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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the findings of a major research project funded by the New South Wales Department of School Education (Australia) which sought to examine the school-community interface and communication in comprehensive high schools. Data were drawn initially from nine schools in western Sydney, with three of these schools being the subject of indepth followup study. The project addressed three major focus areas: (1) the expectations of students' educational needs held by students, teachers, parents and business; (2) the communication processes at work within schools and between schools and their communities concerning education; and (3) the essential characteristics of effective communication. These studies revealed the significant role played by senior school executives, particularly the principal, in the development of communication methods in schools and their influence on school culture and climate. Decision-making and communication methods in the three schools are examined within the context of each school's environment and implications are drawn for school leadership; staff morale; and staff, student and community attitudes. (Author/KDP)

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**SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING: A CRITIQUE OF
LEADERSHIP STYLE AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES
IN THREE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOLS**

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SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING: A CRITIQUE OF LEADERSHIP STYLE AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN THREE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper draws on the findings of a major research project funded by the NSW Department of School Education which sought to examine the school-community interface and communication in comprehensive high schools.

Data were drawn initially from nine schools in Western Sydney with three of these schools being the subject of in-depth follow up study. These studies revealed the significant role played by senior school executive, particularly the Principal, in the development of communication methods in schools and their influence on school culture and climate.

Decision making and communication methods in the three schools are examined within the context of each school's environment and implications drawn for school leadership, staff morale and staff, student and community attitudes.

Introduction: The Study Project

The study described in this paper was funded by the NSW Department of School Education (DSE) and was jointly undertaken by staff of the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean and DSE personnel (Cairney, Hayward-Brown, Craigie, Dinham, Jaffe, Khamis, Nolan, Richards and Wilson, 1992).

The study arose in part because of concern that the local co-educational comprehensive high school which had stood as the cornerstone of secondary education in NSW for almost 30 years was being placed in a position where it must now compete, not only with non-government schools, but with new special purpose government schools. These include senior high schools, selective high schools, technology high schools and those with a focus on performing arts, physical education and other designated "centres of excellence". The development of such schools, coupled with initiatives such as de-zoning, has introduced new elements of choice and competition into the secondary education "market". Additional complicating factors include changes to the secondary curriculum and increased retention rates.

The study (Cairney, et al, 1992: 1) attempted to examine student, teacher and community expectations for education. It was also concerned with the manner in which these expectations are communicated between the various parties involved in education. The project was conducted in Western Sydney and addressed three major focus questions:

- * What are the expectations of students' educational needs held by students, teachers, parents and business?
- * What communication processes are at work within schools and between schools and their communities concerning education?
- * What are the essential characteristics of effective communication?

The project was undertaken in two stages, the first of which consisted of a survey of teachers, students, parents and business within a representative range of nine comprehensive high schools and communities. Schools were chosen to represent the socio-economic and cultural diversity evident in Western Sydney. Stage two consisted of in-depth study in three of these schools, selected both on the basis of their diversity, but also because they were considered by students, parents and teachers to display evidence of effective communication.

During Stage one, students, teachers, parents and business were surveyed. In the case of students, all year 9 and 11 students were surveyed. Parents of all the students surveyed were invited to participate. All staff within each of the nine schools sampled were asked to complete a questionnaire. Business groups were sampled using a database provided by the Department of School Education's School and Industry Links Co-ordinator for Western Sydney. In all, 100 employers were selected representing a range of small and large business types.

In Stage two, students, teachers and parents were interviewed at the three schools. A random sample of 25% of all year 9 and 11 students was selected for group interviews. Small numbers of year 7 and 8 students and some vertical roll classes (one school) were also interviewed. Students were interviewed in groups of 6-8. Teachers were interviewed in faculty and cross-faculty situations while members of senior executives and specialist teachers were interviewed on an

individual basis. Parents volunteered for telephone interviews in response to a written invitation. These were generally conducted at night and lasted for 5-15 minutes.

Data in Stage one were collected using a single survey. This survey included a list of objectives which the literature suggested comprehensive high schools were attempting to achieve with their students (see Collins & Hughes, 1982; Schools Council, 1990; Walton & Hill, 1987). The survey was trialed at a single comprehensive high school (not included in the major study sample) with 82 students in years 7-10. This resulted in further minor modifications to the survey. The surveys were subsequently administered to the 9 schools during March and April, 1991.

Stage one provided 3,567 surveys for analysis, comprising 2,713 surveys from students, 232 from teachers and 622 from parents. In addition, the 100 surveys sent to business groups had a return rate of 49%.

The questionnaire comprised 61 questions organised into 10 sub-groupings. The majority of questions required subjects to use 5 point rating scales to provide judgements on priorities for schooling (*Should*) and their perceptions of what currently occurs in schools (*Does*). For all these questions means and standard deviations were calculated. Subsequently, selected Spearman Rank Order correlations were calculated and Quadrant and Discrepancy scale analyses were conducted for items 1-44 to determine the common matches and mismatches in perceptions and understandings of educational needs and priorities.

The open-ended questionnaire items were analysed inductively by a number of raters. These items included optional comments made after Likert ratings and three additional questions which were purely open-ended. Analysis was completed using the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and involved a detailed coding of the data into specific categories.

Data collections in Stage two occurred over a period of three months. However, most of the data were collected in three day blocks at each of the three schools. A team of 6-8 researchers worked

intensively in each school during the three day periods. Members of the research team also observed specific activities on other occasions outside these three day periods and undertook further staff interviews where necessary.

Stage two interviews were conducted in a variety of formats and with a range of subjects. These included small group student interviews, faculty and cross-faculty interviews, ancillary staff interviews, senior executive interviews (both individual and group), interviews with specialist teachers and parent telephone interviews. Interview schedules were used in each case.

In addition to interviews, document analysis and observation of school activities occurred. A variety of documents were collected from each school, which were analysed by members of the research team utilising accepted principles of content analysis.

In the Stage two data analysis, major themes were identified through processes of coding using the method of "clustering" (Gietz and Le Compte 1981, Miles and Huberman 1984). Sub-categories of the major themes were identified and consolidated through a process of reduction. The NUDIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising) data analysis program was used extensively in the clustering process (Richards & Richards, 1990).

After two initial codings of 10% of the data comprising interview schedules, field notes, records of research team meetings and artefacts, a system of relationships between the major themes and sub-categories was developed in order to allow data to be entered into NUDIST. Three major themes emerged from the data in the analysis: School Reputation, Perception of School and Communication.

This paper focuses on data drawn from the Stage two in-depth studies and in particular, that data relating to school leadership and decision-making. The full results for Stage one and two are described elsewhere (Cairney, et. al., 1992).

Overview of the Three Schools

Each of the schools had its own physical attributes and drew students from differing communities (see Figure 1). A detailed description of each is considered essential to provide a contextual base for our discussion of results.

<< INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE >>

School 1 was built in the late 1970s and has the most aesthetically pleasing environment of the three schools comprising Stage two of the project. Large landscaped grounds provide a peaceful and pleasant atmosphere and effectively shield the school and its occupants from the nearby railway line and major highway. This was reflected in the comments by participants. While few negative comments were made about the environment many positive comments were made by students (13.5% of all positive comments) and teachers (8.3% of all positive comments). For example:

The school is in an attractive bush setting (student).

The grounds are pretty (student).

The environment is pleasant (teacher).

Despite its large student (1350) and staff (86) population, School 1 impressed with its order, cleanliness and sense of purpose. The school is in outer Western Sydney and draws from an essentially homogeneous middle class area. There are very few students of non-English speaking background. The teaching staff are experienced and most have transferred from other less "favourable" schools. Approximately 25% of the staff live in the area.

School 2 was built in the late 1960s in the "square doughnut" style (popular at the time), with a series of similar cement and brick blocks with steel grills and hard surfaces. Graffiti was more prevalent at this school and it also appeared noisy and dusty, with a lack of suitable shelter for students and staff gatherings. The administrative block of the school seemed drab and dated.

However there were efforts being made to improve the school environment, and the large grounds and trees found at the periphery of the school were commented upon favourably by teachers (4.2% of all positive comments about the school) and students (8.6% of all positive comments):

The trees and open space compared with others create a good environment (teacher).
A good environment, it is getting better (teacher).
There has been an effort by the executive to clean up the school (teacher).

Interestingly, while none of the teachers made negative comments about the environment, many students did (27.3% of all negative student comments):

It's a bad school because of the environment.
It's a neglected, dull colour.
The school is poorly equipped and neglected.
The basketball court needs repairing.
The graffiti and smoking in the toilets doesn't make you proud.
There's no grass, no seating and no bins.
The classrooms should be neater and cleaner with carpets and heaters.

School 2 comprised approximately 850 students and 67 teaching staff and was situated in a long established lower to middle class residential area. The drawing population is a mobile one, with approximately 45% of the students of non-English speaking background. The most common languages other than English are Lebanese, Syrian, Vietnamese, Egyptian, Spanish and Turkish. School 2 is the only remaining co-educational comprehensive school in its area and has a falling school population. Staff were less experienced than School 1 with approximately 20% having a non Anglo-Celtic background.

School 3 was built in the early 1960s at a time when secondary education was expanding in Western Sydney. It consists of large two storey "blocks". As with School 1, it has outgrown its facilities and is now attempting to cope with over 1000 students and 70 teaching staff. School 3 appears more barren than the other two schools, with open areas of tar and concrete and with less vegetation to absorb a fairly high level of noise. Facilities show the effects of wear and tear and the school's gardens are not as well tended as is the case with the other two schools. A small number of students commented on the importance of a good school environment (6.2% of all positive comments) without necessarily commenting upon their own school. For example:

*Students are proud of their school because they clean it up.
You are proud of your school if it has a tidy environment.
The environment, grounds and buildings set the tone.*

However, large numbers of students (22.2% of all negative student comments) made negative comments about the environment:

*The school buildings are a bit pathetic and need renovating.
The school could change by more help with the environment.
The toilets need changing - there are no mirrors or toilet paper and they are dirty.*

School 3 draws on three distinct areas: the original Housing Commission area, still mainly rental accommodation; two newly established privately owned estates composed mainly of first home lower income buyers; and a long established "fibro" housing suburb. Overall, the drawing area of the school is predominantly lower socio-economic in origin with a large non-English speaking population (approximately 25%), originally Dutch, German and Croatian, but more recently from diverse migrant backgrounds. Other than English, the common languages spoken in the area are Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Greek, Indian, Maltese, Pacific Islands, Spanish, Tagalog, Turkish and Vietnamese. Only two of the teaching staff live in the immediate area.

Leadership and Decision-Making in Each School

As part of the in-depth case studies for each school the principals were interviewed individually and as part of the senior executive team. Their interaction with staff, students and parents was also observed as members of the research team participated in a variety of school activities (e.g., staff meetings, P & C meetings, parent/teacher nights). Data concerning the individual leadership style of each principal were also obtained from interviews with staff, students and community members. Inductive analysis of these data led to the development of the following profiles.

School 1

The administration block at School 1 impresses with its activity, enthusiasm, pride in the accomplishments of its students and welcoming nature. Key offices are located in close proximity and an "open door" policy appears to be in operation with the Principal clearly at the hub of the administration of the school. The report (Cairney, et. al., 1992: 151) noted that:

Members of the research team were favourably impressed with the administrative block of the school, including its cleanliness and order, aura of tradition and sense of purpose.

The school appeared favourably disposed towards the research team and it was apparent that the Principal had played a major role in "smoothing the way". Recess was extended on the first day of the team's visit and the Principal made a special point of welcoming the team and invited the leader of the project to address the staff.

Staff seemed genuinely supportive of the Principal, their fellow teachers, students and school and there was evidence of what could be called a collective vision. Clearly, the Principal had played a major part in forging and maintaining this vision.

Due mainly to the initiative of the Leading Teacher and Principal, members of the research team were invited to many activities both inside and outside school time. The school exhibited both an attention to detail and an openness to outside scrutiny.

The school enjoyed a good reputation in its local area and the Principal had played a part in fostering this through encouraging staff to publicise school achievement and increased use of the local media. This appeared part of an overall emphasis on excellence, although there was some disquiet from students and staff that the "lower strand" of students might tend to be neglected as a result of this. For students and parents the most frequent reason given for the perception that the school had a good reputation was the academic excellence of the school (21.2% of positive student comments and 47.9% of all positive parent comments). Comments about reputation included:

*The school's reputation has been good for about five years academically (student).
Achievement has been greater in recent years, the results have been very good (teacher).*

Specific talents of children seemed to be fostered by staff and given strong recognition by the school and its community, as teacher comments during interviews indicated:

*We try to promote a balance of skills and content and aim to develop creativity.
We like to get the students interested in a subject in the junior years.*

The academic achievement of the school appeared to be seen by the staff as critical to the school's success. For this reason, the staff, particularly the executive, consciously encouraged dissemination of information about academic results into the media, particularly the major local newspaper. The Principal made comments such as:

*The school set up a media group committee.
Members from faculties may produce an article for the local [newspaper].
There is something in our major local newspaper every week - a very favourable press.*

However, as mentioned above, there was some concern that perhaps the less involved and academic students were being neglected at School 1 due to its emphasis on excellence. Comments included:

I am concerned about my daughter being able to find suitable subjects for her abilities, she isn't so academic (parent).

Musicals are a lot of work and give emphasis on [sic] a select number of kids (student).

We feel under pressure, we are tired of being assessed (student).

It was apparent that there was a priority placed on the symbolic aspects of school culture with the school itself providing blazers for prefects and captains for their official duties and with an overall emphasis on school uniform and pride in the school. One source of this pride lay in the time and effort devoted by staff and students to what could be termed extracurricular activities such as musicals, sport, and Science and Maths competitions. The success that staff and students had received in these areas was recognised by the school and wider community and was a source of communal pride, although in reality only limited numbers of students were directly involved in such activities.

There was a positive orientation to student behaviour in School 1, with a generally held expectation that the students were "good". Comments about student behaviour at School 1 included:

The students are respectable (student).

There are few discipline problems, they're good kids (teacher).

The students are polite and well presented (parent).

Most of us are happy here (student).

There are nice people in the school (student).

This school is a happy, caring place (teacher).

There were very few negative comments made by teachers and students about the reputation of the school and none by parents.

The research team noted that there was a high level of student contact with the senior executive at School 1. The captains of the school seemed very "at home" in the Principal's office and many students were continually "ducking in and out" for a variety of reasons. The Principal also maintained a high level of contact with students who were misbehaving. These students had to present behaviour forms to be personally signed by the Principal on a regular basis. The Principal also made a point of attending some year assemblies and made frequent personal contact with

students and staff. Clearly, despite research evidence to suggest the difficulty of this (see O'Dempsey, 1976; Willis, 1980), the Principal was determined to be visible and accessible to staff and students within School 1. In addition to such personal contact, the Principal used the telephone constantly, particularly in contacting the large staff. During the visit of the team he was seen to frequently telephone staff (usually without needing to consult a directory) to ensure all requirements were met and to keep his finger "on the pulse".

Two significant formal channels of communication at School 1 were daily year assemblies held at different locations within the school where staff and students were kept informed and recognition given for achievement, and the school's use of newsletters which were generally positively viewed by all interested parties. Other avenues for communication were school reports, on which the Principal wrote a comment for every student, the use of notes home, and telephone contact with parents. Individual faculties also utilised various means of communication. Overall, at School 1 there was an emphasis upon open, two-way communication of a positive nature, local newspapers being one avenue for the transmission of such positive images which the senior executive encouraged.

One formal organisational structure for communication at School 1 was the Student Representative Council (SRC). Despite its perceived importance in the school, the SRC proved to be largely symbolic, with generally negative comments from the students because of the small number actually involved and the SRC's apparent lack of real power to initiate change. Student comments about participation at School 1 included:

*Students should have more say about how they would like things done.
The SRC doesn't do anything.
Nobody cares about it.
Only the school captain does something.
You don't hear results [from the SRC].
The SRC says it will do things, but it doesn't.
It's a waste of time.*

However, student opinion was sought and taken into account through such avenues as student surveys about subject choice and timetabling which were instigated and analysed by the school's Key Learning Areas Committee.

Parent/Teacher nights were also utilised at School 1 and were generally favourably regarded. Refreshments were provided for parents and at a meeting attended by a member of the research team the atmosphere was positive and friendly, with the Principal making a point of dropping in to speak to parents over a cup of tea or coffee. The majority (80.6%) of parent comments about Parent/Teacher nights were positive. For example:

*You can communicate through parent/teacher nights.
Parent/teacher nights are valuable.*

A Parents and Citizens' Association (P&C) was also active at School 1 and parents were generally positive about its role and effectiveness. Twenty parents attended a P & C meeting attended by two members of the research team. There was a high degree of input from parents, with no apparent reluctance to ask questions of the Principal and Leading Teacher. It seemed that the Principal was using the P&C meeting to keep informed and thus be forewarned of both student and parental concerns, indicative of the generally pro-active stance of the Principal. The majority of parental comments about the P&C were positive (72.7%). For example:

You find out about school through the P&C.

Overall, it was apparent that at School 1, students, parents and teachers shared a common belief that it was a "good" school. The Principal had a strong influence in setting the general tone or "climate" of the school and had a marked "hands on", "open door", proactive attitude, being at the centre of much that was happening within and concerning the school. The Principal, despite the large size of the school, appeared to deal effectively with the variety, fragmentation and brevity of contacts with others which have been found to typify the lot of the principal.

The senior executive of the school appeared to be a forward oriented cohesive unit, well supported by the other executive staff, and in turn by the remaining staff. Communication was characterised by openness and a willingness to consider the viewpoints of others, and there appeared to be genuine concern with pupils' needs. Relations between the various groups within the school generally appeared to be characterised by mutual respect and consideration although there was some evidence of rivalry and dissonance between faculties.

While it could be argued that School 1 enjoyed certain inherent advantages over the other two schools, it is equally possible, in part due to its size, that the climate within the school could have been far different if it had not been for the considerable influence that the Principal appeared to exert.

School 2

At School 2, the administration block appeared to be the least vital and active of the three schools visited in stage 2 of the project. It seemed drab and dated, with trophies and prizes dating mainly from the 1970s. It was separated from the rest of the school both physically and administratively.

In contrast to School 1, the research team was not expected by most of the staff on the day the in-depth study began. Despite preceding visits, the bulk of staff members only learned of the team's presence through the daily school bulletin on the day interviews were to commence. In addition, there was some antipathy when teachers found through a notice from the Principal that they were expected to attend interviews with the team during their "free" periods. Some executive teachers were upset because they felt they had no say in the presence of the team in the school. It was thus necessary to both explain the purpose and nature of the study and to pacify members of staff so that the in-depth study could take place.

In addition, there were organisational problems on the first day with teachers being informed in several cases that they were to attend interviews at one location while the interviewer was told a different location. Despite these difficulties, the bulk of the staff were cooperative and keen to talk, particularly concerning the perceived problems of the school. There was a general feeling that as the only surviving co-educational comprehensive high school in its "cluster", School 2 had been somehow "passed by" and that this was reflected in the loss of students, particularly the more able "cream", to other schools nearby. There was concern that the school leadership was not doing enough to "sell" the school under these changed circumstances.

In contrast to School 1, there was greater ambivalence concerning the reputation of the school. Of the three schools, students and teachers at School 2 offered the lowest proportion of positive comments (56.5% and 55% respectively) and the greatest number of negative comments (43.5% and 45% respectively) about the reputation of their school. However, due to the high levels of non-English speaking parents and problems encountered by the school disseminating and translating interview request forms, there were very few comments concerning reputation and other matters from parents. Nevertheless, overall there was a general view that School 2 was "better" than other schools in the region and that it had "improved" in recent years. Students and teachers made comments such as:

- The school is cleaning up its image (student).*
- Uniform is a major symbol of improvement (student).*
- New staff at the top has helped the reputation of the school (student).*
- We have more commitment from the deputy and Principal (teacher).*
- The school's reputation is much better than six years ago (teacher).*
- There has been some improvement, more uniforms are being worn (teacher).*
- The school is promoting itself (teacher).*
- The school feels it has a place in the community (teacher).*
- Against other schools, we're good - and we like it here (student).*
- The school is pretty good compared to other schools around here (student).*
- The school has a better reputation than some (student).*
- The kids at this school are better, they're nice, there aren't so many fights (student).*
- The school is more respected now, there is less vandalism (student).*
- There's more violence in other schools (student).*

There were however perceived problems with racism, the unattractive school environment and the community perception of its "inferior students". There was also a general feeling of

powerlessness to influence change coming from both students and staff at School 2. Student and teacher comments included:

It's hard to change if a school has a bad reputation, we need to get students interested (student).

It's hard to change reputation. Mud sticks(student).

It is too hard to improve (teacher).

The school has lots of different groups and you hear bad rumours about it (student).

This school doesn't have a good reputation because of fights between wogs and Aussies (student).

There are tensions between different groups but I think that comes from outside (teacher).

Biggest problem with reputation is inter-cultural rivalry (teacher).

It's a bad school because of the environment (student).

The school is poorly equipped and neglected (student).

The graffiti and smoking in the toilets doesn't make you proud (student).

There's lots of smoking in school - bad drug dealing, rough hooligans (student).

Kids expelled from other schools come here (teacher).

However, one newly arrived executive member did appear to be making a difference. This person seemed willing to initiate change and there had been a concerted effort to improve the school environment and to improve maintenance in classrooms.

Community involvement was seen as extremely important at School 2 and the school placed major emphasis on its "International Peace Day", while the school had also formed liaisons with local senior citizen groups and a local home for developmentally delayed youngsters. A parent "drop in centre" and a Community Liaison Officer were perceived as necessary for the school to build community relations, but these initiatives had yet to be introduced. Overall, the school emphasised a commitment to multiculturalism, although it was noted by students that their parents could not read information sheets about coming events and were rarely given translations of school information.

An interesting finding at School 2 was that the teachers appeared to have a great deal of empathy and respect for the students. This was in contrast to their views on senior school management. Students and teachers alike noted how student behaviour had improved and conflict had eased in the school in recent years. While there was something of an inferiority complex evident, there was also a degree of pride in the school and its population, (both teacher and student), although

teaching staff at School 2 tended to rate themselves more poorly than teachers at the other two schools. Comments from teachers and students to support the mutual empathy mentioned above included:

*We know our year adviser well, there are a lot of teachers like that. Ninety per cent of the teachers are good and respected by senior students, 10% are not so good (student).
The caring teachers talk to you, help you, crack jokes and give you extra time (student).
Most teachers are quite good (student).
The kids at this school are nice (teacher).
Most of the students are good (teacher).
It's a great school. The kids are down to earth (teacher).*

Participation in extracurricular activities such as concerts, award schemes and competitions was a source of school pride, although academic achievement was not given the same high priority as it was at School 1. Student participation generally was of concern to students at School 2, although teachers did not share this view to the same extent. As mentioned above, both groups were concerned over their lack of input to school change although the research team was impressed by the apparent warmth between teachers and students at the school.

In relation to communication, teachers appeared somewhat hesitant to contact parents by telephone and the guidelines concerning this practice did not appear to be clear. Teachers were supposed to go through Head Teachers when telephoning parents, but were anxious about this as they felt that support at senior executive level was lacking. School assemblies were a "bone of contention" for teachers and students, with both groups complaining about the inadequate speaker system, which meant that most of the proceedings could not be heard. At School 2, all students and teachers attended a combined outdoor assembly for 15 minutes each day, (although from 1992, a new Principal had seen this practice revert to a weekly assembly and the public address system had finally been updated).

The newsletter used at School 2 was primarily aimed at parents and labelled specifically the "Principal's Newsletter". The newsletter had a formal tone and mainly addressed the compulsory, instrumental aspects of school organisation, rather than the more informal, voluntary aspects of school life. While the newsletter was highly informative and generally positive in tone, there

seemed to be few positive references to student achievement. On the other hand, there were references to fights and lost property. Staff also received a daily information sheet and a weekly memo, although a lack of staff pigeon holes made distribution difficult. Students received school information booklets at the beginning of the year and these proved to be interesting, comprehensive and positive in tone.

As with School 1, an SRC was in operation. This was once again viewed by students in a negative way, with the majority of student comments about the SRC being critical. Examples included:

*The SRC does not represent our views.
I haven't heard of the SRC doing things.
The SRC really doesn't do much.
The SRC needs support and encouragement.
You never get what you want through the SRC.
We can give ideas to people through the SRC.
The SRC has some power, it has petitions.*

Parent teacher nights were generally positively regarded, especially when senior students served as interpreters. These occurred twice per year. When a member of the research team attended a P&C meeting at the school, there were only six parents present and all came from English speaking backgrounds.

Generally, it appeared that there were a number of communication difficulties at School 2 due to differences in opinion held by teaching staff (including Head Teachers) and the senior executive. It appeared that two members of the senior executive were seen as poor communicators, while the third member was seen in a more positive light. It appeared that there was a lack of collaborative decision-making at the school. Teaching staff and Head Teachers complained about the fact that staff meetings did not address important issues. Head Teachers in particular felt dismay because of their inability to have their views considered. There appeared to be a great deal of animosity between the Head Teachers and the Principal. Many staff suggested that they were not adequately consulted on decisions made at the school. Staff also referred to difficulties in actually gaining access to the senior executive. Teachers commented that the Principal's door was usually closed

and that an appointment was needed to see the Principal. The Deputy Principal was seen as more approachable, but it appeared that the staff viewed the senior executive as usually acting in concert. Staff also felt that the Principal and Leading Teacher did not have a high profile in the school and were rarely seen walking around the school, something the Deputy Principal did do on occasions. The senior executive was generally seen by the rest of the staff to procrastinate on key decisions. Comments made by teachers concerning decision-making and by association teacher morale at School 2 included:

*There is no democratic decision-making.
Teacher morale is low because of the Schools' Renewal Program. The Department won't listen.
It's really time to improve communication.
Most faculties don't have much to do with each other.
Staff meetings are the same - important things come up too late.
There's too much bureaucracy at higher levels.
I feel I can't get anywhere with ideas, nobody seems to be listening.
You often hear about things after they have happened.*

The physical layout of the school did not help in matters of availability and approachability, with the Principal's office being isolated from the centre of school activity and the Deputy Principal and Leading Teacher having offices in different parts of the school. Teacher comments about the senior leadership of School 2 included:

*The Principal's door is often closed.
You never see him.
It's difficult to get to see him.
The Principal reigns supreme and makes decisions despite what the staff or executive decide.*

Interestingly, the Principal and other senior executive seemed to have excellent relations with the ancillary staff, while the general teaching staff did not appear to have a great deal of rapport with the office staff, who tended to stick to strictly designated duties, unlike the office staff at School 1 who appeared more flexible and had the benefit of better equipment.

Overall, despite the difficulties outlined above, there appeared to be a positive relationship between teachers and students at School 2, although there seemed to be a sense of frustration and

powerlessness from both these groups towards the senior executive. The school appeared to lack spontaneity and forward vision. Strict procedures and inflexibility appeared to be "the order of the day". It appeared that staff morale was low and that many teachers had given up trying to change the school, there being no channels open for them to communicate their frustrations. Some staff members spoke about the procrastination of the senior executive and commented upon the difficulties in acquiring staff pigeon holes, publishing a school brochure and providing a community room for parents. Unlike School 1, there appeared to be little recognition of student or teacher achievement, with the dusty and careworn foyer being indicative of this.

School 3

While the Principal was very welcoming at School 3, there was some negativity and opposition to the presence of the research team from some of the staff, who were suspicious of a project funded by the Department of School Education. Unlike School 2, a large and comfortable office was provided for members of the research team and interview rooms were made freely available and in some cases keys were provided for the use of the team to gain entry.

Generally, both students and staff at School 3 viewed their school in positive terms and considered it better than other schools in Western Sydney. School 3 was perceived as having a good reputation by 78% of students and 93% of teachers, although parental response was almost negligible at School 3, with only one parent responding to two distributions of interview request forms to the parent population. Students commented on the high quality of the teaching staff as a major reason for the school's good reputation with good student behaviour a secondary contributing factor. Teaching staff also commented on the high quality of their colleagues, but referred less often to the quality of students as a factor in the school's reputation. One event or "ritual" above all others served as major factor contributing to the positive image and reputation of the school. This was the school's involvement in the annual "Rock Eisteddfod" which promoted cooperation and unity of purpose within the school, despite the fact that only a minority of teachers

and staff were directly involved in this major school activity. Comments concerning the reputation of School 3 and the reasons for this included:

The students are proud of their school if they have better teachers (student).
Most of the teachers at this school are good (student).
School 3 has a good reputation because teachers take trouble with their work, they care, understand and listen (student).
We have better control by teachers than at other schools (student).
We know the school is trying to help us because the teachers work hard (student).
The staff are friendly (teacher).
Most of the teachers are caring (teacher).
The Rock Eisteddfod is good for the school, but it does take up a lot of time (student).
We get involved in heaps, swimming carnivals, maths and science competitions etc. (student).
We have extra-curricular activities such as the Rock Eisteddfod, leadership courses and sport (teacher).

As mentioned above, generally the students at School 3 felt that their school had a good reputation, compared with other school's in Sydney's sometimes maligned west. There was a high proportion of student comments (15.4% of positive student comments made about the school) referring to general statements such as "this school is better than others" in the same geographic area. Teachers agreed with students, but made fewer comments (8.1%). Comments included:

Our school is bad compared with other schools, but is good when compared with other Western Suburbs schools (student).
School 3 is better than ----- High School, our reputation is better than ----- High School, ----- High School and ----- High School (student).
The school's very good considering the area it's in (teacher).
The school is OK - there's a better standard of education on the North Shore because all the good teachers go there (student).

While the senior members of the teaching staff at School 3 appeared extremely conscientious and enthusiastic, there appeared to be some communication difficulties occurring at the senior executive level, and between the senior executive and head teachers. The Principal seemed to have a good working relationship with the Deputy and Leading Teacher, although some staff identified problems caused by the Principal's "new style" approach and the Deputy's "old style" approach. This was somewhat ironic as the Principal had held that position at the school for over a decade.

The Principal communicated an enthusiasm for the school to the general teaching staff while demonstrating an awareness of the potential for teacher "burn out". The Principal was seen as

interested in staff affairs, approachable and a "good listener", although some staff felt that at times, difficulties and problems at the school tended to be ignored. Comments made by students and teachers concerning the Principal and senior staff included:

The boss is the strength in the school (teacher).

The high profile of the boss helps - he is supportive and available to new ideas (teacher).

The school could change by getting a better deputy (student).

The Principal has his vision and is very forward-thinking (teacher).

We are warned about the behaviour policy by the Principal at assembly. He explains it and everyone knows about it (student).

Many staff saw the Principal as successful both in encouraging innovation through allowing staff to pursue special projects and in promoting the positive attributes of the school. Staff participation and collaboration appeared to be a key issue for the Principal at School 3 although the Principal expressed frustration with the low level of staff involvement and the difficulty of changing some teachers' attitudes toward their teaching and classroom behaviour. An added frustration was the tendency of better teachers to be lost to the school through transfer to "better" areas and promotion. The inflexibility of some executive staff was also of concern to the Principal of School 3.

As well as changing teachers' approach to teaching mentioned above, the Principal was also self-critical about the limited success the school had enjoyed in encouraging greater parental involvement in the school. As a result, the Principal had decided to concentrate on the "interested minority".

As was the case with the other two schools, the SRC appeared to evoke disinterest and some criticism at School 3, despite the fact that the SRC had a high profile with other SRCs in the area and was seen as something of a model by other schools. Many students, particularly younger students at School 3, did not appear to understand how the SRC worked and did not think that it had achieved very much. However, leadership and peer support programs were more favourably regarded by students at the school. Student and teacher comments were opposed to each other in the discussion of the SRC. Whereas 80.8% of student comments about the SRC were negative,

77.8% of teacher comments concerning the SRC were positive. Negative comments about the SRC included:

Students do not have enough say through the SRC (student).
There is no feedback on what the SRC is doing (student).
The SRC are not doing their job of communicating (student).
I don't know about the SRC (student).
Students want to make decisions themselves - a lot don't know about the SRC (student).
The SRC should have a bulletin, because nobody knows much about it (student).
The SRC is elitist and does not communicate with the main body of students (teacher).

Positive comments about the SRC at School 3 included:

You can work through the SRC to let the school know what you want (student).
The SRC do fundraising and give money to people for sport (student).
The SRC gets its point across (student).
The SRC certainly communicates to students (teacher).
The SRC is terrific (teacher).
The SRC is [as] democratic as a school can get (teacher).

The staff at School 3 appeared to have a high level of concern for pupil welfare, although the welfare system itself was not always well understood by teachers and students. However, on the whole, School 3 had the most impressive student welfare and communication system of the three in-depth study schools. There was an impressive newsletter aimed more at students than parents, and in addition, each "house" also produced a newsletter with a high level of student input and items of student interest. Students at School 3 were particularly interested in commenting on school policy (50.9%), but teachers made comments at a lesser rate (5.6%). Of students' comments about policy, 67.8% were positive and mainly related to student welfare, student behaviour and uniform policy. Positive comments included:

We know about the uniform policy, we hear about it every week, one teacher from each house goes round (student).
We understand the school behaviour policy and the homework policy (student).
Welfare policy is OK (teacher).

Negative comments included:

Don't really know the welfare policy (student).
Uniform policy is only partially enforced (student).
Behaviour Management Policy booklet only tells the rules and not the punishment (student).
No consistency in enforcement of policy (teacher).
I'm confused about the Welfare policy (teacher).

*Very little feedback from the Welfare Committee (teacher).
There's no ESL school policy (teacher).*

A small proportion of student (3.4%) and teacher (1.8%) comments related to the role of the P&C at the school. While the number of comments was small, of the student comments, 50% were positive. Comments about parental involvement in the school included:

*Most parents aren't interested in the P&C (student).
I don't want my parents coming to the school (student).
Our parents just never come to the school (student).
Only eight parents to the P&C and the same number run everything else (teacher).
It's the best school I've seen concerning getting parents involved (teacher).*

Only six parents were at a P&C meeting attended by one of the research team, all of English speaking background, despite the efforts of the Community Liaison Officer to encourage parents to attend. Those present appeared very enthusiastic and supportive of the Principal and the rapport between the Principal and P&C seemed positive and relaxed. In keeping with the Principal's concentration on the "interested few", these parents were involved in typing newsletters, attending leadership courses and other activities although the local media were not used to any great extent in promoting the school. The Principal commented that:

Parent involvement is only a small percentage of the school population, but this involvement is better than nothing.

The climate of School 3 was probably the most complex of the three depth-study schools. While there appeared to be a strong rapport between teachers and older students, there was also a degree of student/teacher conflict, particularly in the younger years at classroom level. In addition, there appeared to be elements of tension and conflict within the teaching staff. The ancillary staff seemed highly supportive of the teaching staff, while the teaching staff seemed defensive and gave the impression that "outsiders" could not appreciate the problems of their school and would thus distort any findings. They felt that Western Sydney schools had been misrepresented in the educational and wider community. This attitude was most apparent in the head teachers who were not enthusiastic about participating in the project. This seemed in part a rebuke to the Principal for not consulting them about the study and indicative of an ongoing communication problem in the

school. While the Principal advocated and used an "open-door" policy, the Principal's office still appeared isolated.

Within the teaching staff, it was obvious that there was a morale problem and that this was most apparent with staff of middle experience, older and less experienced staff seeming to be more positive. However, staff generally gave the impression that they would rather be somewhere else. It appeared that while a core of students and teachers were extremely involved in the school and positive about its future, it also appeared that a large number of staff and students were suffering from low morale. The Principal seemed aware of this problem and was trying to redress this, particularly for students through peer support schemes and other measures. However, students themselves did not appear to be aware of the concern that the Principal and other staff had for them.

Overall Implications of the Study for School Leadership Effectiveness

Figure two below summarises key aspects of the leadership for each of the three schools investigated in stage two of the project. It was apparent that the leadership of each school, particularly that of the Principal, had influenced school climate, performance and teacher, student and community satisfaction. However, leadership is also a two way process and it was equally apparent that the behaviours of the leaders were also in part a product of the school environment and interactions with others, and thus it was difficult to isolate the influence that the Principal exerted on each respective school.

<< INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE >>

What then, can be drawn from the case studies with relevance to the task of school leadership? The following comments derived from the study are offered for consideration. Where appropriate, additional commentary is drawn from the literature.

1. *An open door policy and Principal accessibility and approachability are important, particularly to staff and students, but this may come at a price in terms of the Principal's capacity to deal with a heavy workload.*

This is supported by a number of studies of the principalship, including that by Duignan (in Simpkins, Thomas & Thomas, 1987: 47) who found that:

Principals typically place great emphasis on the importance of developing and maintaining good interpersonal relations in their schools...[and] emphasised the importance of being accessible to students, teachers and parents. Yet in the same breath, they complained that they can never concentrate for any length of time on any one activity because of continual interruptions.

2. *"Hands on" leadership and attention to detail are also important, but need to be balanced with preparedness to delegate to others and to encourage and recognise the performance of delegated functions.*

Kefford (in Simpkins, et. al., 1987: 59) cites Darling on this matter:

if you cannot delegate, you cannot get the best out of your subordinates. If you want a sense of responsibility, you must grant responsibility, and if you want initiative, you must encourage it.

The key issue for the principal remains the questions of **when**, **what** and **how** to "let go" and the reasons **why** the decision to delegate is made e.g., to shed onerous duties or to recognise and/or professionally develop a staff member.

3. *Consultation and collaboration have important symbolic as well as practical benefit. On the other hand, lack of consultation and poor communication can have deleterious effects on staff morale and cohesiveness. Staff desire committed, positive and decisive leadership, but they also want to be listened to and their views considered by their leaders.*

There thus exists the important issue of individual versus organisational or collective decision making (see Owens, 1991: 262-263), with the principal needing to adopt a position between autocracy and staff indulgence, this position varying from issue to issue. Some problems are best solved by individuals and some by groups. Teachers will be vitally concerned with some issues and indifferent to others. The key point is knowing when either decisiveness or collaboration is needed. However, this is not to imply that all decision making in schools is "rational" or normative. As Owens has noted (1991: 266-267), "In the 'real world', decision making is usually

an iterative, ongoing process whereby the results of one decision provide new information on which to base yet other decisions".

4. *The Principal needs to be a source, facilitator and conduit for both formal and informal communication within and without the school and to consciously utilise a variety of communication measures. This can prove difficult in a very large school yet it is even more important that it occurs in such situations.*

As the Steering Committee of the National Project on Leadership and Management Training of Principals found (DEET, 1993: 16-17), principals require:

creative and interpersonal skills to inspire others through empowerment and interaction ... The skills needed are those which facilitate the collection of information, as well as critical reflection on the impact of local societal and cultural changes on the school's work ... the ability to negotiate with teachers, parents and community members is vital if the school is to achieve its stated mission and goals.

5. *It is important for the Principal to espouse and encourage forward thinking, a sense of purpose and a collective vision.*

Today, this view has become so universally accepted as to appear trite, but its importance remains undiminished. As Saphier and King (1985: 67) have noted (see also DEET, 1993: 16), it is school leadership, and particularly the principal, that gives "shape and direction to a school's culture...[through] a vision that embodies core values and purposes". Like many of the principal's "roles", it is easier said than done.

6. *A balance needs to be struck between attention to detail, policies and procedures (small picture) and to the more symbolic and intangible aspects of school organisation, culture and reputation (big picture).*

Owens 1991: 162) has noted that:

Symbolic leaders make use of words, time, and their personal presence and participation in the organisation's rituals, ceremonies, and other symbolic behaviours. They attend to these as primary activities rather than as peripheral activities to be squeezed in after managerial work is attended to.

- 7. The importance of a school's physical environment in regards to school climate and staff, student and community perceptions of school effectiveness has perhaps been underestimated.***

This aspect has been recognised by Tagiuri (in Tagiuri & Litwin, 1968) as the "ecology", or "physical/material factors" of an organisation. Schein (1985) has termed the visible aspects of organisational culture (including behaviour) "artefacts and creations", a level overlying the "values" of the organisation, which in turn rest on the organisation's "basic assumptions". Schein makes the point that the visible aspects of an organisation's environment are symbolic of the culture of the organisation itself, while Beare (in Simpkins, et. al., 1987: 289-290) has noted that:

School buildings are never merely physical entities, never merely bricks and mortar. They collect emotional colourings and associations according to how they are used ... What trophies, badges of achievement, monuments, status and memorabilia are on display? They demonstrate what is valued and what is worth remembering in that community.

- 8. Public recognition of student, staff and school achievement is important, but efforts also need to be made to ensure higher levels of student and staff participation in such "high profile" sporting, academic and cultural activities which only involved a minority of students and staff at the schools studied.***

Barker and Gump (1964) found that the opportunity for student participation in extra-curricular activities decline with increasing school size. Baird's work (1969) tended to confirm Baker and Grump's findings in that there are only approximately the same number of opportunities for student involvement with increasing school size, e.g., only one first grade football team, only one debating team, only one student newspaper, etc., something with relevance to the three large high schools comprising Stage 2 of the study.

- 9. Extra-curricular activities are also important as symbolic "rallying points" in building the perception and reality of a "good" school, yet the comments made above regarding present levels of participation are of concern.***
- 10. The aim of true, representative and meaningful student (and to some degree staff) involvement and empowerment in school decision making processes remains seemingly unfulfilled.***

Duignan (in Simpkins, et. al., 1987: 310) has commented that:

Successful institutions possess a belief system which values the worth and ability of the individual and supports the need for high levels of achievement. The institutional leader, e.g., principal, is in a key position to promote and protect this belief system ... In the case of the school, he/she cannot be held solely responsible for promoting and maintaining its belief system. Staff, students and parents can, and should, contribute so that the school develops a culture which focuses on high standards and excellence in performance.

- 11. True, representative parent and community involvement is important yet was also presently elusive in those schools studied.**

As the Schools Council (1990: 81-83) has noted:

Relations between parents and teachers in schools has long been a complex topic, full of ambiguities and contradictions. Each school system throughout Australia has taken some initiative to increase the amount of parent participation in the schools their children attend. ... From the experience of the last ten years we have learned that the more extensive forms of parent participation are likely to occur in primary schools. Secondary schools remain less receptive and more 'out of reach' of parents.

- 12. Many of the implications raised above hinge on the notion of "balance". It seems that the Principal needs to be capable of making professional judgements which involve finding a personal position between sometimes opposing ends e.g., "hands on" versus delegation, attention to detail versus "big picture", procedural versus symbolic action, and so on.**

This has been recognised by many writers such as Halpin (1966) and Blake and Mouton (1985) who have represented aspects of organisational leadership on two dimensional matrices or opposing ends of continua, e.g., "consideration" versus "initiating structure" (Halpin, 1966: 86), and "concern for people" versus "concern for production" (Blake and Mouton). In effect, what is usually advocated is a contingency approach where the most appropriate position on a continuum is taken in view of the circumstances, but what is unclear is whether the three principals in the study under examination consciously chose their personal position on a range of issues, or adopted these positions by default or because of leadership failure or inadequacy.

- 13. The above begs the question as to whether leadership training can be provided to assist the Principal to firstly identify the most appropriate position on any continuum, and to then adopt this. It should be noted that this position may well change over time as circumstances change and the Principal and other staff "mature".**

As Duignan has noted (in Simpkins, et. al., 1987: 41), echoing the findings of other research into the role of the principal:

the Principal's role is inherently complex and ambiguous. Relying on personal and professional qualities, skills and strategies, the principal gallantly attempts to overcome this complexity and ambiguity in order to facilitate the achievement of his/her school's ultimate goals - improving teaching and learning.

The recent DEET report on the principalship (1993) is indicative of a growing awareness of the importance of providing principals and potential principals with the "knowledge, skills and professional development ... [needed] now and over the next decade" (title page).

14. Finally, it is difficult to separate the principal from the organisational climate of the school, as there are cause and effect relationships at work, with the Principal influencing and being influenced by the school and those involved within and without it.

As Burns (1978: 18) recognised, there exists a symbiotic relationship between leaders and their followers. The engagement of each with the other almost invariably alters each participant's personal position on the matter in question.

Concluding Remarks

The study under discussion in this paper provided an insight into the work and influence of three principals. In doing so, many of the observations and conclusions of others concerning the principalship have been confirmed. Whatever their perceived strengths and failings, one can only feel respect for the way in which the three individuals concerned have faced their responsibilities. In fact, all principals of schools in the current educational, social and political climate are deserving of support and understanding. It is not an easy time to be a principal (if it ever was), but plainly, it can still be very rewarding and there are still many who aspire to the position.

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Figure 1: The Three School Environments

<u>SCHOOL 1</u>	<u>SCHOOL 2</u>	<u>SCHOOL 3</u>
Built in 1970s, large landscaped grounds, peaceful, pleasant	Built in 1960s, large square blocks, noisy, dusty, graffiti, lack of shelter	Built in early 1960s, large two storey blocks, barren, open, tar and concrete, noisy.
Very large student population (1350)	Falling population (850 students)	High student population (1000)
Experienced, stable staff, "desirable" school; 25% staff live in area	Only remaining co-ed comprehensive school in "cluster", staff less experienced 20% staff non Anglo-Celtic.	Few staff live in area, most desire transfer
Draws on homogeneous, middle class area	Draws on long established lower-middle class area	Drawing area mainly lower socio-economic
Few NESB students	Mobile population with large NESB population (Lebanese, Syrian, Vietnamese, Egyptian, Spanish, Turkish)	Large NESB population originally Dutch, German, Croatian, now more diverse (Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Greek, Indian, Maltese, Pacific Islands, Spanish, Tagalog, Turkish, Vietnamese)

Figure 2: Facets of Leadership and Decision Making in Three Schools

<u>SCHOOL 1</u>	<u>SCHOOL 2</u>	<u>SCHOOL 3</u>
Welcoming staff	Team not expected	Welcoming Principal, negative staff
Order, sense of purpose, activity	Noisy, dusty, graffiti	Barren, open, noisy
Admin block, Principal at hub	Admin block and Principal on periphery	Admin block, Principal on Periphery
Open door policy, hands on leadership, visible, accessible Principal	Closed door, lack of access to senior staff	Open door policy, Principal approachable, good listener
High level of support for Principal	Lack of staff cohesion	Principal admired, although degree of frustration, tension within staff
Principal centre of communication	Senior executive isolated	Concern with lack of consultation
Collective vision forged by Principal	Perceived staff powerlessness, lack of spontaneity, forward vision	Principal attempting to forge common purpose, vision
Attention to detail	Lack of consultation	Some lack of consultation
Active promotion of school reputation, identity	Ambivalent reputation, not good, but "better than rest"	Good self-image, reputation
Perception that school, staff, students, "good"	Degree of inferiority	Defensiveness about reputation
Academic achievement stressed	Less emphasis on academic achievement	Overall balance in emphasis
Community involvement stressed	Community more at arm's length	Concentration on "interested minority"
Attention to symbolic aspects of school culture	Attention to policies and procedures	Attempt to foster greater staff involvement
Extra-curricular activities stressed, recognised	Extra-curricular activities a source of school pride	"Rock Eisteddfod" a rallying point
High level of student/staff contact, respect	Staff empathy, respect for pupils	High level of concern with pupil welfare, yet conflict with younger students
Largely symbolic SRC	Negative reaction to SRC	SRC has high outside reputation, but criticised inside school
Effective formal channels of communication	Dissatisfaction with school communication procedures	Impressive welfare, communications systems
Proactive stance	Perceived procrastination	Principal frustrated by inflexibility of staff