.

**Educational Leadership**

As evident in the literature review, the theme *Educational Leadership* is one considered to be essential in effective schools. Emerging as central from the literature is that the role of the school leader or school leaders at various levels play a significant role in the success of students. For the purpose of this study, *Educational Leadership* is described as the role the Head and other senior staff members play in communicating the mission of the school to staff, students and parents as well as applying the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the teaching programmes. The question then to be asked is whether the students in this study supported this finding? As with the vast majority of other themes to be discussed throughout this project, *Educational Leadership* was perceived by the students to be an important measure of effective schools. However, having said that, *Educational Leadership* does not rate in the minds of the students as important as other themes. Further the students perceived their current school to have effective educational leadership although there is evidence that they were somewhat uncertain of what educational leadership meant and therefore how effective the school was in this regard.

During the focus group phase of the project the researcher was interested in pursuing what the students actually thought *Educational Leadership* as a theme meant and why they considered the school to be only moderately effective considering the longevity and stability of the educational leadership within the school. It is evident from the focus groups that the students did consider the role of the Head and other senior staff to be significant but did not, in their own minds, make a clear connection to these roles and the concept of educational leadership. Table 17 illustrates the importance students place on *Educational Leadership* as a measure of
effective schools and how effective they perceived *Educational Leadership* to be in their school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Educational Leadership</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>31</th>
<th>41</th>
<th>51</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness of Educational Leadership</th>
<th>Question</th>
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<th>11</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>31</th>
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<td>3.8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numerical data collected for each question and the theme as a whole indicate that the questions used in the survey were a consistent measure of *Educational Leadership* and did in fact measure what was intended to be measured. This applied equally to both the measures of ‘Importance’ and ‘Effectiveness’. For the measure of ‘Importance’ the mean responses for each question show that when compared to the total mean, the appropriateness of each question can be confirmed. The data provides confidence that each question was a good measure of that theme. The same conclusions can be drawn for the ‘Effectiveness’ measure.

Figure 6 illustrates that fractionally over 73% of the respondents scored this theme as ‘Important’ or ‘Very Important’ as a measure confirming the use of *Educational Leadership* as a valid and appropriate measure of effective schools.
When measuring how effective their current school was in providing *Educational Leadership*, the students’ responses were far less affirming. Having said that, there were still just over 51% of students who rated their school in the two top categories although the vast majority (46%) rated the school as doing this ‘Well’. A significant proportion (30%) rated the school as providing ‘Poorly’ or ‘Very poorly’ *Educational Leadership* to the students.

When the data is analysed more closely and a comparison between the Year 10 and the Year 12 cohort is made, 73% of Year 10 respondents considered *Educational Leadership* to be either ‘Important’ or ‘Very Important’. The Year 12 respondents’ results were very similar with 74% rating it as either ‘Important’ or ‘Very Important’. An observable difference is that 45% of the Year 10 respondents rated this element as ‘Important’ while 46% of the Year 12 respondents rated this element as ‘Very Important’. When combining the ‘Important’ and ‘Very Important’ scales, however, there is very little difference to note. The students’ rating of the ‘Effectiveness’ measure, that is their perceptions of the schools effectiveness in this theme, showed very little difference and correlated closely to the results shown in Figure 5.

For both the ‘Importance’ measure and the ‘Effectiveness’ measure the female respondents rated this factor higher. However, it was in the ‘Effectiveness’ measure that the greatest variation was found with a difference of 11% between the male and female respondents.

Question 62 of the survey was an open ended question which sought students’ opinion concerning the effectiveness of their school and the reasons for this. While there was a wide range of responses to this question there were responses showing the importance of *Educational Leadership* to the students. For example, one student stated that:

>. . . every aspect [of the school] should be explained clearly and this occurs at the school.

While this comment does not overtly state that educational leadership is important it draws attention to the importance of the communication required by the school to the wider school community. This is very much the role and responsibility of the school leaders. Along similar lines, the following comment, which indicates that the school is not effective in this student’s opinion at least, illustrates the importance of educational leadership again by commenting on what would be expected by many of the school leaders.
[The school is not effective] because it cares too much about its reputation and has strict rules.

The concept of the school’s reputation is fundamentally one that is the responsibility of the school’s leadership and while this student believes this is overemphasised it does demonstrate an understanding that it is an important element in effective schools.

Part C of the questionnaire, again an open ended section, asked students to list the most important factors of effective schools. These factors could come from the questionnaire or from their own considerations. Table 18 shows the list generated from the surveys. The ‘#’ symbol represents those themes distilled from the literature and measured in the survey with the other factors emerging from the students’ free responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># Safe and Supp. Environment</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Positive School Culture</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Appropriate Teaching Methodologies</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/Caring Teachers</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Regular Monitoring of Student Progress</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Focus on Learning</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Student Engagement</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Co-curricular interests and sport</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide range of subject choice</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># High Expectations and appropriate expectations for all</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student attitudes/Competitiveness</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Educational Leadership</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Development of Staff Skills</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and facilities</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Social and Personal Development Skills</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Parental and Community Connection</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for post school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable/lower expectations of students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student role in decision making</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Leadership Opportunities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral care</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian focus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 18: Rankings and Score of the 5 Most Important Factors in Effective Schools

An index score for each theme was calculated by giving a value of five to a theme if it was ranked the most important and a value of one if it was ranked least important of the five by any one student. By calculating a score for each theme they could then be ranked. In addition to the 10 elements contained in the survey instrument, students listed another 12 elements at
least once. Some of these student derived elements were listed first in their list, that is, their most important factor. The highest ranking theme scored an index of 94 while the last three themes listed scored one as a result of being the lowest ranked element by three different students.

While not last in the list of themes covered in the survey, Educational Leadership was well down the list being ranked eleventh. This result again illustrated that while it was certainly considered a useful measure of school effectiveness, the students did not acknowledge Educational Leadership as an important measure.

These initial results indicated that students thought less of Educational Leadership as a measure of effective schools than the literature credited it. The literature considers this to be one of the most important factors and is evident in all but a very few effective school studies. This study, however, showed a less than expected perception in the importance of educational leadership by the students and it is important to understand why the students hold these views. In this particular research context, the students’ perceptions were even more surprising as the educational leadership within the school has been stable for a considerable time. The current Head of the school had been in the position for the past 18 years with the Deputy Head there for the last 5 years. While the students would see little of the School Council, it too, has seen very little personnel change over the past 6 years. Other senior management positions within the school have been stable with the exception that a new tier of ‘Heads of School’ was introduced. These positions were relatively new at the time of the research and had been dynamic in the early stages of the roles.

The trends shown in the questionnaire findings were explored in detail in the focus groups and questions were asked searching the reasons behind the results. Notwithstanding the data from the questionnaires, it became evident from the focus groups that the students did in fact consider the role of the Head and other senior staff to be significant. However, the students did not, in their own minds, make a clear connection with these roles and the concept of Educational Leadership and few students made comment one way or another about this theme. Interestingly the most positive exchange of comments was made in one of the focus groups when the students were simply asked what they considered to be important in an effective school. Student 11 in one of the Year 10 focus groups [FG10.2] commented:
I think it’s important to have a strong person who is the head of the school like the Headmaster. I think he needs to be a strong person, ‘cause he’s running the school sort of thing so it’s important to have. Like, yeah.

The brief discussions that followed this statement affirmed that the Head was considered important but what he did and how it was leadership was unclear in the students’ minds. Another brief discussion relating to the school’s leadership occurred in one of the Year 12 Focus Groups [FG12.2]:

Student 9: They [senior staff of the school] make the rules and tell the teachers what to teach and stuff but the teachers are the ones that do it.

Student 12: I don’t see Mr W [Head] very often and I guess I’m a swat so I’m not in trouble much so I hardly ever see the higher up teachers. I don’t think they are very important but they probably do stuff we don’t see.

Student 1: Mr C [Head of Middle School] is important but all he does is tell us to look smarter and punishes those that do lame things.

Student 8: In the younger years the Deputy and Headmaster were more important because of discipline but now the Director of Studies is more important to us.

Student 12: Yeah! and Mrs G [Head of Senior School] too. She is a big help in giving us information and telling us what is needed for next year at Uni.

The students’ perceptions are that the Headmaster and even Deputy are somewhat removed from them and besides formal occasions they consider these senior staff to have little to do with their education. Of far more importance to the students are those staff members that have direct involvement with their learning. There is certainly a sense that the senior staff members are important in some way, however, there appears to be a distance between the Head and the students resulting in them not knowing and understanding the educational leadership role he plays.

Out of the ten elements surveyed there was general consensus among the students that when considering effective schools, Educational Leadership was not of the greatest importance. The students were somewhat unclear about the concept of educational leadership and were unsure as to the role the senior staff in the school played in the processes of teaching and learning and for some, their role across the wider school. The students felt that the effectiveness of the school relied on the teachers and what they did in the class. Further it was the teachers who were important in making the school safe and supportive, a theme to be discussed later. Little or no understanding was demonstrated of the role the senior staff play...
in designing policies and establishing procedures enabling those aspects of school they felt were important.

Taking these results into consideration and weighing them against the results of previous research as outlined in Chapter Two, there is enough evidence to suggest that this theme is important to maintain in any list of effective school measures. While the students do not overwhelmingly embrace it, there is not enough evidence to suggest it should be excluded.

Appropriate Teaching Methodologies

Appropriate Teaching Methodologies refers to the skill and approach of the teachers in engaging the students in effective learning. It is defined in this study as the ability of the teacher to plan and deliver a well constructed lesson that caters for the learning needs of the students and engages the students in effective learning. The discussions considering previous research contained in the literature review demonstrates that it is without doubt one of the most significant factors in a school being considered effective.

This is not a measure of the personal relationships between students and teachers per se, although it is hard to remove that from this theme entirely, rather its focus is on the technical ability of the teacher. Having said that, it is a commonly held view that a feature of all highly regarded teachers is that they relate to their students and the way their students learn, therefore their teaching methodologies are inherently considered appropriate (Knipe, 2007; Smyth & McInernry, 2007; Youitt, 2004).

It is not surprising then that the students considered this theme to be one of the most important elements to them when identifying an effective school. Further to this, the students’ responses shown in Table 19 demonstrated that their perception of their current school is one that it is very effective in encouraging appropriate teaching methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of</th>
<th>Appropriate Teaching Methodologies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Mean</td>
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<td>Effectiveness of</td>
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<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 19: Appropriate Teaching Methodologies Mean and Standard Deviation by Question
The results shown in Table 19 demonstrate just how important this theme is to the students with a total mean of 4.2. The means for individual questions are also all high confirming their appropriateness as questions measuring this theme. While the data for the ‘Effectiveness’ measure are lower, they nevertheless illustrate a perception that the school is effective for this measure. Again there is good consistency of means across all the questions.

The results in Figure 7 below also show just how important the students saw this theme. When measuring the ‘Importance’ of this theme, 43% of students rated it as ‘Very important’ with a further 45% rating it as ‘Important’.

The results measuring the students’ perceptions of effectiveness of their school were nearly as compelling. A total of 76% of students rated the school as providing *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* ‘Well’ or ‘Very well’ with 27% rating it as ‘Very well’. These are results with which the school should be very pleased.

![Perceptions of Importance vs Effectiveness](image_url)

**Figure 7: Comparison of Importance and Effectiveness - Appropriate Teaching Methodologies**

This theme was one of the more consistent themes across all respondents with the rating of the ‘Importance’ measure and the ‘Effectiveness’ measure showing no notable differences between the Year 10 and Year 12 cohorts or the female and male response. This is indicative of the importance the students placed on their teachers’ planning and presentation of curriculum during lessons.

The importance the students placed on appropriate teaching methodologies is further demonstrated in the listing of the 5 most important elements of effective schools in Part C of the survey. Table 5 indicates that this theme was ranked third out of the 22 elements listed,
having a score of 80. When this result is combined with the survey results, a strong correlation and sense of this theme’s importance to the students is confirmed.

When discussing their current school, students considered their teachers to effectively employ appropriate teaching methodologies during the teaching and learning processes. Several students’ comments demonstrate this point as illustrated by comments such as:

- It has efficient and effective teaching methods
- It mostly has good teachers from which you can learn

As with previous themes, the importance of *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* can be demonstrated by comments that show the students’ perceptions of the school as not always being effective. As one student commented, “. . . the school is successful but it ignores non-academic students”. This comment is more a reflection on the teaching methodologies employed by staff than any other factor as the student is clearly feeling that their needs are not being met by the teaching methodologies employed. It is true to say that while the general curriculum of the school is matriculation orientated; students whose ambition or ability excludes university options are nonetheless catered for in the classroom. However, the perception for this student is that this is not the case for them.

It should be noted that the majority of comments made by students in relation to teachers, both in the open-ended survey results and in the focus groups, related to two quite different characteristics of teachers. First, there were comments on the teachers being ‘good’, and secondly, relating to ‘the caring nature’ of teachers. The comments referring to teachers being ‘good’ has been taken as meaning skilled in their craft and possessing a good knowledge of their subject matter, that is, the same conceptual framework covered in the *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* theme.

The majority of the responses in the focus groups relating to teachers referred to the notion of caring teachers and their ability to establish relationships with students. While the *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* theme encompasses the notion of caring, it is clear that this is of much greater importance in the students’ minds and should be dealt with separately. By analysing the focus group data inductively a new theme, or at least a splitting of *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* as a theme has become necessary. Two new themes
have been developed that replace the *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* theme to better reflect the perceptions of the students. First, the theme of *Caring and Supportive Teachers* has been created, and second the theme of *Good Appropriate Teaching* has been refined as a replacement for *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies*. These two themes are dealt with in turn.

*Caring and Supportive Teachers*

The caring role of the teacher emerged as a significant element for students in their perceptions of effective schools. While students recognised a link between caring teachers and teachers who are skilled and teach well, it became evident that in the students’ minds these two characteristics needed to be dealt with separately. Further strengthening the need to create a new theme there was a perceived need to separate the notion of ‘support’ from safety issues as they relate to the physical environment and realign it closer with the concept of caring teachers. Therefore this project has also separated the notion of ‘support’ from the *Safe and Supportive Environment theme* pairing it with the concept of teachers as carers. By combining the notion of ‘caring’ from *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* with ‘support’ from *Safe and Secure Environment* this new theme has evolved.

While the students expressed a need for the school environment to be a safe place, the school as a place of ‘support’ was equally, and arguably, more important. The students, when they made comment about being supported, did so not in terms of a safe schooling environment but a caring one. Predominantly the notion of ‘caring’ was embedded in the role of teachers although there were also a number of comments about the role of peers as carers and support people.

A key feature of *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* is the nature of good teaching, combining both the technical aptitude of teaching as well as the pastoral or relational role. However, as has been shown, the students in this study drew distinct differences between these two characteristics of teachers and differentiated between good technical teachers and caring teachers. The students certainly recognised that the same teachers often demonstrated both traits, as is evidenced from the extract [FG12.1] below but there were also other teachers who were attributed as possessing one of these traits but not both.
**Student 11:** Some teachers also are more interested in us. They talk to us like they are interested. In Years 8 and 9 we used to try and get teachers off the topic by talking about stuff and we thought it was great because we did not do as much work. In Year 11 and 12 when we have teachers who do this I listen more to the work and learn better. It’s like less time on the work but I learn more.

**Student 6:** Teachers who care make it easier and more interesting doing the work.

**Student 12:** I think they are the same thing . . . The caring teachers are those that teach well.

When this extract was initially analysed it appeared as if it was impossible to split the notions of a caring teacher from a technically good one. For example, student 12 is the clearest in expressing that caring teachers are those that also teach well. Other students focused on the importance of making the lesson interesting and engaging. While this is a technical skill of the teacher it also requires a relational skill on the part of the teacher to be able to connect with the students to make the material relevant and interesting. However, in the context of the general discussion that preceded and followed this brief extract it was evident that the students treated the concepts as different. This was supported at other times during the various focus groups when the differentiation between good technical teaching and caring teachers were made. Knowing the subject area and teaching to get good results did not, in the students’ minds, necessarily make a good and caring teacher. A Year 12 student articulated it this way:

**[FG12.2-ST5]:** But you can have a good teacher who gets good results but is not fun and is not . . . a caring teacher . . . but gets good work from the class. Mrs [K] for example is not the most supportive teacher but she gets great results. Its not much fun [laughter] but I do well with her.

Throughout the focus groups, there were many comments made about the trait of caring teachers. The importance of this concept to the students is demonstrated clearly by their comments.

**[FG10.2-ST6]:** Communication between teachers and students [is important]. The teachers should be approachable to the students so that if they have a problem they can come forward and say I have a problem and get help fixing it.

**[FG12.1-ST14]:** I think it would be the caring environment that the school provides through the teachers and other parents and things like that. ’cause if its not caring or a good environment then kids aren’t going to come to school and learn.
[FG10.2-ST11]: The way that kids can interact with the teachers. They’re very easy to come across, they’re easy to talk to. Yeah its just easier to learn in class if you have that sort of relationship with a teacher. Like you can talk to them and ask them questions.

In all three of these comments, the role and the importance of the caring teacher is evident. This theme continued to emerge through all of the focus groups and at various times during each discussion. At times they were dispersed in discussions about other themes and in other instances they stood alone.

Mediator: Is this a good school?
General murmur: Yeah
Mediator: Why?
Student 4: I think it’s a good school because the teachers care, they actually care if you have troubles and lots of schools don’t have that, so its good for education.
Student 5: Yeah the teaching is good. I have lots of teachers that are strict but they are nice and reasonable. I have one that’s hopeless but . . .
Mediator: What makes that teacher hopeless?
Student 5: They don’t control the loud boys who do slack things to others and don’t bother to check the work so you just end up doing rubbish. I don’t bother trying in the class ‘cause the work is not looked at. She also never seems to care and I reckon she doesn’t know my name.
Student 4: Most of the teachers care heaps and chat and josh with you. The ones that don’t and are just tough don’t make class time good. Then the work becomes boring and homework is a waste.

Another interesting response referring to the caring nature of teachers came in a discussion [FG10.2] relating to the need for staff to further develop their skills.

[FG10.2-ST5]: I think it’s a helpful thing because it shows us that they care about us and they want to learn new ways so that they can teach us new techniques. ‘cause if you get taught with the same technique all the time it can get boring but it just shows us that they do want to go out there and they do want to find new techniques that can be taught and make their teaching more effective.

The importance of the caring nature of teachers is evident, this time expressed as the reason why the teacher would make an effort to undergo further professional development. The content of the professional development is not the issue being discussed; rather it is the fact that the teacher is willing to undertake professional development illustrating his or her care for the students. Professional development is encouraged at the school and is significantly
supported by the administration by the allocation of a substantial budget for professional
development each year. This includes both short courses as well as further formal education
through universities with fees relief provided by the school. It is not uncommon for staff to
attend professional development and for students to be aware of it. Further, during each
student vacation break the school has Professional Development Days. The individual growth
of the teacher’s professionalism and the sharing of this knowledge to other members of staff
is the rationale behind the school’s support of professional development, however, in this
student’s mind at least, the teacher is doing the professional development because they care.

The school in which this research has taken place is explicitly aligned to one of the major
Christian denominations and makes it unambiguous to those enrolling that it has a specific
and well articulated Christian worldview. While the Christian ethos of the school does not
draw substantial comment by the students and was certainly not addressed in the
questionnaire, there were students who have interesting perceptions about how the Christian
ethos impacts the school and it effectiveness. It could be argued, however, that the Christian
ethos of the school in embedded in the concept of school culture, something to be explored
later. Following on from earlier discussions in FG12.1 concerning the Christian worldview
within the school and the commitment of the staff the following brief exchange occurred.

\[FG12.1\text{-ST5}]: \text{The religion aspects come in because the [teachers] who are}
religious tend to be more caring and work towards, I don’t know how to say it . . .
but if you went to say a government school where, based on the religion of the
teachers they aren’t willing to excel, the students don’t benefit. Instead teachers
just get paid.

While it initially appeared difficult to untangle comments relating to the technical skill of
teachers and the supportive nature of teachers, the deeper the analysis the greater the evidence
emerged illustrating the need to separate the concepts. Of greatest importance to the students
was the caring nature of the teachers. One of the important features of focus group research
discussed in the methodology chapter related to the need of treating the focus group and
interaction between participants as a whole as much as a series of individual comments. The
theme of \textit{Caring and Supportive Teachers} has emerged from such an approach and students
perceived it to be a significant element in measuring the effectiveness of schools.
Nevertheless it is also essential to recognise the students’ views concerning the quality of the
teachers’ skill of teaching and as such, in addition to the *Caring and Supportive Teachers* a theme addressing *Good and Appropriate Teaching* has been developed as well.

*Good and Appropriate Teaching*

The theme *Good and Appropriate Teaching* is similar to but distinct from the theme of *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* as derived from the literature. The addition of the word ‘good’ is as a result of the use of the word by the students when referring to the technical competency of their teachers.

It is evident from the data that the students perceive good teachers and good teaching skills as essential in effective schools. The students were explicit in their desire to have teachers well grounded in their subject area, as well as possessing an ability to communicate and impart their knowledge to students well. Many students spoke about learning styles and measured good teachers as not only those that taught them well, but ones that had a diversity of teaching approaches and were able to engage all the students at different times and in different ways. Nevertheless the most important element of a good teacher was one with whom an individual was able to communicate.

*Moderator:* What other elements do you think there are that make a school effective – either this school or other schools?

*Student 1:* The kind of teachers that we have here really help us a lot in getting the best out of our abilities.

*Moderator:* How do they do that?

*Student 1:* They work one-on-one with us and you can ask them to do that and they can help you through anything you’re having trouble with.

The one-on-one student/teacher relationship and the ability of the teacher to relate to the student emerged regularly as being important. What is interesting is that this relational aspect of the teacher student exchange is considered as engaging to the students but not necessarily caring. That is, the student is engaged with the work and feels they are learning quite separately to the caring nature of the teacher. That teacher may well be caring at other times but the important element is the engagement and instructional elements of the role. The ability of the teacher to engage the student in a positive learning environment is further illustrated in the comments below.

*[FG12.1-ST6]*: I think that the choosing of teachers is a big part of being an effective school because if you have a teacher that doesn’t have much
personality or something I won’t like the subject as much. I won’t like going and I won’t learn from it. I find the subjects where I have teachers that are funny and have good personalities, I like those subjects more.

[FG12.2-ST5]: I think, for me, the most important part of school is teachers who make things interesting. Some subjects I find really hard but if the teacher is good and interesting that makes a big difference.

[FG12.2-ST5] Um . . . [a teacher] that we have fun with but explains things well and does lots of different things rather that just talk and write. I have some teachers who just make the work interesting and change what we do and explain things well. Its great. Some teachers are just boring and seem to only teach to a few kids in the class.

There has been much evidence discussed already that points towards the consensus amongst students that good teachers are those who are able to cater to the differing needs of students within their classes. Provided below are several statements that confirm for the students the need for teachers to differentiate their teaching and in so doing cater for all the students’ learning needs and styles.

[FG10.1-ST12]: With what was said then, the learning mixed with high expectations, I think its important that all students are catered for. . . like the ones that want to go to TAFE are just as important as the ones that are going to get high above 95 UAI.

[FG10.1-ST1]: I think that’s really important ‘cause some students find learning easier in some way and harder in some way. So I think the teachers should learn to adapt to that kind of learning so that all of them know which way everyone learns so that its easier for the students.

[FG10.2-ST 13]: It’s really important to have a wide range of teachers who teach like in their own way. Like some teachers are more verbal and others get you to write down a lot of things. Lots of students are different types of learners so its really important to have a wide range.

While these individual comments are important in demonstrating the need for teachers to differentiate their teaching to student’s needs, there were also substantive discussions that took place confirming the students’ perceptions. The extract below from FG10.1 is an example of the type of discussion that took place.

Student 6: Everybody learns in a different way and I think teachers would learn that just writing notes or just talking is not the way to go. You need to break it
up, have a bit of fun for people who are kinesetic or something like that. Play games, draw colourful mind maps, maybe still write notes and still talk and that kind of stuff but play games that help you learn. Pictures and that kind of stuff not just the regular notes, talking, notes every lesson. It gets really boring and I think teachers learning how to do that is good teaching. How to incorporate all those different styles into their teaching is really important.

Moderator: Do you think the teachers here on the whole do that well or could do it a lot better.

Student 6: Some teachers do it well but others not so much.

Student 12: Yeah I’ve noticed as Student 6 said some do it well and some not so much, but its better when they interact with the students. In English for example, in the last lesson we talked about, we’d be doing a story and we’d talk about something that’s related to the story. That gets everyone involved in it and everyone interested and listening then because they want to hear what other people are saying and they want to give their opinions as well. Whereas in another class for example, say commerce, we’re just given 20 questions to do in three lessons and we do those whole 20 questions not interacting with each other and that’s probably bad for maybe the auditory learners. Then we’ll just go through the answers and leave it at that. It seems to be better interacting so you feel you can ask questions rather than not feel “oh I don’t want to ask a question ‘cause I’ll sound stupid” sort of thing. So make the students feel more comfortable I think. You can sort of relate to it easier.

As evident in this extract, the ability of the teacher to differentiate their teaching styles to accommodate the learning needs of the students is an important part of a teacher’s and therefore school’s effectiveness. Several of the students in the extract above emphasise the need for teachers to be technically sound with an ability to engage all their students in the learning process. The importance of teachers being technically skilled, particularly in differentiating their teaching, was further emphasised by the following students.

[FG10.2-ST7]: . . teachers that come across well with what they talk to you about and have good knowledge of what they’re talking about . . . and engaging, they come across to the students’ well. They entice you to learn more about the subject.

[FG12.2-ST5]: Some of the teachers are not that good. Like we talked about earlier, the teachers really make a big difference. I hated maths ‘til this year but with a change in teacher its ok now. I think things are explained well now and we have fun. We learn doing more interesting things rather than just bits from books or hundred’s of photocopies.

It is evident from the many comments and discussions across the focus groups that students perceive the role of the teachers as fundamentally important and central to their learning. The skills of greatest importance are the ability to engage with the students and to teach in a way
that caters for the breadth of learning styles of the students in the class. There were also comments relating to the ability of the teachers to adapt and change in an attempt to improve the teaching and learning process.

A discussion revolving around almost the identical issue was raised in one of the Year 12 focus groups [FG12.2]. Once again the ability of the teacher to adapt their teaching styles to the learning styles of individuals is seen as fundamentally important to the students.

_Moderator:_ OK, what about good teaching methodologies? Is that important? [long pause]. Let me ask it another way – do the teachers teach well?

_Student 12:_ Pretty much. The best teachers I have had seem to be able to teach well. For example, my friends and me all learn differently and the teachers are good at helping all of us. Again there are a few teachers who just teach the same way all the time. That’s OK if you learn like that. Mr X . . . oh sorry! Well anyway, him, he just talks, write things on the board and gives out photocopies. I don’t mind that but my friends in my group just find it boring and hate it.

_Moderator:_ Is how a teacher teaches important then?

_Yeah, Yes [murmurs of general agreement]_

_Student 3:_ Yeah, a teacher can make the work really boring and I lose interest or they make it good. I always hated history but I got . . . a new teacher this year and its heaps better.

_Student 5:_ I think, for me, the most important part of school is teachers who make things interesting. Some subjects I find really hard but if the teacher is good and interesting that makes a big difference.

_Moderator:_ What do you mean by a good teacher?

_Student 5:_ Um . . . one that we have fun with but explains things well and does lots of different things rather that just talk and write. I have some teachers who just make the work interesting and change what we do and explain things well. Its great. Some teachers are just boring and seem to only teach to a few kids in the class . . . Some of the teachers are not that good.

The importance of the teacher’s skill in engaging the students in learning is essential for the students and they have clear views about which teachers do this well and which teachers do not. There was also a sense through the various focus groups that different students appreciated the styles of different teachers. It is important not to be tempted to use the findings of a small group to make generalisations about the single best approach to teaching other than to say that an effective school needs a broad base of teachers with different styles willing to teach to the needs of the students. Comments from other students in other focus groups make similar points. For example:
Some of the teachers are really engaging and Year 11 and 12 we have smaller classes and like we talk to most people in that class because they are smaller classes and stuff so we talk to those people we don’t usually talk to.

The kind of teachers that we have here really help us a lot in getting the best out of our abilities. [Pause] They work one-on-one with us and you can ask them to do that and they can help you through anything you’re having trouble with.

The last of these comments has been included earlier but is useful in illustrating another point too. It occurred at the beginning of an exchange that evolved from a discussion on good teachers to one focusing on caring and supportive teachers. While this study has created a divide based on the comments of the students it is clear that there continues to be considerable overlap and that good teachers include an element of relationship between student and teacher that cannot be removed or simplified. The need for skilled teachers is strongly expressed by the students.

As a result of the data analysis the evidence demonstrated that the students’ perceived caring and supportive teachers as separate concepts in their own right. The students recognised that it is intrinsically difficult to split the ‘skill and craft’ of teaching from the ‘relationship’ elements of a good teacher. In one of the focus group the moderator tried to differentiate between these two elements and the response was unambiguous.

Moderator: Now what we have here are two different elements. Teachers who teach well and caring teachers.
General murmur: Yeah
Student 12: I think they are the same thing sir. [Pause] The caring teachers are those that teach well.

A further comment of interest seems at first glance not to be discussing this theme at all. However, within the context of the focus group discussion [FG10.1] it became clear that this student was referring to the good organisational ability of the teacher when she said:

[FG10.1-ST5] . . . you don’t do one topic one day and another topic the next day you might spend a couple of weeks on one topic and then move on.

The majority of comments referred to the face-to-face teaching rather than, as this comment does, the scope and sequence of the lesson. This organisational side of teaching was seen by this student to be important. Students have a lot to say about the appropriate teaching
methodologies of their teachers and it is their perception that this is an essential element of effective schools. It is also important to note that on the whole the students believe their current school to have teachers who are effective in their teaching methodologies but as always there is room for improvement.

In addition there were comments particularly from the Yr 10 focus groups relating to the appropriateness of providing opportunities for students not pursuing further study at university. It was felt that an effective school is one that caters for students who leave the school after Year 10 seeking work or vocational training as much as catering for those leaving after Year 12 heading to university.

I think that it is important that all students are catered for as well. Like the ones that want to go to TAFE are just as important as the ones that are going to get a high UAI. Like it’s important that there are subjects available to people that aren’t going to go to university but go to TAFE or start work or something, so it is important that every students needs are met.

In summary, while this discussion began with the theme of Appropriate Teaching Methodologies it has been demonstrated that the students believed this theme to not measure what they perceived as most important in the teaching and learning processes. The original theme was therefore reconsidered and reformed so that the key elements of the themes as the students perceived it become the primary focus. As such the original theme transformed into Good and Appropriate Teaching. By doing this it became necessary for a new theme to be developed, namely Caring and Supportive Teachers to take into account the emphasis by the students on the caring nature and support of their teachers as fundamental to effective teaching and therefore effective schools. A further impact on the Safe and Supportive Environment theme occurred as the concept of ‘support’ was paired with ‘caring’. It has therefore been removed from the original theme and that too has changed its focus slightly to emphasising the role of good building design, good resources and appropriate procedures to ensure safety. The new theme of Safe and Well-Resourced Facilities will be discussed later.

*Pervasive Focus on Learning*

Effective schools must necessarily focus on the processes of teaching and learning. The section immediately beforehand dealt with the students’ perceptions of teaching. As the literature review demonstrated, the importance of learning, and in particular effective schools
focusing on learning as a priority, is an element emphasised as being essential in an effective school and therefore should be measured. The theme *Pervasive Focus on Learning* relates to the underlying culture of the school that encourages students to focus on their own learning. This study has confirmed these findings in that the students also perceived this to be an important part of an effective school. Further to this, the results demonstrate that the students were of the opinion that their current school was effective in focusing them on learning. Table 20 as follows demonstrates the findings of the survey.

In measuring the ‘Importance’ for this element the results showed an overall mean of 4.2. This indicates the substantial importance the students placed on this measure as a determinate of effective schools. While the mean score for the ‘Effectiveness’ measure was slightly lower it was nonetheless a notable result indicating that the students’ perceive their school effectively provides a focus on learning.

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*Table 20: Focus on Learning Mean and Standard Deviation by Question*

The means for each question when measuring ‘Importance’ show a consistency across all questions demonstrating that these questions are good measures of this theme. There is, however, a good deal more inconsistency when measuring ‘Effectiveness’. Questions 3 and 13 have produced means of 4.1 and 4.2 respectively whereas question 43 has recorded a mean of 2.9. Question 43, which was “How well does this school praise a wide range of students not only those who achieve the most?” is an outlier that prompted further exploration in the focus groups.

The results illustrated in Figure 8 show the ratings the students gave to this theme for both the ‘Importance’ of *Focus on Learning* as a theme as well as how effective their school was in delivering this to the students. For the ‘Importance’ scale, the combined responses for ‘Very
important’ and ‘Important’ produced a very strong response of 84%. When differences in the cohorts were examined the Year 12 cohort indicated an even stronger emphasis on this theme with a result of 88%. Both cohorts produced results for the ‘effectiveness’ rating of 71% for the combined ‘Very well’ and ‘Well’ measures. This is a very positive outcome for the school. Again when the cohort results are analysed separately the differences between the ‘Importance’ measure and the ‘Effectiveness’ measure for the Year 10 cohort demonstrated there was no notable difference. The combined responses for the Year 12 cohort fell from 88% for the ‘Importance’ measure to 64% for the ‘Effectiveness’ measure.

These results demonstrate that the students acknowledge Focus on Learning as an important element of effective schools. Of particular note is the greater emphasis the Year 12 students placed on this theme to that of Year 10. While the students demonstrated that this is an important measure they were moderately critical of their school. Overall they felt the school was reasonably effective in creating a school environment that focused them on learning, although the Year 12 cohort felt more could be done in this regard.

In addition to students rating this as one of the more important measures of effective schools, when it came to listing it as one of the most important elements in Part C of the questionnaire, it received a score of 59 making it fifth on the list of key themes and sixth overall (Table 18).

There were a number of students who wrote responses referring to this theme, including:

- It [the school] not only focuses on academics but sport and music too.
- Yes it is [effective] because the learning environment is a positive pressure to succeed.
- Talents are developed and there is a strong focus on learning.
While *Focus on Learning* as an element was considered important as evident from the survey results it is an element that elicited few comments and discussions during the focus group phase of the project. It became clear during the discussion that students considered teaching and learning together as one and the same. In other words, a school that had good teaching also had good learning. For the students the concept of a clear focus on learning was more about the rhetoric by the school concerning the importance of academic focus rather than the actual processes of learning in the classroom.

Even though the discussions that can be directly attributed to this theme are limited, a number of interesting comments were made. As an example, in FG10.1 the following statement was made:

> [FG10.1-ST8] I think it [focus on learning] is important because most of the students in the higher years are going into HSC years. Its important years of their life for many reasons whether they choose to leave or to go to TAFE and do an apprenticeship or they choose to go on to Years 11 and 12 and go onto university. Its important that learning is there and that the teaching is there. The students feel that learning is important because . . . they’d be happy to learn and they’d be able to feel that they will accomplish something at the end of the two years.

In one of the Yr12 focus groups [FG12.1] following a discussion on teaching and learning the following brief exchange occurred concerning the school context.

*Moderator:* Why, what makes you say that [the school is focused on learning]?
*Student 13:* The high expectations that teachers set.

While the students believed a focus on learning was important they had difficulty articulating what that actually means to them. For some students it was simple because “School has to be about learning, it is a school”. Following this statement another brief exchange took place [FG12.2]. In this exchange the focus on learning, for one of the students at least, was perceived as a negative element of the school.

*Student 9:* School has to be about learning, it’s a school.
*Moderator:* Does this school focus on learning?
*Student 8:* Too much.
*Moderator:* What do you mean too much?
*Student 8:* Well we are always being told to work hard and that this is an academic school and stuff.
Student 12: I think its good because the school get really good marks in the HSC and that’s important.
Student 5: But I don’t want to go to uni so it’s a bit over the top sometimes.

In this exchange the negativity is clearly levelled at the academic focus of the school, which is very clearly and often communicated to students and the community in general. This particular school has the matriculation of its students as its ultimate focus and there is some resistance to this from those students who do not want to or perhaps cannot achieve this. The academic success is clearly a positive for some students but of far less importance to others.

The lack of detailed discussion by the students focusing on learning was somewhat surprising following the level of importance placed on this element in the survey results. Nevertheless, while it is an important factor it was certainly not seen as the most important factor for the students who participated in the focus groups.

In spite of the little discussion that took place there was a strong consensus overall that an effective school had to focus on learning. When asked if this was an important element the standard response was ‘Yes, it’s a school’. Students indicated that the focus on learning was a ‘given’ in the school. When asked to explain what they believed this element involved the standard responses were along the lines of making sure students learnt and improved their knowledge. Some discussion took place concerning the importance of not interrupting class time too much with notices and other interruptions. While there was general agreement there was little discussion overall.

While the literature deals with Focus on Learning as a discreet theme of importance, the students did not perceive it as such. For the students the learning took place because of Good and Appropriate Teaching from Caring and Supportive Teachers. In an attempt to pursue this further in the focus groups, it became apparent that other academically related factors were important. With further analysis of the focus group data it became apparent that a measure focusing on the school’s academic success and the diversity of subject choice was important to the students. It became necessary to include a new theme as a measure if school effectiveness, namely Academic Success and Curriculum Choice. This new theme emerged consistently from the focus group discussions in response to the students acknowledging that
subject choice was central to maintaining their interest in learning and better catering to their abilities to achieve well.

_Academic Success and Curriculum Choice_

The breadth of research covered in the literature review demonstrates that academic performance, as an important measure of effective schools, is irrefutable. While this element has been a significant focus in the literature, there has been much debate as to how best to measure academic success and over the years there has been a decline in its use as a measure. The trend away from attempting to measure academic success is indicative of the dangers of falling into using a univariable and contextually inappropriate measure of student performance. In response to this, the ten themes used in this project did not substantially focus on academic achievement as a measure of an effective school. This has been proven to be an error and needs to be addressed. There has perhaps been an overreaction to the early trends to over measure academic success as a key indicator of effective schools, a stance that needs rebalancing.

One of the reasons the measurement of academic success was avoided was the tendency of the measures being subject specific rather than focusing on the student’s overall results across all subjects and the use of contextually inappropriate measures. Academic success is not universally the same and cannot be measured in the same way across all contexts. However, it was evident from the students’ responses in the focus groups that to them academic achievement was an essential measure of a school’s effectiveness. The extract below from a Year 12 focus group [FG12.2] illustrates the importance of academic success.

*Moderator:* What’s an effective school? What does an effective school look like, feel like?

*Student 12:* Good HSC results. This school gets really good HSC results. That’s why my parents sent me here. . . In Year 12 most of the students want to go to university and so having good HSC results is important. That’s what we want and the school has helped other students to get good results.

*Student 9:* Even for us who do not want to go to uni the results are important because we can take what we learn to TAFE or jobs and stuff.

In addition to the success of previous students as an important indicator of the effectiveness of the school, the breadth of curriculum offered by the school was considered just as important. Students felt that an effective school is one that provides educational opportunities for all
students by catering appropriately for their needs and interests through as broad a curriculum as possible and, in the New South Wales context, with as much subject choice as possible. This is demonstrated by the following comments by students when considering what is important in an effective schools’ educational programme. The students responded with comments such as:

[FG10.1-ST12]: . . it’s important that there are subjects available to people that aren’t going to go to university but go to TAFE or start an apprenticeship or something so its important that every student’s needs are met.

[FG10.2-ST13]: [Also] a wide range of topics [subjects] that you can study.

[FG12.1-ST4]: The range of subjects the school provides for the students is important.

Throughout the various focus groups there was a perceived need for schools to have as broad a curriculum choice as possible. The school is acknowledged in the community as a school that encourages all students to work towards matriculation and as such offers a restricted range of subjects in the senior years. The school’s focus on academic subjects restricts subjects that have a vocational training focus and draws some criticism from students in the later years of their schooling. It is, however, one of the reasons many parents send their children to the school.

By way of seeking further students comments in each of the focus groups, student were asked what areas of their school they consider to be the least effective. The restrictive subject choice emerged as a strong factor and indicated a need for this to be considered by the students as a measure of effectiveness. The following extract from FG10.2 is an example.

Student 13: Just a wider range of subjects for Years 11 and 12. Like I found in Year 9 the subjects were really good but in Year 11 and 12 there is not that wide a range I am looking for because I’m more creative so maybe like hospitality or something.

Student 11: I think that it would be good in Year 9 and 10 if subjects like drama or dance or something could be continued so that they have that foundation in Year 11 and 12 because other schools have an advantage of doing it through Years 9 and 10 and getting into Year 11 and 12 and doing it again. That’s coming from a creative side.

Student 7: I agree with Student 11 but also work experience. It think that’s important for everyone to get out and experience because some people don’t get
that opportunity whether it be their home situation or they just can’t get to a place to work. I think it’s important for kids to have a generally good idea what’s really needed, that you actually have to get out there and work hard if you want to get anywhere. So I think that’s important.

It has been held for a long time that the clearest measure of an effective school is the academic success of the students who attend the school. How the academic success of any school is measured is a point of much discussion in the research literature. There are no simple measures of academic success and to measure a school’s effectiveness on academic measures alone is problematic and very limiting in scope. It is clear that the students at this school consider academic success to be an important measure of school effectiveness and that this school in particular is successful in this measure. In their opinion the success is measured using the simplistic measures of good HSC results and UAI rankings. While much debate about the worthiness or otherwise of such measures of academic success should take place, the fact remains that this is what these students have used. It is their perceptions that these measures are appropriate.

The results from this project indicate the necessity to measure academic success when examining the effectiveness of a school. An important consideration for institutions measuring their academic success in light of this is, what measure is appropriate in each context and how can it be, and indeed should it be, compared across contexts.

**Positive School Culture**

*Positive School Culture*, like a number of the other key elements of effective schools, is a research field all of its own. The brief exploration of the current literature in Chapter 2 leaves the reader with an understanding that *Positive School Culture* is an essential and important part of measuring school effectiveness. However, there appears little consensus as to a clear definition of what *Positive School Culture* actually is and how it reflects in schools. This project has taken *Positive School Culture* to refer to the underlying sense of contentment and the feeling of satisfaction that life in school is ‘right’, that is, it is consistent with a person’s positive expectations and/or beliefs of school. It manifests itself in a willingness by both staff and students to become involved in the general life of the school. It is where staff feels they work together collegially to improve and support one another and where students feel valued, cared for and have a basic enjoyment of school. The general lack of clarity that exists
concerning the concept of Positive School Culture is evident in the findings of this project as well. While there was some consensus that the questions referring to Positive School Culture were measuring important elements of effective schools, the open-ended responses and focus group discussions lead to the conclusion that the students either did not perceive this element as very important or they did not understand the concept of Positive School Culture. Notions of happiness and being part of a community were expressed but often in relation to other elements, particularly a safe environment.

As evident from Table 21, Positive School Culture as a theme scored the lowest mean of all themes across both the ‘Importance’ and the ‘Effectiveness’ measures. Even so the means indicate that the students viewed a positive school culture as being important but that the school is perceived as only moderately effective in producing a positive school culture.

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**Table 21: Positive School Culture Mean and Standard Deviation by Question**

Again for both the ‘Importance’ and ‘Effectiveness’ measures, the means across each question are consistent. The questions therefore are considered good measures of this as a theme. Figure 9 below illustrates the ratings students gave this theme for both the ‘Importance’ and ‘Effectiveness’ measures.

**Figure 9: Comparison of Importance and Effectiveness – Positive School Culture**
The limited importance students placed on this theme in general is demonstrated by the data that shows that for the combined ‘Very important’ and ‘Important’ ratings the total response was 71%. When this is compared to the ‘Effectiveness’ measure it is even lower with less than half the respondents, 47%, thinking the school is effective in this regard. When the data is analysed for differences between the cohorts and gender, the Year 12 cohort ranked this theme a little higher when combining the top two scales in both the ‘Importance’ measure and the ‘Effectiveness’ measure. There was however, no difference between female and male responses.

Considering the relatively poor showing of this theme in the questionnaire results, unexpected results emerged when students were ask to list the five most important elements of effective schools. In seeming contradiction to the questionnaire results, this theme ranked second scoring a total of 86. This result came about when analysing the data by placing a range of comments under the theme of *Positive School Culture*. Many students were expressing sentiments that were often varied but were best placed under the general description of *Positive School Culture*. Comments included sentiments such as:

- Good morale in the school
- Positive attitudes
- Maintain a level of enjoyment
- Encouragement within the school
- School spirit
- Enjoyment while at school
- Positive atmosphere
- Good atmosphere in school

This list provides an indication of what students perceived to be important that are attributed to the broad conceptual framework of *Positive School Culture*. It is demonstrable that students think these elements are important but they do not necessarily gather them together in the theme of *Positive School Culture*. This finding was further strengthened by the focus group findings.

None of the focus groups voluntarily raised matters contained in the theme of *Positive School Culture* and when specific questions were asked it was clear that the students had no real concept of what school culture was and how it related to this theme. Having said that, by
analysing many of the comments relating to *Safe and Secure Environment* as a theme, the notions of enjoying school, being happy at school, and a good school spirit were all addressed in one way or another.

The following brief exchange from FG12.2 illustrates the lack of understanding and therefore lack of comments concerning *Positive School Culture*.

*Student 7:* By that [school culture] do you mean the feeling of the school?

*Student 3:* Its happy.

School culture is clearly an important element within an effective school when measuring student satisfaction but how best to do this and what elements need to be included is the basis for much more specific and detailed research in the future. Important questions for further exploration include if the students see themselves as being instrumental in the development of the culture or is it simply imposed despite them? Regardless of whether it fits within the broad concepts contained in the theme of *Positive School Culture*, the students recognised that school needs to be a happy place for students. Notwithstanding the students’ lack of understanding concerning school culture there were not infrequent comments about coming to a place that was happy.

*[FG10.2-ST11]*: Just in reference to the school environment, I think it’s important to have an environment for kids to come in every day like 5 days a week to be a happy. A place where they can feel comfortable and they can enjoy being at school. So I think its important that there is an environment where they are happy to be in.

Throughout the focus groups it was evident that the students recognised the needs for school rules that promote safety and protection for all students and that such rules and accompanying procedures allowed school to develop into a happy place. Generally the comments from the students revolved around the rules and the way the teachers interacted with them although the following comment demonstrated the role that a school uniform played in establishing a positive school culture.

*[FG10.1-ST12]* If everyone came to school in different sorts of clothes then straight away there’d be a separation between who has cool clothes and who has the not so cool. So right from the beginning it would be separated and then you wouldn’t get a chance. Like you wouldn’t feel comfortable going up and talking to people because that’s just something else that separates people whereas if you have a uniform then everybody is the same in that regard sort of thing.
It was felt that having a uniform enabled the students to interact better with other students who they may not ordinarily associate with because of their clothes. Comments were made that this has a flow on effect beyond school and allowed students to develop a wider group of friends than they think they ordinarily would have had.

Another aspect that drew some student comment in a general sense was the Christian ethos of the school. While the students did not indicate that it was essential to have a Christian influence in a school for it to be a happy place it was interesting to note the number of brief references and comments to the Christian underpinnings of the school. The various Christian focused student activities such as fellowships, prayer groups and Bible Studies along with the acknowledged Christian influenced care by the teachers was acknowledged.

*Positive School Culture* as a theme was a difficult concept for the students to come to grips with and in general very few comments were made concerning *Positive School Culture*. When this theme was raised specifically the students showed little understanding of what it was. It is worth noting that all the focus groups came to understand *Positive School Culture* to mean a catch all for the good feeling of the school. That is:

> [FG10.1-ST6] A [good school is a] place where you can learn but you can also have fun so it’s not an uptight kind of thing.

As stated, while school culture as a concept meant little to the students, the various elements that can be said to contribute to the culture of the school were recognised as important. The students however did not recognise these elements as a standalone function to be measured in the school, rather these elements were dispersed throughout many of the other themes. It is evident that the students’ believe this is an element that does not warrant inclusion in a list of elements to be measured. The options of being happy and safe and being in a place that is enjoyable are all bound up in other elements. The elements where such sentiments emerged the greatest are *Safe and Secure Environment, Caring Teachers* and *Engagement of Students across the School*.

*Engagement of Students across the School*

While the students’ appeared to have limited conceptual understanding of school culture, the whole notion of student engagement has emerged as being quite different. *Engagement of*
Students across the School refers to the ability of a school to motivate students to learn by increasing their sense of belonging and therefore involvement with academic work by encouraging participation with other students across a range of activities outside the classroom. It is evident from the student responses across the survey and the focus groups that an effective school is one that provides many and varied opportunities for students to become involved in their school. The students saw this involvement as being much more than just in the classroom and include activities that cater for the interests of a broad range of students. In light of the survey results it was not surprising to hear students make comments during the focus group discussions that it was important for them to take up opportunities that made life more enjoyable at school just as much as it is the school’s role to provide such opportunities. The current research demonstrates the importance of students becoming engaged in their learning, both in and outside the classroom as an essential element in effective schools. This project has confirmed these findings and if nothing else demonstrated just how important the students believe this to be in an effective school.

As alluded to earlier, the survey results illustrate the importance students placed on being involved in their education beyond the classroom. Table 22 indicates that students believe being involved in non-academic pursuits within the school and becoming engaged in the broader life of the school are essential. Each of the questions that measured this theme had consistent means and demonstrated that they were good measures of this theme as a whole. The overall mean of 4.2 when measuring the ‘Importance’ indicated the level at which the students consider this to be important. The means across all questions measuring the ‘Effectiveness’ of the school also demonstrate consistency although the overall mean of 3.6 is lower. While the students recognise the importance of student engagement they have rated the school moderately successful in achieving this for them.

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Table 22: Engagement of Students Across the School Mean and Standard Deviation by Question
As Figure 10 shows, 79% of students rated this element as being either ‘Very important’ or ‘Important’ in an effective school. When measuring the school they attend the results expected were lower with a 58% rating as engaging students ‘Very well’ or ‘Well’. When a comparison of cohort results was done, just over half (51%) of the Year 12 respondents rated this theme as ‘Very Important’. For the ‘Effectiveness’ measure they rated the school with a combined ‘Well’ and ‘Very Well’ rating of also 51%.

![Perceptions of Importance and Effectiveness](image)

The Year 10 cohort also rated this theme almost identically across the two themes although both the ‘Importance’ measure and the ‘Effectiveness’ measure were higher. The Year 10 cohort believed that they were better catered for and also demonstrated that this was of greater importance to them in an effective school. There was little to no variation between male and female responses. The results indicate that there is great consistency in the students’ minds of the importance of this measure as well as the effectiveness of their school.

Part C of the survey, requesting students to list the five most important elements of an effective school, saw a somewhat unexpected result considering the prominence of this element in the focus group phase and the strong showing in the survey questions. Engagement of Students across the School scored an index of 41, ranking this theme seventh overall and sixth out of the themes measured in the survey, a modest ranking which was lower than expected. This ranking would suggest that the students did not consider student engagement to be as important as the survey results showed. However, the focus group phase confirmed the initial survey results with Engagement of Students across the School being one of the most discussed themes during the focus group phase of this project. Throughout the focus groups,
discussions took place concerning the importance of this theme as a measure of effective schools and as an indicator of the effectiveness of the students’ school.

The students’ responses during the focus group phase demonstrated that they considered the breadth and diversity of activities provided in the school to be of great importance. *Engagement of Students across the School* in the students’ eyes ranged from sport played as part of a school competition to sports of interest but not part of school competition, through to hobbies such as model making and movie making, to the cultural pursuit of the fine arts, drama and music. Some students also included activities from the religious orientated groups within the school such as fellowship, prayer groups and Bible Study groups. The underlying and binding factor in all these activities was an involvement in groups within areas of student interest that allowed the individual student to be connected to other students, staff and the wider school community outside of the formal teaching and learning processes of the classroom.

While this theme recognises student engagement as essential, there needs to be a breadth of activities provided by schools that will allow students to participate in their desired activities. It is for this reason that more clarity in the theme is needed to adequately address the issues raised by the students. As such a revised theme, very similar in nature to that contained in the literature yet with a greater emphasis on breadth of activities has been developed, namely *Extra-curricular Opportunity and Engagement*. Rather than simply acknowledging that student engagement is important this redefined theme acknowledges that it is the diversity of activities that is important. It is the responsibility of an effective school to maximise the number of students involved by providing the maximum opportunities catering for their interests.

*Extra-curricular Opportunity and Engagement*

One of the discussions that took place [FG10.1] predominantly focused on this theme and a considerable amount of time was spent discussing it. Two segments of the discussion follow in response to the broad questions “What makes a good school?” In the context of the focus group, the second extract took place before the first but for the purposes of this discussion their order has been reversed.
The extract below demonstrates the essential nature of schools providing opportunities for students to become engaged outside the classroom. Also, it importantly touches on the students’ recognising the onus on them to take up the opportunities presented.

*Student 8*: A lot of students go through the school and they aren’t involved in anything. They just get to school at 8.10 they do their classes and they finish at 2.40 and go home. Whereas they could be involved in things that they are interested in outside of school but they don’t get involved inside the school. They might enjoy playing music outside school but they’re not involved in a music ensemble or they are not involved in a music type area. Its important that they get involved in the school not just in the learning otherwise they think that they might think that school is just for learning, school is just where you come to learn and go home.

*Student 12*: But what about areas outside of music? Like I don’t mean to have a shot at the school or anything but I think there needs to be more areas catered for other than music because not everyone can play music, you can learn but it might not be interesting. As you said, sport is a lot more popular and sport is also within the school but areas other than music, as well that other people are interested in, like they might be willing to do other sort of, I don’t know, do you know what I mean? . . . The school needs to focus on other things co-curricular as well as Music.

*Moderator*: Do you think that’s important in a school, that a school provides all of those opportunities or not?

*Student 12*: Yes. Very important.

*Student 5*: I think also that activities outside of schools also builds friendships in other year groups because if you come to school at 8.10 and leave at 2.40 people just tend to stick to their own groups. But if they do co-curricular stuff they tend to make friends outside of the year groups that they wouldn’t make otherwise.

*Moderator*: And you think that’s important and valuable?

*Student 5*: Yes.

*Student 8*: And I think that being involved in other things not just the curriculum, would also boost their confidence or it might strengthen and build their confidence in other areas. Also, student involvement might not just be student involvement in joining groups or things, it might be the student involvement in like, Student 12 said, they might like to make an opinion and say maybe we need to create a group in this area. Maybe they’re [the school] not focusing on this area as much as other areas, we need to create a group in that area.

During this discussion the students articulated the notion that school is far more than a place of academic pursuits. While schools are undoubtedly places of learning, the students believe that social interaction is essential. It appears not only important in that the activity, whatever it may be, is a learning experience in itself but also because it allows students to participate in the social interaction afforded by such pursuits. The greater involvement in these social
interactions the stronger the student’s association with the school, and therefore the more worthwhile it is coming to school. The flow on effect is that the greater the desire to come and engage with school across a variety of interactions the better the students will apply themselves to their academic studies and therefore achieve greater success.

It is also worth noting the importance the students placed on associating with students in other cohorts. The students recognised that involvement in cross cohort activities allowed them to learn from older students and use them as role models as well as being given an opportunity of leading the younger students. As students move through the school the function of the cross cohort activities change but their importance remains significant.

The second of the two extracts from FG10.1 mentioned above illustrates the importance placed on sport in particular and some of the shortcomings of the school’s sporting opportunities.

* Moderator: What other things make a good school?
* Student 1: I think you have to have different sporting things because if we are just doing the same thing everyday it sort of gets gruelling and you don’t want to come to school. It gets boring so you should also have things outside of class as well as in class. Mostly sporting stuff but all different things like that.
* Student 7: It’s heaps important to have something that you’re interested in other than school work. I love going and debating and the public speaking and you can’t do that outside school easily like sport on Saturday.
* Student 5: It is great if you love music and stuff but I like sport and there is not enough sport played at school.
* Moderator: How would you like to see more sport at the school?
* Student 5: Like the gala days are cool and the carnivals but Tuesday sport is a bit slack like puddocks – that’s crap – oops [laughter]. Sorry.

The following extract from FG10.2 further illustrates this point.

* Student 7: I think it’s important for young adults and kids that are coming through the school that they have activities outside the classroom ‘cause that energy you focus on in the classroom you need to put it somewhere. So I think it’s important to do like sport. This school I think focuses more on the drama aspect not so much on the sport. So we have Tuesday sport and things like but I think more involvement for the kids possibly more incentives.
* Moderator: What sort of things should there be that there are not now?
* Student 13: I guess more time for sport, probably more training organisation. I find that we should, like for Gala Days, start basketball, hockey and that but we haven’t done any practise. We just turn up on the day and by the end of the day
we are starting to get good. But if we trained we would have a high level and a possibility of being able to win. That focus I think is not really there.

*Student 5:* I agree with him because I’m involved in netball and I think we should have more training sessions and stuff ‘cause it’s like he said, we do get there right at the end of the day.

As referred to previously, and noticeably from the extracts above, not all comments about sport within the school were positive. This is the single greatest criticism of the school and the area that the students believed to be the least effective. This comment reflects the role of sport within the school and resources and time afforded to it. The comments below from a range of focus groups further spell out the concerns the students have about sport and its failure to meet all their needs.

*FG10.2-ST7:* Sport – that’s probably my big thing [in answer to a question asking what the school is least effective in] – I’m definitely involved in other stuff but I’m not music orientated ‘cause I wasn’t brought up in a musical family or musical school like [this]. So I found it very difficult to come here because you sort of feel if you don’t do music you’re left out. So I think it’s important to organise sport a lot better so that kids that don’t have the music background are able to interest themselves in a different way.

*FG12.1-ST14:* Well I think sport is one. It’s getting a lot better now but I know a couple of people who have done some pretty good things in sport but they don’t get recognised or anything like that because it's out of school.

*FG12.2-ST3:* I think it is effective but like I said it could do some things better. Like sport... I don’t play an instrument and stuff but I love sport. The carnivals are good and the gala days are fun but there is not enough. The Rugby League competition is really bad and we don’t even have posts.

The school has a clear academic and cultural focus, which has seen greater resources deployed to these areas at the expense of sport. From the comments made this is quite obvious to the students although some recognise that this is an area that is being addressed, even if it is somewhat slowly and too little in their minds.

Despite these negative comments about how well students are catered for in terms of sport at the school, what is evident is the importance of providing opportunities for students to be engaged with activities outside of the classroom. On the whole students thought that this was an essential feature of effective schools and that their school, with the exception of sport, did this well. The following comments and extracts are examples of student opinion.
[FG10.2-ST13]: In reference to relating to everyone in our year, like having close relationship with our year group, I believe that the outdoor education programme is really good. Like our school camps. At the camp this year we had a really good chance to bond with our group. Like you speak to people that you usually don’t have a good relationship with at school, you talk to them. We got so close on camp and everything and I think that was really good for us.

[FG10.2]
Student 11: I think the whole activities outside of the learning side of the school is really strong here. Like you have orchestra, musicals, sporting events, gala days, teams and debating clubs. Like there is a whole range of things you can do and its really good ‘cause you can leave options open for different types of people.
Moderator: Do you think there are some areas that don’t cater well for some students?
Student 11: For some there would be. There’d have to be for some ‘cause some people don’t like music and some people don’t like sport so it just depends.

[FG12.2]
Student 1: Getting good results is good but I find that does not make school fun for me. I like school because I have heaps of friends here that we do lots of stuff together.
Moderator: Do you mean spend time together outside of school?
Student 1: Yeah, but also at school. I love things like the camps and D of E [Duke of Edinburgh] and the Ag Show Team. My group do all of that, except the Show Team [laughs]. They think that's a bit yuk but I love it.
Student 4: Yeah, like [Student 1] I love doing things outside of class too. I have a heap of friends both in Yr 12 and in other years from my music. The International Tours are fantastic. I love the concerts and even the weekly rehearsals are just fun.

[FG21.2]
Student 7: I like coming to school because I do stuff I enjoy too. If all I did was come, go to class and then go home I would not like it as much. Ah, mates are good too.
Student 5: Yeah I think it’s important and this school has lots of options if you like music, but as I said, far less for sport. But D of E [Duke of Edinburgh] is cool and the camps are cool so it’s not that bad.

From the scope and depth of these extracts it is worth noting the extent of the students’ views concerning this theme. School is far more to these students than turning up to school, going to class and then going home. Being able to spend time with friends and peers in a variety of settings beside the formal classroom is an essential part of school for them. Their views about
the effectiveness of the school are also bound up in the ability of the school to offer activities that suit their needs and interests.

There was a strong consensus amongst students that being involved in the life of the school beyond the classroom is essential to making school enjoyable and effective for them. An effective school was one that catered for the interests of students and encouraged them to become involved in activities with other students. These student interactions were considered important as it allowed older and younger students to mix in areas of interest as outlined clearly by the following statement.

[FG10.2-ST8] For example, I talk to most of the people in my [school band] section because I play trombone and they range from Year 7 all the way to Year 11. I’m able to talk to them, meet them.

There was also some debate as to how important the school’s role was in providing extra or co-curricular activities for students. A few students felt it was ‘good’ but not essential as they could follow their interests outside of school. Other students considered it absolutely essential and believed the school should ‘make’ all students participate in at least one activity. One boy explained that he only began to enjoy camping after being involved in the Duke of Edinburgh Awards Scheme because his friends were. He believed that:

[FG10.2-ST6] Everybody should be forced to do something, they might find something they enjoy that they would not have tried.

While the original theme examined in this project recognised the need for student activities, simply providing activities is not the measure of success. Of greater importance is the suitability of the activities to the students’ needs. The perceived lack of suitable activities of interest with which to engage was the area of greatest dissatisfaction of students attending this school.

There is a general consensus amongst the students that a greater breadth of opportunities needs to be provided in order to engage more students across the school. It is important for schools to provide a breadth and variety of activities for students to become engaged with across the school but it must be equally recognised that it is simply not possible to cater for every student. Having said that, however, it is clear that there is much to do in this school to better cater for the wider needs of its students.
Safe and Supportive Environment for all

As has just been demonstrated there is no doubting the importance students place on engaging with school as an important element in effective schools. There is also little doubt about the importance they placed on effective schools providing a safe and supportive environment in which they can learn. The theme of Safe and Supportive Environment for all is also recognised in the literature presented in Chapter 2 as being of fundamental importance to an effective school. A Safe and Supportive Environment for all describes the surroundings that is created through school policy, implementation of that policy and the relational ability of staff with students that means that students can attend school feeling they are in a safe place that protects and cares for them.

It is evident from the data displayed in Table 23 that the mean measuring ‘Importance’ as a whole (4.4) that the students acknowledged this theme as the most important element in an effective school. Each of the questions also had a mean that demonstrated that the various elements that make up this theme were also important in their own rights and that they were good questions to use in measuring this theme. The mean measuring the school’s ‘Effectiveness’ as a whole was also very high with a mean of 4.3. Again each of the questions showed a consistency demonstrating that the students recognised that the school was very effective in delivering to them a safe and supportive school.

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TABLE 23: SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION BY QUESTION

Figure 11 confirms these findings too. Over half of the students (57%) rated this theme as ‘Very Important’ and when it is added to the 32% who rated it ‘Important’ 89% of the students rated it as ‘Very important’ or ‘Important’. The results indicate that the students consider their safety, particularly having an environment that allows them to be safe and to know the support structures available to them as essential. Not only do the students think that
this is an absolutely essential element of effective schools but they rated their school as extremely effective in delivering it to them. Again 57% of students rated their school as providing a safe and supportive environment to them ‘Very Well’ and another 30% as ‘Well’.

When a cohort analysis was done, both cohorts rated the ‘Importance’ measure highly for the combined ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ ratings with 90% for Year 10 and 87% for Year 12. When measuring ‘Effectiveness’ the Year 10 cohort also rated their school for the same combination at 84% while the Year 12 cohort rating it 92% for the combined ‘Very Well’ and ‘Well’ ratings with almost 60% scoring it a ‘Very Well’.

For both the ‘Importance’ measure and the ‘Effectiveness’ measure the male respondents scored this theme higher than the female respondents. For the combined top two ratings the male respondents scored this theme at 92% for both the ‘Importance’ and ‘Effectiveness’ measures. This is the only theme where the ‘Effectiveness’ measure was not notably lower than the ‘Importance’ measure. For the female respondents the combined rating scored 88% for the ‘Importance’ and 85% for the ‘Effectiveness’ measures.

The degree by which this data demonstrated the importance of this theme to students was strengthened even further with the data generated from students ranking their five most important factors of effective schools. The Year 10 students ranked this item first while the Year 12 cohort ranked it third overall as the most important factor. Overall the theme of Safe and Supportive Environment for all topped the combined league table of themes ranked by
students being ranked first with an index of 94. Table 18 is represented in graphic form below (Figure 12) illustrates the ranks.

![Figure 12: Graph showing five most important factors of effective schools](image)

The survey results for this theme demonstrated just how important this theme was to the students. While this emerged as importance in the literature the strength of these results were unexpected. The reasons for this strength of opinion were explored during the group phase questions. The results added even further strength to the data.

There was considerable discussion in each of the focus groups concerning this theme demonstrating in its simplest form the importance to students of having a safe and supportive environment at school as confirmed through comments such as:

\[FG10.1\text{-ST12}\]: [This school is] one that you can feel relaxed to go up to talk to anyone in the Year Group or whatever without feeling pressured or hassled or whatever.

\[FG10.1\text{-ST5}\]: Because people need to have a guideline for what they do otherwise they’ll just run wild.

The following brief exchange from FG10.1 also gives useful insight.

\textit{Student 5}: A really important part of the structure in the school are the rules. Like some rules are dumb but the most time they are here to protect us. Most younger kids don’t understand. When I was younger I didn’t think about them but now I see that they are there to help.

\textit{Moderator}: What do you mean help?
Student 5: Um… without rules there would be much more hassling between students. Like in the diary there is that page on what happens if you bully and kids know who to see and what to do.

Student 3: I agree.

Moderator: What element do you agree with?

Student 3: Running and stuff in the playground. I thought when I came here in Yr 9 that the no ball games except on the oval rule was stupid. But it's good because those who want to sit and talk can do that without getting a footy in the head. [Laughs]

It is worth noting a conflicting interest within the students. It is quite evident from the focus groups that students want school to have guidelines and structures that make them feel safe and yet on the other hand do not want to feel suppressed by structures that are in their minds too restrictive. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon to have comments that expressed the need for rules, regulations or structures that are aimed at keeping students safe and in a settled environment.

Of course this dissension in needs and wants is not easily managed. Those who administer educational institutions readily acknowledge that many adolescents, particularly those that are disengaged from schooling (Deed, 2008) seek to test whatever boundaries are placed before them. Indeed (Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003) go so far as to argue that disengaged students are a significant problem in contemporary schools. The challenge as always is to set in place boundaries that cater to their needs and wishes to be safe and yet provide an environment that is not so bound by rules as to be stifling. This was expressed by a Year 10 student as follows [FG10.1].

Student 6: Things are structured but not, I don’t know, just being happy in general.

Moderator: What do you mean by being structured?

Student 6: Like it’s not claustrophobic you can be comfortable and have a bit of fun and everyone’s not bossing you. Not bossing you to do things. It’s a bit more relaxed.

The data indicate that students believe having a safe and supportive place to go to school is important but it is also evident from the responses that their current school is very effective in this regard. While there is the recognition that students do get harassed at this school, the students’ views are that it is much less than other schools and on the whole it is managed well by the school. The following extract from FG10.1 gives an interesting insight.
Student 1: I think if you go around other schools, I have friends that go to different schools, . . . a lot of other schools where you’ll go and you’ll get bullied a lot more than you would at say this school. I don’t know it just seems like everyone is different from everyone but when you come to a school like this you feel like everyone is the same as you and you can talk to anybody.

Moderator: Bullying happens here though doesn’t it?

Student 1: Yeah but it seems like its not as much. I’ve heard my mates at other schools. You hear a lot of kids that just break down all the time and go emo or whatever it is.

Moderator: What do you think is the difference?

Student 5: I think the student-teacher relationships are a big thing with the bullying because students feel comfortable to go to a teacher and say this kids has done this to me and feel comfortable about it. I think that’s a big thing because then the teachers can deal with it in a good way.

Student 8: Its that this school has laid down guidelines such as the school rules and the bullying protocol and they’ve actually placed that down so that people should know that it is not to happen, this is to happen to make this place a happy place.

The discussion above demonstrates the role of appropriate procedures to deal with bullying and harassment is clearly important to the students but of greater import is the action of the school to incidents of bullying when they occur. Once again the role of the teachers is shown to be important, this time in the provision of support. The fact that the students feel comfortable and secure in approaching and talking with the teachers when there are matters of concern to them provides them with an environment in which they feel safe.

In the discussion surrounding the notion of school culture, it was recognised that the students understand that the school as a safe place is a fundamental part of school. Many of the school culture notions of happiness and safety are dealt with in this theme. The same can be said for the students who referred to the religious association of the school as an explanation for the safe and secure environment.

In the minds of the students this school provides a safe and supportive environment that caters well for their needs and is well summarised, by a number of Year 12 students:

[FG12.2-ST5]: This is a safe place, there is some teasing, but that happens. It is important to feel safe. I remember being frightened in Year 7 when I came but it did not take long to feel safe. The Tutors and Heads of Year are very caring.
[FG12.2-ST8]: Where students come [to school] without stress. I changed schools a few years ago and this school is heaps happier and people get along well. School is not my favourite place but it’s good here.

Having a Safe and Secure Environment for all at school is demonstrably the most important element of an effective school for the students. Somewhat unexpected was the way that the younger Year 10 cohort considered this to be the most important factor. The depth and detail of their discussions were compelling. While the Year 12 cohort also saw this as an important factor, for them the role of teachers was of greater importance.

Throughout the focus groups there was a sense that for students in their early years of secondary school and during the early adolescent years, having a Safe and Secure Environment overshadowed all else in an effective school. The Year 12 students saw themselves as comfortably entrenched in school and they had less concern whether it was a safe and secure place. The Year 12 cohort therefore focused on their academic elements such as teaching and learning. There was an assumption by these students that the school was safe and they needed no longer to consider it, nonetheless they recognised the role it had played in them being happy and content at school.

The weight of comments and references by the students concerning the importance of attending school in a safe and well-resourced environment was significant. The breadth of what the students felt encompassed a safe and well-resourced environment was far reaching and traversed issues relating to academic studies and teaching, peer relations, school rules and the school’s physical resources as well as the culture of the school. It is almost impossible to split these broader concepts from each other within the students’ responses as the discussions flowed from one to the other.

During the analysis of the focus groups it became more evident that it was appropriate and necessary to split the concepts of safety and support, from one another. The students referred to these two concepts quite independently, indeed linking the notion of safety more to buildings and physical resources than support of students by the school, teachers or indeed other students. The notion of support was linked far more closely to the caring nature of teachers. This being the case the concepts of safety and well-resourced facilities will be dealt with shortly while the notion of support has already been considered in an earlier section. In
order to deal with the safety and well-resourced facilities a redefined theme, namely *Safe and Well-Resourced Environment* has been developed.

**Safe and Well-Resourced Environment**

This new theme is essentially the same as *Safe and Supportive Environment* as found in the literature and measured in this study’s survey. However, after analysing the focus group data it was felt the theme necessitated a reworking. The notion of support was seen to be quite different from safety and had more to do with the care of teachers than safety and security. As a result this project removed this element and linked it with caring teachers as outlined previously. The focus group data indicated that the students perceived the concept of safety to be interwoven with buildings and the physical surroundings. It is evident that the buildings, facilities and a sense of security and belonging within the campus has, in the perceptions of the students, more to it than the buildings as resources and as much to do with the layout and design of the campus. As one student explained on two separate occasions within the focus group discussion:

**[FG12.2-ST3]:** The thing I like about the buildings is the big open spaces. There are no real nooks around the place, which make me feel safe. I think that is why there is not as much obvious physical bullying. Teachers on the playground can see pretty much everywhere.

**[FG12.2-ST3]:** It’s happy. I don’t see fights around the place, there are not many places that fights can occur without teachers seeing it and stopping it quickly.

The open spaces and the easily supervised playground areas were considered to be a major factor contributing to the students’ safety. There was no sense of the students being constantly watched in a security surveillance sense. However, the ease of supervision and proximity of supervising staff, aided by the design of the playground space was regarded as important. The absence of ‘hidden areas’ where students did not feel safe has much to do with the design and layout of the buildings over and beyond the buildings as simply a physical asset. The ability for students to move around the campus in a feeling of security where they are not likely to be the brunt of poor behaviour is a function of the building design. The school is on a large campus with spread out buildings that form natural easily observable and therefore supervised playground areas. There are no internal corridors. Classroom and building doors open onto
wide verandas, which also provide covered but otherwise open footpaths linking buildings through open playground areas.

Usually the focus of building design is the internal size and function of the building, however, those responsible for the initial design and construction of school buildings and the overall layout of school campus would do well to be considerate of the playground space provided by the location and physical dimensions of the buildings. This seems to play as much a role as the internal function of the building. Whether this was by design or accident is unknown in this particular study. Nevertheless the campus layout and specific design of each building is an aspect of the school that promotes a positive student experience.

Of even greater important to the students than the physical layout of the school was the enforcement of rules that allow them to use the facilities in a safe way. A comment by a Year 10 student referred to earlier expressed it well when he said:

[FG10.2-ST3]: I thought when I came here in Yr 9 that the no ball games except on the oval rule was stupid. But its good because those who want to sit and talk can do that without getting a footy in the head. [Laughs]

The provision of separate passive and active playground areas was important to the students and while it is ‘another rule’ the reasons for it are well understood. Rules are seldom seen as important to students and adolescents often see these rules as restrictive and, either intentionally or through disregard, push the boundaries of rules. Having said that, it is important to the students to have rules that allow them to feel safe and provide places and situations to cater for their different needs in the playground.

Further to the rules that stop silly and sometimes dangerous behaviour in the playground, it was evident that the provision and clear articulation of rules that attempted to prevent and deal with bullying and harassment were fundamentally important to students.

[FG10.2-ST8]: It’s that this school has laid down guidelines such as the school rules and the bullying protocol and they’ve actually placed that down so that people should know that it is not to happen this is to happen to make this place a happy place.

The examples provided illustrate the importance of rules to ‘protect’ the students. The insight of the students is interesting in that as they mature they have a greater realisation of the
importance of rules. Once again the importance of having systems and rules in place to deal with harassment and bullying are noted by the students and the success of the school in this regard is recognised. What can be drawn from the variety of student comments is the importance of the students to be able to discuss concerns with teachers and to report students who are harassing or bullying others. A school that facilitates this is considered by them to be an effective school.

There were also several stand alone comments that have already been discussed that nevertheless are useful to reconsider in this context. For example:

[FG10.1 - ST12]: One that you can feel relaxed to go up to talk to anyone in the Year Group or whatever without feeling pressured to be hassled or whatever.

[FG10.1 – ST6]: A place where you can learn but you can also have fun so it’s not uptight kind of thing.

[FG10.2 - ST11]: I think it’s important to have an environment for kids to come in every day like 5 days a week to be a happy place where they can feel comfortable and they can enjoy being at school. So I think it’s important that there is an environment where they are happy to be in.

[FG10.1 – ST1]: I think if you go around other schools, I have friends that go to different schools, I’m not pointing say it’s a public school I’m not saying its just that but there are a lot of other schools where you’ll go and you’ll get bullied a lot more than you would at say this school. I don’t know it just seems like everyone is different from everyone but when you come to a school like this you feel like everyone is the same as you and you can talk to anybody.

The forthright nature of these statements illustrates the importance of a safe environment where, as the second of the two comments draws out, “you can learn”. Student 1 in focus Group 10.1 (the last of the comments above) made an interesting comment during the discussion as well relating to what might be described as the homogeneous nature of the student body and a statement regarding the culture of the school. The school being studied in this project is one that could very easily be described as having a homogenous student body. It is located in an area that is traditionally a white Anglo-Saxon community. Recently there have been a number of students from southern European backgrounds, but almost no local students from an Asian background. The school has recognised this and has a programme of encouraging international students from Asia to come to the school as well as teaching Asian foreign languages rather than European languages. Nonetheless the homogeneous nature of
the school is picked up in the earlier comment and is recognised as a possible reason for the feeling of safety within the school.

The abundance of comments from the students indicates that they consider their school to be effective in providing a safe and well-resourced environment. The extract below illustrates the way the students acknowledge the success of the school in this regard.

*Moderator:* How important do you think it is that students can come here and feel safe? And do they?

*Student 8:* I think that’s really important because if someone’s not comfortable with where they are then it sort of doesn’t look like it’s a very good school. If they aren’t going to control how other children treat people like bullying and that sort of stuff.

*Moderator:* And you think this school is effective in doing that?

*Student 8:* Yeah, mostly. I think there are probably some cases where people feel uncomfortable but overall I think it’s fine.

The school these students attend has a clearly articulated and recognised Christian approach to education and is acknowledged by the wider community as a Christian school. It is not, however, a school for children of Christian families only and has an open enrolment policy in regards to religious background. Parents who enrol their children at the school do so on the understanding that their children will be exposed to Christian teaching through Biblical Studies, assemblies and weekly Chapel services. The vast majority of students at the school would either not consider themselves Christians or may associate Christianity with a cultural background, but certainly not a personal ongoing commitment. It was unsurprising therefore that the Christian focus of the school did not emerge as a key issue for many students. Having said that, statements about the faith position of the school and how this contributed to the school’s effectiveness were made, for example:

*[FG12.1-ST13]:* [I think] the Christian ethos of the school definitely makes it a happy surrounding.

The sense of safety has more to it than the physical surroundings and well-resourced facilities. The culture of caring by both staff and students plays an essential role in the sense of security of a school. The responses of the students necessitated a slight redefinition of these concepts. While their safety has more to do with the physical surrounds, the support they receive from the school has more to do with people rather than the physical environment.
It is important for school administrators to acknowledge the importance of the physical environment and care must be taken to design, construct and set procedures in place that allow students to be safe and feel safe. Safety, while important, was overshadowed in the minds of the students by the role of their teachers as support people in their learning and interaction with others. The relational element of teaching is arguably one of the strongest elements that have emerged from the data.

*High Expectations and appropriate expectations for all*

Having high expectations of students and staff members is well accepted as an important element of effective schools throughout the literature as discussed in Chapter Two. *High Expectations and appropriate expectations for all* in this project refers to setting standards that challenge both students and staff to achieve their best, not only academically but in terms of their interactions with others and involvement in the broader life of the school.

Students who know and understand they are expected to perform, behave and be involved will usually do so better than those who have low expectations placed on them. The same can be said about the staff of a school. This widely accepted position within the effective schools research is confirmed by the students’ perceptions in this study. The students’ acknowledge that having high expectations placed on them and their teachers is important. The results as in Table 24 and the following discussion demonstrates that for the students this is an important element of effective schools even though they perceived their school not to be as effective as they believed it should be.

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Table 24: High Expectations and appropriate expectations for all Mean and Standard Deviation by question
The questions used to measure the importance of this element in the survey have all produced consistent means with an overall mean of 4.6. The consistency again confirms the appropriateness of each question in measuring this theme. The high overall mean indicated the importance the students place on this theme as a good measure of school effectiveness. Not only is this theme considered to be a good measure but the school is effective in the students minds in having high expectations.

Figure 13 illustrated the extent of the student’s perceptions of how important this theme is to them as a measure of effectiveness. Sixty-four percent of students rated this theme as being ‘Very important’ with another 27% rating it as ‘Important’. Also of note are the students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of their school. This theme is one that the students perceive their school to be effective with 81% of them rating the school as doing this theme ‘Very well’ or ‘Well’ with 34% and 47% respectively.

When measuring the ‘Importance’ of this theme the combined ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ scales for the Year 10 respondents was 93% while the Year 12 cohort recorded 87%. Both cohorts recorded the ‘Importance’ of this measure to be greater then the school’s ‘Effectiveness’. While it is demonstrably important to the students their perceptions are that the school is not as effective in implementing this theme, as the students would like. This is one of the few themes that Year 10 scored higher that Year 12 in both the ‘Importance’ and ‘Effectiveness’ measures. There was no discernable difference between the male and female respondents.
When it came to students ranking *High Expectations and appropriate expectations for all* as a measure of effectiveness the result was somewhat intriguing. It was ranked in the middle of the list of most effective measures being tenth overall and eighth for the themes measured in the survey. It was ranked ninth by both the Year 10 and 12 cohorts. Even though the survey results demonstrated this as a far more important element, when students were free to list, it ranked it far lower that one might have thought it would. The results from the survey were such that it was felt necessary to explore the reasons behind the results during the focus group phase of the research.

The results from the focus group discussions confirmed the weight students gave to this theme in the rankings. That is, while it was important it was not the most significant factor for them. In all the focus groups there was very little discussion time spent on this theme and even when direct questioning took place to explore the survey trends there was little said with the discussions quickly moving onto other elements or tangential discussions. However, one discussion in a Year 12 focus group [FG12.1] raised issues relating to high expectations placed on students and how important it was.

*Moderator:* Why, what makes you say that it’s focused on learning?
*Student 13:* The high expectations that teachers set.
*Moderator:* In what? Just the academic area? Do you think the school has high expectations of its students outside of the academic area of the school too?
*Student 13:* Yeah with sport and music. Just generally high expectations. It makes you more active to excel in the area.

In this extract the high expectations of students is important but it is perceived by them to be wrapped up in other themes such as *Pervasive Focus on Learning*. The high expectations were important not only in the area of academic work but also in areas such as uniform and general conduct. Most students saw the high academic expectations placed on them as positive and a good indicator of effectiveness while a small minority saw it as a negative influence.

The majority of students, who considered having high academic expectations placed on them as important, held this view because it translated to academic success and therefore a factor in a school being considered effective.

*[FG12.1-ST13]:* The high expectations that teachers set in class is important because it gets the best out of the students. I think academic success is really
important and the good teachers are good at setting the standard and helping us to reach it, well to try at least.

The students believed that good teachers who set high expectations are important as they get the best out of the students.

In general the view of the students was that high expectation of academic excellence was important but as far as other standards, such as uniform and conduct, it was not so important. The school surveyed is considered within the region as having strict rules and enforcing good behaviour and uniform, which is supported by the parents, but not generally accepted by the students as important. This is evident in the following comment from a Year 12 student:

[FG12.2-ST8]: Yeah like uniform and behaviour. The school is a bit picky on some things – it can get annoying but I think it’s good.

However, having said that the students do consider it important as the standard of uniform continues to be high indicating that in practice the recognition of maintaining high standards is present.

While little was said during the focus groups directly relating to High Expectations and appropriate expectations for all as a theme, the students still indicated they believed it to be important in a variety of circumstances. There was a general perception amongst the students that High Expectations and appropriate expectations for all really were part of the school and were covered in other themes and concepts such as focus on teaching and learning as well as safety and support. The high expectation of student behaviour in general was seen as very important and was created by the overriding culture within a school.

Regular Monitoring of Student Progress

The evidence from the literature review demonstrates that Regular Monitoring of Student Progress is an element that is highly regarded as being important in effective schools. This element has similarities with other elements that have an academic focus although its principle focus is the need to assess both, formally and informally, student academic achievement and other more general aspects of educational development. In New South Wales and increasingly at the Federal level of government, the role of assessing is becoming even greater. The introduction in 2008 of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and
Numeracy (NAPLAN) for all students in Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine across all Australian states is evidence of this trend. The need for schools to report their results in an “easy to read format” (MCEETYA, 2007, p. iv) demonstrates further the importance the legislators in Australia are placing on this element. Along with the evidence in the literature that regular monitoring is important, a strong case is made that over monitoring by way of assessment is not beneficial. The data from the focus group provided evidence that the students recognised the need for assessment albeit reluctantly. However, to them it was not the monitoring per se that was important but rather the timely, clear and in depth feedback following the assessment that was of critical importance.

The results from the survey are presented in Table 25, which reveals that when measuring the ‘Importance’ if this theme, the overall mean was 4.6, which is one of the highest across all themes. The consistency across all questions measuring this theme was also evident demonstrating that each question was a good measure of this theme. While the importance of monitoring progress for the students was demonstrated they only moderately considered the school to be effective in monitoring them effectively. While the means across the questions were consistent they were notably lower with an overall mean of 3.8.

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Figure 14 further illustrated just how significant the students rate this theme. A significant majority of students, 68% rated this theme as ‘Very important’ with a further 26% rating it ‘Important’. The combined ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ ratings for the ‘Importance’ measure was 94%. The importance to the students is demonstrable from these results.
When the results measuring ‘Effectiveness’ are examined there is a notable decline in scores. While 74% of students stated that the school regularly monitored their progress either ‘Very well’ or ‘Well’, only 28% gave it the top rating of ‘Very well’. While this is a lower response it is still a good indicator that the school is effective for the students in this regard. Both cohorts scored this theme extremely highly for the combined ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ with the Year 10 cohort scoring the school as being slightly more effective for this theme. There was no discernable difference between male and female respondents.

The data presented from the surveys demonstrates that the students consider this element as a significant element in effective schools. The strength of these results was further strengthened by the data that emerged from the students listing their five most important measures of an effective school. This measure ranked as the fifth most important element and ranked fourth in the elements measured in the survey. Significantly this element was ranked second amongst the Year 10 students with a total index of 35. When a close analysis of these results was completed, as demonstrated in Figure 15, the overwhelming number of Year 10 students who listed this factor phrased it in terms of timely, positive, praiseworthy feedback. This unexpected focus within this theme was also evident in the focus group discussions and as a result the need to refocus what this theme measured became apparent.
This emphasis on feedback is quite a different focus than that of the literature but nevertheless is fundamentally important to the students. This different perspective by the students, from that evident in the literature, has prompted the researcher to refocus this theme to emphasise the feedback element. As such a replacement theme, very similar to that measured in this research, has been developed but with the student feedback overtly included. This new theme, namely *Regular Monitoring and Feedback of Student Progress*, will be outlined and discussed forthwith.

A case could also be made that this theme be incorporated as part of *Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* as a mark of a skilled teacher is one that provides constructive and timely feedback as needed by the students. Due to the strength and number of the student comments during the focus groups it was felt that this was much an important element for them that a standalone element was important.

*Regular Monitoring and Feedback of Student Progress*

The data from the survey is explicit in demonstrating that the students recognise frequent monitoring of their progress as important. As already stated, however, they see the essential element not so much in terms of the assessment process itself but rather the feedback and particularly timely, positive and constructive feedback. This also became clearly apparent during the focus group discussions. While none of the focus groups spent a great deal of time discussing this theme, the salient comments made expressed the importance of the feedback. The actual assessment was noted as being a necessary evil but the feedback, if done well,
made the whole process and discomfort worthwhile. The following extract is a good example of the students’ perceptions of this element.

*Student 10:* The testing is important although sometimes we have too many assessment tasks all at the one time. In Year 11 it was not so bad but this year it has happened a few times. When I think back we were hardly ever tested in Year 10 or before except for the exams.

*Student 7:* We did have assessment tasks but I agree they were pretty easy and not that big.

*Student 6:* I really appreciate it when you get assessment tasks back and there are comments about how to do better next time. Some teachers are really good at telling you how to improve. It’s really frustrating to get an assignment back with just a mark or only the bad things shown. It’s heaps better in the senior school than in Year 10.

This brief extract was a good example of the discussions in each of the focus groups. The focus for the students was significantly different to that in the theme tested. The literature acknowledged the need to test and monitor students to gauge their academic progress, and while this is undoubtedly useful it is not the benefit the students perceived in the process. If the students are to gain from frequent monitoring it must be coupled with quality feedback. For the feedback to be useful it needs to be more than just right or wrong and a mark. Detailed feedback with advice for improvement was essential in the student’s minds. The greatest element of importance was that the feedback be timely, allowing the students to review their work while it was still fresh in their memories.

The Year 12 cohort were at pains to particularly emphasise the need for good feedback. There was one particular discussion that drew attention to one member of staff who the students did not particularly think was effective in terms of being a caring teacher but she was praised for her very helpful feedback. An earlier discussion in the focus group drew attention to the perceived failings of this teacher in terms of her developing helpful relationships with her students but here her helpful feedback was acknowledged.

*Student 11:* The best teacher I have had that makes assignments helpful is Mrs K.

*Moderator:* Why? What makes Mrs K’s feedback good

*Student 11:* She always gives the marks back quickly. Her mark sheets have heaps of comments on them, good and bad. I always feel I learn from this.
The discussion concerning assessments throughout the focus groups that indicated the students’ placed value on this element nearly all had to do with the importance of feedback. Undoubtedly the students believe regular monitoring is important but of greater importance is regular monitoring with timely and detailed feedback. Hence the need to refocus this theme as discussed.

*Development of Staff Skills*

*Development of Staff Skills* focuses on the skills acquisition of teachers as they develop professionally so that they are able to improve their teaching and the learning of their students. Out of all the themes measured in this research project this was the theme that was considered the least important by the students. This can be seen from the survey data as well as the open ended questions and especially the case in the focus group phase of the research.

While the means for a number of the questions measuring this theme are high, the overall mean is one of the lowest recorded being 3.9 for ‘Importance’ and 3.5 for ‘Effectiveness’. The data in Table 26 appears to demonstrate that the students do not believe this to be a good indicator of a school’s effectiveness.

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**Table 26: Development of Staff Skills Mean and Standard Deviation by Question**

There were a number questions relating to this theme, notably Questions 9 and 49 measuring ‘Importance’ and Questions 19, 39, 49 and 59 measuring ‘Effectiveness’ that had a very low mean even when compared to the total means. It appears that these questions might not have been good measures of this theme or otherwise the students misinterpreted them.

Figure 16, however, allows for a different interpretation. When describing the ‘Importance’ of this measure, 75% of the students rated it as either ‘Very Important’ or ‘Important’. The
students also recognise that the school is only moderately effective in this measure with 61% indicating the school does this ‘Very well’ or ‘Well’. While this is not the strongest set of results they do demonstrate students’ perception of value in staff development. The analysis demonstrated that there is very little difference between the Year 10 and 12 cohorts and between male and female respondents for this theme.

Perceptions of Importance

Perceptions of Effectiveness

Overall the data illustrates that in the minds of the students this is not the most important measure of effectiveness. This finding is supported by the data collected from the open ended questions listing the top five measures of effectiveness. This theme scored poorly ranking 13th in total and ninth out of the ten key elements measured in the survey with a total score of 16.

The students’ perceived lack of importance of this element as a measure of school effectiveness is confirmed by the lack of discussion in the focus groups relating to this theme. Even in response to direct questioning concerning this theme the discussions were limited and indicated the students’ lack of understanding of what this theme meant. There were very few comments made that could be directly attributed to this theme and apart from the comment below very little was said.

[FG10.2-ST7]: I think it’s definitely important for the staff to also improve, you know as the Year groups get older ‘cause they need to learn new ways of teaching. You find that over the years that different teaching habits certainly improved certain aspects of your learning. So it’s important that the teachers also learn.

Even this comment is not one that really addresses the theme and when contextualised within the focus group discussion it says more about the skill of teaching than the importance of
teachers continuing to develop and learning to learn. This result was somewhat unexpected considering the substantial resources the school puts aside for the professional development of teachers. Within the school it is not uncommon for staff to raise in the students’ minds the importance of continual and lifelong learning and the holding in esteem of staff who continue their university training as postgraduates. The school has a healthy programme of encouraging further study within its staff and at formal assemblies acknowledges the success of staff who continue their education. It is somewhat surprising then that the students had so little to say in this regard. However, these findings highlight a very important aspect to the perceptions of students for effective schooling. The overall focus of the students is understandably on their own learning environment and factors that they believe impact them the most rather than the needs of the teaching staff. This is not to say they do not appreciate the staff undergoing professional development, but it is not perceived as a significant factor in the overall effectiveness of their learning.

It is, however, important to still acknowledge that in general the research to date emphasises the need for teachers to undergo regular professional development or further training and although it is an element the students gave little consideration to, it is still important that staff undergo professional development. It continues to be important if for no other reason than to model the importance of and need for continued learning. The lack of students’ interest shown in this theme is not reason enough to abandon ongoing professional development of teachers as an essential element of effective schools.

*Parent and Community Connection*

*Parental and Community Connection* measures the engagement of the school with its local community, particularly its parents. It does not assume parental involvement in the classroom but rather parental involvement in wider school activities and the school’s ability to communicate its mission, policies and student progress. It is evident from the data collected throughout this project that the students considered it important for the school to communicate with parents. In particular the need for communication of information concerning student progress and general school information was important although students saw little more to it than that.
The students saw a need for parents to be informed and for parents to communicate with the school but little evidence indicated that they felt an ongoing complex relationship was necessary. The use of newsletters and academic reports played an important role in the way the school communicated and the use of the student diary as a form of communication when necessary was good. The students did not see a need for parents to become actively involved in the school and indeed did not want it.

While the survey data in Table 27 show this to be an important theme in effective schools, the effectiveness of the school in this regard was considered relatively poor in comparison to other themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Parental and Community Connection</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>45</th>
<th>50</th>
<th>60</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness of Parental and Community Connection</th>
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<th>20</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 27: PARENT AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION BY QUESTION

The means for each of the questions that measured the ‘Importance’ of this theme were consistent with a total mean of 4.1 for the theme as a whole. This consistency in means indicated that the questions were good measures of this theme. The means measuring the ‘Effectiveness’ were also consistent with a much lower overall mean of 3.6 being recorded.

Figure 17 demonstrates the importance of this theme to the students by showing 82% of them describing this theme as either ‘Very important’ or ‘Important’. The students did not consider that the school connected well with the community with only 14% of them describing the school as connecting ‘Very well’ with the community and another 39% describing the connection as being made ‘Well’. This was the only theme where such a significant percentage of respondents recorded a ‘Not sure’ response. When describing if the school connected with the community, 32% responded that they were ‘Not sure’. This being the case there is much consideration the school needs to give in this regard.
For the combined ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ ratings 91% of Year 12 respondents described it as ‘Important’ with 55% describing the school’s ‘Effectiveness’ as ‘Very well’ or ‘Well’. The Year 10 cohort showed little variation between the two and were generally lower for the combined ratings with 60% for both. While this theme had no notable variation between male and female respondents for the ‘Importance’ measure there was a significant difference in the ‘Effectiveness’ measure. Male respondents believed the school to be more effective than females with 9% more describing it as achieving this ‘Very well’ or ‘Well’.

There is an unmistakable perception amongst the students that having good Parent and Community Connections was important for effective schools, which confirms what the literature as reviewed in Chapter Two found. However, it should be noted that there is a significant difference between this element when measuring ‘Importance’ compared to measuring ‘Effectiveness. It appears that although the students see this communication as important, the school is not very effective in the way it tries to achieve open communication with home and the wider community.

Having noted that the students believed communication between home and school is important, even though the school is not effective in their minds in facilitating this, they then ranked it lowest out of the ten themes measured in the questionnaire. The students ranked this theme 10th overall with a total score of only six. This is an apparent contradiction to the survey results demonstrating a degree of confusion as to what this theme was measuring. While comments in the focus groups were made regarding the role of parents, no comments were made regarding the involvement of the broader community.
Noting that the survey and the open ended question give a somewhat contradictory result of this as a measure of effective schools, the focus group data supported the notion that this is not an important measure in the students’ minds. It is evident that communication with the broader school community in particular is seemingly of little importance to the students. The comments that emerged from the focus groups shed some interesting insight into what the students thought was important within this theme.

In FG10.1 the comment that began the entire focus group discussion concerned this theme. In response to a general question seeking students’ views concerning important elements in effective schools, the following brief exchange took place, ending as quickly as it began.

*Student 5*: I think the involvement of parents is a big thing ‘cause, like our parents with the P&C, they get together to discuss what they think is good about the school what they think needs to change. Everything which I think is a good thing we take home and tell our parents. They could see something that isn’t quite right but they could go to the P&C meeting or whatever and voice their opinion on it which is a good thing.

*Moderator*: Do you think your parents feel that they are welcome to come to the school?

*Student 5*: Well I don’t know I don’t think they feel comfortable. I don’t know that but yeah I think parents should feel comfortable coming to school.

In the other Year 10 focus group [FG10.2] another discussion concerning *Parent and Community Connection* occurred.

*Student 7*: I think it’s important. You need a community that’s outside the school and they need to be aware of what’s going on in the school so that they can help the students at home as well. Also to create a better environment for people working.

*Moderator*: How do they get involved in the school?

*Student 7*: P&FA, different events, parents come along. I don’t think so much in high school they don’t come along to say sports or that because they’re not able to because they’re working. Musicals they supply costumes. I know a couple of parents who do that.

*Student 8*: Instead of just the parents getting involved with the school it is also the school getting involved with parents. Like sending out the newsletters and letting the parents know what’s happening in the school. Like student achievements and things that are happening in the Junior School or even High School.

*Student 8*: I think it’s good but I think it could be sent out in a more regular basis I think like yeah there’s a fair bit happening from what I’ve seen. I think not all of it gets out because we don’t have a big enough newsletter or we don’t send it out enough.
It is evident from both these exchanges that the students perceive there to be a need for some form of communication but what form it should take is unclear. It is also unclear as to whether they are referring to direct involvement of parents or the wider community. One of the most interesting discussions surrounding this theme flowed on from a discussion relating to regular monitoring of student progress and the feedback that teachers give.

*Student 6:* I think [feedback to parents] it’s important because if you come from a family where your parents only just tell you that they’re involved but they’re not actually involved then they might cause you to stress out a bit more. I know some families where the parents only want their kids to go well but they don’t get involved at all so they say you have to go well and they get in trouble if they don’t. So I think they should be involved so they know what it’s like.

*Student 14:* I think the parent/teacher interviews are a good thing because it also helps the parents know from the teacher how they think their child is doing.

*Student 6:* I think the meetings that they’ve been having for the parents to go to are good. . . . like the HSC Information Night.

*Moderator:* Are there opportunities for parents to be involved in the life of the school?

*Student 3:* With the P&F and how they can organise things like the canteen. More parents should get involved within the school.

*Student 3:* Because you can meet other families and get to know them and stuff like that.

In this exchange a greater clarity was given for the students’ perceptions of the importance of the parents’ relationship with the school. The role of the formal mechanisms such as a Parents and Friends Association is important, as is the role of parent teacher interviews and information sessions. What is less clear is the student’s views about parents generally getting involved. There was a general sense across all the focus groups that parents have a right to be involved but it was not that important. In some aspects the students thought this school was relating well with parents yet in other ways it was noted that deficiencies existed. The comment made about the transfer of information between school and home via a newsletter is interesting in the context of this school. The school produces quite a lengthy fortnightly newsletter, which is distributed to every student on Fridays and also emailed to parents. The school began to email the newsletter after parental comments that a significant number of newsletters do not make their way home or if they do they remain in the students’ bags. It appears as if the newsletter, while seen as worthwhile by some students, is not valued by others.
While students did not rate this the highest measure of effective schools, it is evident from the discussion that there are important communications that must take place between home and school. Open communication is a vital part of an effective school, something the students recognise as important.

CONCLUSIONS AND GENERALISATIONS

The evidence from the data analysis is that the students perceived the measures of effectiveness used in this study and considered important throughout the literature as important to varying degrees. Not all that surprisingly, a number of the themes were considered more important than others but on the whole they appear to be useful tools in measuring the effectiveness of schools. There was, however, evidence that emerged through the focus groups indicating the need for refinement of a number of themes. The students perceived subtle differences to the focus of the themes that emerged from the literature. A number of themes were subtly reformulated and a number of other themes added.

From an individual school context, the results should be encouraging to the staff and broader community of the school. The results indicate that on the whole the students perceive the school to be effective. This is particularly the case in those themes that they consider as the most important measures of effective schools. Not surprisingly, all the themes measured produced data showing the students perceived the theme to be more important than the school was effective. When a close examination and analysis of the results is conducted it is clear that for most themes there is only a slight variation. Often the students scored the importance measure as ‘Very Important’ while the effectiveness measure was scored as ‘Well’. If the two scores are combined as has been reported throughout these findings then there is often no notable difference. That is, the students think the school is effective in the measure as much as the measure is important.

As a result of the coding undertaken during the inductive data analysis, five themes emerged as being particularly important to the students. A number of these themes are distillations or variations of what has emerged from the literature to date while others are altogether new. The five themes are:
Consideration of these themes illustrates that a number of them, namely *Good and Appropriate Teaching*, *Safe and Well-Resourced Environment* and *Extra-curricular Opportunity and Engagement*, can be directly linked to themes already shown in the literature as being important. Nonetheless they have a slightly different focus derived from the perceptions of the students. Two of the elements however, *Academic Success and Curriculum Choice* and *Good and Supportive Teachers*, are best considered as new elements not previously measured and should be looked upon as important in their own right.
CHAPTER FIVE - CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OVERVIEW

This study began with the intention of exploring four general principles. Each of these aims will be addressed in this chapter, further it will draw a number of conclusions from the research data and analysis and make recommendations at a number of levels. Conclusions and recommendations will be made concerning the general research fields of school effectiveness and school improvement as well as recommendations that are specific to the school context.

Restatement of Aims

The broad aims of this research were to discover the perception of students within one particular school concerning the importance of certain measures of effectiveness and then provide an explanation of these perceptions as they relate to the students’ actual experiences within their school. There was an intention to determine whether the students consider their current school to be effective. This project aimed to investigate a broad range of elements drawn from the literature as considered important in effective schools ranging from academic achievement to engagement in non-academic activities through to the delivery of pastoral care and an environment that is conducive to learning. It also aimed to investigate the reasons why students responded the way they have.

In more specific terms, this research has a fourfold objective:

1. To discover whether students perceive a range of elements considered within the literature as important in determining effective schools to be appropriate and good measures of effectiveness.
2. To discover if there are any additional themes the students consider important in determining effective schools that are not covered by the literature sourced themes.
3. To discover if students perceive the school they attend to be effective using the themes as well as the inductively derived themes that emerge.
4. To investigate the reasons why students hold the views they do.
Restatement of Study Context

It is important to keep in mind the context in which this study was conducted. With any form of research, findings need to be interpreted within the context of the study as it is not always appropriate to take the findings in general and apply them to another context without first evaluating the contextual similarities and differences.

In Summary, the site of this study was an independent school in Sydney, Australia preparing students for the New South Wales Board of Studies School Certificate and Higher School Certificate Examinations.

The participants in this study were students in Year 10 and Year 12. All parents of students in these year groups were sent information packages and consent forms. Once forms had been returned 22.6% of Year 12 students and parents had given their consent to participate in the study and 42.4% of the Year 10 cohort did likewise. This amounted to 19 Year 12 students and 31 Year 10 students, totalling 50 participants in all.

The participants were asked to indicate their future educational aims or their intention to directly enter the workforce. A significant majority of 84% of the respondents intended to matriculate and attend university post Year 12.

The findings have been treated as a whole with data between Year 12 and Year 10 students analysed separately. Gender differences were not a central aim of this study and only data collected via the survey were analysed for any gender differences.

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL?

Evaluation of Literature Derived Themes

That section of the survey to which students’ responded using a 5-point Likert scale demonstrated that the students considered all ten themes as good and appropriate measures of effective schools. All the themes scored strongly on the scale measuring the importance of the themes. No theme had a mean of less than 3.9 with the majority of themes scoring 4.2 or more. There were two themes that were equally considered by the students to be the least important measures of school effectiveness, namely Educational Leadership and
Development of Staff Skills. Nonetheless these two themes still scored high enough to be considered good measures. The theme that was considered the most important to the students was Regular Monitoring of Student Progress.

However, the information obtained from the open-ended survey questions and focus group phase of the research indicated something different. When explanations were sought for the initial survey results it was clear that the students interpreted a number of the themes in slightly different ways to the way in which they were defined in the research literature. What is constant across all the data is the students’ view that the themes are good measures, perhaps requiring a slight reorientation or modification. When the qualitative data is analysed it can be shown that the most important theme to the students is the provision of a Safe and Supportive Environment for all. Again however, it is important to note that the students saw the safety element as different to the supportive elements in this theme. Their perceptions were that the built environment and school rules and procedures were an important aspect while the support of staff, particularly teachers was more a reflection of good and caring teachers.

The students demonstrated that for those in Year 10 the most important element in an effective school was the provision of a Safe and Supportive Environment for all. The need to feel safe and well looked after while at school played a significant part in the lives of the students and the evidence indicates that as the students became more and more familiar with the school, as they progressed through the years, the more safe they felt. This no doubt has to do with both their growing maturity as well as becoming the older students within the school. The students considered themselves as becoming the big fish in a small pond, hence their heightened sense of security within the school.

As the students moved into the final two years of their schooling the importance of safety slipped from being the most important factor and was over taken by the need for students to have good and caring teachers. This element was the second most important for the Year 10 students but as the academic focus began to increase it became the major factor for the Year 12 students.

The students perceived the important role of teachers as being two fold. First teachers had to be technically skilful, knew their subject area well and were good practitioners and secondly
that they were caring teachers who were more than just interested in their students’ academic progress but in their general welfare also. The elements identified from the literature combined these two elements into the one theme but as the data demonstrates the students saw them as two quite distinctive, albeit closely interwoven themes.

What is demonstrable from the student responses is that the work of previous researchers into the most appropriate themes to use when identifying effective schools is appropriate albeit with slight amendments and the theories that have developed about what makes an effective school and how to measure it are robust and proper.

**What do Students Find Most Important in Effective Schools?**

While the data from the survey instrument proved useful in determining if the pre-existing themes were appropriate and useful, the focus group phase of the research gave the greatest understanding into the perceptions of the students in regards to effective schools.

The focus group phase of the research confirmed the findings of the survey in that the pre-existing key elements from the literature were all shown in varying degrees to be useful and good measures of effective schools. Having said that, as a result of the findings, a few themes required alteration and a number of new themes considered as important.

*The Importance of Teachers*

The open-ended questions of the survey began to show an interesting trend in the differentiation between good teaching and caring teachers. The literature deals with these two concepts in the one theme but it became increasingly clear that the students, while seeing a correlation between the two concepts, saw a quite clear distinction between them. A teacher might be technically skilled (good) and/or caring but they were not necessarily both. Examples of teachers who were caring but not good practitioners in the class room and also teachers who were skilled but somewhat remote were given by way of examples.

While the technically skilled teachers were important, it was the caring teachers who were considered of greatest importance in an effective school. The importance of students believing they have caring and supportive teachers cannot be underestimated as being important in
effective schools. What was most fascinating is that the role of caring teachers became increasingly important as the students progressed through their schooling. While in the early years of secondary school the importance of a safe and secure school environment cannot be over emphasised, in the last two years of schooling the role of teachers, particularly as carers become the most important factor.

The Importance of The Physical Surroundings

Another pre-existing theme that requires further consideration and development is the provision of a Safe and Supportive Environment. While these themes received overwhelming positive responses for the students in terms of how important they were, the focus group phase illustrated a interesting focus that was not initially included in this theme. The literature focuses on the safety of students in terms of a culture free from bullying and a place where students can come and feel safe from physical harm. While this was undoubtedly important to students they also included the role of the buildings and the provision of physical assets that kept them safe. It became increasingly clear during the focus groups that the design of the buildings such that they provide easily supervised playground space and transit routes around the school was an important factor. The role of teachers and of school rules also played an important part as described in the literature but it was the role of the school’s architectural design and campus layout that became an interesting addition to this theme.

The Importance of Academic Focus

In all the literature to date the importance of academic success in the measurement of effective schools is indisputable. This is not surprising as schools are first and foremost places of teaching and learning and therefore their effectiveness as a whole must measure this. Thankfully the times of only measuring academic success as an indicator of a school’s effectiveness is over but nonetheless it remains an essential element. It was not surprising then that the students also considered this to be an important aspect of effectiveness.

The students’ perceptions of academic success did not focus on single subjects but did concentrate on a single measure. As outlined earlier, in New South Wales the matriculation process uses the Board of Studies Higher School Certificate examinations as a provider of academic results. These results then undergo a complex statistical calculation and a
University Admissions Index is generated. This UAI is then used as the basis for universities to offer places to students for undergraduate courses.

By the time students reach their final few years of schooling in NSW they have a good knowledge of how the UAI system works and what it is they have to do to succeed. What became increasingly evident from the focus group data is the importance the students place on the UAI as an indicator of success. The achievements of former students from the school are clearly used by the students as a measure of effectiveness for the school. It is worth noting that the UAI is not a measure of a single subject but an index generated from all their achievements across their full range of academic subjects. As individual students are able to attempt a wide range of subjects across the state the UAI is an attempt to create parity across subjects.

It is also interesting that the students emphasised the need for effective schools to provide a breadth of curriculum choice. Effective schools were considered to be ones that allowed students to attempt a range of subjects that suited their strengths and interests. Students saw an academically effective school to be more than one that just gets good results but one that offers a breadth of subject choice catering for their interests.

*The Importance of Engagement of Students across the School*

There is little doubt as to the importance of engaging students at school in more ways than in the classroom through activities across the full extent of the life of the school. It is important that students felt a sense of belonging and engagement with the wider school if they are to achieve their best academically. An effective school must provide opportunities for students to enjoy the wider life of the school and engage with other students and staff beyond what they would otherwise have contact with if it were just an academic experience. The wider the circle of staff and peers a student comes into contact with, the greater the sense of community or family will be developed and the more the students will feel part of the institution and therefore be able to achieve their best.
IS THIS SCHOOL EFFECTIVE?

While a significant part of this study was to determine student perceptions on how best to measure school effectiveness, another important aim was to examine if in the student’s mind the school they currently attended was itself effective. In the pre-existing themes measured in the survey it was demonstrated that in the students’ minds the school was generally effective. While the results were below those scores achieved for the ‘Importance’ scale there were still results indicating the general effectiveness of this school. The theme for which the school scored the highest mean when measuring effectiveness was the provision of a Safe and Supportive Environment for all with a mean of 4.3. The themes the students saw the school as being the least effective in was Educational Leadership and Positive School Culture with means of 3.2.

Interestingly these results were supported by the open-ended survey questions and the focus group data although there was considerable uncertainty in the questionnaire data, as discovered in the focus group phase of the research, as to what school culture was. The questionnaire data showed the students felt school culture was not effective in this school, however, when the elements were ranked and in the comments made in the focus groups it became clear that the students did think the school had a positive and effective school culture. Their views on this were that the culture of the school is not a stand alone concept and is one that cuts across all the themes.

The most affirming response for the school community was the overall consensus that the school was being effective for these students across a wide variety of measures. Of particular note was how effective the students perceived the school to be in terms of the teaching staff. The data demonstrates that the students perceived their teachers to not only be technically good but also caring and responsive to their needs. Caring and supportive teachers were an element that the students not only saw as important but also rated the school highly.

STUDY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

This study set out to determine if the elements used to date to measure effective schools were just as applicable to students as they were to other key stakeholders. Further, it was interesting to determine what other factors, if any, were important to students and to explore the reasons
behind their views. The qualitative approach of this study proved to be very useful and managed to provide the rich data that was sought in order to explore the reasons for the students’ perceptions. Taking a two pronged approach to the analysis of the data also proved useful. The inductive analysis that was used to determine the appropriateness of the ten themes derived from the research to date provided data that allowed the researcher to determine if in fact these were good measures as perceived by the students. The deductive analysis approach provided interesting data that allowed the researcher to examine what other elements were important to the students. The data allowed the researcher to make recommendations about how the themes initially measured might be refined, some removed and others added providing a more comprehensive list of elements that should be measured when examining effective schools.

The focus group phase of the research provided the richest data and was most useful in the end, however, the simple questionnaire data that was collected provided a very useful springboard on which to base the focus group discussions. The results from the survey allowed the researcher to present to the students the findings and ask for the reasons why this was the case. Interestingly, after the focus groups the data collected from the survey took on new meanings and different and more appropriate conclusions could be drawn.

During the analysis phase it became apparent that further valuable results could have been collected had the research project included students in the earlier years of their secondary schooling. The results collected from a group in Year 8 could have provided valuable additional data that might have supported or refuted the findings concerning the change over time of student perceptions. Certainly any future study would benefit from including younger students in the research methodology. Arguments about the importance of hearing younger students’ voice are just as applicable as older students.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Revised Key Elements of Effective Schooling

How best to identify an effective school has been at the forefront of educational research for many years and there has been a pleasing ongoing development of the theory of effective schools and how to best measure them. What this study has been able to add to this body of
research is in the close and detailed examination of what students think important in effective schools. It is a hope of this study that further research will be conducted examining students’ views. It is an ongoing frustration that considerable research takes place and yet so little space is devoted solely to the views of students. There is much work that can be done in this area and it is hoped that further studies can be conducted.

While this study has essentially verified the directions of research to date and confirmed the appropriateness of the theory development thus far, it has highlighted a number of areas that need revision and the addition of further themes important in the measurement of effective schools. There are other elements measured in this study that best fit together and as such the element of Pervasive Focus on Learning has been excluded as it is caught up predominantly in the theme of Academic Focus and Curriculum Choice. The theme of Positive School Culture is also covered by a number of themes and it was felt did not warrant a focus of its own. School culture is so pervasive in all a school does that to measure it is really a measure of other factors. When the views of students are combined with a distillation of the most important themes from the literature ten themes emerge as being the most appropriate elements of effective schools. These themes are listed in Table 28 alongside the original themes as used in the survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Elements of Effective Schools</th>
<th>Revised Elements of Effective Schools</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Educational Leadership</td>
<td>• Academic Focus and Curriculum Choice</td>
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<td>• Focus on Appropriate Teaching</td>
<td>• Caring and Supportive Teachers</td>
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<td>Methodologies</td>
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<td>• Pervasive Focus on Learning</td>
<td>• Extra-curricular Opportunity and</td>
</tr>
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<td>• Positive School Culture</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Engagement of Students Across the</td>
<td>• Good and Appropriate Teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>School</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Safe and Supportive Environment for</td>
<td>expectations for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all</td>
<td>• Parent and Community Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High and Appropriate Expectations</td>
<td>• Professional Development of Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>for all</td>
<td>• Regular Monitoring and Feedback of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regular Monitoring of Student</td>
<td>Student Achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>• Safe and Well Resourced Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Development of Staff Skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Parental and Community Connection</td>
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A précis of each of the revised elements follows by way of explanation.
**Academic Focus and Curriculum Choice**

The students were clear in their views that the academic success of past students was one of the most fundamental measures they used to establish the effectiveness of a school. It became apparent from the students’ comments during the focus groups that parents used this as a measure also. What is important in coming to terms with academic success as a means of evaluating schools’ effectiveness is what standards the academic success is measured against. This needs to be a point for discussion within each educational context and will differ from location to location.

Students also recognised the need for them to attempt subjects for the HSC and therefore the UAI that were of interest to them as well as catered to their academic strengths. There was general consensus that the subjects offered by the school were good, although some students would have liked a wider range from which to chose.

However academic success is measured it is undoubtedly a fundamental element of the perceived effectiveness of a school. The need to have a curriculum that provides choice caters for both interest and abilities is paramount. While much of this was covered in the theme of *Pervasive Focus on Learning*, the students believed this needed to be a far more focused element.

**Caring and Supportive Teachers**

The students saw one of the most fundamental measures of an effective school as being one that had teachers who cared and supported them. Undeniably an effective school had to have teachers who are not only good practitioners but also caring and supportive. The theme of *Focus on Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* encompassed both the caring and technical skill of teachers but as a result of this study it is recommended that these two areas become distinct in their own right. As such two themes, *Good and Appropriate Teaching* and *Caring and Supportive Teachers* have been developed. Notwithstanding this it is important to recognise that good teaching practitioners and those who care are often seen as the same people but the process is different and schools must be able to foster both within the staff to be effective.
The relational side of teachers and the way they interact with students is the feature that stood out as being the most important. Students wanted to be able to have staff who related to them well, took the time and effort to form a professionally appropriate relationship and genuinely care where they came from each morning. Teachers who did not let their standards drop but took into account the individual pressures and difficulties of students were those the students considered to be the most effective. Schools that encouraged and developed these traits within their teachers are the schools that will be most effective for students in this regard.

*Educational Leadership*

This study has left this theme unchanged. The role of the leaders within the school is essential. What was interesting in this study was that the students did not immediately attribute the smooth operation and effectiveness of the school to the school leaders. Nonetheless the weight of evidence throughout the literature demands its inclusion regardless of the limited attention given to it by the students in this study.

*Extra-curricular Opportunity and Engagement*

While *Engagement of Students across the School* is a well-developed theme in the literature and there has been considerable research to back up the use of this as an essential theme in effective schools, the students took the view that there needed to be more than just the provision of extra or co-curricular activities. It was recognised in this school that there were lots of such activities and they were done well but what was lacking was a full diversity of activities catering for a wide range of interests. Performance, particularly music was perceived as being catered for really well. The area of sport were seen as deficient. The students recognised that there were a significant number of students within the school that did not engage in the life of the school outside the classroom and that was perceived as having a negative impact on the overall culture and spirit of the school. While the school did really well with what it offered, the students perceived there to be significant areas for improvement.

As such the theme of *Engagement of Students Across the School* has been reworked slightly to take into account measurement of the diversity of activities provided by the school. This encourages the measurement of more than just the provision of activities but the diversity and
range of student interests too. Again this is a contextually sensitive element and universal measures are not appropriate.

**Good and Appropriate Teaching**

As briefly discussed in one of the earlier sections, the theme *Focus on Appropriate Teaching Methodologies* has been reframed. The emergent *Good and Appropriate Teaching* as a theme has refined its focus away from the relational way teachers teach to simply the technical skill and subject knowledge they bring to their teaching. The way the teacher engages students in their own learning style is fundamental and important to their ability to teach well. School administrators need to ensure that they are able to develop within staff an ability to improve the technical side of their teaching. This includes their planning, programming as well as subject knowledge acquisition. Students recognised those staff whom were in their minds continuing to learn their subject as opposed to those who seemed not to. They were also able to recognise those staff that constantly updated their resources and improved as opposed to those staff who seemed to present the same work year after year.

**High Expectations and Appropriate Expectations for all**

This study has done little to alter this theme. Students recognised the need for high expectation to be placed on them if the school is to be effective. Interestingly these high expectations were to do with more than academic success, although that was central, but also included their dress and bearing as well as behaviour. The high expectations placed on students outside of the class room was seen as essential to producing an environment within the classroom that allowed the students to focus on their learning.

Students also recognised that the high expectations were also placed on the staff of the school. This was demonstrated through dress codes, conduct as well as teaching practices. The fact that the staff had high expectations placed on them meant that they in turn had high expectations of their students. This was seen as a positive element of the school.

**Parent and Community Involvement**

While students saw this as being important it was not the most essential element. The students did not believe that parents needed to be at school to become engaged and recognised the
significance of parent information sessions, parent/teacher interviews, groups such as a Parents and Citizens group as well as the need to have clear and open communication via newsletters and the internet site.

**Professional Development of Staff**

The ongoing development of staff knowledge and skills is always important in effective schools as it demonstrates an ongoing commitment to the improvement of teachers. The students felt encouraged when they knew staff were attending courses or doing further study of their own as it demonstrated that the staff were interested in learning and self improvement. The fact that the staff were willing to attend extra courses, often in their own time, demonstrated a level of care for the students that they appreciated and acknowledged.

**Regular Monitoring and Feedback of Student Achievement**

It was a strong view of many students that the regular monitoring of their work was essential to the effectiveness of the school. Further to this, and an aspect not really covered in the initial theme was the provision of feedback. In terms of feedback two key elements were mentioned. The students felt that they needed regular and ongoing feedback that was detailed and timely. As far as detail goes, the students wanted much more that just the marks but details on where they went wrong and how their work could be improved. Second, the timely nature of the feedback was important. The students felt that the faster they had the work returned the more helpful the feedback was.

**Safe and Well Resourced Environment**

This element is an adaptation of the *Safe and Supportive Environment for all* theme. The safety side of the school surrounds and the rules were recognised, and the support role of teachers was also recognised. However, the support role of teachers has been moved to a different theme where it fits better. What the students added to this theme was the importance of the design of the buildings and the playground areas so that students felt safe as they moved around the school. A well designed school is one where the students did not feel spied on but did feel that incidental supervision was easy as staff moved around the campus.
As indicated, many of these themes are adaptations of the themes initially distilled from the research to date. Several of the themes have been reworked although they are essentially the same after taking into account the particular focus brought to them by the students. A number of additional or substantially altered themes are included too.

**Future Considerations for the School**

On the whole the school should be well pleased with the results of this research as the students undeniably consider the school to be effective. That is not to say that there are not areas that need improvement but they are essentially happy at school, they get involved, they believe they have all they need to achieve well and they appreciate the caring and technical skill of the teachers.

While it is clear that the students’ perceptions of their school’s effectiveness were high there are a number of areas than need to be addressed by the school’s administrators. First there is the perception that while the senior executive is important to the school the students are unsure what they in fact do. There is a real challenge here for the school to ensure that the senior executive of the school become far more visible and involved in the day to day life of the students. There is great danger in becoming so aloof, as appears to have occurred already, that the leadership of these key staff is lost. The students while having a very positive view and relationship with the teaching staff seemed to have little understanding of the senior staff. That is not to say that they thought ill of these staff or indeed that they felt they contributed nothing to the school, however, they were confused as to their day to day role.

Second, there is a perception that while the school provides good opportunities for students to engage in out of classroom activities, these activities are far too narrow and essentially only cater for those who are musically or performance orientated. There are, in the student’s minds, limited opportunity for them to become involved in activities beyond performance. Sport and other adventure activities are seen to be too limiting and debating and public speaking activities cater for too small a number of students. There is a general consensus that more opportunities are needed that caters for a greater range of student interests.

A further important element that the school needs to give consideration to is the perceived lack of subject choice. In the context of the New South Wales Board of Studies curriculum,
the school used in this study does not offer anywhere near the full range of subjects. It is important to note that approximately 100 subjects are offered in the senior years for examination in the Higher School Certificate. No school can possibly offer them all. The students’ views in this school are that the focus to date on essentially matriculation subjects only is too restrictive and vocational courses should be considered. While this may not be the direction the school chooses to explore, it is essential that a wider range of options that cater better for the interests of the students are offered.

**Future Considerations for Policy and Practice**

It is demonstrable from the richness of the data that has been collected that the methodology used in this study was appropriate and effective in obtaining results that could be analysed both deductively and inductively. This approach has meant that the study has been able to both test existing theory and suggest areas where current theory needs to be further developed in order to better take into account student voice. The potential for further research in this area is significant and is dealt with in the next section.

As the methodology has proved to be appropriate, the data can also be considered useful in informing policy development and practice. The revised key elements of effective schooling suggested as a result of this research, and the reasons for these changes as articulated by the students, has much to offer policy makers and school practitioners. For a start this project has demonstrated just how valuable the views of students can be in determining the effectiveness of a school. While the students essentially confirmed the effectiveness factors arising from the literature the subtle variations and changes are important.

This being the case, it is imperative that schools ascribe greater weight to the views of students. That is not to say that policy development should be left in the hands of students, rather that their effectiveness and impact on students be regularly monitored and reviewed as necessary. Students have valuable insights which to date have been seldom given the sway they deserve.

While the central and important role of the teacher in effective schools has been confirmed by this research, it does highlight the importance of the caring nature of the teacher. The caring nature of the teacher is a trait that is not easily distilled from the effective schools literature to
date. The relational and therefore caring aspect of the teacher should not be underestimated and the challenge for any school leader is to ensure that the highly skilled teachers employed also possess the necessary personal skills. The challenge is creating good recruiting procedures that enable the selection of teachers with both an outstanding knowledge of their subject and good practitioners possessing relational skills that allow the students to feel cared for.

An interesting matter for schools to consider is if there is any role for students to become involved in the selection of teaching staff. At face value there are many problems with this notion, however, it does warrant some consideration and is an area of possible research in the future.

Another element that policy makers and school leaders should carefully consider is the provision of a safe environment. This element was clearly identified by both the Year 10 and Year 12 cohorts as being essential in an effective school. Their views on what makes a school safe and secure, however, were somewhat different to the notion expressed throughout the literature. There is clearly a need for educational leaders to sit up and take note of the physical surroundings and environment generated by the construction of buildings. This research has clearly demonstrated that wide open spaces where the students feel well supervised contributes significantly to their sense of safety. Avoiding poorly supervised spaces by way of campus design appears essential.

A well planned campus is important but so too is the need for rules that are enforced when providing students with a sense of safety. The students emphasised the need for the rules to be more than simply a code contained in some policy document but a culture within the school that the staff were willing and ready to implement and enforce. A set of good rules, well applied, along with a campus that allowed good supervision are essential to students feeling safe and therefore should be the goal of all school leaders and policy developers.

**Future Considerations for Further Research**

A dominant feature of this research has been in establishing a methodology that has enabled students firstly, to subscribe to the effectiveness measures acknowledged widely within the research to date and secondly, identify and measure these factors within their school. There is
considerable potential for this study to be replicated across schools. It is important here to acknowledge that the single site of this research and therefore the ability to generalise the findings across contexts is limited. However, as the study is easily replicated, the potential for its use in other contexts is significant which may lead to the generation of a body of empirical data that will add substantially to the body of research.

There is also much greater depth and detail of research that could be done that examines the role student voice plays in the school effectiveness research domain. School effectiveness research has come to rely far too heavily on the self-report and observation of adults. This research has shown that students do have a great deal to offer this field of study and the results can be informative and insightful in areas that student voice has hitherto had limited audience.

Again it is acknowledged that the scope of this study is limited because of the single site study approach. This being the case there are a number of opportunities for further research emanating from this study. It would be interesting to replicate this study’s methodology across a number of research contexts such as within:

1. a larger range of like schools
2. Government schools
3. schools with various religious ethos
4. across a greater range of ages

In addition to these potential research projects focussing on students it would be very informative to bring parents and teachers into the one study along side the students and compare the results with the students within the one context.

Not surprisingly following a study such as this, there are many more interesting research possibilities that would warrant the application of the same research methodology. In doing this a significant body of data could be generated that might have a far greater and substantive influence over current theory development as well as informing policy makers and school leaders as to what is important to focus on within effective schools.
Final Summation

While the literature to date has given less than adequate voice to the students when considering how to measure effective schools, it is pleasing to note that the results of this study essentially support the findings and the current state of theory development. The students have perceived the themes that were distilled from the literature and measured in the survey phase of this project to be robust and appropriate. There are particular elements that the students demonstrated required greater focus than the literature derived themes gave to them. As a result of these findings a reworked list of themes with appropriate foci has been developed for consideration and use in further studies of student views of effective schools. Having said that it is important to reiterate that this study like much of the school effectiveness research does not intend to develop a definitive list of elements. What it has achieved is to refocus some of the most commonly accepted elements to better reflect the particular interest of the students without diluting the interests of other appropriate key stakeholders of effective schools.
REFERENCES


Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health, 16*(1), 103-121.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Consent Forms and Subject Information Sheet
Appendix B: Survey Instrument
Appendix C: Indicative Focus Group Questions
APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORMS AND SUBJECT INFORMATION SHEET

The University of Sydney
Division of International Relations
Faculty of Education & Social Work

Dr Kevin Laws
Faculty of Education and Social Work  A35
University of Sydney
NSW 2006
Telephone: +61 2 9351 6396
Email: k.laws@edfac.usyd.edu.au

PARENTAL (OR GUARDIAN) CONSENT FORM

I, ________________________ agree to permit ________________________
who is aged ______ years, to participate in the research project –
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. I have read the Information Statement and the time involved for my child’s participation in
the project. The researcher/s has given me the opportunity to discuss the information and
ask any questions I have about the project and they have been answered to my
satisfaction.

2. I understand that I can withdraw my child from the study at any time without prejudice to
my or my child or child’s relationship with the researcher/s now or in the future.

3. I agree that research data gathered from the results of the study may be published
provided that neither my child nor I can be identified.

4. I understand that if I have any questions relating to my child’s participation in this research
I may contact the researcher/s who will be happy to answer them.

5. I understand that in giving this consent I agree to participate in both phases of the
research.


Signature of Parent/Guardian

Signature of Student

Please PRINT Parent/Guardian name

Please PRINT Student name

Date

Date

Please return this form to your Tutor or the box in the Administration Centre
no later than Friday 9 June 2006

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING

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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT
Research Project

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

(1) What is the study about?

This study will research whether students perceive particular factors to be important in effective schools and then to determine whether they believe their school is effective according to the criteria given. Two cohorts will be involved in the study, namely Year 10 and 12.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Mr David Nockles and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Education at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Doctor Kevin Laws, Associate Dean, Division of International Relations, Faculty of Education and Social Work. Mr Nockles can be contacted on 4647 5333 while Dr Laws contact details are provided above.

This study is being conducted with the approval and support of the Headmaster.

(3) What does the study involve?

The study will involve two phases. The first is a questionnaire measuring student perceptions followed by phase two which involves students from one Tutor Group in each year being involved in a focus group discussion to explore trends that become evident from the questionnaire. Only students for which permission has been granted in Phase 1 will participate in Phase 2. Students from the affected Tutor Groups not involved in the research will be distributed amongst the other Tutor Groups during this phase. In phase two, data will be recorded electronically and then transcripts produced after which the audio will be erased. No names will be used in the transcripts and the identity of the participants will not be disclosed at any time.

(4) How much time will the study take?

The questionnaire will take about 20 minutes to complete and will be conducted during tutor period in early April 2006. The follow up focus groups will involve two 30 minute sessions, also taking place during tutor period some time during July 2006.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Neither parents nor students should feel under any obligation to consent.

Your decision whether or not to permit your child to participate will not prejudice you or your child's future relations with the University of Sydney or the School. Please complete the attached consent form and return it to the Administration Centre or Tutor if you agree to your child's participation in this study. If you decide to permit your child to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue your child's participation at any time without prejudice.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?

All aspects of the study, including results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.
(7) Will the study benefit me?

The study is intended to add to the rich debate in current research literature regarding elements of effective schools and how they are best measured. It is intended that the findings of this research become available to the School in order for it to examine its programmes and make improvements bettering the life chances of the students at the School.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

(8) Can I tell other people about the study?

You are welcome to tell people of your child’s involvement in this study, although it should be understood that participants are restricted to Year 10 and 12 students at the School.

(9) What if I require further information?

When you have read this information, an information evening coinciding with a P&FA Meeting will be held where Mr David Nockles will outline the research further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Mr David Nockles at 4647 5333 or Dr Kevin Laws at 9351 6396.

(10) What if I have a complaint or concerns?

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811.

This information sheet is for you to keep
APPENDIX B: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The University of Sydney
Division of International Relations
Faculty of Education & Social Work

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

APRIL 2006

Thank you for participating in this study.
The questionnaire below will take you approximately 20 minutes to complete. The information you provide is anonymous and cannot be attributed to any one person.

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research study can contact the Manager, Ethics Administration,
University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811.

PART A: GENERAL INFORMATION

For each of the following, please circle the appropriate alternative.

1. You are:
   a) Male
   b) Female

2. This year you turned:
   a) 15 years old or younger
   b) 16 years old
   c) 17 years old
   d) 18 years old or older

3. You are currently in:
   a) Year 10
   b) Year 12

4. Your School House is:
   a) Barker
   b) Broughton
   c) Hassall
   d) Heber
   e) Johnson
   f) Marsh

5. Your future education plans include: (Circle as many as might apply)
   for year 10 students
   a) attending university
   b) attending TAFE
   c) attending another tertiary college
   d) going to work after completing the SC
   e) going to work after completing the HSC
   for Year 12 students
   a) attending university
   b) attending TAFE
   c) attending another tertiary college
   d) going to work after completing the HSC
### How important is it that a school...  
### How well does this school...  

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21. use the Headmaster and other senior staff to communicate with parents and students about teaching and learning?

22. make students aware that their work will be regularly assessed.

23. challenge its students to capacity in a wide range of school activities?

24. encourage an atmosphere where students are enthusiastic about learning?

25. promotes different teaching strategies?

26. demonstrate that it is a safe and secure place?

27. develop strategies to encourage students to learn better?

28. make sure there is a positive atmosphere within the school?

29. monitor the involvement of students in activities outside the classroom?

30. monitor the development of further skills within the teaching staff?

31. through its Headmaster and other senior staff lead frequent discussions about teaching and learning with parents and students?

32. regularly assess student achievement through homework?

33. expect students to master subject matter each year?

34. encourage feedback from parents about the quality of the educational programme offered?

35. constantly monitor the teaching of students?

36. clearly state its set of behaviour expectations?

37. assess student learning on a regular basis?

38. promote a positive attitude within the students?

39. assist students to find an activity in which to become involved that suits their interests?

40. give teachers time off teaching to attend short courses?

41. through its Headmaster and other senior staff discuss matters concerning teaching with parents?

42. monitor achievement to keep track of students' progress?

43. praise a wide range of students not only those who achieve the most?

44. use parents and/or community members to assist the educational programme?

45. focus on teaching as its primary purpose?

46. make its codes of conduct known?
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<tr>
<td>47. Encourage students to develop their own learning style?</td>
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<td>48. Maintain a level of student enjoyment within the school?</td>
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<td>49. Recognise the success of students in activities outside of the classroom?</td>
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<td>50. Provide professional development opportunities for teachers?</td>
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<td>51. Through its Headmaster and other senior staff explain teaching methods to parents?</td>
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<td>52. Use many different methods (including samples of student work and tests) to assess learning?</td>
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<td>53. Consistently challenge students?</td>
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<td>54. Provide opportunities for informal contacts between teachers and parents?</td>
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<td>55. Provide opportunities for its teaching methods to be generally understood?</td>
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<td>56. Develop a good sense of security and order at school?</td>
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<td>57. Expect students to improve their own learning?</td>
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<td>58. Assist students to be positive and enjoy themselves while at school?</td>
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<td>59. Focus on student involvement in areas other than academic work?</td>
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<td>60. Develop a programme for teachers to improve their teaching?</td>
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61. Did we leave anything out that you think is very important in effective schools?

62. Do you think this school is effective? Why or why not?

PART C: MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

Please list what you consider to be the 5 most important factors for an effective school. These can come from either PART B or your own consideration.
Focus Group Questions

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING

The questions that will be asked of the focus groups will largely be driven by the trends that become evident from the results of the questionnaire.

Essentially, one question will be asked from each of the themes examined in the questionnaire. The responses from the participants will then lead to further questions to establish themes further and to clarify points of uncertainty. The main gist of the questions will be as outlined below.

Educational Leadership
- What do you think educational leadership is and how important is it in an effective school?

Appropriate Teaching Methodologies
- Do you think teachers at this school use an effective variety of methods or strategies in their teaching to help you learn?

Focus on Learning
- Is it important for students to understand how they learn and does this school appropriately focus its attention on learning?

School Culture
- How important is it being happy at school and what makes for a happy school?

Student Engagement
- What sorts of activities do you like to be involved in at school and how important is participation in these activities to you?

Safe and Supportive Environment
- Do you feel safe at school and what makes for a safe school?

High expectations of all
- Do you think that this school expects a lot of you and the teachers? Is this a good or bad thing?

Regular Monitoring of Student Progress
- Is it important that teachers check your progress regularly? It is helpful or simply annoying?

Development of Staff Skills
- How important is it that teachers keep learning?

Parental and Community Connection
- How important is it that parents and other interested community members become involved in the school?

In addition to the questions focussing on the 10 themes, questions relating to other areas of effective education not dealt with in the questionnaire and how effective schools are best measured will be asked. These questions are far more general in nature.

- What do you think is the most important factor for an effective school?
- Do you think this school is effective? Why or why not?