Successful leadership of Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances: Insights from Western Australian Primary Principals

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Finally to Kerri, James, Zarina and Emanuel, I thank you for your love and support and for believing that I would, one day, eventually finish this project.
ABSTRACT

To add to the growing body of literature on Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances, the intent of this research was to contribute to theory by addressing the central research question, ‘How do principals deal with the distinctive challenges in Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances?’ In particular, the research sought to understand how principals are influenced by the environments in which they work, how they understand these environments, and how they articulate these understandings into describable actions in their workplaces.

This qualitative study was framed by the interpretivist paradigm as this approach allowed for examination of the meanings that the participants had of the particular contextual nuances evidenced in their schools. More specifically, the research was informed by the symbolic interactionist perspective. In accordance with the qualitative nature of the study, data collection methods comprised semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observation. A grounded theory approach to data analysis was employed, which enabled the generation of theory inductively from the data collected.

The findings of the research are presented according to three substantive themes identified, namely, ‘moral purpose’, ‘relationships and trust’ and ‘community connection’. These themes portray the various ways in which the participants made sense of their environments and the actions they took to meet the ongoing challenges faced in their schools.

The implications arising from the findings suggest that with regard to principal selection, there is an important need for school context to be considered alongside the applicants’ skills and abilities, It would also be desirable to develop greater understanding of SFCC in Western Australia by means of further research on a broader scale.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This introductory chapter begins with a description of the study reported in this thesis. In doing so, it presents the central research question and outlines the purpose and context of the study. It then describes the structure, function and organisation of the Western Australian Department of Education and provides justification for the study as well as for the research methods employed. It concludes with an overview of the remaining six chapters contained in the thesis.

Description of the study

This qualitative study examines the work of principals in Western Australian government primary schools. In particular, it is concerned with principals working in a specific sub-set of primary schools which the researcher has classified as being schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCC). The purpose of the study is to generate theory about how the leadership of SFCC is influenced by distinctive contextual factors.

The study is underpinned by the following central research question:

How do principals deal with the distinctive challenges in SFCC?

This central research question was addressed through the following guiding questions:

1 Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances (SFCC) is a term originating from the United Kingdom. Such schools are defined by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as those where 25% or fewer of the pupils achieved five or more grades A-C in GCSE and equivalent examinations and/or 35% or more pupils receive free school meals (NCSL, 2010).
1. What are the distinctive challenges encountered by principals in the course of their work?

2. What are the specific issues relevant to the school context which influence the principals’ work?

3. What strategies do the principals employ to deal with these challenges in their schools?

4. How do the principals know that the strategies employed are contributing to the success of their school?

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study has been to develop theory about how the actions of school principals are influenced by the environment in which they work. The particular focus of the study was to understand how individual principals made sense of this environment and translated this understanding into describable actions as they went about their work as school leaders.

In an era of decentralized education control from system to local level in the international, national and state contexts, the increasing expectation of policy makers and system administrators is that school leaders will manage and overcome issues specific to their individual school circumstances. In Australia, this fundamental shift in educational policy is occurring within an emerging climate of increasing school accountability linked to such measures as the
National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)\textsuperscript{2}, which is increasingly referred to as being part of a ‘high stakes’ testing regime, so named due to the effect tests such as these can have on school resource funding at both the federal and state levels.

In Australia, varying degrees of devolution have been evident with the focus in the past being on utilities and infrastructure management, flexible staffing options, strengthening of school councils or boards and the creation of school charters. In the Western Australian context, decentralization has been epitomised by the implementation of the Independent Public Schools (IPS) initiative, which was part of the Western Australian Liberal Party’s election platform when it won office in 2008. In essence, the intent of the IPS initiative is to deliver more flexibility at the school level with regard to program delivery, the expenditure of financial resources and staffing capabilities.

Many school leaders would argue that decentralization has also caused the diminishing of support services to schools such as those that were once offered by district or regional offices. In Western Australia schools have now been allocated to regions and, within these regions, networks have been established. Increasingly, schools are now working collaboratively through these networks to source and deliver professional learning programs relevant to school needs and to negotiate access to student support services. Whether, in fact, the loss of support since the re-structure is actual or perceived, or whether it is just the process of accessing this support which has altered is not a focus of this study.

\textsuperscript{2} NAPLAN tests measure student performance in literacy and numeracy in years 3, 5, 7 and 9.
However, it does put into the spotlight the question of how school leaders continue to meet the needs and demands of specific school contexts. Of particular interest to the researcher is answering this question from the perspective of principals charged with the responsibility of leading some of the state’s more challenging schools.

Over the past decade researchers in the field of educational leadership have been contributing to a growing body of literature which describes various aspects of SFCC (Chapman & Harris, 2004; MacBeath, Gray, Cullen, Frost, Steward & Swaffield 2007; West, Ainscow & Stanford, 2005). There is an emerging body of evidence which suggests that leadership in such schools is in no way uniform (Harris & Chapman, 2002) and that it is apparent that certain leadership styles will assist in SFCC being described as successful or ‘highly performing’ (Bell, 2001). Chapman and Harris (2004) note that the relationship between school context and school improvement is an important but neglected area requiring further investigation, and while school improvement may form part of an ongoing agenda for many school leaders, it is the work of the principal in the already ‘successful’ yet challenging school which is the central theme of this study.

The Department of Education (WA) has no particular definition of SFCC but does, however, assign resources to schools based on certain criteria. These criteria include the school’s Socio Economic Index (SEI) rating, the enrolment

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3 The SEI rating has since been replaced with the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) measure.
of students learning English as a second language, and the enrolment of Aboriginal students and students with special needs. Certain schools are also classified as Metropolitan Teaching Program (MTP) schools, based on their being historically hard to staff. Teachers at these schools receive an additional stipend to their salaries as well as being able to access employment permanency after two years of continuous service.

While considering the leadership of challenging, yet apparently successful, schools within the climate of decentralization and increased accountability described above, it is the work of the principal in such schools which is central to the study reported here. As such, this study aimed to generate theory about how leadership in schools is influenced by the distinctive contextual factors occurring in SFCC.

Context of the study

When discussing leadership in schools the predominant understanding of this term is that it describes individual rather than collective endeavour (Harris, Day & Hadfield 2003). Whilst it is becoming more common to find collaborative, shared or distributed leadership models evident amongst school administration teams, the term, in the main, still refers to the work of the principal as an individual. For the purpose of this research it is this work of the principal as an individual school leader in terms of the decisions and actions he/she takes, that is of core interest. Naturally, the effect of the principal’s work will influence other staff through direction, empowerment or otherwise, and this is dependent on the
particular style of leadership attributed to the principal, and this too is a secondary consideration in the study reported here.

There is agreement amongst researchers that there does not appear to be a single approach to leadership which seems to be more or less effective than others in SFCC (Harris, 2002; Harris & Chapman, 2002). Hattie (2009) maintains that there are two major forms of educational leadership, namely, instructional and transformational. In essence, instructional leaders are those who focus on the teaching and learning climate of the school and on establishing clear expectations and understandings of the teachers’ work. Transformational leaders focus on energising and motivating their staff, encouraging them to develop collaborative work practices in order to overcome challenges and reach ambitious goals. Whilst these two approaches to leadership have been linked to improvement in SFCC (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Hopkins as cited in Chapman & Harris, 2004), it has also been reported that no one particular leadership style was evident in a group of studied disadvantaged schools (Maden & Hillman, 1993).

In order to gain familiarity with the operational context of the Western Australian Department of Education, the following section now describes its structure, function and organisation.

The Western Australian Department of Education

The following describes the administrative structure and function of the Western Australian Department of Education. Over recent years, fundamental changes
have been made to the ways in which schools have been supported by central and district (now regional) offices. Subsequently, changes have also been made to departmental management.

**Function**

The Department of Education is the state government agency responsible for the delivery of public education in Western Australia. In 2012/13 there were over 275,000 students enrolled in 763 schools. Schools vary with regard to delivery of educational programs but are made up of:

- primary schools catering to students from Kindergarten to Year 6
- district high schools catering for students from K-10 and in some cases, K-12
- education support centres (both primary and secondary)
- senior high schools catering for students in Years 8–12
- the School for Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE)
- schools of the air (for students in some remote regional areas).

Schools are mostly classified according to the student enrolment numbers although some district high schools and all senior high schools are classed as level 6 schools.

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4 Year 7 students relocated to secondary schools at the beginning of 2015
Table 1: Classification of schools in Western Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Enrolment Numbers</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 100</td>
<td>Level 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-300</td>
<td>Level 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300-700</td>
<td>Level 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700+</td>
<td>Level 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These schools are spread across a vast area and are found in some of the most diversified geographical locations in Australia.

**Corporate Executive**

The governance of the department is the domain of the Corporate Executive. This group comprises the Director General, two Deputy Directors General, five Executive Directors of various inter-department branches and 8 Regional Executive Directors.\(^5\) The main function of this group is to ensure compliance with and delivery of strategic direction and performance as documented in the department’s operational planning exemplified by the current *Strategic Plan for WA Public Schools 2012-2015*. The Director General reports to the State Government’s Minister for Education.

\(^5\) A chart outlining the structure of the WA Department of Education is attached as Appendix A
Defining challenging schools

Unlike the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in England, the Western Australian Department of Education has not assigned any particular terminology or definition to a school which operates in more challenging circumstances.

In the England the term SFCC applies to “schools conspicuously adrift of the average school performance and showing a gulf between them and the highest performing schools [and] 35 % or more students entitled to free school meals” (MacBeath, Gray, Cullen, Frost, Steward, Swaffield, 2007, p.37).

For the purpose of this study a SFCC is defined as one which matches the following criteria.

- The school has a low Socio-Economic Index (SEI) number. SEI is based on three variables; occupation, education and income. It is calculated using the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data obtained from collection districts around the school rather than a school’s specific enrolment data. Western Australian schools’ SEI scores range from 50 – 128 with 50 being low and 128 high. For the purpose of this study participant schools in the study had an SEI< 93.0.

- The school is classified by the Western Australian Department of Education as a Metropolitan Teaching Program (MTP) school. (once known as a ‘difficult to staff school’). Schools classified as being an MTP school attract an additional salary allowance for teachers.

Four principals were selected to participate in this study on the basis of their particular schools meeting the above criteria.
Research methods

The purpose of this study has been to develop theory about how the actions of school principals of SFCC are influenced by the environments in which they work. The particular focus of the study was to understand how individual principals made sense of this environment and translate this understanding into describable actions as they go about their work as school leaders.

The study was a multi-case study design in which principals were selected for the study by means of purposive sampling. For the purpose of this study the case is defined as being a primary school principal. The criteria used to select the cases were as follows:

- the individual cases were permanently placed at their schools and not acting or relieving in the position of principal
- they had been at their schools for a period of not less than five years
- the schools to which the cases were attached met the criteria for SFCC as described above.

The data were collected using qualitative research methods including in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with principals, analysis of school program information documents and on-site observation.

Significance of the study

This study examined the approaches principals of SFCC in Western Australia have taken to overcoming the complexities and challenges they face in their day-
to-day work as school leaders. It sought to provide insights of value to principals either working in, or intending to work in, SFCC, which they may find of assistance in their roles.

Decentralization and increasing autonomy are becoming dominant features of education systems worldwide. Principals in such systems are increasingly expected to meet a variety of context-specific challenges without any significant support. Increasingly, principals are seeking this support through professional organizations and peer networks, such as collegial groups. This study has the potential, therefore, to be used in peer support activities including discussion around effective practices principals employ in challenging circumstances.

Structure of the thesis

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature around SFCC and identifies related emergent issues and themes. Chapter 3 describes the design and methodology of the study’s research approach. Chapter 4 presents an overview of each participant in the study, including workplace descriptions. Chapter 5 articulates the findings generated from the research, including excerpts from the semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Chapter 6 analyses the findings from the study and presents the substantive themes generated as they relate to the central research question. Chapter 7 presents a conclusion to the thesis.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction
The purpose of this chapter is to examine the body of literature relevant to SFCC as it was from this work that the study reported here was conceptualised. As discussed in Chapter 1, the aim of the study was to develop theory about the way in which school leaders make sense of the environment in which they work and translate this into describable actions.

The Central Research Question it will be recalled was: How do principals deal with the distinctive challenges in Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances? This chapter now examines the relevant themes derived from the literature that are pertinent to this study. These include:

- an overview of the issues faced in SFCC
- leadership in challenging schools
- successful leadership strategies in challenging schools.

Issues faced in schools facing challenging circumstances
Zikhali and Perumal (2016) and Harris, Chapman, Muijs, Russ and Stoll (2006) describe many factors which impact upon schools in disadvantaged areas, including high staff turnover, poor facilities, lack of resources, falling pupil numbers and constant streams of supply teachers. Harris, Gunraj, Janes, Clarke and Harris (2005) go further in describing geographical isolation, selective education systems, poor support from local education authorities, low levels of qualifications amongst adult populations and poor employment opportunities as additional factors often compounding the
problems faced by many schools in challenging circumstances. These factors are often simply not encountered by schools in more affluent areas. As noted by Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, and Russ, (2004) these specific contextual circumstances suggest that different improvement strategies are needed in SFCC. Whilst it is useful to identify the contextual factors which contribute to the challenging nature of a school, West, Ainscow & Stanford (2005) point out that some of these factors are not always amenable to change and indeed describe precisely those intransigent problems that beset SFCC. Another contextual factor which impacts upon the operation of SFCC relates to teacher efficacy and accountability. If teachers believe that factors hindering student learning and progress are outside of their control, this can create a sense of powerlessness to change things. A ‘what do you expect?’ attitude can prevail. Chapman and Harris (2004) support this in saying that SFCC often expect little from the community and hence little from their students. Muijs et al. (2004) note that in schools with high staff turnover, school culture and vision can be affected, but this can also be the case with some stable staff as, in some instances, this stability leads to complacency and a resistance to change. This culture of low expectations can also be evidenced at times by teachers often blaming the shortcomings of their students on their parents (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; Vincent, 2000). Bell (2001) reinforces these ideas by stating that the quality of instruction and curriculum in low-performing schools is rarely put forward as a determinant for student academic performance; rather, it is the characteristics inherent in the backgrounds of students which are cited as reasons for their academic weakness. On this, Bell comments, “in the absence of credible models of success, the prevailing orthodoxy that demographic factors will overwhelm
school-related variables maintains its veneer of certainty” (2001, p.8). According to this view, there is only so much that can be expected of schools due to students' home / life factors which are beyond teachers’ and principals’ control.

**External factors**

There are, of course, external contextual factors which do impact on the operation and success of schools. These factors include the students’ home lives, including parental attitudes toward schooling, as well as financial, transport, cultural and attendance issues. Jacobson (2008) and Ylimaki, Jacobson, and Drysdale, (2007) also cite correlates of poverty such as poor nutrition, inadequate health services, high rates of illiteracy and criminal activity, including drug and substance abuse, as existing in the communities of high-needs schools in the United States. All of these and more will impact upon students' schooling success in a variety of ways.

Reynolds et.al (2006) note that critics of the school effectiveness and school improvement movement are of the view that unless the vast social and economic inequities faced by communities are addressed, SFCC are unlikely to improve. Harris et.al (2006) state that more attention needs to be paid to external factors that render a school less or more able to improve, as the evidence shows a negative correlation between a high proportion of students from socially disadvantaged families and their progress or attainment. While it is useful to be aware of issues impacting upon schools, the literature does not look at particular strategies that schools employ to counter their effects. How schools connect with the communities in which they are located and the
sort of programs they initiate to meet specific needs also contribute to a school’s success. As Gu and Johansson (2012) have pointed out:

Recognizing the dynamic interaction between the internal and external dimensions of school contexts over time is key to understanding the ways in which schools respond to and act upon various favourable and unfavourable, stable and unstable factors in their endeavours to improve school performance.

(p.310)

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find two schools which have exactly the same contextual factors impacting upon them. Therefore, it would seem logical to follow with the premise that one particular form of leadership will not impact upon any two schools in the same way. There is not a ‘one-size- fits-all’ model of leadership for improvement in SFCC and, indeed, if there were, schools would simply aspire to perform like other schools in order to achieve success (Reynolds et al., 2006). The question of which leadership style is most effective in challenging schools, therefore, is quite enigmatic. Is any one style ‘better’ than another? Can any particular strategy be employed to put the school on a pathway to success?

**Defining leadership**

Day, Harris and Hadfield, (as cited in Muijs & Harris, 2003, p.437) have observed that, “a preliminary glance at the vast leadership literature … reveals that it is largely premised upon individual endeavour rather than collective action, and a singular view of leadership continues to dominate, equating leadership with headship”. However it is becoming more common to see various forms of distributed or shared leadership in schools that are
typically characterised by the sharing of responsibility with, for example, curriculum leadership and other traditional core administrative roles. Harris (2002), whilst examining a study of effective leadership in SFCC, noted that distributed leadership is a strategy principals use to meet the demands of complex change. Similarly, Maden and Hillman (1993), write that in many improving schools in disadvantaged circumstances there is evidence of shared decision-making and collegiality. Moreover, Muijs et al. (2004) consider that the most effective forms of leadership in schools are democratic and involve teachers leading their schools. Indeed, research by Silns and Mulford (2002), shows that student outcomes are more likely to improve when there is evidence of distributed leadership in the school and when teachers are empowered to have control over their individual areas of interest.

**Leadership in SFCC**

Keedy (1993), notes that a range of leadership styles was most effective in SFCC and that no single leadership approach worked in every situation. The lack of uniformity in leadership styles in SFCC is also noted by Harris and Chapman (2002) and reinforced by Muijs et.al (2010), finding that certain approaches may be more suited to specific contexts. Dodman (2014) asserts that: “leadership that simultaneously leads a school forward while distributing power throughout the faculty is considered the path to creating not only a successful school as measured by achievement tests but also a learning organization”. (p.56)
In 2000, the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in England chose eight schools for a study which became known as the Octet Project. The schools were all categorised as SFCC. The purpose was to test the notion that, with the right kind of support and challenge, even these so-called ‘schools on the edge’, could turn failure into success (MacBeath et al., 2007).

In 2000, a symposium including leading academics and leaders of ‘high-performing, high poverty’ schools in the United States also found that leadership seemed to make the difference in making these schools ‘high performing’ (Bell, 2001).

Hattie (2009) asserts that there are at least two major forms of leadership — instructional and transformational. He describes the differences thus:

Instructional leadership refers to those principals who have their major focus on creating a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high teacher expectations for teachers and students. Transformational leadership refers to those principals who engage with their teaching staff in ways inspire them to new levels of energy, commitment, and moral purpose such that they work collaboratively to overcome challenges and reach ambitious goals. (p.83)

Hopkins (2001), also sees instructional and transformational leadership practices as being central to improvement in SFCC.

While the above may describe the predominant forms of leadership occurring in contemporary educational settings, individual leaders bring with them a particular style and interpretation of the principal’s role to the task of leading a school. This observation is supported by Maden and Hillman’s (1993)
study found that there was not one singular leadership style evident in the improving SFCC they researched. Leithwood and Riehl (2004) identified direction setting, the development of people and redesigning the organization as being three core leadership practices central to school success regardless of context. However, Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki & Giles’ (2005) study of seven high-needs schools in the United States could not determine whether these core practices alone affected school performance. On this, Jacobson et.al (2005) commented:

We found that the ways in which these practices emerged and how they interrelated over time was neither linear nor formulaic. Each principal, in his or her own fashion, had to constantly recalibrate the contextual conditions and constraints the school confronted and then adapt their core practices to create the conditions necessary to enable school improvement. (p.611)

In another study of eight disadvantaged Victorian schools that were found to be out-performing similar schools academically, the researchers found that each of the schools had strong leadership with a principal who had a clear vision and direction for the school and who spread leadership throughout the school (Zbar, Kimber et.al;2009). It is apparent then, that studies connected with leadership in SFCC, do not present unanimous agreement as to which, if any, style of leadership is best suited to such schools. However, there appears to be some agreement amongst researchers that the way in which school leaders exert their influence tends to be dependent upon where their school sits on a trajectory of improvement. The successful leader, then, is
one who is attuned to the needs of the school and has a suite of strategies available to them that match his/her school's needs at that time.

**Contextualised leadership**

The body of research on leadership in SFCC broadly agrees with the notion that the style of leadership needed to drive improvement in these schools is dependent on contextual factors, both external and internal. This is supported by Hallinger and Heck (2010) who observe:

… from the perspective of leadership practice, the research supports the view that school improvement leadership is highly contextualised. The type of leadership exercised by the principal and the school’s leadership team must be linked both to the school’s profile of learning results and improvement capacity at any point in time. (p.106)

A study by Klar and Brewer (2013) reinforces this idea by noting the importance of school leaders in understanding the nuances of the contexts in which they work. Chapman and Harris (2004) express the view that the relationship between school context and differentiated approaches to school improvement is an important but neglected area which requires further investigation. Clarke and O’Donoghue (2016 a) note the importance of the school leader in being able to ‘read’ the complexities of context in order to determine the priorities of his or her school. The literature available on the subject to date reflects this but there is some agreement amongst authors on effective strategies that, when implemented, bring about notable change and improvement.
Styles of leadership

According to research examined by Goleman (2000), there are essentially six distinct types of leadership which operate within the business world, each with their own distinct styles and with each delivering a unique impact on the working atmosphere of the organization in which they are found. They vary from the authoritative to the collaborative and deliver outcomes which vary from the positive to the negative. In the current context of decentralization, with schools managing human resources and finances at the micro level, it is possible to see similarities between business and educational leadership styles. As previously acknowledged, how a school leader determines the style of leadership he/she uses will depend on the individual’s interpretation of the school’s prevalent contextual issues at any particular time. For example, a school in difficulty, at the beginning of an improvement program, may need firm directed leadership at the outset leading to a more democratic approach as it ‘moves and improves’. Chapman, (2003), Muijs et al., 2004). Gray (2000), reports on research conducted in England that shows that authoritarian styles of leadership are most prevalent in schools which have been placed in ‘special measures’(whereby the school has been inspected and is on a managed improvement plan) or experiencing serious weakness, particularly in the early stages of improvement. Harris (2002) reports that head teachers adopt leadership practices to match the school’s stage of development. There is an assumption here that principals have sufficient emotional intelligence to grasp the core issues impacting upon the school and to tackle each issue by appropriately, matching their actions to the situation.
The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is the organization responsible for monitoring and inspecting schools in England. In a report this authority produced titled *Twenty outstanding primary schools: Excelling against the odds* (2009), transformational leadership is discussed as being an approach which is underpinned by the head teacher’s moral purpose. It states that the beliefs of these head teachers include that all children can achieve high standards; that all teachers can teach to high standards; that high expectations are held of students; that early intervention is essential (for students with learning difficulties); that teachers must be learning all the time and engaging in self-reflective practices (Ofsted, 2009). The literature tends to discuss strategies for improvement that focus mainly on the internal operations of schools, for example, staff development and teaching and learning programs.

**Key strategies linked to successful leadership of SFCC**

The literature suggests that effective school leaders develop a shared sense of purpose and direction within their schools. This purpose is often referred to as 'moral purpose'. On this Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher (2005) make the comment that, “moral purpose in educational change is about improving society through improving educational systems and thus the learning of all citizens. In education, moral purpose involves committing to raise the bar and close the gap in student achievement”. (p.54)

Successful leadership in SFCC is characterized by the principal having the ability to share key messages with staff and students alike. These messages include the principal’s vision for the school, expectations of staff and students and their belief that every child can learn and is entitled to a quality
education (Harris, 2002). Mulford, Kendall, Ewington, Kendall and Silins (2007) report from a survey of leadership in Tasmanian schools that many principals who work in high-poverty communities have come from a similar background and are committed to making a difference to the young people who live in them. This would undoubtedly strengthen the individual sense of moral purpose brought to the role of principal. In line with this, Harris (2002) further reports that effective leadership practices in SFCC are underpinned by the principal’s set of personal and professional values which places human before organizational needs.

Effective leadership of schools can influence the academic achievement of pupils. Hallinger and Heck (1998) comment that this influence can account for up to a quarter of school-level variance in student achievement, Whilst Reynolds et al. (2006) report that 8–15% in attainment difference between schools is dependent on what they actually ‘do’, that is, their internal conditions. Whilst this is encouraging, it should be noted that ‘effective leadership’ is not just a measure of a principal’s ability to raise his or her school’s academic achievement. As Levin (2006) states, “many schools that are struggling under very difficult conditions with rather poor results are nonetheless staffed by some amazing educators whose efforts to make a difference are nothing short of inspiring” (p.401). It is this ‘making a difference’ to the lives of students and the way in which principals strive to foster the conditions that will support this ‘difference’ that is central to their leadership of SFCC.
In various studies which examine the operations of SFCC, common elements have been identified which have led to or tend toward school improvement. These include;

- goal and vision setting,
- strong focus on teaching and learning,
- setting of high standards and expectations for staff and students,
- creation of a positive school culture which includes building a sense of community and establishing positive relationships amongst all stakeholders,
- continual professional development of staff,
- leadership.

These common elements will now be examined in turn.

**Goal and vision setting**

Hallinger and Heck (1998) draw a distinction between the way in which transformational and instructional leaders place emphasis on goal and vision setting but nevertheless recognise its importance with regard to school improvement. As mentioned above there are often low expectations in the achievement of students in SFCC and when faced with this, principals may generate a belief in a culture of improvement and set out to do this by setting clear expectations with students and staff and sharing a vision of improvement (Chapman & Harris, 2004). West, Ainscow, & Stanford (2005), Muijs et al. (2004), Bell (2001) and Day (2005) also point towards high expectations of student achievement and staff performance as being evident in schools whose leaders are aiming for improvement.
Focus on teaching and learning

In examining a study of eight schools Harris et al. (2006) found that a focus on teaching and learning was identified as the singular most important factor in raising pupil achievement. Harris (2006) reports that principals involved in the Octet project held a belief in the notion that all students had the capacity to learn, and dispelled the notion of ‘cultural deficit’. Potter and Reynolds (2002) discuss the importance of schools understanding that they can improve and that every individual in the school has a contribution to make in regard to this improvement.

As noted above, teachers in SFCC can develop apathy toward their work if they believe that the factors impairing student achievement are outside their control. Schools in disadvantaged communities are often exposed to programs such as those designed to support children’s social and emotional development, and support programs in literacy and numeracy. These can erode the time available for the delivery of the day-to-day curriculum. On this Chapman and Harris (2004) observe that:

The demands of numerous initiatives can prove to be counter-productive in securing school improvement, particularly in schools where there are additional problems of social disadvantage. One way of rationalizing and focussing improvement efforts is to locate them strictly in the area of teaching and learning. (p.222)

There are obvious links between a focus on teaching and learning with staff professional development, the establishment of positive relationships, and developing a positive school culture. Importantly, teaching practices need to match the needs of students. Hopkins et al. (1996) states that this focus on
teaching and learning can be advanced by training staff in particular teaching methods from the start of a school improvement effort.

Research from Ledoux and Overmaat (as cited in Muijs et al., 2004, p.154) shows that students in lower socio-economic areas require more structure and more reinforcement from the teacher, the curriculum delivered in a smaller amount, and rapid feedback. Bell (2001) also points to the teaching of specific skills and strategies as being key in meeting the requirements of students in SFCC. In a study of leadership in 34 English secondary schools, West et al. (2005) found that the focus on improving teaching and learning is seen by many principals as also being related to the needs of the staff. This means that staff roles and responsibilities are redefined along with operational aspects of the school in order to cater for this heightened teaching and learning focus.

High standards and expectations

As already described in this chapter, the expectations that teachers have of their students in schools in challenging circumstances can be low (Khupe, Balkwill, Osman and Cameron, 2013). The reasons for this vary, but include a sense that the factors affecting students’ achievement are outside of the teacher’s control. Accepting mediocrity leads to more of the same and little will change unless the bar is raised. Similarly, leaders need to highlight the expectations they have of staff in advancing an improvement agenda. For example, Chapman and Harris (2004) found that principals in improving SFCC ‘talked up’ the school, set clear expectations, encouraged respect for others and imparted a sense of urgency for maintaining high academic standards and exerted pressure upon staff and students to excel (p.224).
Works by Lein, Johnson and Ragland (1996) and Montgomery, Rossi, Legters, McDill, Partland and Stringfield (1993) as well as research by Gurr et al., (2014) all note that high expectations are important to student achievement and this is more likely to be the case in low Socio-Economic-Status (SES) schools.

Developing a positive school culture and sense of community

School culture has been identified in a number of studies as being important to school improvement efforts (Muijs et al., 2004; West et al., 2005; Harris, 2002; MacBeath et al., 2007). There are several intertwined elements which make up the culture of the school. These include the sense of community developed by staff and students and further, the involvement of the broader community in the work of the school. Harris (2002) reports on an interconnectedness of home, school and community and cites the way in which principals involve themselves in the local community, including attending community events and inviting views and opinions from a variety of stakeholders. Flessa and Gallagher-Mackay (2010) remark that involvement by parents in schools that have had a history of limited positive interactions will require multiple strategies for formal and informal involvement on a range of topics. Moving to the school context, the term ‘community’ is often aligned with the professional work of teachers and administrators with some schools striving to build a ‘professional learning community’ often typified by the presence of collaborative and collegiate work groups. This also links in with particular leadership styles that have a focus on collaborative and/or distributed leadership. In this connection, Muijs and Harris (2003) find that teacher leadership is particularly powerful
as it directly contributes to school effectiveness, improvement and development.

**Professional development of staff**

Building a professional learning community within a school requires staff to be involved in continuous professional development, which either caters to the particular internal needs or facilitates out of school initiatives and developments (for example, curriculum reform) within the school (Chapman & Harris, 2004). The building of such communities requires heavy investment in leadership by the principal and involves such organisational matters as timetable structuring to enable collaborative meeting times and the expenditure of monies on programs and teacher relief. Muijs et al. (2004) find that professional learning communities continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn. This requires administrators to allow teacher self-direction with regard to their professional learning at the same time as effecting a form of quality control or scrutiny over it, thus ensuring coherence with school direction. However, there is also a need for professional learning to cater for individual needs. As Harris (2004) reports, the emphasis placed on continuing development of staff by principals tends to entail a recognition that teachers are their most important resource.

**Leadership**

While the literature does not point to one particular form of leadership as best suited to SFCC, there is recurrent identification of transformational leadership as being evident in schools working through so called ‘turn around’ or improvement strategies. Similarly, examples of distributed, shared and collaborative leadership are common in these schools. Harris
(2010) argues that highly creative approaches to tackling complex problems are needed in difficult schools and this cannot be undertaken by one individual alone and that also highly effective principals tend to invest in the leadership of others. Bearing this in mind, Potter, Reynolds and Chapman (2002), state that leadership in improving schools is often described as transformational, seeking to satisfy higher needs and engage the full person of the follower whilst Silins (1994). found that transformational leadership produced significant effects on teacher perceived reform processes and school, program and student outcomes. A contrasting model of transactional leadership produced much less evident effects.

Conclusion

Whist there are various definitions that describe SFCC, the difficulties and challenges in these schools can vary enormously. In this connection Reynolds et.al (2006) have suggested that:

The emerging research evidence concerning improving schools in difficult contexts demonstrates that each school within this grouping has a unique organisational mix of cultural typology, improvement trajectory and level of effectiveness. Unlike effective schools, which have been shown to exhibit similar characteristics, schools in the low-performing grouping may look homogenous but in practice exhibit very different characteristics.

(p.437)

There is agreement that improvement strategies must take account of school context whilst building capacity internally for change (Reynolds et al., 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). There has not, however, been much done in
identifying or generating those particular strategies needed to progress this improvement. Chapman and Harris (2004), state that the issue of the relationship between school leadership and school context is an important one requiring more examination. Harris and Thomson (2006) assert that more research is needed around the practices of other leaders (for example, district personnel and parents) as well as the relationships between principals and parents and other external organisations in order to examine the impact of them on the progression of school improvement.

In conclusion, this review of the literature reveals that whilst certain leadership strategies have indeed led to improvement in some challenging schools, it is not clear which elements of school context influence the work of principals in pursuing school improvement. As mentioned above, most of the strategies employed tend to focus on the internal practices and culture of the school. The question remains, however, as to how external contextual factors influence the decision making of principals as they set about to ‘improve’ their schools. This gap in the existing literature was the impetus for this study’s central research question which is: How do effective principals deal with the distinctive challenges in SFCC?
CHAPTER THREE
DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the design and methodology framing the qualitative study reported here. The chapter is structured in four main sections. Firstly, the chapter outlines the chosen methodology and the rationale for its use. Secondly the selection process of participants is discussed. Thirdly, the main data collection methods used in the study are detailed as well as the methods used to analyse the data. Finally, the trustworthiness of the study is considered.

The methodology of the study

The main aim of this study was to develop theory about how the actions of school principals were influenced by the environments in which they work. The particular focus of the study is to understand how individual principals make sense of this environment and translate this understanding into describable actions as they go about their work as school leaders.

In order to gain rich insights into the work of principals in SFCC, case studies were investigated at those schools led by the four participants. This was done to ensure broad data collection was used for highlighting similarities between the cases and therefore allowing some transferability of findings. According to Punch (2005), a case study 'aims to understand the case in depth, and its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context' (p.144). Robson (as cited in Cohen et.al, 2007, p.253) states that case studies ‘opt for an analytic rather than a statistical generalization’ and help to develop a theory which can assist researchers to understand other similar cases, phenomena or situations. For the purpose of this research, the
case constitutes the principal of an individual school and not the school itself. In particular, this study can be described as a collective case study as it involves four participants. This type of study aims ‘to learn more about the phenomenon, population or general condition’ (Punch, 2005, p.144) of the object of study, which, as it relates to the investigation reported here, is on how the principals’ work is shaped by his/her particular school context.

Theoretical approach

This qualitative research project was framed by the interpretivist paradigm since, ‘interpretivists examine the meanings that phenomena have for people in their everyday settings’ (O’Donoghue, 2007, p.17). Further, the study focuses on ‘how people define events or reality’ and ‘how they act in relation to their beliefs’ (Chenitz & Swanson, as cited in O’Donoghue, 2007, p.17). This study is also informed by the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective. On this, Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds (1975) state that this perspective focuses on minds and meanings which characterize human society and that it is about how one interacts with others which gives this meaning. In particular it is stated that, “in the interactionist image, the behaviour of men and women is ‘caused’ not so much by forces within themselves…but by what lies in between, a reflective and socially derived interpretation of the internal and external stimuli that are present”. This theoretical perspective was best suited to the study here given that the concern of the research was with gaining understanding of how principals interact with the stimuli around them, including students, teachers and parents, and how those interactions influenced their actions as leaders.
Selection of participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants, as this strategy involves ‘the deliberate seeking out of participants with particular characteristics, according to the needs of the developing analysis and emerging theory’ (Morse, 2004, p.885). Accordingly, four participants were chosen for the study on the basis that they met the criteria described in Chapter 1 used to define SFCC in Western Australia. To meet the criteria this meant that the schools in which the principals worked had achieved at least one standard deviation above the norm for at least one NAPLAN assessment in 2011, an SEI rating of less than 93, and were included in the Western Australian Department of Education’s MTP for difficult or hard-to- staff schools. At the time of the study, the participants, two male and two female, had all been employed by the Department of Education for over twenty years, with a significant portion of this time spent in leadership positions.

Ethical protocols

In accordance with the nature of the study, whereby participants divulged personal information and also discussed particular issues with their staff and community members, it was necessary to follow ethical protocols. The study was approved by the University’s Human Research and Ethics Committee and as part of the requirements for approval, participants were provided with clear information about the nature of the research. Each participant gave signed formal consent to participate in the study. As the research was undertaken on Department of Education school sites, it was also necessary to seek approval and authorisation from the Department to conduct the study. Any references to people or place names were removed from the written
transcripts. Each of the participants was assigned an identifier code, for example, case one is referred to as PR1.

Data collection
In keeping with the qualitative nature of the study, three methods of data collection were employed: namely semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observation. O’Donoghue (2007) argues that a researcher operating within the interpretivist paradigm “is concerned with revealing the perspectives behind empirical observations, the actions people take in light of their perspectives and the patterns which develop through the interaction of perspectives and actions over particular periods of time.” (p.20)

Semi – structured interviews
Data were collected by means of two individual, semi-structured interviews of an hour in duration which the researcher conducted at the four participants’ (PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4) schools. The first round of interviews sought to gather information about the school in which the principals work with regard to their community contexts as well as their professional experience. This discussion about community context focused on the climate of the school in terms of student, staff and parent harmony. It also included gaining information on the general background of the student population, including parent circumstances. Matters covered in the interview included parent employment, financial hardship, language background and marital status. Other school background information including stability and experience of teaching staff was also discussed.
The second round of interviews focused specifically on the work of the principals in their respective schools. In particular, the questions asked were:

(i) What are the distinctive challenges encountered in your work as the principal of this school?

(ii) What are the specific issues relevant to this school’s school context which influence your work?

(iii) What strategies do you (as the principal) employ to deal with these challenges in this school?

(iv) How do you know that the strategies employed are contributing to the success of your school?

Document analysis

Document analysis was also undertaken to assist in the generation of emergent themes from the research. Documents examined included an information booklet outlining all the programs run in each of the four schools. Documents such as this supported and, in some cases reinforced information from the recorded participant interviews. Other documents analysed across the four schools included those dealing with behaviour management, school dress code and parent information booklets. These documents were analysed in the same way as the interview transcripts using the open coding technique described below. These policy documents were grounded in the ‘real world’ and were used to develop insights relevant to the research question. Furthermore, academic performance data were collected from the Western Australian Department of Education’s Schools Online website.
Observation

Max Van Manen (1990) identifies ways of investigating experience as we live it, with observation being one of these. Further, he defines observation as being a way of entering the life-world of persons as both a participant and an observer. Each of the participants’ schools was visited by the researcher twice over a six-month period in 2013, with informal observations being made of the overall physical environment and layout of the school as well as the surrounding community. The researcher took field notes which informed the descriptions of the school’s context. This process sensitised the researcher to the complexities of the context of the school in question.

Data analysis

The data generated from the processes described above were interpreted and analysed using a grounded theory approach, as this method of analysis generates theory from the data collected (Punch, 2005). It is primarily an inductive approach to data gathering and analysis (O’Donoghue, 2007) and is suitable for the purpose of this study as it is ‘oriented to developing concepts, insights and understandings from patterns in the data rather than collecting data to preconceived models, hypotheses or theories’ (Taylor and Bogdan cited in O’Donoghue, 2007, p.58).

Subsequently, the analysis of the data was undertaken through the use of open coding techniques in order to identify dominant themes emerging from the research.
Open coding

Open coding is the process of ‘breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising data’ (Strauss & Corbin, as cited in O’Donoghue, 2007, p.91). According to open coding, each idea in the data is given a label with similar ideas given the same label. Once the interviews had been transcribed by the researcher, the researcher then identified concepts to label in order to break the data down into manageable units which were then compared and contrasted against data recorded against each of the participants. The substantial themes emerging from this process were identified as: moral purpose, community connection and, relationships and trust.

The open coding of data began with the transcription of the electronically recorded participant interviews. Each of the transcripts was read together several times in order to establish basic descriptive codes. From these descriptive codes, concept indicators were developed and then applied to the transcripts to formulate the substantial themes mentioned above.

By way of illustration, the following is an example of the open coding which led to the emergence of the theme ‘moral purpose’. During one interview, PR4 made the following statements when discussing her work at the school.

Figure 1: Excerpt from PR4 interview transcript 26/11/2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept Indicators</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having positive expectations</td>
<td>The other thing that was really important to me was high expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying purpose</td>
<td>You would have to have a real clear understanding of your own moral purpose to work within a community like [the schools].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting stakeholders</td>
<td>It’s just about building their confidence because a lot of these parents lack confidence and so building their confidence – being able to walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification of needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

36
into the school and talk with us…

…getting to school at 7:30am because they wouldn’t get fed the night before. So it’s the basic requirements — you have to cross the line — you have to shift the fence to make sure that the kids are looked after.

The other thing I needed to do was to support them in crisis. Because the school had a lot of crisis points — behaviour, parent dysfunction. So staff needed to know I was there, right behind them.

The indicators used to generate the concept of moral purpose from transcripts and documents comprised high or positive expectations (of students or staff), attributing purpose to work and the articulation of a variety of support given to various stakeholders.

Trustworthiness of the study

Guba and Lincoln (cited in Scott & Morrison, 2005, p.254), describe several criteria to determine the validity of interpretivist research. These include confirming the credibility and conformability of the data. In particular, this is to confirm whether the analysis grounded in the data is logical and of high quality (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Several devices were employed to ensure that the data collected from the study were reliable and accurate. These devices included member checking, whereby participants were asked to read and validate interview transcripts verifying that they were accurate interpretations of that which was recorded at interview. The interview transcripts were analysed alongside field notes of observations made by the researcher. Documents supplied to the researcher by participants or sourced from the internet also assisted in data triangulation. Data triangulation was undertaken whereby the various sources
of data (field notes and observations, documents and interview transcripts) were read together in order, as Bui (2009, p.185) states, to confirm and corroborate the findings between data sources to provide a holistic picture of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the design and methodology used to investigate principals’ insights into their work in challenging schools. In doing so, it has described the theoretical perspectives by which the research was framed, the ways in which data were collected and the procedure used to analyse the data. The trustworthiness of the study was also discussed.

The following chapter now describes the four cases included in the study.
CHAPTER FOUR
DESCRIPTION OF THE CASES

Introduction

This chapter presents a contextual description of the Western Australian Department of Education and outlines the participants’ background and experience as well as particular contextual matters including community engagement, NAPLAN data and student behaviour. This chapter is the precursor to the description of the findings in Chapter 5 and provides important information in relation to the personal traits of each of the cases in the study. These traits are pertinent to the ways in which leadership practices are evidenced within the given settings.

Western Australian Department of Education

The Western Australian Department of Education is the state government agency responsible for the delivery of public education in Western Australia. In 2012/13 there were over 275 000 students enrolled in 830 schools. These schools are spread across a vast area and are found in some of the most diversified geographical locations in Australia.

Previously organised into 22 districts, a restructure occurred in 2010 resulting in the districts being collapsed with 8 new ‘regions’ taking their place. Simultaneously, schools were placed into networks with each being allocated funding and access to some services traditionally provided by district offices. This change agenda was part of the Liberal – National Coalition state election platform in 2008 reflecting a desire to promote greater autonomy within the state school system.
In Western Australia, as a sub-group, metropolitan Perth schools are also diversified. The Perth Metropolitan area extends from Joondalup in the North to Mandurah in the South and East to Mundaring (Regional Development & Lands, 2013). The population of metropolitan Perth is approximately 1.74 million people — 74% of the state’s total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Within the metropolitan area there are 334 primary schools equally divided between the North and South Metropolitan Education Regions. Typically, schools are defined by their SEI, which is strongly linked to the contextual factors of the local area. In general, the range of SEI across metro schools is 78–115 with 78 being low.

There are 75 schools in the metropolitan area which are part of the Department of Education’s MTP. These schools are also known as ‘difficult to staff schools’. Two thirds of these schools are located in the South Metropolitan Education Region with the remaining one third located in the North Metropolitan Education Region, (Department of Education, 2013a).

The cases

It will be recalled that the term ‘case’ refers to the principal as it is his or her work which is the primary focus of this study. At the time of the study each of the four participants were principals of government primary schools located in the South Metropolitan Education Region as defined by The Department of Education Western Australia.

Case one: Overview

PR1 is the principal of a Level 5 primary school located within the south east corridor of the Perth metropolitan area. The SEI of the school is 88.96
(ICSEA value 866) with an enrolment of around 440 students from kindergarten to year 7. The school commenced operation as an independent public school (IPS)\(^6\) in 2010. The administration team comprises the principal and 3 deputy principals with a combined full time equivalent (FTE) of 3.40. There has been a significant growth trend in student numbers with the school population almost doubling in the past six years. The school experiences a high level of student transience with over 160 students either enrolling in or leaving the school in 2012. Some of these students have left then re-entered the school on more than one occasion.

Opening in 1970, the school is of the cluster variety, with the original buildings being a series of classroom blocks and the classrooms themselves opening onto common areas. Several additional buildings have been constructed, the most recent as a result of federal funding from the federal government’s Building the Education Revolution BER initiative. The school presents well, and neat and attractive gardens complement the well-kept facilities.

The student population is drawn from a range of cultural backgrounds, with a significant enrolment (fifty five) of Indigenous students. Other well represented groups include New Zealanders, Africans, and Indonesians. Additionally, there are several families from Middle Eastern countries including Afghanistan and Egypt. Some members of these represented groups entered the country with refugee status.

Parents of students participate in a variety of work types with blue-collar, low-skill occupations predominating. Some parents are employed as para-professionals, with some engaged in various ‘work for the dole’ (welfare

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\(^6\) The Independent Public Schools initiative was introduced by the Liberal coalition government when they won government in 2009. IPS schools have flexibilities around staffing and programs offered and are governed by a school board.
payment) schemes. Some parents have no form of employment and rely upon various government funded pensions and benefits.

Community engagement
The school offers a number of programs designed to support students and their families. These are presented in the context of what the school describes as a ‘full service model’. These programs include a breakfast club, an after-school sports program, and a 3-year-old pre-school program. Services for parents include access to counselling and family support programs, access to technology through basic courses, adult literacy and numeracy tutoring programs and access to an art and craft facility.

NAPLAN data
In 2011 the school recorded a result at an ‘above expected’ level ( > 1 standard deviation above expected) in one of fifteen of the literacy and numeracy assessments, eleven results of ‘at expected level’ (within 1 standard deviation of the expected level) and 3 results which were ‘below expected’ (> 1 standard deviation below expected).

Attendance
The rate of students classified as attending regularly in the first semester of 2012 was 89.6% which was slightly below the state public school average of 92.3%
Behaviour

The principal describes the school climate as it relates to student behaviour as ‘quite settled’, noting that this fluctuates and can be influenced by negative incidents occurring in the community. On her commencement at the school in 2005, PR1 described the climate as almost dangerous, and stated that she did not feel safe. Much work has been done implementing behaviour management approaches, including educating staff and parents about the school’s expectations with regard to both parent and student conduct including advice on how parents can best approach the school when they are concerned about something which has occurred at school.

PRI experience and background

PR1 has over twenty years’ experience as both a teacher and administrator and has been in her current role for 8 years. Her experience includes working in rural Western Australia, Africa and New Zealand. Within Western Australia, PR1 has worked extensively in education support contexts, a district high school, and has had several administrative roles in schools with low SEI ratings. PR1 cites working in low SEI schools as her preference. There was a complete change of administrators at the school when PR1 commenced, with both deputy principals and the principal vacating their positions simultaneously. Historically, there has been a high staff turnover at the school, and PR1 described this as adding to the pressures of an already ‘huge’ workload. PR1 cites her core education philosophy as being centred on the belief that all students can learn and achieve. PR1 brings strong moral purpose to the work she does in the school and has high expectations of
teachers, noting that a key challenge has been developing shared vision and beliefs amongst the staff.

Case two: Overview

PR2 is the principal of a Level 5 primary school also located within the south east corridor of the Perth metropolitan area. The SEI of the school is 92.66 (ICSEA value 925), with an enrolment of around 500 students from kindergarten to year 7. The administration team consists of a principal and two deputy principals, with a combined FTE of 3.0. In the past five years the school has experienced nearly 20% enrolment growth. The school opened in 1986 and comprises the three original teaching blocks, which are complemented by a new early childhood centre and science and art rooms. These newer buildings were funded by federal funding under the BER initiative. The gardens are extensive and extremely well maintained, with the gardener taking an active role in environmental programs operating in the school. The school has also put a considerable amount of its own funds towards minor works projects to enhance and upgrade facilities.

A culturally diverse student population is evident, with around thirty-five different ethnic groups represented. Approximately 10% of the students are Indigenous. Parent employment is mainly blue-collar, with some fly-in- fly-out (FIFO) mine workers represented. There is also a large number of families dependent on government-funded pensions and benefits.

Community engagement

A school liaison officer is employed 2 days per week to assist with supporting and inducting new students and families into the school. There is
a strong focus on pastoral care programs which are mainly student focused; however, referrals to outside agencies are often made and the school maintains a strong link with the Department for Child Protection. A breakfast program operates 3 days per week.

A core group of parents is involved in mainly operational matters, including running the canteen and uniform shop and giving support with such events as sports carnivals and fundraisers. There is lesser engagement by parents in the school governance domain, including the School Council and other committees.

**NAPLAN data**

In 2011, the school recorded results at an ‘above expected’ level ( > 1 standard deviation above expected) in 5 of 15 of the literacy and numeracy assessments, 8 results of ‘at expected level’ (within 1 standard deviation of the expected level) and 2 results which were ‘below expected’ (> 1 standard deviation below expected). The school is part of the Improving Literacy and Numeracy National Partnerships (ILNNP) program, which provides federal funding for the implementation of school based strategies. The school has used a large portion of this funding to employ a specialist numeracy teacher for the past two years.

**Attendance**

The rate of students classified as attending school regularly in the first semester of 2012 was 91.7% which was slightly below the state public school average of 92.3%.
**Behaviour**

The principal described 2012 as being a particularly difficult year, with a small number of students causing the greatest proportion of negative behaviour. One of these students was suspended thirty times. Coupled with this, 7 prohibition orders\(^7\) were issued in 2012 against parents who displayed negative behaviours including the use of threatening and offensive language, the consumption of alcohol on school grounds, and refusal to leave the premises. Nineteen critical incidents\(^8\) were recorded in 2012; however, most of these were as a result of incidents occurring outside of the school grounds, which nevertheless had an impact on the operation of the school. These incidents included two violent street brawls involving large numbers of people.

**PR2 experience and background**

PR2 has been employed in the Department of Education for forty-two years. He has extensive experience as both a teacher and an administrator working in a variety of educational settings, mainly in low SEI schools, including sixteen years in rural Western Australia. He has been in his current position for the past 6 years. PR2 discloses that his role is both challenging and rewarding and describes his school as being a wonderful environment to work in. PR2 identifies that establishing strong relationships between staff, students and parents is key to building the strong foundations necessary to promote student learning. This belief underpins the school’s foci on the pastoral care programs in operation. PR2 believes such programs are

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\(^7\) A prohibition order can be issued by the principal, preventing a person from entering the school grounds for a period of up to sixty days.

\(^8\) A critical incident report is made to central and regional office when the matter is of a serious nature.
essential in order that all students are given the opportunity to reach their full individual potential as learners, even when many of them are living in dysfunctional home circumstances.

*Case three: Overview*

PR3 is the principal of a Level 4 primary school similarly located within the south east corridor of the Perth metropolitan area. The SEI of the school is 92.68 (ICSEA value 906), with an enrolment of approximately 220 students from kindergarten to year 7. The school population is culturally diverse, with around forty nationalities represented. There are several refugee families at the school, as well as children of 457 Visa holders. There are approximately 12 Indigenous students at the school representing around 5% of the total enrolments. This figure has fallen from between 10-12% in 2008. Transience accounts for fluctuations in the school population of around twenty students per year. The administration team consists of the principal and one deputy principal. The school opened in 1979 and is built in the cluster style, with classrooms which can open into one another for collaborative work. A new undercover area incorporating a canteen, music and art room was recently completed as part of the federal government’s BER initiative. The gardens are neat and well cared for. Parent employment is mainly blue-collar. There is a high number of families dependent on government-funded pensions and benefits. The school is located within a high rental area and the principal cites rising rents as a reason for some families having to leave the area, thus impacting on the school’s enrolment figures which have declined in the past 5 years.

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9 A 457 visa allows the holder to work in Australia for a specific time period.
Community engagement

PR3 describes the parent body as being fairly supportive, in a passive rather than an active manner, with a small group of parents involved in the parents and citizens association. The principal explains that poverty affects parental ability to provide opportunities for their children, and this has been the main driver for the implementation of the ‘Passport Program’. This program is funded by the school and is a parent incentive scheme. Parents are able to earn points by volunteering in the school. These points are assigned a monetary value which can be used to purchase food from the canteen and uniforms, and can also be put towards other costs such as excursions. While the school does not offer a breakfast program, it does provide food on an individual needs basis when a child has no lunch or has not had breakfast. Cheap second-hand uniforms are also sold for as little as two dollars. There is a focus on social and emotional programs to support the belief that enabling students to build relationships will lead to better interactions amongst the school community. A promoting alternative thinking strategies (PATHS) program is also in place to teach social skills explicitly.

NAPLAN data

In 2011 the school recorded results at an ‘above expected’ level ( > 1 standard deviation above expected) in 1 of 15 of the literacy and numeracy assessments and 14 results of ‘at expected level’(within 1 standard deviation of the expected level). There were no results categorised as ‘below expected’ (> 1 standard deviation below expected). The school is part of the Improving Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership (ILNNP) program which provides federal funding for the implementation of school-based strategies.
The school has been using these funds to employ specialist literacy and numeracy teachers to target students in years 2, 4 and 6.

**Attendance**

The rate of students classified as attending school regularly in the first semester of 2012 was 92.5% which was slightly above the state public school average of 92.3%.

**Behaviour**

PR3 describes student behaviour as being ‘terrible’ when he initially arrived at the school, with frequent physical altercations occurring between students. PR3 has a strong belief that student behaviour issues affect student learning which led him to initiate teacher involvement in the classroom management strategies (CMS)\(^{10}\) program and to develop a new behaviour management policy with staff.

Two prohibition orders have been issued in the past 5 years against parents displaying threatening and aggressive behaviour whilst on the school grounds. PR3 reports that student behaviour is now much less of an issue than it had been. He is proactive in maintaining a highly visible presence within the school and, when possible, is on playground duty at every break time.

**PR3 Experience and background**

PR3 has been with the Department of Education for twenty-five years and has thirteen years’ experience as an administrator in a diverse range of

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\(^{10}\) The Classroom Management Strategies program (CMS) is centred around low-key approaches to behaviour management.
settings, including regional Western Australia. He has held his current position for the past 5 years.

PR3 sees problems around parental poverty as being one of the key challenges the school faces in meeting the needs of its students. This factor is central to school planning in terms of the programs offered to students, which are mainly centred on building resilience and improving individual impulse control. These programs include teaching students strategies to use when faced with incidences of bullying, and coping techniques that are passive rather than aggressive. Many of the students’ parents speak English as a second language and have come from relatively impoverished backgrounds. PR3 states that a large number of these parents are aspirational in expressing the hopes they have for their children’s future, wishing them to experience a better upbringing and quality of lives than they themselves did.

Case four: Overview

PR4 is the principal of a Level 4 primary school again located within the south east corridor of the Perth metropolitan area. The SEI of the school is 95.0 (ICSEA value 913), with an enrolment of approximately 230 students from kindergarten to year 7. Roughly 50% of the students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and represent diverse cultural backgrounds. Indigenous students account for a further 20% of the enrolment. Total student numbers have risen by 30% over the past 5 years. The school experiences a relatively high transience rate with many families living in short-term accommodation. This situation has improved over recent years. The administration team consists of the principal and one deputy principal. The school opened in 1952 and is built in a traditional style, with classrooms
grouped together in threes with a common wet area. The rooms can open into one another for collaborative work. A new undercover area with a canteen was recently built with funding from the federal government’s BER initiative. While the gardens are neat, the buildings require some attention to improve their aesthetic appeal.

Many parents at the school are unemployed and many families are reliant on various government allowances and pensions. There are a few full-fee paying students from families holding different types of temporary visas. A number of these families have no vehicles and this has an impact on student attendance and punctuality. There are several large blocks of units located around the school and, until recently, several rows of semi-detached housing.

Community engagement

PR4 describes parent engagement with the school as being ‘fantastic’ and completely different from when she arrived. This turnaround has been attributed to the school offering programs and holding events that recognize cultural difference among the local community. These include running an Indonesian dance program and an African ‘drumbeat’ music program, observing significant religious events such as Ramadan, and hosting a well-organized and resourced National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) day. Many programs encourage parent participation at the school and a ‘Passport Program’ is in place through which parents can earn points towards paying for uniforms, excursions and other school expenses. The school offers a breakfast program to meet the physical (and nutritional) needs of the children, and to assist students in becoming settled and ready for classes. The school sees itself as the centre of the community,
with PR4 stating that ‘while they (the school community) are many they are one’, and the theme of the school as constituting a ‘family’ is part of the school’s philosophical approach.

**NAPLAN data**

In 2011 the school recorded results at an ‘above expected’ level (> 1 standard deviation above expected) in 1 of 15 of the literacy and numeracy assessments, with 13 results of ‘at expected level’ (within 1 standard deviation of the expected level). There was one result categorised as ‘below expected’ (> 1 standard deviation below expected). The school is part of the Improving Literacy and Numeracy National Partnerships (ILNNP) program which provides federal funding for the implementation of school based strategies. The school has been using these funds to focus on improving literacy and numeracy teaching strategies, as well as on student wellbeing and curriculum delivery through the use of technology.

**Attendance**

The rate of students classified as attending school regularly in the first semester of 2012 was 89.3% which was below the state public school average of 92.3%. The school has expended considerable effort on improving not only attendance but also punctuality. One strategy employed is the highly popular ‘Fun, Fitness and Friendship’ program, which requires students to be at school on time in order to participate.

**Behaviour**

PR4 states that student behaviour was ‘abominable’ upon her initial appointment to the school. As such, there was a high rate of student
suspension and numerous prohibition orders being issued to parents. High levels of violence, alcoholism and substance abuse were prevalent in the community, and these issues often impacted upon the operation of the school with frequent local or on-site disruptions. Consequently, a behaviour management co-ordinator was employed and the provision of student services was also strengthened. PR4 reflects that it took a lot of time to ‘raise the bar’ in terms of setting expectations with regard to the behaviour of students and parents alike.

PR4 experience and background

PR4 has been with the Department of Education for over 30 years and has a diverse background as an administrator and teacher in metropolitan schools. Curriculum is an particular interest of PR4 and she has held several positions in central office and regional offices leading various curriculum projects. PR4 volunteered to come to the school and saw it as a professional growth opportunity in order to better understand the needs of Indigenous and English as a second language (ESL) students. The school had been through many leadership changes and PR4 committed herself to providing stable leadership over the next several years. PR4 identifies behaviour at the school as being the biggest source of stress in her work upon her arrival, and her goal was to build ‘a safe, warm and welcoming environment’ at the school. This was coupled with a desire to develop high standards and expectations of students and staff. PR4 informed staff that ‘disadvantage is never a destiny’ and says that she would accept no excuses when it came to student performance and that the ‘bar needed to be lifted’.
Conclusion

This chapter has presented contextual background information for each of the four cases involved in the study. It has also offered an insight into the personal traits of each of the school leaders which they employed in a variety of ways as they went about their work. The following chapter now presents the findings of the research.
CHAPTER FIVE
DESCRIPTION OF THE FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter describes the findings of the study reported in this thesis. For this purpose, it has been organised into the three main themes which emerged from the analysis of the data.

It will be recalled that the central research question of this study was:

How do principals deal with the distinctive challenges in SFCC?

Data collected for the purpose of the study were of three types. First, performance data were obtained from the Western Australian Department of Education’s Schools Online website to assist in the identification of schools matching the SFCC criteria as defined in Chapter 1. Secondly, two electronically recorded interviews of participants (the cases) were conducted. and thirdly, documents from the participants’ schools were analysed. A detailed description of the data analysis methods employed was given in Chapter 3. Lastly, the researcher undertook informal observation at the participants’ schools. Three key themes were identified from the analysis of the data, namely, ‘moral purpose’, ‘relationships and trust’ and community connection. Each of these themes will now be examined in turn.

Theme one: Moral purpose

The theme of moral purpose was manifested in this study according to the following constituent dimensions:

- The expectations held by the participants in relation to staff, students and community members. These expectations were aligned to behaviour, academic rigour and the roles of the stakeholders;
• The purpose each participant attributed to their work, which was often framed by the identification of stakeholder needs;

• The support each participant identified as being given to various stakeholders, namely, teachers and support staff, students, parents and/or carers and other community members, including outside agencies.

Attention is now turned to describing the three dimensions of moral purpose in more detail.

*Expectations*

Each of the participants spoke about their work against a backdrop of purpose, in other words, of wanting to affect and make a difference to the lives of the students in their charge and more broadly, to the students’ families. This strong sense of moral purpose articulated by the participants was influenced by the high expectations of teachers, students and parents. A ‘no excuse’ mentality was prevalent among the principals in relation to the expectations they had of the students and teachers in their schools. These expectations were modified by the principals having a clear understanding of their specific contextual challenges and utilising a variety of strategies in a quest to ameliorate, wherever possible, those factors perceived to present a barrier to the child’s learning and /or well-being.

On commencing at her school, one of the participant principals described the school’s community as being ‘disparate’ in contrast with her previous work environments. Her priorities were therefore to bring the community together and to build a positive school environment: As she commented on this matter:

The other thing to me that was really important was the high expectations. So right from the word go there were no ‘...yeah
buts’ [no excuses] in our school. So we had these signs up, ‘No Yeahbut— little monsters don’t live here’. That everything is a possibility (PR4).

This was an explicit example of PR4 sharing her personal belief with staff.

All the principals mentioned that they had, at times, experienced tension between themselves and the teaching staff over the way in which they had dealt with issues in their schools. This tension was essentially around the need to balance teachers’ expectations of how they perceived a situation should be managed and the actions the principal actually took in responding to it. The following comments serve to illustrate this tension:

… it’s very important, parent engagement, if you get your parents offside- they're really, really important and I’d say I put a very strong weight on my parents whereas a lot of my staff don’t like that. I’ve still got a very strong staff group who see it as ‘them and us’ and want no parent involvement, or very limited, unless they’re going to fundraise. (PR1)

Teachers can be quite demanding at times and expect certain things. I find that giving them the information around their issue helps explain to them why perhaps I can’t do that immediately or perhaps what they’re expecting is actually a breach of policy. (PR3)

While this tension mainly manifested itself in issues to do with student (and sometimes parent) behaviour, it also came from expectations articulated by the principal with regard to students’ academic performance. To counter this, all
principals presented a clear vision to their staff about what they wanted their schools to ‘look like’, while expressing a shared belief that all students can learn under the right conditions. In practice, this meant that each of the principals, while cognisant of the barriers that existed to student learning, continuously focused on the positive elements of his/her school and community. As one participant commented:

I think there’s so many positives about the school. And it’s sort of that clash of philosophies [between some of the teachers and the principal] - that is what is tricky about human resource management. It’s that negative outlook versus the positive and the looking at the holes rather than the positive… I’m a bit more strengths-based approach with families. Where really our community is very skilled, it might not be skilled in the traditional sense, but there’s a lot of great things—I’ve seen some amazing things happening here and sometimes I think that some people describe a low SEI school as being undesirable to work in... But I think there are some great things happening here. There are great teachers, great community members. (PR1)

PR1 went on to articulate that the ‘strengths-based approach’ was as she had described in a school document which suggested that the aim was ‘To re-think the idea of families as problems to families having problems, but also having strengths’. None of the participants saw difficult student circumstances as being a reason to accept mediocre academic performance; we raised expectations with a lot of whole school planning for English, maths, history and science. (PR3)
Purpose

Without exception, the participant principals were alert to the circumstances affecting the lives of many of their students and acknowledged this through the approach they took to their work. One participant expressed this approach as follows:

I push the message of being compassionate with kids too.
Understanding their home circumstances and giving a bit of a leeway in some areas. Each child is different and we need to recognise that. (PR2)

PR 4 applied for her position as she wanted to gain specific experience working with Indigenous students and students with ESL backgrounds. She described people telling her that she must have been ‘crazy’ for taking on such a challenging school, but said she had a choice and she wanted to do it. As she went on to emphasise, It was what I wanted to do…the principal going in to [this school] would have to have a true moral purpose for wanting to make a difference to this community (PR4).

All the participants had a clear vision for their school, which they used to remind and reinforce to themselves and to their staff, the purpose of their work. This was considered to be necessary because at times they became ‘caught up’ in matters which distracted them: for example, from spending time either working with teachers or focusing on curriculum planning. To illustrate, PR1 commented that keeping the balance between social welfare and curriculum was one of the tensions she faced. Further weight was given to the concept of school vision by PR3 who stated:
Every one of our planning documents has our vision on it, has our mission on it … mission and vision form our purpose and the purpose of all schooling is to develop kids academically or intellectually, socially, emotionally (PR3).

He went on to say:

In terms of making a difference sometimes the question to me is — before I can improve academic results, I really need to set the kids up for the pre-conditions of learning. Set them up to have the right disposition for learning (PR3).

These comments articulate the participants’ shared belief that all students in their care be given the opportunity to achieve to their best possible academic outcomes and that it was their duty to provide the support to enable this to happen.

**Support**

Knowing about the often difficult circumstances which students faced in their home lives drove each participant to obtain programs for their schools with the intent of being able to provide for a variety of needs. These programs were either delivered by outside agencies or were formulated and delivered by the schools themselves. A ‘whatever-it-takes’ attitude prevailed coupled with a non-judgemental mindset when it came to considering dysfunction amongst students and families. As one participant stated:

I tend to go the extra mile for the parents, and the school goes the extra mile which means — they [the parents] go the extra mile [for the school]. And I like that, the holistic approach. (PR1)

The support generated by the participants was quite varied and in some cases extended beyond the school gate as illustrated in this comment:
If the parents were in crisis we had food packages we’d give them — it was never money, it was food or we would give them contacts to go and see where they could go and sleep for the night, that sort of thing—you’ve got to shift the fence. (PR4)

In addition to providing external support, a range of pastoral care programs were offered internally at the participants’ schools. These included initiatives that met basic student needs, such as the provision of breakfast or lunch and others that met the deeper emotional needs of students, such as grief and loss programs and those to do with building self-esteem. The reasons for having these programs in place were centred on the needs of the child. As one participant commented on this matter:

We try very hard to address the social and emotional development of children in addition to the academic development and we have a whole range of pastoral care programs we put in place. (PR2)

While students and parents were well supported in each of the participant’s schools, so were the teachers. The participants recognised that their teaching staff worked in often highly stressful work environments and the support they gave varied in the way in which it was manifested. This included giving support with behaviour issues, sourcing outside agency support for their students and recognizing and acknowledging the good work of their staff. This element was seen as being particularly important. One participant commented on this as follows:

I think they [staff] feel supported [when dealing with parents] and also supporting them with student behavioural issues. We do that very strongly here. Not to say that they handball everything to
admin, but with the more serious problems we do support them.

We are seen as a very caring and supportive school and that’s the sort of ethos that I’ve been very keen to maintain here. (PR2)

In summary, all of the participants held high expectations of staff, students and community members alike. They identified with the needs of their communities and endeavoured to provide support wherever possible in order to achieve the best possible learning outcomes for their students. Attention is now turned to the second theme identified from the analysis of the data; namely ‘relationships and trust’.

Theme two: Relationships and trust

Each of the four participants mentioned the need to establish and foster good relationships and to build trust with and between stakeholders: parents and the community, staff and students. Each participant saw this as fundamental to achieving any particular success within their schools. As one participant explained, it took time for these relationships to be built:

I found those early years quite difficult inasmuch as I had not established strong links with the community or staff because I was an acting principal — that was a bit of an obstruction for me (PR2).

This theme of relationships and trust between the participants and each of the stakeholders— parents and community, staff and students—will now be examined in turn.

Parents and community

Being open, honest and communicative were traits described by each participant as important enablers to building relationships with parents. They made
themselves available whenever possible and were a visible presence around their schools, engaging in, for example, informal conversations—listening to and learning about their students and their families. As one of the participants commented on this matter:

One of the key things that I loved to do at the beginning was to meet the parents at the gate in the morning—say ‘good morning’, welcome them in and say goodbye to them in the afternoon. In a context like [school] where multi-cultural families don’t speak English sometimes, they always understand a warm and welcoming face. So it was actually being present in the community. It was uncomfortable for me to talk to people who couldn’t understand me at the beginning, but they began to know and trust me, and they’d stop and they’d smile and all of those sorts of things. PR4

This openness in communication extended to dealings with, at times, particularly difficult or aggressive parents who were unhappy with something that had happened at the school and either came to the school in person or spoke with the principal by telephone. The participants employed what they felt were effective mechanisms in managing such situations. One of the principals when asked further about how he did this responded as follows:

Well first of all by myself or the deputy principal being available and not trying to, I suppose, sweep things under the carpet—being open and available and even though they might be quite angry with us, taking their concerns seriously. Often they’ll complain about things like bullying, theft of equipment, theft of lunches and even though they might not seem like big issues to us they are to parents… all they want us to do is to listen effectively to them and do the best we can to solve the problem. (PR3)
All of the participants felt that their relationships with parents had been enhanced and become more positive than when they had first commenced at their schools. While they still had critical incidents to deal with from time to time, mainly around parent conduct, these had decreased. There had also been a reduction in the number of prohibition orders they had issued and a reduction in the number of parent complaints at the school and regional office levels. They attributed this improvement to their willingness to be approachable, open with their communications, and to the need to take all parent concerns seriously. They also cited being consistent with the way in which they dealt with matters as important to building good relationships. In this connection one principal put it this way, ‘I understand my parents and I understand the way they’re going to relate to me.’ (PR3)

Trust in relationships with stakeholders was seen as being very important to all of the participants, with one commenting that when there was a lack of trust from parents it became more difficult to resolve concerns and misunderstandings. They worked hard to establish trust and saw this as an enabler, which assisted them in their capacity to lead their schools successfully. Two participants commented on the centrality of trust as follows:

I find that I have established a trust with the community and also the staff and that certainly helps when you’re running a school like this (PR2).

My key focus was to build productive relationships with my staff and with my community. With the staff I needed to be able to get them to trust me (PR4).
Each participant saw the maintenance of good relationships with parents and the broader community as something which they attended to constantly. This was achieved in a multitude of ways, including by means of personal contact either by face to face meetings or by the telephone, newsletters and assemblies.

**Staff**

The participants all believed that having good relationships with their staff assisted in building a team approach which enabled them in working together to implement programs for the benefit of the students. As one participant described when speaking about teamwork:

> I definitely try to involve, particularly with the admin team, a team approach and even with the staff that’s been my style—always to be supportive and develop teamwork with the teachers and staff, because I find that you get the best out of people when you reward them and encourage them to participate, rather than just dominate (PR2).

Showing appreciation to staff for their efforts was also seen as important by the participants in building relationships, and each principal did this in different ways. As one participant observed:

> It’s that acknowledgement and value of staff that actually helped make that relationship and every single year I found somewhere to nominate a teacher for [awards] … it’s just to show that —yep—we’re really grateful for what you’ve done (PR4).

Another of the participants described human resource management as being her greatest ‘stress’. In particular, this stress related to staff transience and the ability to retain key people who were implementing programs in the school. She
believed that having good collegial relationships with teachers assisted their retention, and she described it this way:

The thing is to get good people to drive things—sustainability is a big thing at these schools and keeping good staff to drive these things. How to keep things sustainable so it’s not reliant on you and that’s what I’m always working at, which is why it is so gut-wrenching when [teachers] want to go. (PR1)

One of the participants described how having good relationships with his students assisted him in preventing small problems from becoming larger ones. He did this through spending almost every recess and lunch break in the playground. His motivation for doing so arose from his frustration over the time he was spending resolving incidents that had arisen in the playground, and this was distracting him from other matters to which he needed to attend. He described it in this way:

I remember when I first came here and we were staying in the office. I’d have a line of kids at the office door and then I’d be talking to kids for 15 or 20 minutes—well probably longer, probably half an hour, trying to unpack issues with kids. But over time I decided that I would go on duty at lunch and recess and I found that kids were approaching me with their little issues and I could short-circuit the long line at the office. So, rather than wasting my time after lunch or after recess I could deal with their issue, solve it, fix it—and we could move on fairly quickly. (PR3)

The ways in which the participants built relationships with their students varied, from telling stories at assemblies, to being a presence in the playground, or welcoming and farewelling them at the school gate. The participants tried mostly to make their interactions positive with the students, even when having to sort
out behavioural issues. They believed that they approached such matters fairly, with one participant mentioning that some students didn’t get a ‘fair shot’ in their home lives and that it was important they were given one at school.

In summary, all participants devoted time and effort into developing good relationships with key stakeholders. They valued the trust which was part of these relationships and made conscious efforts to communicate effectively with their school communities. Attention is now drawn to the final theme generated from the study that of community connection.

**Theme three: Community connection**

The theme of community connection as described here has been categorized according to the two distinct ways in which it was manifested in participants’ schools. The first way involved the participants making connections with external agencies and programs to assist students and families, while the second was related to parents and community members either assisting in the school or engaging in particular school based initiatives.

The participants had a good understanding of the communities in which they worked, and endeavoured to engage parents and other stakeholders with their schools in a variety of ways. This community involvement was seen as being important by all of the participants in order to foster a positive and productive school environment. On this, a typical comment made was as follows:

> Community involvement was a crucial factor in getting a climate, a positive climate in the school to actually provide for these students. (PR4)

The participants identified needs within their communities and endeavoured to cater for them where they could. For example, one of the participants, whose
school contained a high percentage of non-English speaking parents, arranged for adult English classes to be held on the school site. Another participant introduced a program based on the results of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)\(^{11}\) testing, which measured vulnerability in pre-schoolers across five domains. He went on to describe how these results provided the impetus for the approach the school took with the provision of programs:

"The areas that they were vulnerable in were physical health and well-being and social competence, communication skills and general knowledge. So that’s a big factor for us to try and get the students in as early as possible to screen them and to try and help get the support of the parents in addressing any needs. We have the ‘mums and bubs’ program, which I spoke about before which is largely run by Communicare. But that’s one way that we’re trying to get the families into school as soon as possible to try and educate them in things like nutrition and education and all the other aspects of child development. Trying to catch them earlier. We’re also tapping into the parent centre that’s going to be established at [school] so we’re hoping to tap into that in the future. It’s not up and running yet, but that’s the sort of intervention that we’d dearly like to see—trying to catch them as early as possible. (PR2)"

The ability of the participants to engage the school community is one seemingly intertwined with the above-mentioned theme of relationships and trust. This engagement happened over time and was linked to the participants’ understanding of the communities in which they worked. Indeed, one of the participants had what may be described as personal empathy with his

\(^{11}\) The Australian Early Development Index is now known as the Australian Early Development Census.
community; ‘I feel comfortable in this environment and that’s probably because I grew up in an area just like this.’ (PR3)

Another way the participants articulated the theme of community connection was through the involvement of parents in the operation of their schools. Two of the participants described parent involvement in their schools as being almost non-existent when they first started in their positions. They cited the fact that they had been able to increase parent engagement with the school as one of their success indicators. One participant attributed this increased engagement to the overall parent satisfaction with his school. As he stated:

I suppose an indicator of their happiness with us is the level in which they engage in the school. We’ve got a lot more volunteers coming into the school. When I first got here there was no one running the uniform shop, there was no one running book club, they wouldn’t volunteer to go into the classrooms. There was a culture in the school where teachers would discourage parents from volunteering, so we see a lot more of that now. (PR3)

One of the participants also saw the importance of building connections with the community as being a top priority from the start of her appointment at the school:

Community involvement was a crucial factor in getting a climate, a positive climate in the school to actually provide for these students. When I first came here there was no P&C, there was no school council. Very disparate community because of the efficacy of it. So one of my first things was to bring that community together. (PR4)
In summarizing this theme, the ways in which participants connected with their communities varied. However, these community connections can essentially be placed into two distinct categories: the provision of programs that supported parents and families; and the ways in which parents and community members were involved in supporting the school.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the findings of the study through the presentation of three themes generated from the data, namely, moral purpose, relationships and trust and community connection. It has established the importance of each of these themes to the participants and has included examples which articulate their perspectives about how each of the themes is manifested in the successful operation of his/her school. The next chapter will now analyse each of the themes with reference to the existing literature relating to schools facing challenging circumstances.
CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter discusses the three emergent themes presented in the previous chapter, namely, moral purpose, relationships and trust and community connection.

The first theme, moral purpose is discussed by examining each of its three constituent dimensions as manifested in the study. These dimensions are expectations, purpose and support. The second theme, relationships and trust, is discussed in demonstrating how the presence of good relationships and established trust between the principal and stakeholders can contribute to success in leading schools facing challenging circumstances. Finally, the theme of community connection is discussed according to how positive connections are made with and between stakeholders and the role this plays in assisting principals in their work.

Theme one: Moral purpose

The findings described in Chapter 5 indicate that each of the participants in the study identifies moral purpose as an intrinsically self-motivating force that has an empowering effect on their work. The participants hold strong beliefs that all students are entitled to achieve academic and social success while simultaneously believing that it is the principal’s responsibility to create and support a school environment that enables this to happen.

Bezzina (2012, p.250) describes moral purpose as being the commitment to ends that express underlying values and ethics. He further states that is has
been consistently reported as a necessity in bringing about desirable student learning in schools.

Similarly, though differently inflected, Barber and Fullan’s definition of moral purpose (2005) centres on student achievement as being of core importance and is as follows:

The central moral purpose consists of constantly improving student achievement and ensuring that achievement gaps, wherever they exist, are narrowed. In short, it’s about raising the bar and narrowing the gap. It also involves treating people with demanding respect, and contributing to the larger social environment [other schools, for example]. (p.2)

Each of the cases involved in the study reported here articulate a sense of moral purpose which, to an extent, reflects both of these above definitions. The participants in the study are not prepared to accept mediocrity from students or staff, nor would they accept excuses for poor student achievement or lack of academic progression. Each participant clearly understood and accepted the context in which they work and sets about to establish safe and supportive environments conducive to the achievement of sound educational outcomes for their students. In keeping with Jacobson’s observation (2008, p.9), the participants are cognizant of the barriers to learning but do not allow these conditions to be used to lower expectations. In a similar vein, Gu and Johansson (2013, p.323) assert that moral purpose, trustworthiness flexibility and commitment are attributes required to lead successful SFCC.

The theme of moral purpose in this study was manifested according to the three constituent dimensions of expectations, purpose and support. These
dimensions will now be discussed with regard to the relevant literature pertinent to moral purpose in education.

**Expectations**

Chapter 5 highlights some of the tensions that existed between the participant principals and their staff as they articulated their beliefs into expectations. For example, principals acknowledge that the home life and background of some students present teachers with significant challenges to their work. However, what is not accepted by the participants is the notion that these challenges are insurmountable or that little can be done to counter such influence on student achievement. The participants in this study endeavour, where possible, to build a sense of community, described as central to success in developing local communities (Michalak, 2012). Evident also through the participant interviews, is that each principal is unrelenting in holding fast to their expectations as they pursue a vision for success. This observation is akin to the findings of Gurr, Drysdale, Clarke & Wildy (2014) which identify tenacity, perseverance and self-belief as desirable leadership qualities in successful SFCC. The rationale for the approaches taken by participants in their schools was also evidenced in a study undertaken by Day, Harris & Hadfield, (2001) that found the high expectations of standards and achievement held by principals were driven more by intrinsic and existing personal values than external forces, including those imposed by the government. The notion of principals having high expectations was also found to be a characteristic common in outstanding SFCC (Ofsted, 2009) with another study additionally identifying this factor as being of crucial
importance (Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2009, p.4). The participant principals in the study reported here are alert to the particular social and economic factors impacting upon their school settings. They are non-judgmental in expressing views on these factors and as described above, are skilful in their attempts to either circumvent or at least minimise the perceived detriments such obstacles bring to the learning environment. For example, common across all four cases is the presence of specific school-based programs which are designed to support the pastoral care of students and in some cases, parents. This ability to connect with and respond to the needs of the community reinforces the notion that context matters (Gurr et al., 2014, p.86).

Observations made during the present study confirmed that all the participants have high expectations of student achievement, of how teachers go about their work, and of how the school responds to a variety of social and academic needs. Without exception, each spoke purposefully and with conviction about his/her responsibility to ensure these expectations were met.

**Purpose**

Each of the participants has developed a vision for their schools in collaboration with their staff. They align professional learning to academic and pastoral care programs that support these visions and consistently refer to them in their work for two key purposes: as a reminder of what they want to achieve; and for giving consideration to the way in which new initiatives and programs both support and align with their vision. Bush and Glover (2012, p.29) note the presence of shared vision, mutual understanding and cooperation as being central to success in a study of high-performing English
schools. These elements are examined further in the section on relationships and trust below, but are, nevertheless, worth noting here. The participants described that often a tension in their schools is in having staff understand, as they do, the significance of the context in which they are working. This is fundamental to establishing shared vision and means that, without exception, they consistently remind themselves and their staff of the purpose to their work. PR4 states that a principal stepping into the role at her school would need to have a ‘true moral purpose’ in wanting to make a difference to the community, suggesting that this would be a necessary attribute for anyone wanting to be successful in the role. In their study of effective school leadership, Day, Harris and Hadfield (2010) note that the vision and practices of the principals studied in their research were underpinned by a number of core personal values including respect, integrity and honesty and a sense of caring for students and staff. Further, they stated that it is impossible to separate the ‘personal from the professional’ as these values are often part of the individual’s strong religious or humanitarian ethics (Day et al., 2001, p.43). As reported in Chapter 5, the participants in the present study were alert to the circumstances of their students with one, PR4, applying for her position despite colleagues telling her that she must have been ‘crazy’ to do so. Simply put, she had a strong desire to make a difference and seemingly saw it is her moral duty to do so.

Although leadership approaches in SFCC are not a particular focus of this study, the relevant literature on this topic indicates that various approaches are taken in such contexts (Harris & Chapman, 2002, p.11) depending on specific needs at particular times (Muijs et al., 2010, p. 156).
The ability of the participants to identify with the communities in which they work is strong and possibly assists them in their practice. PR3 stated that he grew up in an area similar to the one in which he now works and he feels that this background assists him to better understand his students and the challenges they face.

Support

As described in Chapter 5, each of the participants has implemented various programs of support in order to respond to the needs of the students and the wider community. All of the participants’ schools offer initiatives designed to address such basic needs as the provision of breakfast, low-cost uniform replacements, fee subsidies for incursions and excursions, and accessibility to stationery and other student consumables. The participants have a shared rationale for doing so, as they believe that it is important to address what PR4 spoke of as the ‘pre-conditions’ for learning in order that students are best able to achieve any particular academic success. Lupton (2004) notes in a study of disadvantaged schools, that it can be argued that good management and professional practice can overcome difficulties faced. However, what constitutes ‘good practice’ in such schools can be hard to describe, since there are constraints on what is ‘doable’ and not all school managers are in a position to provide the programs needed (Lupton, 2004, pp. 31–32). Similarly in the participants’ schools there are constraints limiting the type of support which can be offered. These constraints include limited finances, lack of appropriately qualified or trained staff to run programs and service demands on providers exceeding available supply.
However, it is evident that such constraints did not dissuade the participants from, as PR1 remarked, ‘going the extra mile for their students’.

Each of the participants recognized that their individual schools are often difficult places for teachers to work in and at times, quite stressful. Poor student behaviour, demanding and sometimes aggressive parents, communication difficulties (particularly with parents from ESL backgrounds), and a lack of student and/or school resources all contribute to this. The support given to student needs is also coupled with support for staff. Harris (2006) notes that success in such schools is partially attributed to those in leadership positions providing the right amount of ‘pressure and balance’ whilst simultaneously building positive relationships with stakeholders and this is of prime importance (Harris, 2006. p. 13).

That moral purpose was is central to the participants in this study achieving any kind of success as they go about their work is evident throughout the interviews undertaken. In practice, it is this foundational belief which gives meaning to the work that they perform. It influences their thinking and decision making and reflects the strong beliefs and values each held. The literature around leadership in SFCC identifies and affirms that moral purpose is an integral factor, which contributes to the desire of principals in wanting to achieve the very best outcomes for their students (Barber & Fullan, 2005; Bezzina, 2008; Bezzina, 2012; Gurr et al. 2014; Mulford et al., 2007).

**Theme two – Relationships and trust**

As described in Chapter 5, the participants in the study identified that it is important to establish good relationships with teachers, parents and students
in order that they are able to work co-operatively and collaboratively to achieve desired goals and outcomes. Building trust in these relationships is also seen as being of high importance, with one participant stating that the presence of trust was helpful when ‘running a school like this’ (PR2). The discussion of this theme is organised into three dimensions, with each having a particular focus on how it is manifested according to the identified stakeholder groups, namely, parents and community, staff and students.

*Parents and community*

Building connections with the community assists the principal to create programs which facilitate student success (Jang & McDougall, 2007). Effective leaders engage with their communities and engender trust with parents by showing their genuine care for their children (Harris, 2010). The findings from the study reported here showed that the participants valued the relationships they had built with parents and that it had taken time and a degree of persistence to develop them. Jang and McDougall’s study of schools facing challenging circumstances in Canada (2007, p.24) noted that ‘while some administrators see the community as a challenge, that is something to be overcome, other educators celebrate the diversity that the community brings to schools’. The same observation may also be made in the present study, reinforced by a comment made by PR1 who advocated taking a ‘strengths based approach’ with her community. By this she explains that her focus was more on the positive attributes and skills that parents and others in the community could bring to the school to enhance the learning experience of the students.
As described in Chapter 5, the participants worked hard to develop strong working relationships with their communities. This meant that they are approachable and available to parents, communicate school events and happenings in a variety of ways and are a visible presence around the school. They meet parents and students at the gate, spend time in the playground getting to know their students and encouraging community members to be involved in their schools. Two of the schools in the study have independent public school status and have parent, staff, and community representatives on their boards, whilst the other two have school councils with parent and staff representation. At times this willingness to have parents involved with the school is met with resistance from some teachers on the staff who did not wish to engage with parents aside from the more traditional forms of contact, such as parent interviews or open nights. Nevertheless, this resistance does not deter the participants from their desire to involve the community in their schools. They do not force teachers to involve parents or community members but, rather, worked with those staff who were open to such involvement and supported them in doing so.

Michalak (2012) argues that the imperative to include parents and the local community is an urgent one if students from challenging backgrounds are to make vital educational progress. It is clear that the participants in the study reported here also hold the same belief which is evident throughout the findings presented in Chapter 5, detailing particular approaches participants took to their work. In particular, the theme of moral purpose is inextricably linked with the strong desire of the participants to establish and build sound relationships and trust with their school communities. All see it as their duty to do the very best for the students in their care and each feels that it is
important to connect in meaningful ways with their communities. The literature, in general, affirms the presence of good relationships and trust between stakeholders as being an essential ingredient in achieving any form of success in SFCC (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Day, 2005; Harris & Chapman, 2002; Khalifa et al., 2015).

Staff

The participants in the present study cite the importance of having good relationships with staff as being fundamental to their work. These relationships developed because of the participants’ willingness to give support to staff, particularly in managing student behaviour; by acknowledging the good work of staff, and through involving staff in the formulation of the school vision and/or purpose statements. The participants were collaborative and inclusive when making decisions about the implementation of new programs or initiatives in their schools, valuing input from all staff. In the same vein, valuing staff and building relationships with them is described by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) as essential to the development of collaborative cultures in schools, assisting to build both social and professional capital. The participants in the study here recognized that their schools are not easy places to teach in and, at times, can indeed be quite stressful. One participant, PR1, believes that having good relationships in place is important, as it assists her to retain teachers with staff stability, an aspect of her work she considers to be one of her biggest challenges.

The participants all share the view that it is important to recognize the efforts of their staff as regularly as possible. On this point, one participant, PR4, stated that she regularly nominates teachers or education assistants for
awards, and feels that it is a way that she can show how grateful she is for their work. Other acknowledgments were more informal, such as principals mentioning good work at staff meetings, holding celebratory morning teas and end-of-term functions or, as one did, providing each teacher with a card which they could ‘cash in’ to receive, for example, extra preparation time or be excused from a playground duty. These acknowledgements are appreciated by their staff and clearly assist in the development of good working relationships.

Each of the participants’ had students with behaviour challenges, which, at times, significantly affected not only individual staff members, but, at times, the whole school. One principal spoke of a large gang fight which occurred across the road from his school, and other incidents requiring ‘lock down’ are not uncommon across the cases investigated The participants all offer post-incident support to affected staff, with one having de-briefing sessions with all staff after particularly serious incidents.

It is evident that the participants have developed a sense of ‘being in this together’ with their staff. They empathize with them in various situations, support them with difficulties, act as mediators between teachers and parents and do whatever they can in offering support. They accept that they (the school) cannot change certain contextual challenges but do not waver from their desire to do the best they can for the students in their care. The variety of actions taken by participants as they encounter specific challenges reinforces the notion that leadership in SFCC is influenced by distinctive contextual factors.
**Students**

As outlined in the description of the cases in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the student cohorts in each of the participant’s schools were drawn from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The participants all work actively to promote and celebrate this diversity in many different ways. These include organizing activities for events such as NAIDOC Day and Harmony Day\textsuperscript{12}, inviting different cultural performance groups into their schools and generally celebrating the difference and diversity all of the children associated with their schools. They make genuine attempts to build relationships by being visibly present in the playground, by greeting students on arrival to the school and farewelling them as they leave. They adopt a ‘no blame’ approach to behaviour management and deal with students in a respectful manner. They focus on restorative practices to mend relationships between students and between students and staff. They feel that students see them as fair and approachable, which they believe is important to maintaining good relationships. It is instructive to mention here that in commenting about leadership in SFCC Harris (2006) notes that:

> All of the principals recognised the importance of developing and maintaining good personal relationships with students, teachers, parents, support staff and the local community. They were considered to be fair and were seen as having a genuine joy and vibrancy when talking to students. They generated a high level of commitment in others through their openness, honesty and the quality of their inter-personal relationships (p.16).

\textsuperscript{12} Harmony Day is an event with the aim of recognizing cultural diversity in Australia.
The above observation captures succinctly what the researcher also encountered when interviewing the participants in the present study. The presence of good and trusting relationships between stakeholders assisting the participants to lead their schools was clearly apparent. Also apparent was that the participants are proud of these relationships; they value them highly and employ great skill and determination to develop them over time.

Theme three – Community connection

As outlined in Chapter 5 of the thesis, the theme of community connection emerges in the study in two distinctive ways, namely, connections with outside agencies and connections with parents and community members.

Outside agencies

A number of outside agencies engage with the participants’ schools, providing a range of services. Common to all four schools is the presence of either a school chaplain or a qualified youth worker (in some cases both) who work in differing ways to support students. The programs offered are mainly involved with assisting in the development of pro-social life skills as well as individual and group counselling and support for students. One participant, PR1, promotes her school as providing a ‘full service model’ in terms of support for students and families. This support includes visiting health nurses for Indigenous students, support and advocacy for refugee families, and links to justice related agencies. While the range, type and frequency of services offered to students and their families varies, what is apparent across the cases is a very strong desire by each of the participants to support their school communities however they can. Often this work is difficult and frustrating, with efforts at times stymied by factors including the
lack of financial and/or human resources. Nevertheless, the participants are relentless and determined in their efforts to seek support, and are not deterred when unsuccessful in doing so; rather, they keep looking for other alternatives. Each of the participants works to involve their communities in a way which may be described by Muijs et al., (2010) as ‘socially inclusive’ (p.143), with context having an important bearing on decisions taken and strategies employed to achieve this aim. The participants’ motivation for such work is once again linked to the first theme discussed above, namely, moral purpose. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) speak of educationally defensible partnerships having a clear moral purpose and being able to demonstrate how they will improve teaching, learning or caring in schools. That the participants are able to identify with the context of their communities and establish such supportive partnerships is indisputable and contributes to their efforts of developing positive climates within their schools. On this matter, PR3 comments that her first three priorities on commencing at her school were to build a positive climate; to unite the community; and to develop a shared ethos amongst staff and parents. As she set about increasing and encouraging parent and community involvement in the school she believed that staff became more positive in the approaches they took with students and became keener to be involved in certain programs. This, in turn, gave her better insight into staff skills and abilities and afforded her opportunities to engage in sharing leadership in the school. All the participants spoke about their communities with genuine passion and were sincere in expressing their empathy and understanding toward the often complex and challenging circumstances many of their families face or have been through. Existing studies relating to SFCC reaffirm the presence of this
quality in school leaders (Day, 2005; Gu & Johansson, 2013; Harris, 2006; Ylimaki et al., 2014).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the themes of moral purpose, relationships and trust and community connection which have been generated from the study reported here. It has been indicated that the concept of moral purpose cannot necessarily be considered separately from the other themes identified, since moral purpose presents itself in so many aspects of the participants’ work. School context influences and informs the participants’ decision-making, particularly around ways in which they engage their communities and support their students. While their leadership styles and practices may differ, achieving the best outcomes for their students is always of paramount importance. The following chapter now presents the conclusion to the thesis.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter will first summarise the findings of the study reported in this thesis. It then reiterates the conclusions from the findings in relation to how the principals of SFCC in this study responded to the distinctive challenges encountered as they went about their work. Finally, the implications of these conclusions for theory and practice will be discussed.

The aim of this study as presented in Chapter 1 was to develop theory about how the actions of principals in SFCC are influenced by the environment in which they work. In this chapter, the findings as outlined in Chapter 6 will be further consolidated with attention given to the implications these have with regard to leadership in SFCC. Insights into how the principals of four SFCC in Western Australia go about their work were considered to be worthy of study as, the main body of research in this area has been undertaken outside of this context. Michalak (2012) notes that in challenging school contexts, leaders need to have strong educational values in order to achieve any particular success. Bush and Glover (2014) also cite personal and professional values as being important because they serve to ground the actions of the leader. Gu and Johansson’s (2012) research supports this observation adding that the strategies used by school leaders to achieve success will vary dependent on the developmental stage of the school, while Gurr et al. (2014), add that perseverance, tenacity, self-belief and moral purpose are needed to maintain school direction (p.89). In the study reported
here, the presence of strong educational, personal, and professional values amongst the participants was evident as was their ability to understand the context of the schools in which they worked.

**Summary of the Study**

The study began with the central research question: How do principals deal with the distinctive challenges in SFCC? Following from this central research question were four guiding questions

1. What are the distinctive challenges encountered by principals in the course of their work?

2. What are the specific issues relevant to the school context which influence the principals’ work?

3. What strategies do the principals employ to deal with these challenges in their schools?

4. How do the principals know that the strategies employed are contributing to the success of their school?

This research was framed by the symbolic interactionist perspective as it focuses on minds and meanings which characterize human society and it is about how one interacts with others which gives this meaning (Meltzer et al., cited in O’Donoghue, 2007, p.142). In this study the focus was on how the principals reacted to their particular school contexts, made sense of them, and articulated this understanding into describable actions as a result. The study was of a multi-case design and used semi-structured interviews, document analysis and informal field observations to gather
data. The data generated from these processes were analysed and interpreted using a grounded theory approach, as this method of analysis generates theory inductively from the data collected (Punch, 2005). It was suitable for the purpose of this study as it is ‘oriented to developing concepts, insights and understandings from patterns in the data rather than collecting data according to preconceived models, hypotheses or theories’ (Taylor and Bogdan cited in O’Donoghue, 2007, p.58).

Subsequently, the analysis of the data was undertaken through the use of open coding techniques in order to identify dominant themes emerging from the research.

The findings were presented in two distinct ways. First, to give context to the study, each participant principal’s background, experience and school setting were described, which included information about community characteristics and academic performance. Secondly, the three themes generated from the data were presented, namely ‘moral purpose’, ‘relationships and trust’, and ‘community connection’.

Attention is now turned to summarizing the findings as described in Chapter 5 and 6. The implications of these findings are then discussed in relation to leadership practice in SFCC, and finally, the limitations of the study and possible questions for further research are outlined.

Summary of findings

The perspectives of the participant principals in this study were articulated according to three main themes, namely moral purpose,
relationships and trust and, community connection. Each of these themes is now reiterated in turn.

*The principals attached strong moral purpose to their work.*

Evident in discussions with the four participant principals was that all of them were driven by a sense of duty to serve their schools and respective communities in the best way possible. This meant, in practice, that the participants sought to ameliorate the challenges particular to their school, countering them with actions with the intention of ‘levelling the playing field’. They all had a ‘no excuses’ mentality when it came to dealing with staff, students and parents coupled with a ‘whatever it takes’ attitude to their work. This typically meant providing programs to support student, and at times, parental need. High expectations were held by participants of all stakeholders and they aligned school vision in such a way to support, and ultimately meet, these expectations. Bush and Glover (2014, p.559) report that the emphasis of moral leadership is on integrity and that the critical focus of such leadership is on the values, beliefs and ethics of the leaders themselves. Furthermore, Newman’s (2004) study of Jamaican principals found that moral purpose was a key motivation which influenced the principals’ work, finding that they anchored their behaviour, interactions and decisions in the dominant values of care, social justice and excellence (p.164). It is clear that values also influenced the work of the participant principals in the study reported here and underpinned the actions they took as they went about their work. Importantly, each of the principals thoroughly understood the context of their schools and as noted by Wildy and Clarke
(2012, p.71), school leaders who deeply understand and appreciate the complexities of their context, as well as the culture of the school and the community are strengthened in their confidence to deal with local issues and problems.

**The principals built relationships and trust with stakeholders**

The participant principals all practised being visible, approachable, honest and open with parents, students and teachers. This behaviour was manifested in a variety of ways, including being present at the school gate and using this as an opportunity to have short informal ‘chats’ with parents and students, taking an interest in the lives of the students and their families. They also endeavoured to involve parents in a variety of school based programs as well as in school governance through the school board or parents and citizens associations. The principals were proactive when dealing with behaviour issues and, while reporting that at times parents did not always agree with the way these issues were dealt with, that parents, nevertheless, appreciated being contacted and informed of what had been happening at the school. The participant principals were all proactive in their attempts to have parents and community members involved with their schools including running programs such as playgroups for 0-3 year olds and offering adult literacy classes. The principals reported that this welcoming and supportive approach greatly assisted them to develop effective working relationships with stakeholders with one of the side-benefits being two way trust between the parents and the school and that they felt parents
appreciated the efforts they made to include them in the school community.

The principals connected with their communities

It will be recalled that the participant principals introduced or supported programs which met the particular needs of the community. The schools were all in low SEI settings with many families living on low incomes. The participants were acutely aware of this fact and attempted to minimise the impact of this through initiatives such as the provision of breakfast, and the availability of low cost uniforms. The ‘passport program’ operating in two of the schools saw parents volunteering in classrooms and earning points which could be used to subsidise various school related costs. Other connections were made by, for example, recognising and celebrating cultural difference in the school community by promoting such initiatives as National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee and Harmony days. Relatedly, Khalifa et al. (2015), state that: ‘educators who venture out of the school setting to establish a constant and positive presence in the school’s community will significantly improve their relationships with parents and, ultimately, the education for children’ (p.23).

The participants also connected with appropriate outside agencies resulting in a variety of services being available to parents and students. For example, the ‘mums and bubs’ club at one school, with the aim being to support parents with child development matters and assisting them to access to child health services. The participants’ schools
provided students and families with access to either school chaplains or youth workers. One of the schools, recognizing a high rate of adult illiteracy in the community, arranged for adult literacy classes to be held on the school site. In short, the principals saw their schools as being a central facet of their communities, were proud of this, and took every opportunity to maintain strong and meaningful connections with them. This approach resonates with the research undertaken by Ahumada et al. (2015), which found that when people have a greater connection to their context, it is more likely that they will exercise an active role in the school (p.12). In a similar vein, Barnett and Stevenson (2016) report that the ability of principal of high needs schools in gaining an understanding of the factors which affect community context, including values as being an important aspect of their actions (p.32).

In summary, the participants in this study all had a deep understanding of the contexts in which they worked. They were each driven by a strong sense of moral purpose, driven by the belief that they had a duty to do the very best for the students in their care. They were conspicuously aware of potential barriers to the achievement of success and worked hard to overcome these in a variety of ways.

Limitations of the Study

With only four cases, this study is comparatively small-scale when considered against the backdrop of SFCC in Western Australia as a whole. Furthermore, the cases were located in primary schools, with two of them being relatively small, requiring the participants to take quite a
‘hands-on’ approach to their work. In secondary school settings and large primary schools, the organization and dynamics of leadership within them, is, by nature, more complex with a greater distribution of responsibilities around school management and student welfare. Therefore, the findings of this study, as they describe individual rather than team or group actions, may not have particular relevance to the secondary context.

The definition used to describe SFCC by the researcher was specific to this study, and, does not fully align with the term as it is currently used in contemporary writing on the subject. This is due to different criteria being used in the international literature relating to SFCC. Nevertheless, across the cases, similar themes and ideas emerged leading to the findings presented above. All of the participants’ schools were urban based and characterized by similar attributes. For example, they each had relatively large multi-cultural student cohorts and were able to access a range of metropolitan based agencies for support. Therefore, in order to ascertain whether or not the findings may be mirrored in rural or isolated settings it would require a broader study to be undertaken.

Implications of the Research Findings

Implications of the research for policy and practice

This study has described commonalities evident in the ways in which the participant principals went about their work. Specifically, this meant that the principals approached their work with strong moral purpose; they valued their ability to build relationships and trust with all stakeholders
and, finally, were able to connect with their communities in productive and meaningful ways. In terms of policy and practice, a greater understanding of SFCC in Western Australia needs to be developed. This includes developing a nuanced definition of the term ‘SFCC’ as well as identifying the particular leadership qualities which are needed in such defined schools.

In previous years, the selection of principals for Western Australian government schools was undertaken at the central office level with applicants applying to pools. This meant in practice, that the applicant wrote a generic application focusing on their key skills and attributes, addressing a standard set of selection criteria. This is no longer the case as applicants now apply to specific locations and are expected to show the transferability of skill to a particular context. The findings of this study indicate that moral purpose, the ability to build trust and relationships with stakeholders, as well as being able to make strong and meaningful connections with communities, have assisted the principals in the study to lead their schools. These traits are worthy of consideration both by applicants to SFCC and members of selection panels.

Implications of the research findings for the theoretical literature

Much of the available literature on successful or high-achieving SFCC focuses on the analysis and description of leadership practices within such schools that have contributed to improvement or in some cases, remarkable school turn-around. The literature universally acknowledges that there is no one particular leadership style which seems to be more effective than another and notes that depending on where the school may
be on a continuum of improvement, the leadership approaches taken by
principals will vary. (Potter et.al, 2002; Harris, 2002; Levin, 2006).

Other relevant SFCC literature examines the role school context has in
influencing the work of principals. In particular these studies focus on
strategies principals employ to counter those factors which have the
potential to impact upon the learning of their students. This is sometimes
described as a social justice approach to leadership and is typically
driven by the individual principal’s own set of values and sense of moral
purpose (Gu and Johansson, 2013; Bezzina, 2012; Harris, 2010; Ylimaki,
Jacobson and Drysdale, 2008). This study generated themes which
contribute to, and support, this body of literature. Primarily, it found that
the participant principals attributed strong moral purpose to their work
with this influencing the decisions they made around selecting and
implementing a variety of strategies and programs relevant to the
contexts of their schools. Clarke & O’Donoghue (2016 b) make several
assertions in relation to leadership in diverse contexts. Among them, they
cite the importance of school leaders being sensitive to their own context
in terms of the people, problems and issues as well as being attuned to
school culture and community. The ability to do this, they argue, assists
leaders to determine the school’s priorities and interests (p.200). The
participant principals in this study clearly demonstrated an awareness of
their contexts and this influenced their work not only in how they went
about it, but also in the policies and practices they implemented in their
schools.
Conclusion

To close, leading schools is a complex task. There is not, nor should there be, a one-size-fits all approach to leadership. Indeed, it is crucial that processes of leadership preparation and development should promote flexibility in the employment of leadership styles and strategies. SFCC deserve particular attention as they require leadership driven by people with strong values, who believe in the communities they are part of, are able to bring out the best in people around them and relentlessly strive to provide the very best for the students in their care.
REFERENCES


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4. Staffing tables and charts

Figure A6: Organisational Chart

At June 2015

Western Australian Department of Education Organisational Chart