CHAPTER SIX

THE SUBORDINATE PROPOSITIONS

Introduction

This study of 'Western Australian Government primary principals' conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' school' has already contended that the superordinate proposition examined under the theme 'Weaving the Fabric' takes precedence over the other four propositions. Without 'Weaving the Fabric' the school is perceived to lack the basic set of values which has been termed the ethos. Once a school has established an ethos, the other four propositions provide the additional conditions perceived necessary as part of 'good' school. These other four subordinate propositions together with their associated themes are:

'WALKING THE TALK': Principals consider a 'good' school has dynamic leadership which enables a school vision, copes with ambiguity and structures productive relationships in the pursuit of quality teaching and learning.

'PRODUCING THE GOODS': Principals consider a 'good' school questions the efficacy of external testing, creates self-assessment tools, attempts to be transparently accountable to its own community and encourages child-centred teaching and learning.

'LEADING AND LAGGING': Principals consider a good school nurtures a symbiotic relationship with its local community with a view to meliorating educational change.

'SEEING IS BELIEVING': Principals consider a 'good' school generates a sound reputation which, although ultimately linked to

quality teaching and learning programs, is heavily promoted through the marketisation strategies of attitude, appearance and public opinion.

This chapter will now discuss each of the subordinate propositions in turn. Each proposition has a number of properties which will be individually considered. Also the relationship between the four subordinate propositions and the superordinate proposition will be detailed.

Walking the Talk

The proposition formulated under this states:

> Principals consider that a 'good' school has dynamic leadership which enables a school vision, copes with ambiguity and structures productive relationships in the pursuit of quality teaching and learning.

'Walking the Talk' focuses on leadership. The principals interviewed for this study spoke from the viewpoint of their own leadership experiences, although all were aware that other staff are potential leaders. Treen summarises the stance on leadership that emerged from every interview by explaining that:

> Leadership is not encompassed in one person. Leadership comes from people and it's inbuilt … one of the concepts we have to work through is understanding that leadership does not mean that you're the boss and you tell them what to do, and how to, and what to, and give them everything (BT, 40).

Having agreed that leadership can be performed by staff other than the principal, it becomes clear that all interviewees accept that the principal plays a major role in directing the school because, as Gaynor put it, "that's what we're here for" (BG, 159).

None of the leaders surveyed could envisage a truly ‘good’ school which didn’t have a principal taking a leading role. Gaynor, when challenged to define the principal’s role in leadership, provided the following response:

> I guess leads the leaders to lead and encourages and supports the leaders to lead, and also is … the change facilitator and the change manager … I’m with the staff doing the learning with the staff and looking for the opportunities to lead the staff (BG, 116).

This thesis defines leadership in terms of these statements by Treen and Gaynor. There is the consistent conception, throughout the various interviews, of the primacy of the principal’s role in regards to leadership. there is also the strong understanding that schools have leadership teams and that successful principals make effective use of such teams to enhance the ‘goodness’ of their schools. Finally, this thesis distinguishes between leadership and management. Though management is one aspect of a principal’s role in a school it is not a property of leadership. Indeed, an emphasis on management could well be detrimental to inspired leadership.

The theme ‘Walking the Talk’ was derived from an interview with Deakin. His perception of a ‘good’ school is based not only on things that happen in his own school, but also on experiences he has had searching out schools for his family. One school he visited had, in writing, just the ethos he was looking for. However that ethos was not reflected in the processes and procedures of the school. As Deakin explained, these values and beliefs certainly weren’t being enacted in the classrooms:

> They hadn’t been able to put into practice what they preached. You know the saying “you gotta walk the talk, you gotta live the talk”. They had the talk but they couldn’t walk or deliver. Culture is all about living and walking the talk (TD, 130).

The proposition formulated under the theme 'Walking the Talk' concerns leaders using their own skills and the skills of others to ensure that their schools do convert ethos into action. The properties of this proposition are dynamic leadership, enabled vision, challenge of ambiguity, productive relationships, and quality teaching and learning. Each of these aspects will be discussed in turn.

First property of 'Walking the Talk':
Dynamic leadership

None of the principals interviewed proclaimed themselves to be 'dynamic' leaders. Few took much direct credit for the 'good' things that were happening in their schools. It is necessary to look at what they had achieved in order to judge their dynamism.

Three of the principals had opened, or were about to open, new schools. These three schools were large, complex and sited in areas with a wide mix of socio-economic levels and nationalities. Given that the principals had been selected for their jobs on merit (a relatively recent appointment process in Western Australia), and in light of the perceived success of the schools (all three having received wide press coverage), it would be fair to assume that these principals have a flair for innovation and adventure. Treen, whose school opened in 2001, had incorporated state-of-the-art information technology into Sunset Beach Primary; Peters had highlighted a unique pastoral care program at Edgeworth, complete with part-time school chaplain; and Deakin had an organisation based on teaching teams and teaching blocks which had left his parents standing "in dumb bewilderment" when they first heard about it (TD, 177).

Two of the principals, Skilton and Yardley, had won positions in large, difficult schools which had compiled poor reputations. By the time of interview, both these schools were held in high esteem by the Department of Education, Skilton's school running exceptional programs in civics and arts, and Yardley's school being a leader in 'Boys in Education' and pastoral care. Coincidentally, both Yardley and Skilton, had performed several secondments as District Directors in their own and other school districts, Yardley being appointed as a permanent Director in late 2002.

Four female interviewees were included in the study and all were leading principals and role models in an administrative position that was heavily male-oriented. Hegerty retired weeks after the interview, having served in education for more than forty-five years. As a principal, she had instigated highly successful junior primary programs which focussed heavily on self-esteem. Tander and Gaynor were both moving up through the levels of primary school administration and both won appointments to bigger schools in the years following their interviews. Latham, when interviewed, had just secured her first substantive principal position after serving as a deputy principal. Her promotion to Merrivale Primary was recognition for several years of leadership in an acting capacity at the head of difficult schools.

It is possible to look at the records of achievement for all of the principals in this study and find strong backgrounds as educational leaders and professional role models. This consistency of achievement is partly explained by the 'purposive' sampling techniques used for the study. Candidates were chosen on the basis that their schools were perceived by

their colleagues, and by District Directors, to be ‘good’. One principal, himself in an innovative and successful school, lauded Deakin and Peters by declaring that:

> You look somewhere like Townshend (pseud), or you look somewhere like Edgeworth (pseud), where they’re continually trying to push the envelope on what’s the best way to do their business in terms of maximising student learning. That’s a sort of indicator of excellence in schooling (CJ, 14).

Yardley, towards the end of an interview which outlined the fact that his school had been in the newspaper fourteen times for the year, and that his school’s programs had attracted interstate visitors, did reluctantly take some credit for his school’s impressive performance. He explained that:

> I don’t take all the credit for all the good feelings but you do create the overall parameters of how people can operate with you … For any principal not to believe that, or acknowledge that, I think they’re just fooling themselves really (KY, 515).

It was Tander, principal at Mt Nardon, and an educator heavily involved in curriculum review and staff development, who portrayed the principal’s role most forcefully, confidently announcing that:

> If I believe strongly … I will go with what I believe. And I think you have to have a certain level of feeling good about yourself to be able to do that. And I don’t care whose feathers I ruffle if I feel strongly about something. And I think that principals … I think we’ve got a lot more power than we think we have (DT, 355).

Tander enunciates two important characteristics of dynamic leadership. The first is the ability to be bold and imaginative. Many examples of this adventurous and entrepreneurial predilection emerge from the fifteen interviews contained in this study. They range from Treen’s sandboarding (BT,10) to Peters’ chaplain (MP, 152). ‘Good’ principals do test the theory

that they have ‘a lot more power’ than bureaucratic regulations suggest they have.

Secondly, and significantly in regards to the theme ‘Weaving the Fabric’, dynamic leadership appears based on values and beliefs. Just as a ‘good’ school has an expressed ‘reason for being’ so too does a dynamic principal have firm values and beliefs. ‘Good’ principals need to know where they are heading. They need belief, vision and action. They need to ‘walk the talk’.

Second property of ‘Walking the Talk’:
Enabled vision

Treen, the newly appointed principal of the then unfinished Sunset Beach Primary, notes that:

> The person that leads the school is without doubt an instigator of a good school, but I don’t think it is the only driving force that is the maker of a good school. I think you have to have an idea, or a dream, or a vision (BT, 1).

Treen goes on to talk about having something that “you are actually aspiring to within a school” (BT, 5). This is a valuable definition of what a ‘vision’ actually is – something to aspire to. In Chapter Five, the focus was on the ethos being the set of values at the heart of the school. The ethos is not the vision. The researcher’s own school, Endeavour Primary, had a clear set of values in every classroom. They were called ‘The Seven Cs’ and encompassed values such as ‘commitment’, ‘courage’ and ‘care’. These values were not the vision for the school; the vision was a well documented aspiration for where the school was going. Though the values are likely to remain unchanged the vision is always subject to review.

Latham, new to her school and searching to restore direction and purpose after some previous upheavals, and after recent departures of long-serving staff, turned firstly to the ethos statement to clarify the philosophical nature of the school. Only after the school's values had been enunciated could she and the staff begin to shape the vision. She clarifies this process by noting that:

> We, in fact, had to make a decision whether we were going to have a vision statement or an ethos statement, and personally, I think the ethos statement is more important because that's recognising what your school's all about, and then building on that and knowing where you're going (RL, 106).

As Latham suggests, first comes the ethos statement and then the school vision builds on that. Principals need to be aware of this progression, from ethos to vision. It is a key strategy in solving the 'good' schools' puzzle..

Ethos is about identifying the fundamental values, whilst vision is about planning the direction. Ethos is knowing why the school exists and vision states what the school intends to do. Gaynor explains how it is a challenge of leadership to tie these two elements together:

> If you can get all the energies harnessed in that direction to get the best outcomes for kids, parents, the community surrounding the school … the staff … and everyone who has anything to do with the school. If they know why they're here and they work hard to achieve what they set out to achieve … that's a good school (BG, 2).

Wray had the experience of being promoted to a school where the teachers were competent and hard working, but the ethos and vision had not been enunciated, clarified or aligned. He described how this lack of direction was manifesting itself when he first arrived at the school:

> Everyone was just beavering on doing their own sort of thing, so in terms of school directions and school priorities, there wasn't a great deal of school cohesiveness there at all (IW, 66).

In Wray's case there was an urgent need for the principal to take a leadership role in re-establishing purpose and direction. Local circumstances would appear to dictate how much of the principal's own vision should be incorporated into the vision statement for his school.

At a new school, in particular, the suggestion is that the principal should provide much of the vision. Treen's vision was based on the key value of 'fun' and, as he explained, its genesis was of an experiential kind:

> It's come from me at the moment because I'm it. But what it is, it's an eclectic bit of twenty five years of teaching of what I think is the way to go (BT, 219).

Skilton who took over an established, though struggling school, agrees with Treen that the principal is a key player in enabling a vision to be created. He enumerates the rehabilitation process that he adopted at Barnsley Primary:

> First of all start off with a vision of the school. It's a shared vision that is really required, emanating from the principal … the principal has got to have an idea of direction that he or she wants to take the school (SS, 4).

Skilton goes on to clarify the role of staff and community collaboration in reviewing the vision. Interestingly, he still emphasizes the primacy of the principal's role:

> And it's important that, whilst the leader, the principal, will have his or her own vision about the direction of the school, it is important that this is a collaborative vision. It's a shared one with the school community (SS, 19).

Tander is another strong believer in the school principal influencing the direction of the vision, and also in the concept of tying the threads of ideas

together. Certainly the staff and the community should be involved, but leadership is required to keep the efforts on course and coordinated. Left to their own devices she sees the staff "battling against each other. You have to have somebody that ties it together and gives permission for that to happen" (DT, 270).

A school vision of some kind, based on the values and beliefs of the ethos statement appears to be an essential property of a 'good' school. It seems unlikely that the principal would ever have less than a decisive influence over the content of that vision.

In schools with a well established ethos, knowledgeable staff and an involved community, the principal needs to be wary about disempowering people who can contribute constructively to the progress of the vision. A paradoxical position can arise whereby the principal creates a vision that is shared by nobody. This situation is alluded to by Mustard who introduces it through an analogy with a spider:

> It's like a spider weaves this big web around things and it only operates efficiently while the spider's there building. It's gone as soon as you go (AM, 311).

Jones warns of the same problem suggesting that there is so much emphasis on leadership in schools that the visions are almost forced to become part of the principal's role. Predictably, he argues, "when the principals go the visions fall over" (CJ, 31). The debate over how much control the principal should have over the vision is really bringing us back to the 'Walking the Talk' proposition. If the principal really believes a 'good' school should be

based on collaboration then the vision to some degree should be a collaborative one.

The principals participating in this study on 'good' schools were not united on the title of 'vision' for this directional statement that guides a school. Treen, as we noted talked about 'ideas and dreams' (BT, 3) while Urlich uses the term 'mission statement' (SU, 105). Yardley avoids using 'vision' because he sees it as an "altruistic and far off thing" (KY, 145) and prefers to consider that 'ethos' drives his school (KY, 147). Yet despite some dispute over terminology, or Peters' declaration that he finds his school's vision "really hard to come to grips with" (MP, 108), all schools in this research had a clear sense of direction for their school.

Tander, herself wrestling with terminology, can identify with a vision as she explains:

> It's to do with setting some sort of direction so that people know where they're going and I think … some people call that a vision. I don't know, maybe it is a vision (DT, 49).

'Good' schools do know where they are going. They have in place a statement that is developed collaboratively but inspired and sustained by the school leadership. This statement outlines the purpose for the school.

Third property of 'Walking the Talk':
Challenge of ambiguity

The struggle to create a vision for a school highlights a general characteristic about schools themselves. Ball (1997, p.321) captures this notion well when he talks about schools being "inherently contradictory. They may be productive and oppressive, liberating and inefficient, purposeful and unfair." In the example of the school vision, the tension for school principals is

between being too autocratic or too democratic. Ironically, both characteristics are needed at different times. There is also the ambiguity of the management role and the leadership role whereby a school principal needs to know what things are important and which things should get priority. Again, there will always be some elements of each required.

In the context of developing the school vision. Peters, the principal of Edgeworth Primary, sees the dichotomy between what he calls 'nuts and bolts' issues and 'the big picture'. He describes the ambiguity in the following terms:

> I have a problem separating 'big picture' from 'nuts and bolts'. I brought lots of nuts and bolts with me, I guess, and I still ask myself – "What is the vision of this school?" – I find it really hard to come to grips with that (MP, 106).

Peters' dilemma is an interesting one because it raises the issue of what constitutes the 'big picture'? Developing a vision certainly does, but what about subject policies or teaching philosophies? There is ambiguity about where 'nuts and bolts' issues finish and 'big picture' begins. Then there is the issue of who should be involved with what? Teaching staff should become involved at both levels although the degrees of involvement will vary. Often staff just want to teach and consider ethos statements, vision documents and policy making as unnecessary diversions. 'Big picture' issues are time consuming for principals too, but Treen sees them as the very substance of leadership, suggesting that some principals are focussing their energies in the wrong direction. His beliefs are clearly put:

> I think management is part of a school. I don't think it encompasses good leadership. I think you can be a fantastic manager and a terrible leader. You can have every policy,

> you can have every procedure in place but you've still got a school that's ordinary (BT, 65).

Kallahan, principal of the small, well established Watari Primary has a different concept of 'big picture' in his leadership. Like Treen he decries the divertive influence of office paperwork, but Kallahan's focus is on the classroom. Here is a principal who likes to be with children and to teach. Kallahan has no doubt where his priorities lie, as he explains:

> I would rather take a lesson with the kids, or go into a room, than come over here and fill a form in. Now certain forms, stats and so on are vital … I do those immediately (TK, 346).

Treen, Peters and Kallahan all have differing view on the role of the principal. All run successful schools so it is difficult to be definitive about which stance is 'right'. This is a demonstration of the paradox and ambiguity that challenge the staff and leadership of 'good' schools.

The challenge of ambiguity is not restricted to philosophical differences about leadership, management or the role of the principal. Schools, as Ball (1997) noted, are intrinsically paradoxical. Thus, in Western Australian schools, ambiguity and paradox are also demonstrated through the recently introduced Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998), and the New Education Act (Education Department of Western Australia, 1999). These legislative and administrative changes formed part of the devolution processes, and together indicate a move towards the assessment of outcomes, greater independence at the school level and more competition between schools.

Changes such as these are very challenging to schools and test their tolerance of ambiguity. 'Good' schools will question the fidelity of such changes, but will also be prepared to implement those that are required of them. Tander explains why schools in particular must be prepared to change:

> If it's a learning organisation, and a moving organisation, then it's got to move forward, it's got to move along (DT, 253).

Yet change is unsettling. The new curriculum, despite its five year implementation period, creates teaching and assessment problems for all teachers and has increased the demands on their time. The irony is, according to Kallahan, that the impact is on his best teachers who are "taking things on to the detriment of their health" (TK, 263).

Kallahan is faced with the classic ambiguous situation. The new curriculum is important to his school because it will keep it at the forefront of education. The developments will also enhance the reputation of the school and perhaps encourage increased enrolments. It is also a mandated change and the school must get on with it. However, on the other side of the educational ledger, his best teachers are becoming, temporarily at least, less productive and more stressed. His less able or less enthusiastic teachers are resisting the change, and will be even less enthusiastic if the outstanding teachers fail. The pressure of the paradoxical situation is significant.

The conflict for Peters was the way that outcomes philosophies were impacting on standards of neatness and some of the more traditional programs that were valued in his school (MP, 343). Peters was prepared to

solve the problem by trying to implement the new but save the best of the traditional approach. He commented: “it’s a juggling act I guess” (MP, 346).

For the leader of a ‘good’ school ‘juggling’ is a daily occurrence. There are competing demands from parents, continual directives from the Department of Education and the daily attention to the needs of children. Jones notes that “there are too many drivers at the moment and that’s why we’ve got all the adventures we’re having” (CJ, 306). Yardley summed up the necessarily flexible and pragmatic way that ‘good’ school leaders tolerate the ambiguity and sustain the integrity of their schools. His school’s approach is thus:

> I don’t alter my values and we don’t alter our concept of why we are here, but we certainly fill in all the right forms and go to the right meetings (KY, 404).

It is a critical property of ‘good’ schools that they cope with ambiguity. Paradoxical situations will arise daily because that is the nature of schooling. Schools represent values. What is taught and how children should behave is based on what the community values. These values are at variance with one another and are subject to change. Supported by the school’s own system of values and beliefs the school principal, and others in authority, must accept the ambiguity and inspire others with thoughtful but timely decisions.

Fourth property of ‘Walking the talk’:
Productive relationships

The ambiguity that plagues school leadership is no less pervasive for other staff in the schools. The Jones comment about “too many drivers” (CJ, 306) is just as pertinent at the classroom door as it is at the front office.

Devolution has made schools more transparent, more open and more subject

to the wishes and whims of interested outsiders. Goens (1996) comments on the complexity of this scenario:

> Today's schools are expected to reform themselves in a world where the contradictions and irrationalities of political confusion, conflicting demands, and swirling social problems have invaded the serenity of playground (Goens, 1996, p.54).

For the teachers to be able to survive in this competitive and demanding environment there is a need for them to be valued, encouraged and protected. School leadership has an important role to play in creating and sustaining productive staff relationships in schools. The first important task, in this regard, is to block out all the distracters. Yardley describes this 'gatekeeper' role:

> I see my job as gatekeeper, and I play the game, and I go to all the meetings and I do everything, and basically I only involve the staff in what I think matters. And what I think matters relates to the core purpose (KY, 34).

Protected from the vagaries of the outside world, there is then a need to establish a focus on the direction or core purpose of the school (IW, 134). This core purpose is represented initially by the school's ethos and vision because these properties provide the framework that unifies the staff's endeavours. Yardley sees this directed unity as "the key essential to a high performing school" (KY, 28). Tander notes this same critical step, insisting that staff need to have:

> Shared understandings about where we're going. How we're going to get there … so there's a feeling of togetherness and we're a team (DT, 53).

To be a productive relationship this team of staff needs to be given responsibilities in planning and leading the directions in which the school is

going. This is all about 'empowering' staff (DT, 282) and bringing out "the leadership qualities in other people" (BT, 43).

Yardley sees it as important to recognise and encourage the potential leaders who are often isolated in the classroom. He suggests that:

> You just need to acknowledge that leadership or give them a chance to display some of those qualities and let them out front occasionally (KY, 245).

The empowerment of staff ensures that there are "different levels of leadership" (SS, 122) in a school. It isn't possible or desirable for the principal or the administrative team to always be the driving force for improvements or change. Often others can do it better. Wray outlines how this process can be encouraged:

> I had one lady who drove a library automation and library skills thing, so I provided her with the time and the where-with-all to do it, and I think that probably worked a whole lot better coming from her than it would have done from me (IW, 130).

For some staff, who may not want such a high profile role, it may be the case that they just receive acknowledgement for what they do. 'Good' schools tell teachers "just how important they are" (BT, 28). They need to be told that "their contributions are valued" (DT. 11) and that they "are doing a very good job" (TK, 288). These small acts of recognition are integral to the theme of 'Walking the Talk'. They reflect and reinforce the schools' beliefs and values, and they help build productive relationships.

Hegerty, with over forty years of successful experience in primary schools, had developed a reputation for being a perceptive and empathetic administrator. She worked hard to generate strong staff relationships and

believed that ‘good’ schools were cognisant of “the fact that teachers are in the classroom for a very long time” (WH, 6). The challenge, as she saw it, was to make sure that good teachers have options that allow them to stay productive in their teaching. Hegerty suggests giving these teachers “a little bit of added responsibility” (WH, 13). Gaynor concurs and specifically encourages teachers to lead curriculum developments in schools. Gaynor’s advice is to develop:

> ….an understanding of where your staff are on the continuum of their acceptance of change and then use the ones at the leading edge to model and support those who have doubts (BG, 79).

The nurturing of productive relationships within a school obviously extends beyond the staff, but it is with the staff that the process must begin. It commences with the principal being able to help generate a direction for the school and then aligning the staff with that direction. The administrative team has to be supportive and responsive to the staff (RT, 37) and endeavour to develop what Yardley calls “authentic relationships” (KY, 3).

Authentic relationships represent one of the major keys to the development of ‘good’ schools. These relationships are authentic because they are genuine and because they are true to the ethos of the school. They are relationships that extend beyond the staff by incorporating the students, parents and wider community (KY, 5). For the school there are a host of benefits. Tander believes that encouraging authentic relationships and building teamwork results in “unleashing the talents that are in the place.” (DT, 149).

Structuring productive relationships is not an easy task. Some schools, where staff are merit selected, benefit from being able to choose teachers and administrators who already demonstrate support for the values, beliefs and directions of the school. These staff will already share a common bond and will most likely thrive on change. For schools without merit-selection, which was the majority in this study and the vast majority across Western Australia, there will be, as Tander sees it, staff who are "antagonistic, unmotivated, stressed and angry" (DT, 350). These difficult staff are, according to Urlich, a threat to 'good' schools making it "hard for the school to progress" (SU, 282).

Principals of 'good' schools consider that they need to work hard to develop strong staff relationships. At Loisville Primary with a student population of almost a thousand and 50 teachers, Yardley and his team are constantly motivating and encouraging the teachers. Yardley explains the focus of their efforts:

> We try to reward innovation, and we try to reward the things we think are important, like collaboration, team teaching and all that kind of stuff (KY, 489).

Productive relationships will not develop of their own accord. They are the product of continual efforts to recognise, reward and support the staff, and other members of the school community.

Fifth property of 'Walking the Talk':
Quality teaching and learning

It is axiomatic that a 'good' school would promote quality teaching and learning. There is a close link drawn here with the superordinate proposition encompassed under the theme 'Weaving the Fabric' whereby a school's

values and ethos directly determine how and what teachers will teach.

Gaynor explains how her school, Lancelot Primary, makes the transition from key values to quality teaching:

> There are core human values and preparing students for life is really decision making skills, and if you can bring values into your decision making, you can teach children to do that. Then I think you've got the ingredients for a good school (BG, 18).

Strong leadership will ensure that the value system of the school is continually related to all the activities in the school, giving them consistency, in the sense that "we're all doing this, and we're all doing that" (SU, 313). Quality teaching and learning comes from an environment where there is unity, direction and sense of purpose. This environment includes the documented school vision and the clear resolution of ambiguity. It also includes productive relationships, especially between the teachers and the students. According to Yardley:

> The difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher has got nothing to do with curriculum, it's got nothing to do with resourcing, and nothing to do with particular innovations … it's got to do with the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the kids (KY, 6).

An environment conducive to quality teaching and learning is the direct responsibility of the school leader. The principal and the administrative team need to recognise the direction the school is to go in, then ensure that the direction is followed. Effort in this regard needs to be determined and dynamic because productive education requires this supportive framework. With the appropriate conditions in place Gaynor believes things just happen:

> You feel as though, wow, this is really powerful stuff when it happens. Keeping it happening and keeping that critical mass so that it happens for everyone, is the key (BG, 24).

Strong leadership, a defined ethos, a clear purpose and productive relationships provide the ‘critical mass’ that invests a school with the opportunity to ‘deliver the goods’.

Producing the Goods

The proposition formulated under this theme states:

> Principals consider that a ‘good’ school questions the efficacy of external testing, creates self-assessment tools, attempts to be transparently accountable to its own community, and encourages child-centred teaching and learning.

The theme for this proposition is derived from the transcript of the interview with Ronni Latham. Latham had been acting principal of the historic little Merrivale School close to the Perth CBD. In the first six months of her tenure she had worked hard to improve some of the administrative, organisational and educational practices at the school. Anxious to secure a permanent appointment, she had felt under scrutiny by the District Director. She conceded that she had adopted a fairly autocratic approach in order to make the necessary reforms:

> The reality is that I’ve had to actually push through a lot of those accountabilities, that side of things, because I knew that I had to produce the goods (RL, 165).

Latham’s situation gives some indication of the pressure Western Australian schools and schools nationally are under, in regards to performance. Part of the annual accountability, instigated by the Department of Education, is self-assessment coupled with a Director’s visit. There is also an annual literacy and numeracy test for all primary school children in years three, five and seven.

The theme 'Producing the Goods' presents a proposition, which targets issues of accountability. The proposition will be discussed through each of its four properties; external testing, self-assessment, transparent accountability and child-centred teaching and learning. Where necessary properties will be linked back to the superordinate proposition encompassed within the theme 'Weaving the Fabric'.

First property of 'Producing the Goods':
External testing

Making schools more accountable is a trend associated with government moves towards devolution. In return for giving schools more control over their budgets, staffing and planning, the Government audits schools to check performance and progress.

McBeath (1999) suggests that the greater involvement of the government in the accountability of schools has caused the evaluation to become part of the political processes. He warns schools to "be alert to political agendas, both on the large, international stage and in the micro-content of school and classroom" (MacBeath, 1999, p.5).

For Western Australia the politicisation of accountability is manifest through a greater reliance on 'audit' type activities such as external testing and annual school reports. Accountability has also become linked with compliance. Rather than perceiving themselves free to create and operate a diversity of programs, schools have the perception that they are tightly constrained by the testing and annual reporting requirements. This issue was raised by a recent review of education in Western Australia, wherein the authors note that:

> It was evident from information provided to the Taskforce that the Department's accountability requirements have much more to do with compliance and inputs than with reporting of tangible outcomes (Robson, 2001, p.35).

The principals interviewed in the course of the 'good' schools' study reported here, were quite united in their strong views about the accountability requirements for their schools. Their outlook was motivated by the manner in which the accountability was being performed and not by the concept of accountability itself. Gaynor echoes the position taken by other principals when she observes that:

> I know we have to be accountable. I have no problems with being accountable. It's being able to effectively demonstrate it, and the way we are doing it now is not the way to do it (BG, 323).

Gaynor was protesting both about the annual testing of all Year 3, Year 5 and Year 7 children in literacy and numeracy, and about the annual District Director visits. Gaynor had ideas about how the Director's visits could be made more productive in her school:

> To me, the compliance stuff is just a pain. I mean, I have a plan that anyone can come in and read. It's developed by the staff and parents, it's comprehensive, it's about student learning, it's all about our ethos … If someone would just come in and read that, and say 'That's it. OK, off I go.' That would be fine (BG, 266).

It is worth analysing Gaynor's statements at some length because it does incorporate much of the substance of this proposition encompassed by the theme 'Producing the Goods'. Gaynor also links back to the superordinate theme 'Weaving the Fabric' which, it is recalled, suggested that the school beliefs and values are the central framework of schools. Noticeably, Gaynor suggests that the ethos ought to be one of the issues under review when schools are demonstrating their accountability.

Gaynor's major grievance is that the external testing and the Director's inspection don't do her school justice. In particular, the Director's school visit doesn't focus on the real 'goodness' in her school. The current measurement, she believes, is about something else. Not only, in her view, is the direction of the accountability requirements flawed, but the requirements of that accountability are a distraction in her attempts to create a 'good' school.

The important issue is Gaynor's alternative ideas for the 'inspection' visit. She is willing to be open and accountable, but she wants people to see the things she values about her school. The things she values may, of course, be hard to measure. They may also be things in which the government has no interest. Tension is seen between the perceived importance of the 'fabric' of the school and the absolute need to be compliant with the Department of Education's wishes. 'Good' schools should comply with government measurement requirements, but questions should be asked about how productive and relevant these audits might be. Kallahan, voices his opinion concerning the need to question the accountability process by saying:

> If we are just 'yes' men then you are not going to have a good school in terms of – it will not be fluid, it will not be flexible. It will not have the things a particular school needs (TK, 240).

Kallahan's comments about fluidity and flexibility strike a chord with the words of Rose (1996), author of *Possible Lives*. Rose believes that:

> If we judge one school according to the success of another we could well diminish the particular ways the first school serves its community. (Rose, 1996, p.3)

Rose and Kallahan are defending the right for schools to be unique. All schools have different needs and skills (MacBeath, 1999, p.4). Administering one test to all will force every school to change to meet the test, making each the clone of the other. It is once again paradoxical that devolution, designed to pass decision-making to the schools, indirectly imposes more constraints. Urlich believes that external testing and regular audit of school processes are not only restrictive, but are punitive as well. He has the perception that accountability is aimed at "principals and teachers who are not going to do the right thing unless you monitor them." (SU, 12). The punitive option would certainly compromise risk-taking and innovation.

Principals were aware that external accountability was measuring the tangible elements that were easiest to observe and record. Thus, while 'good' schools appear to have put effort into aligning visions, values and ethos, this work deals with intangibles, and intangibles are difficult to measure. Much that constitutes the fabric of the school can only be sensed, or 'felt. This is why Gaynor and others are happy to invite people into their schools and let them experience what Rose (1995) terms "everyday acts of courage and insight, the little breakthroughs, the mundane re-imagining of the possible" (Rose, 1995, p.430).

Interestingly, Yardley who had spent some time as a Relieving District Director in two different education districts, was aware of the importance of the less tangible characteristics of schools. He found that the feelings he got as he entered a school were strong indicators of the 'goodness' of the school itself. He recalls his impressions as he first arrived:

> I used to laugh that I could have written the report seven minutes after I got there and invariably those immediate reactions you have, or that gut-feeling you have, are, by-and-large, ninety-nine percent right (KY, 497).

The importance of the 'feel' of a school, perceived by the principals in this study as a indicator for measuring 'good' schools, appears to escape some Directors as they perambulate their school visits. Gaynor expressed her disappointment with the current audit visits:

> I think that they would go out knowing far less about the actual values and feelings of that community and just far more about how many kids knew their tables and how many kids knew how to spell (BG, 374).

There are concerns from the principals about the impact of the Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy (WALNA) Tests on the character of schools. These tests have been operating in the state since 1998. They are part of a national plan to address the needs of children in regards to literacy and numeracy skills (Department of Education, 2002). The program is financed by the Federal Government and it tests all children in government schools and most of the children in private schools. The annual results of these tests are an important focus during District Directors' visits to schools and, as such, compound the problem of judging schools by numbers. They also compound the problem of creating schools where a 'good' student is seen to be one who "regurgitates maths and spelling" (MP, 186). Tander held the view that:

> We're not measuring good schools …. We're measuring achievers in mathematics and language and stuff (CS, 296)

'good' schools are nervous or sceptical about the impact of the direction being taken by the audit and testing process in Western Australia. Hegerty, on the verge of retirement after a long and successful career as a school

principal, is concerned that schools are now doing things they "aren't truly convinced are going to be of any use" (WH, 33). She goes further, warning that:

> There are threats and challenges to good schools. The threat of national testing, the state testing and the reduction of things to numbers (WH, 42).

That things are going to become more highly scrutinised in the future is the issue raised by Skilton, the substantive principal at Barnsley. At the time of the interview, he was Acting Director in the Fremantle District. His speculations had an international perspective about them:

> I think the direction is a little like the scenario … with the English system, with an external visit every three years … and I would also like to see it on a triennial basis, so that for two years it's an accountability process which is more low key, with every third year it being a bit more intensive and greater scrutiny (SS, 179).

Like Skilton, most of the principals interviewed for this study appeared knowledgeable about the directions being taken by all forms of external audit and were able to debate the merits and pitfalls involved. In every case these principals indicate their corporate support of the processes despite their willingness to question motives and outcomes. All schools were endeavouring to turn the testing and inspection to advantage. Peters expressed his loyalty and his concerns most strongly:

> I use the word 'compliance' quite a bit and I guess a great case in point is where I sit with student outcome statements. I have some cynicism about where it is going to lead us and how effective it is going to be. But, at the same time, I comply and I demonstrate loyalty to the system, and I go out of my way to communicate where the system is going (MP, 289).

Treen, whose career has taken him into some remote schools where WALNA testing and the demonstration of academic excellence were not

high on the agenda, is still able to find some value in the external tests. He notes that:

> To me the academic measurement (WALNA) is minimal. You know, 'I've moved my kids two and a half stanines to the right'. That's my personal opinion. To parents, I use it as a PR selling point. That's more a marketing strategy than an actual (BT, 157).

Hegerty, who, as we have seen, was no champion of National testing, could also still draw some positives from the Director's visits. She reflects on the District Director visitations, saying:

> I find the Director's visits do cause tension. Not because of the District Director but because of the fact that it causes you to reflect and you think about the things that could be better. You can always do things that are better (WH, 29).

Though the principals interviewed for this study had objections to many aspects of external accountability they were robust and flexible in their reaction to the problems. Their reaction was a demonstration of their ability to cope with ambiguity. Yet in the end they were still prepared to question the process and suggest solutions.

Calvin Jones, principal of the large Chatham Primary was an articulate critic of national testing. He argued that there are "too many subjective measures that, are important to schooling to suggest you can only measure it empirically" (CJ, 312). Jones went further suggesting a solution to the problem:

> It is exceptionally hard to measure schools, exceptionally hard. In fact, I think the move towards self-assessment has to be strengthened. (CJ, 299)

There is no doubt that the issue of school accountability is very relevant to the perception of 'good' schools. What is measured is inclined to be what is

valued. Principals challenge the external accountability regime because it is diverting attention from the most important features of schools. These latter features may be amenable to self-assessment.

Second property of 'Producing the Goods':
Self-assessment

Many of the principals interviewed for the study on 'good' schools reported here appear to be developing methods of self-assessment in order to ensure that their schools are better able to determine their own strengths and weaknesses. Another outcome of self-assessment is more transparent reporting of individual student and whole-school performance.

MacBeath (1999), in a valuable text entitled *Schools Must Speak for Themselves; The Case for School Self-Evaluation*, records his belief that performance tables and inspection reports fail to tell the whole story about schools. In promoting the contribution of self-assessment he describes the process as the product of a nation with a high level of skill in the use of tools for self-improvement. He suggests that:

> It is an unhealthy system which relies on constant routine attentions of an external body to police its schools (MacBeath, 1999, p.1)

The support of self-assessment in schools would appear to be a movement towards a better analysis of 'goodness'. It is interesting that Jones, and several of his fellow principals appear to be moving down this path. Self-assessment offers a better solution than the often irrelevant external tests.

There is no delusion about the importance and difficulty of whole-school accountability. Mustard, whose school produced high academic standards, due partly to the strength of it's socio-economic catchment area, is aware

that parents need to be informed about the curriculum and assessment changes taking place. He explains his position in these words:

> Assessment is going to be a challenge, I think, and the misuse of information about schools can be a challenge, so I think schools have got to get out and talk with their parents so they have some understanding about what's expected (AM, 277).

For Yardley, in a school where the socio-economic index was much lower and the WALNA results much lower, assessment of academic outcomes was far from a priority. Yet his school also had to comply with the system-level requirements. With teachers trying to cope with student absenteeism, children's low self-esteem, and the sometimes-disruptive classrooms, there was very little spare time. Yardley describes his school's struggle:

> I think the tension here is the expectations that every teacher has to be able to master eight or seven curriculum areas … and be able to record, plan and report those student outcome statements (KY, 418).

The solution for Yardley's school was the same as that for Mustard's, to get the parents involved. In particular, Yardley's parents needed to be aware that Loisville School's ethos was not academic excellence but 'to create a better community'. Their focus was not primarily spelling and maths but on values, discipline, love of learning "and having fun" (KY, 394). Loisville school needed to be judged on far-different criteria in order to evaluate its unique and apparently worthwhile programs.

Jones, keen to move towards self-assessment at Chatham Primary, reported his frustration with the ambiguity of a new Curriculum Framework (1998) promoting developmental learning, and the conflicting onset of standardised

national testing promoting age appropriate achievements. As Jones outlines it, the demands were hard to reconcile:

> We're moving down a track that's implying providing open-ended, un-scaffolded experiences that allow children to demonstrate their own level of expertise … conversely, we have a Federal Government agenda to increasingly standardise tests (CJ, 326).

Jones was philosophical about the intrusive standardised tests, noting, that his school would "accept them and take what's good from them" (CJ, 334).

At Glenbowden Primary, principal Steven Urlich was similarly philosophical. He was also able to offer support for the WALNA tests:

> The national literacy and numeracy tests are good tests … and the results you can see. Teachers can identify areas that they need to address (SU, 394).

For Urlich, the external tests provided a baseline for what was happening in his school. The teachers could glean a mass of diagnostic data from them and parents could find out in terms of state-wide results where their child was positioned for maths and literacy. Urlich was already turning the test results to his own advantage and using the data for school improvement. Some of Urlich's support for the National tests could be attributed to the fact that Glenbowden was a school that produced strong academic results, a situation appreciated by staff and parents.

Urlich also supported the tests because they offered an alternative to the vagaries of the new Outcomes Curriculum (1998). Many schools were challenged by the developmental approach to accountability that this curriculum proposed. Urlich expressed his concerns that the outcomes curriculum, whilst producing the "theme approach and topic approach and

integration of the subjects" (SU, 397), was creating difficulties with monitoring. The same anomaly concerned Peters at Edgeworth Primary who aired his uncertainties in the following way:

> I'm just not convinced that the totally open-ended way is going to suit all students and teachers and that things are going to be measured accurately and validly (MP, 298).

Edgeworth Primary had developed a wide spectrum of tests, many of which were administered at the beginning of the year, to give teachers a profile of every student in their class. All this data was shared, in various forms, with the school decision-making group, District Director and, ultimately, the parents (MP, 324).

'Good' schools appeared to be developing a whole range of self-assessment practices. Many were driven by the WALNA tests and involved, as we have seen, individual schools using their test data to create diagnostic improvement plans for groups of specific children. Many schools had joined the state-wide Data Club to learn how to convert the external results into useful and comparative graphs which are able to plot progress, and highlight value-added increments. Skilton reports on schools in the Fremantle District creating 'Like Schools Clusters' (SS, 239) to share data and strategies based on WALNA testing. Concerns about both the rigidity of National testing and the vagueness of the new Outcomes approach, were causing the 'good' schools to be innovative and eclectic with their own assessment programs.

However, the most striking characteristic of what principals perceived to be 'good' schools, in regards to 'Producing the Goods', was the emphasis on child-centred teaching and learning models, and the accompanying,

individual assessments. Much of this work was based on the premise that "there's more to being a good school than having academic results" (TD, 21), which was the mantra of most of the schools in the lower socio-economic strata. The other premise was that assessments should be based on what had been learnt and what could be done. Child-centred learning involves goal setting, appropriate assessment and self review. Tander outlined the merits of this individual approach by explaining that:

> You've got a teaching pedagogy in the classroom that values, that really allows for authentic instruction, because the instruction is based on the needs of the child, and the needs of the teacher, and the needs of the parents. It's transparent because everyone's been part of it … and what does that allow you to do then? It allows you to set the next set of goals for the child (DT, 108).

Tander has provided the essence of teaching, learning and assessment, in what is perceived to be, the current version of a 'good' school. The emphasis is on the individual child, the parents are involved, and the assessment is transparent, individualised and constructive.

Kallahan's Watari Primary has also made progress, using *the Curriculum Framework* (1998) to develop individual teaching and assessment. He points out that this manner of teaching and learning incorporates school values, collaboration of all the people involved and an emphasis on reflection. In his opinion:

> That type of activity, and the group and collaborative work that is involved in reflective analysis and goal-setting, are two key features that involve the students, the teachers and the parents. Now this collaboration and reporting is meaningful and effective, and that helps make a good school (TK, 102).

‘Good’ schools are turning external testing and the need for enhanced accountability to their own advantage. Their self-assessment procedures, though still experimental and developing, are allowing the business of schools to become more transparent to all manner of interested parties. Gaynor details how this individual reporting to parents and inspectors might proceed:

> Have a look at the portfolios, have a look at the pad work, have a look at the exercise book, listen to what I’ve heard the kids discuss, look at my conference notes (BG, 294).

To ‘produce the goods’ in an accountability sense, the successful schools are creating their own methods of recording and reporting. In doing so they are opening up their procedures and processes for all to see.

Third property of ‘Producing the Goods’:
Transparent accountability

There was strong support from all principals interviewed in the case of current study, that schools should be transparently accountable, especially to their local community. Skilton, often seconded as a District Director, is aware of the need for Departmental gathering of data. He is able to place Departmental requirements in context with the local community needs, using the following framework:

> I sort of tried to rationalise this, as far as the accountability policy is concerned, by looking at ‘outward’ accountability and ‘upward’ accountability, and I see … that the most important accountability is the ‘outward’ one to the school community … making sure you’ve delivered as far as your community is concerned (SS, 163).

External testing, in the shape of the WALNA assessments, has been one element of greater transparency of ‘good’ schools. The individual student’s results are supplied to the families of those children by the government but,

at the time of the interview, there was no Departmental insistence on the release of whole-school WALNA results. Despite the absence of any official requirement most principals interviewed were already distributing school level results to the community. Kallahan outlined his school's approach:

> We're quite happy for our results to go out into the community. We put them in our newsletter, and so on, to indicate quite clearly how our children are achieving (TK, 127).

Though this school-level reporting is a characteristic of the schools involved in this study, an even more significant 'good' schools' indicator was perceived to be the general openness of all of the school's teaching and learning processes. It was apparent that schools were endeavouring to educate their parent body to generate better understanding of what the school was doing and what the school was achieving. From Tander's perspective transparent accountability was all about knowledge:

> To make sure the school continues to be a good school you have to give people the knowledge … They have to have all the facts … knowledge is available and it's shared by everyone and there's no secrets … there isn't a body of knowledge that is exclusive to the teachers or another body of knowledge that's exclusive to the parents (DT, 66).

Tander calls a school that shares its information so broadly 'a learning organisation'. These 'learning organisations' are identified by the characteristic of everyone learning together.

Wray describes the new accountability processes as "allowing participation and being as transparent as you can in your operations" (IW, 326). Various parent groups require different amounts of information and will respond differently to learning opportunities. At Wray's school, as he indicates, parents are eager to learn:

> We ran curriculum improvement sessions last week. One in the afternoon, we had fifty-six people rock up to and the one at night we had fifty (IW, 335).

At other schools, where parents are more reluctant to attend, principals have had to be more innovative in involving the community. Peters, at Edgeworth, spoke of the value of surveys and telephone contact, whilst Yardley, at Loisville, holds his fortnightly ‘Captain’s Table’. Jones uses the first forty-five minutes of a Parent’s and Citizen Meeting as an information presentation session. All these efforts are directed at making the whole school community better informed and better able to participate in the running of their school. In the final analysis, it is not the number of parents who turn up at meetings, or return the survey sheets, that determine whether the school is accountable and transparent, it is the school’s effort and willingness to respond to the community’s needs. Gaynor advises that the sharing process with the community is a large step for the community and one which schools should treat diplomatically by:

> Just being as honest and as open as you can and understanding your parent group … how far they want to go with things and where they want to leave things (BG, 163).

The openness and transparency of ‘good’ schools is very evident in the classrooms. This is one area that can always attract parents because they feel more confident in dealing with issues directly connected to their children. It is up to the schools to provide an open and welcoming environment, and this environment is partly a product of the new outcomes-based curriculum. An emphasis on outputs rather than inputs, a trend in countries seeking greater school accountability, promotes teaching and assessment methods that focus on the progress of individual children, rather than on a class as a whole.

Individual attention and developmental learning translate into portfolios, interviews with parents and the collaboration of all parties. At Glenbowden Primary, the reporting to parents involves an interim report in term one and a formal written report at the end of the year. In between those two reports there are interviews. The expectation, as Urlich explains is that all parents will attend and all children will be involved:

> We would expect them to attend, we have that expectation of parents … and the three-way conference … we are putting the responsibility on the child in the three-way conference. They have to address why they are performing or not performing (SU, 118).

Gaynor terms these interviews with parents 'learning journeys'. As at Glenbowden, the process is clear and open and, in Gaynor's own words, without surprises:

> There are no surprises in a report and parents need to know how the report was composed. They need to be there and follow the journey their kids are taking and support them in that journey (BG, 46).

'Good' schools are seen to be the ones that are being transparent in both 'upward' and 'outward' accountability. They are accountable to the Department of Education, their own school, the parents and, of course, the students themselves. Jones is able to encapsulate the accountability direction 'good' schools are taking:

> I think we should be transparent in our work with children. Our children should be able to see the processes and understand that this is working this way because it gets this outcome for you (CJ, 185).

The fabric of a 'good' school involves an obligation towards the success of every child. In turn, that obligation involves accountability processes which are of value to staff, parents and the children themselves.

Fourth property of 'Producing the Goods':
Child-centred teaching and learning

It appears evident from data already discussed under the theme 'Producing the Goods', that the principals' conceptions of a 'good' school involve a school which has taken up the challenge of change and, although sceptical about the direction of some of the changes, has modified its practices to become open, accountable and collaborative. In particular, the schools have developed a consistent ethos, identifiable values and productive relationships between teachers, students and parents. Under the auspices of an outcomes focus, and the new *Curriculum Framework* (1998), Western Australian schools have adjusted their planning and processes to the extent that the spotlight has turned specifically onto the individual child. Reporting and assessment have developed a child-centred orientation, as have teaching and learning.

The interviews conducted for this study have produced evidence suggesting that 'good' schools, from the principals' perspective, concentrate the bulk of their energy and time on the progress of the individual child. It is also clear that the first priorities in educating those children are associated with the basic human values such as happiness, respect and self-worth. Many of these values form the ethos and fabric of the school. Thus, as Yardley puts it, his school is determined to:

> ….equip these kids with skills and understandings and just motivation and stuff, so when they leave here there's some hope for them (KY, 155).

For many children the fundamental need is for the development of self-respect. Until students feel good about themselves they will never be able to

learn. Hegerty's school offered a wide variety of programs so that everyone could achieve at something. She also made sure, as she indicates, that the students were recognised for their achievements:

> Everyone has a chance to feel good about something …We have lots of little in-house competitions. Perhaps too many. It might be chess, it might be scrabble. We try to make it possible, for as many as want to be in things, to be in them (WH, 119).

Whilst Hegerty's school tries to promote a sense of 'belonging' amongst the children, Peters' school employs a school chaplain because "many of our children are part of families where there is trauma, social trauma, physical trauma, death" (MP, 157). Good schools work hard to make all children feel safe, happy and valued. Schools need to cater for a wide range of individual needs and have "an ethos of an acceptance of differences" (TK, 196).

Many principals spoke of the need to develop a love of learning and a desire to attend school. Treen endeavoured to make school fun so that children will "want to come back on day two" (BT, 333). Urlich wants children to be "interested" (SU, 49) while Darkin wanted to see his students "involved" (PD, 112). Wray talks of a need to make the learning environment "exciting" and mentions a previous school which was "the most stimulating place … 'cause there was always something on the boil" (IW, 13). Deakin supports "a friendly but working environment" (TD, 63) which he later classifies as "humming" (TD, 297). It is not until these basic needs have been dealt with that 'good' schools can move on into the 'real' learning program. To a degree, quality teaching and learning will always be reliant on sustaining the basic human values which constitute the ethos and vision of 'good' schools.

Hamilton (2002, p.7), in a recent article entitled *Rethink on Schools' Job* appears as an advocate for teaching children life skills and values. He challenges educators and the general community to reflect on what the prime task of schools actually is. He declares that:

> What I believe we need to do is be more explicit about the personal and social outcomes that we are attempting to achieve, give them a higher profile in the objectives of the school [and] make some decisions about how we can intelligently assess and report them.

This study of 'Western Australian Government primary school principals' conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' school', suggests that attitudes, values and social development (SS, 236 and BG, 374) are very much the real job of schools. Until children can "get on with people" (BG, 374) they can't begin to focus on their other learning. Urlich declares that children also need to be able to think:

> We're getting into thinking, whereas before it was 'Do this, do that'. That is the difference (SU, 432).

Other principals use the term 'empowerment' which Gaynor describes as "supporting children to be able to participate in their own lives … define their own future" (BG, 9). Tander uses a similar designation – "You're trying to empower them to really learn themselves and that's where we're heading for" (DT, 334).

No doubt 'good' schools do provide adequate coverage of the new outcomes curriculum, but the point made by principals in this study, is that there is an initial and ongoing need to ensure that the child, as a person, is catered for and that each student has developed the appropriate skills to learn. The focus in a 'good' school is on learning rather than teaching and on the individual

child rather than the class group. Ultimately as Kallahan indicates the child should take charge of their own learning:

> The kid knows his baseline, and he knows where he's going, and he understands by analysis and reflection, that he can do this, this and this to improve. Then that's what we're looking for (TK, 137).

The conception of a 'good' school in the year 2000, as seen through the eyes of fifteen school principals, doesn't have a predominant emphasis on academic excellence, rigorous discipline or fierce competition. The emphasis emerging from the 'conversations' of the principals is that education should be about working with children as individuals to ensure that they are confident, well adjusted and eager to learn. There will be some schools, even amongst those used in this study, where the parents may not be satisfied with this child-centred approach. Latham suggests that at Merrivale the emphasis on standards still remains paramount:

> Most of the parents here have actually been through a private school education, so they're very much into grades and things like that … you do face a challenge from our parents and the way they're moving (RL, 199).

Merrivale typifies the ambiguities of education. While curriculum changes are promoting developmental approaches to teaching and child-centred assessment, community attention is still focussed on whole-class instruction and numerical test results. Schools need to 'produce the goods' but it is difficult to know what those 'goods' should actually be. The answer lies in what is valued in education. From the principals' perspective there are doubts about the value of National testing, but strong support for child-centred learning. Some schools may struggle to convince parents to accept this point of view.

Leading and Lagging

The proposition formulated under this theme states:

> Principals consider that a 'good' school nurtures a symbiotic relationship with its local community with a view to meliorating educational change.

Ball (1997, p.317) in his article *Good School Bad School : Paradox and Fabrication*, described schools as "complex and contradictory". This theme 'Leading and Lagging' represents that complexity and paradox. The theme positions 'good' schools amidst the ebb and flow of society's changing beliefs and values and highlights the difficulties of schools trying to match this tide.

The title for the theme is drawn from the text of interviews with two principals participating in this study. Urlich, the principal of Glenbowden Primary, a well-supported 21 year old school in a compact middle-class suburb, talks about societal change and who leads that change. His unequivocal position on that debate is as follows:

> We are *leading*, the school is definitely now *leading*. We are, absolutely. For the changes to occur, the school has to lead because, again, it comes back to knowledge, vision … direction in which we're heading (SU, 242).

Deakin, founding principal of the innovatively organised 4 year old Townshend Primary, thinks differently. In a discussion centring around the concept of 'good' principals being essential to 'good' schools, he notes that:

> Education should not trail too far behind the changes in society. It *shouldn't drive* the changes in society … You can mount an argument that maybe it should, but at times then we would see too many radical influences come into a school and schools should not be seen as a radical place (TD, 183).

‘Leading and Lagging’ is a title that intends to highlight the school’s paradoxical position in society. Schools change and society changes. It is difficult to determine which influences which and to what degree. The proposition encompassed in the theme, suggests that the relationship between school and society should be symbiotic, of mutual benefit to both. Thus we have already seen that Merrivale Primary, small, historical and amidst a high socio-economic community, is heavily influenced by the beliefs of that community. In contrast, Yardley, principal of Loisville Primary, a school of 930 children in a difficult socio-economic environment, thinks it is his school’s job to “try to reshape society … that’s what we think we are doing here at Loisville” (KY, 75). Perhaps the nature of the society in Yardley’s catchment area determines what response the school must make. If the nature of his community changes, as the school hopes it will, perhaps roles might reverse.

Amidst the dynamics of society, politics and economics, it would appear from what the interviewed principals perceive, that ‘good’ schools are acutely aware of their responsibilities to society and their community. Although all schools struggle to identify their own specific role they all appear to have key elements in common. These elements are contained in proposition statement outlined above. Three properties constitute this proposition – nurturing relationships, symbiotic relationships and educational change. Each of these properties will be examined in turn.

First property of 'Leading and Lagging':
Nurturing Relationships

'Good' schools work hard to develop a variety of connections with the local community. Some of these relationships have already been discussed through the superordinate proposition entitled 'Weaving the Fabric' which demonstrated how school values and beliefs helped in the development of whole-school community characteristics. The theme entitled 'Producing the Goods' is also connected to 'Leading and Lagging' because it dealt with the issue of openness and transparency. 'Good' schools are those that allow their processes and achievements to be examined by all who are interested. The communities associated with 'good' schools are able to observe what the school is doing and in turn the school issues the community with regular reports on the progress it is making.

The theme 'Leading and Lagging' takes community relationships a step further and presents the case that 'good' schools have developed a unique interaction with their parent community. Specific processes are put in place to enhance effective communication and tostimulate more concordant alliance. Based on the interviews with principals it would appear that the nurturing of the relationships between school and community is facilitated in five main ways; welcoming, involving, surveying, meeting and empowering.

To get parents into a school is often a difficult task. Schools don't always bring back happy memories for parents. This explains some of the reluctance. Schools are also very busy places, with complex timetables and mysterious rituals. They are often poorly signposted and doors are

sometimes shut. They're not easy places to approach as Wray reveals when he talks about visiting a new school to which he had been promoted:

> There were no signs up. I couldn't find the office when I came here … I noticed there were people going to and fro and nobody stopped to ask "Can I help you?" (IW, 239).

'Good' schools try to make their appearance more welcoming by putting up the signs and creating a pleasant environment in the front office. A warm welcome is critical to nurturing strong relationships with the community. It is interesting that Carrawine Primary School has a welcoming web-site featuring a picture of its young 'school ambassadors'. These ambassadors are charged with the job of meeting and directing visitors, a ritual which Skilton describes as being replicated Barnsley Primary:

> We have year seven students trained as school ambassadors, and those students actually take families around … the kids are very proud to take visitors around their school (SS,84).

Yardley, of all the principals, had the most difficult job in enticing parents into his school. Certainly, the size of the school, and the jumble of temporary transportable classrooms didn't make the site terribly inviting. However it was really that the parents themselves, many of whom had left school at 15 "because they hated it" (KY, 280), were reluctant to come. Initially, it was the building of a Federation Park playground at the school that first attracted community interest. Yardley recalls the occasion:

> We just said we were going to have this Federation Park…it looks terrific…We've developed it all with parents' assistance…so people within the area do take an active interest (KY,314).

The building of the playground was more than welcoming, it was 'involvement'. Yardley was able to use this event to create pride and a sense of

ownership in the school, something that would lead to an even more productive relationship in the future.

Other schools used a variety of different methods to create involvement. Treen's yet-to-be-opened school had a steering committee that included parents; Latham used parents to help design the new undercover area; and Wray had parents organising a community barbecue. Being made welcome, and being included, leads parents into bigger and more productive things. Urlich noted how his parent group took it upon themselves to become involved:

> They have expressed a desire to be a community, as for example, you know, a country town community. So they have formed an actual social committee whose task it is to have a community event (SU, 256).

A different form of involvement, used by 'good' schools to develop better community relationships, is the survey. Darkin's school had just conducted their survey (Appendix II), a thirty question Department of Education document, to which the school had received a 50% response. It included some written suggestions and comments about the strengths of the school and areas for improvement. Peters, Kallahan and Mustard had also recently completed surveys, and Jones was preparing to conduct one. In Jones's opinion the survey allowed parents to become involved in school development:

> We've got to … do things like survey our parents and ask them "What's good, what's bad?" and be willing to take the criticism on the chin. (CJ, 301).

All schools hold meetings of some kind with parents, including the mandatory Parents and Citizens' Meetings and the regular School Council

gatherings. ‘Good’ schools are the ones that optimise the value of the legislated meetings, as Jones does, by ensuring that “the first forty-five minutes of a P and C Meeting is always an information presentation” (CJ, 179). School Council groups, now legislated to have a majority parent membership have positive roles to play in community relationships, as well as in the directional planning for the school. In Skilton’s view, the Council is much more than a rubber stamp for school-generated policies:

> I think to foster that community relationship is really important, and I think the direction we’re taking through the new Schools’ Education Act, of involving parents beyond the rubber-stamping of school councils, is an important direction (SS, 133).

‘Good’ schools hold other meetings with parents. These may be meetings of individual parents and the principal. Peters explained that at Edgeworth Primary, he tried to make himself easily available for interviews:

> I think the style of leadership in the school encourages community members to walk into the school and ask if they can see Mr Peters (pseud) … without an appointment, and I think that’s important (MP, 81).

At Yardley’s school there were structured meetings of small groups of parents in the principal’s office for morning tea and a chat about the school. This tradition had the advantage of involving parents who might not normally attend. It also developed, as Yardley discovered, a sense of trust in the promises that were made:

> Every second Wednesday I have what’s called Captain’s Table. I invite seven parents to morning tea and ask them how the school is going … then they start to believe … that you’re actually serious about what they’ve got to say (KY, 287).

Perhaps the most critical thing that ‘good’ schools do to nurture community relationships, and to garner support for change, is give the parents

information. To some extent this comes from newsletters and reports. Wray was diligent in the way North Trenton's newsletters were compiled:

> I just feel that it's so important that parents don't feel like "Oh here's a surprise. I'd never heard about this!" So there's always heaps put in the newsletter about things that are happening … We've just changed our Behaviour Modification Policy, so every newsletter there was something about "We are reviewing … Things will be changing" (IW, 441).

Often, the sharing of information goes beyond the written word and becomes talks and presentations. Jones outlines a session with parents on the Curriculum Frameworks, Urlich was introducing his parents to the issue of 'Boys in Education', and Deakin held sessions with his parents on Team Teaching and Multi-Age Grouping.

By virtue of information session, newsletters and meetings of various kinds, parents gain the skills and confidence to participate as partners in the development of the school. Though they may be left 'open-mouthed' as they were during Deakin's initial parent meeting, with enough guidance and support, schools can "educate parents to be able to engage in these sorts of debates" (CS, 177). Empowering parents is a bold move because it involves "breaking down barriers, and pushing the envelope, and challenging people's mindsets" (MP, 277). With their new skills and greater confidence, parents can play their part in creating and sustaining 'good' schools. Jones saw parent empowerment as the process that might allow schools to break out of the 'conservative' mould that parental opinion can lead them into:

> The community, I would assess, is very conservative in its educational thinking and I think that is very true … it becomes far safer for us as teachers to maintain that conservative line because we are less challenged by parents in what we do (CJ, 119).

The principal of a 'good' school realises that collaboration with parents and the wider community is a powerful liaison which will enhance the character of the school. It is also realised that such collaboration is not easy and will not develop of its own accord. The school has to take steps to make it happen. Once in progress the relationship has benefits for all. The community is empowered and the barriers of ignorance and misunderstanding are steadily lowered.

Second property of 'Leading and Lagging':
Symbiotic Relations

'Good' schools, as perceived by the principals interviewed for this study, work hard to nurture a positive relationship with their school community. A specific feature of this nurturing is the education or empowerment of parents. This is a process which will "get people on side" (MP, 175) allowing them to collaborate and debate with better understanding. The nature of the relationship appears to be symbiotic.

Symbiosis involves "the living together of two dissimilar organisms especially when this association is mutually beneficial" (Random House, 1968, p.1331). Symbiosis is not a 'parasitic' union, where one benefits at the expense of the other. Thus, in a 'good' school the relationship between school and parents appear to be symbiotic because it is an alliance of two groups who are not alike, but who, share a common interest in children's education. With trust and understanding this coexisting relationship can flourish and produce great benefits for schools and families.

Principals interviewed about 'good' schools were able to identify the differences between parents and teachers that make the relationship tense.

Some of these differences have already been discussed and include in particular a perceived lack of knowledge by parents about school processes, procedures and philosophies. Principals, in this study, perceive that 'good' schools minimise the 'knowledge-gap' by involving parents in school life and providing them with necessary information and training.

There are other variances in perspective that need to be highlighted. Chief amongst these is that some school staff, with a few principals possibly included, see their symbiotic partner as the 'enemy'. Deakin and Darkin used this expression when talking about the attitude of some of their teachers. Darkin acknowledges that:

> ….there are many teachers … who look on parents as their enemy. And that's not really the way it's going to work (PD, 251).

Schools can no longer afford to harbour such an antagonistic attitude between parents and teachers. With improved transparency in school operations, and the new Education Act (1999) which gives parents a much more powerful position in school governance, parents must be included as part of the school community.

Minor sources of tension between schools and parents are now mainly confined to areas of misunderstanding, lack of information, or different motivation and goals. Parents often put their own child's well-being ahead of whole-school policies and directions. Mustard reports a disagreement over school uniform where the father refused to make his son wear the correct school shorts. Legally correct, though the parent was, the non-compliance was damaging to the school community and to parent-teacher relations.

More subtle are the parents who impose unreasonably high standards on their own child's work (RL, 13), or object to what has been a careful classroom placement (IW, 343). There is often a lack of unity in what various parents want from the school (SS, 231). Peters notes that "people have self-interest, or family interest, or small group interest or sport interest" (MP, 271). There is tension on the school's part in trying to create a balance from all the demands. Deakin sees a problem with parents who want a different style of education to that which schools currently offer:

> The community is demanding from the schools a different sort of education for their children and we in education are trying to change towards that (TD, 164).

Jones, as we have seen, believes that parents think schools are moving too quickly and they would prefer to see less radical curriculum and teaching styles. This is a widespread malaise inhibiting educational improvement. It is a problem which Jones urges schools to confront:

> I think most communities, educationally speaking, are very conservative in their thinking, and we have to challenge that. I think excellent schools challenge that (CJ, 142).

Mustard, having just surveyed his parents to find out what they really do want from their school, is frustrated to discover that:

> …all they really want is terrific teachers who will teach the 3Rs perfectly and then fill in with all the frills. So they just want everything (AM, 23).

These tensions which beset all schools hardly seem to encourage a symbiotic relationship, but 'good' schools can cope with ambiguity. Many of the principals interviewed talked about parents and teachers being "joint educators" (RL, 23), or "parents as partners" (DT, 200). Urlich notes that his parent community has said "you're the experts" (SU, 255) and just let his

teachers get on with their job, whilst Gaynor reports that her parents have become heavily involved in helping with behaviour management, and are now “part of that solution” (BG, 92).

At Townshend Primary, Deakin has instigated a behaviour management policy in which parents play a participating role. Having given the parents knowledge and practical training the school is benefiting from improved community relationships, especially between individual teachers and parents. Deakin speaks about the project’s success:

> We’re slowly changing attitudes that parents are not our enemy, they’re our partner, and the more we treat them as a partner, the better the school is. And the funny thing is the better the children actually behave (TD, 89).

‘Good’ schools are working hard on developing a symbiotic relationship with parents. Gaynor sees the key as eliminating the ‘them and us’ beliefs and understanding “that we are all on the same side” (BG, 37). Mustard believes “we’ve all got to be going in the same direction” (AM, 338). In the end, improved relationships will come from involving parents in the school, empowering them with information, listening to them and being collaborative. ‘Good’ schools are doing that and Skilton observes that parents are assuming their rightful role in the social fabric of the school:

> I think that the school is a community asset or facility and that parents have a very important role about being involved (SS, 23).

All schools, by nature of their business, interact with their local community. It is perceived, by the principals participating in this research, that ‘good’ schools develop a mutually productive relationship that can be termed symbiotic. The symbiotic relationship so formed is sustained through the proactive efforts of the schools themselves.

Third property of ‘Leading and Lagging’:
Educational Change

If a school’s relationship with its local community is fraught with tension and ambiguity so too is the concept of educational change. The theme ‘Leading and Lagging’ as has been noted, indicates the uncertainty of who is doing the leading and who is lagging behind. To help solve this conundrum, schools and their communities need to create a symbiotic relationship through which information can be shared, issues debated and decisions made. This is the process which provides an avenue for the acceptance of change.

Some schools have a reluctance to change. Ball and Goldman (1997, p230) believe that “education acts as if frozen in time, teaching most of the same material in the same way as it was taught 50 years ago.” This reluctance to change is one of the great paradoxes of schools which are actually in the business of change. Tander puts this position clearly:

> If it’s a learning organisation, and a moving organisation, then it’s got to move forward, it’s got to move along (DT, 253).

‘Good’ schools are those that have “flexibility and change management” (TD, 181). They are the ones that have “an open mind to learning” (BG, 79) with staff who are ready to “go and be different (BT, 294). Jones describes the innovative schools as places “where they’re continually looking to push the envelope on what’s the best way to do their business in terms of maximising student learning ”(CJ, 15).

If it is in the nature of schools to promote and develop change, and if it is acknowledged that “change is happening all the time” (DT, 49). There is a

need to discover why some schools are so resistant. Urlich would lay some of the blame with teachers who still rely on traditional teaching methods which don't engage the children. His message to these teachers is "you're finished, you are redundant as a teacher in the modern world" (SU, 275). Treen would agree, calling such teachers "blockers, blockers to development" (BT, 212).

It is possible to cite other reasons for schools to be resistant to change such as lack of time (TK, 249), poor planning (DT, 88) and the unreasonable expectations that constitute the change (WH, 154). Many of these inhibitors can be addressed within the school. Staff can be performance managed or merit selected. Time can be made available, plans can be created and requirements can be prioritised. The inhibitor that is more difficult to control is the conservatism and misunderstanding in the community.

'Leading and Lagging' has focussed on the process of changes in schools. The question of who is leading and who is lagging behind has everything to do with what elements of schools are being valued. As we have seen, the parents and wider community appear to be conservative. Jones is frustrated by his community's traditional educational ideas (CJ, 119), Deakin's parents couldn't "understand that education could be any different" (TD, 178), Mustard's parents wanted "teachers who would teach the three R's" (AM, 23), and Latham's parents objected to the introduction of portfolios (RL, 203).

For 'good' schools the issue isn't about who should lead, it is about sharing the information, being well informed and then making decisions together.

‘Meliorating educational change’ means doing things better. Doing things better will mean that change will be determined by the whole school community, within the boundaries of Department of Education policy. The melioration of change will come about through the improved partnerships that ‘good’ schools create amongst their community. Change will take place if parents understand about the education in their school and are involved in the processes to direct it. The School Council is the prime body to instigate change and in good schools this body is no longer “rubber-stamping the decisions” (RL, 24).

A clear example of a school combining with its community to bring about educational change is Yardley’s Loisville Primary. This thesis has traced the efforts made in that school to attract its reluctant parents onto the school site and into the classrooms. It was the parents at Loisville who represented the least likely group to participate in school affairs. Yet the school, through its community programs, its dedication to the welfare of the children, and its well publicised educational innovations, developed a great sense of collaboration and pride. Yardley was able to describe his parent body “as united as you’re ever going to get it behind the school” (KY, 294). The vision of Loiseville is to “try to reshape society” (KY, 75). Whilst the school appears to be ‘leading’ rather than ‘lagging’ the collaboration with its community ensures that this purpose is a shared endeavour.

Seeing is Believing

The proposition formulated under this theme states:

> Principals consider that a ‘good’ school generates a sound reputation which, although ultimately linked to quality teaching and learning programs, is heavily promoted through

> the marketisation strategies of attitude, appearance and public opinion.

The theme 'Seeing is Believing' deals with the difficulty of locating and recognising 'good' schools. The perplexity of this task centres around the idea that the 'good' school is essentially "a conceptual entity which people collectively create and maintain largely in their minds" (Wilson, 1996, p.223). Nonetheless it is the case that 'good' schools are identified and promoted in the community. Their existence appears guaranteed by their reputation.

To enable schools to embark on this quest to establish 'goodness' the principals of such schools must themselves have developed a conception of what constitutes a 'good' school. Jones acknowledges to having developed such a concept:

> I know in my head what I think good schooling is, and that's the measure I use (CJ, 315).

The title for this theme comes from an interview with Trent Deakin at Townshend Primary School. The school was in its fourth year of operation at the time of the interview and Deakin was the foundation principal. Many of the school's processes were innovative, including the way that children were taught in multi-aged groups by teachers in teams. The methods at the school were unusual enough to attract some disbelief from the inaugural parent group, and to attract some nervous attention from the District Director. Deakin recalls how the Director allowed him a relatively free hand to try new ideas:

> This has been my first real opportunity to put into place large scale innovations and change … my current District

> Director places one major restriction on me. I must keep her informed. That's my only restriction (TD, 189).

Because his school was so different new parents shared the Director's apprehension and Deakin believes they needed to visit the 'homerooms' to assure themselves that the system would work for their child. Deakin remembers that on entering the homeroom parents just went "WOW!" As a leader of a 'good' school Deakin has his own clear picture of what is 'good' but he is aware that others may need to see the idea in action:

> You don't have to have one teacher one classroom. You can have this beautiful, stimulating environment. But *you've got to see it to believe it* (TD, 69).

The phrase 'Seeing is Believing' encapsulates the 'good' school. Cerebral constructions may suit the dreamers and philosophers but they won't suit the paying public.

The theme 'Seeing is Believing' has the properties of 'sound reputation', 'quality teaching and learning', 'marketisation', 'attitude', 'appearance' and 'public opinion'. Each property will be addressed in turn and, connections will be drawn where appropriate, to the superordinate theme.

As a footnote to this introduction, and as an illustrative focus for the conceptual discussion to follow, *The West Australian* newspaper of April 30, 2002 (p.3) carried a half page report on land sales in a popular northern suburb. A jubilant, successful land purchaser, pictured on page three, announced to thousands of West Australians his particular reason for wanting this land:

> Essentially, my only objective really is to send my kids to Townshend (pseud) Primary School which is considered, by myself, to be one of the best government schools in Perth.

Such is the power of reputation and public opinion.

First property of 'Seeing is Believing':
Sound Reputation

The ultimate test of a 'good' school would be that it have a sound reputation. The principals interviewed in this study, supported that ultimate test, agreeing that 'good' schools are connected to 'good' reputations.

Predictably, as has been the case throughout this research into the nature of 'good' schools, 'reputation' is an elusive value judgement. The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary defines reputation as "What is generally said or believed about the character of a person or thing" (Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, 1965, p.698). Reputation is an ephemeral characteristic generated out of attitudes, appearances and people's own experience. Like 'goodness' it can wax and wane. Thus, when we talk about a school with a sound reputation, we are still dealing with beliefs and opinions. The solidity of 'reputation' is the breadth of evidence used to create it and the longevity of its existence. For schools, a sound reputation is a hard-won asset. Once gained it is hard to lose. Once lost it is almost impossible to retrieve.

A large number of the schools chosen for this study had publicly 'good' reputations. It was a conscious research decision to target reputable schools, since it was assumed that their principals would have first-hand acquaintance with 'goodness'. North Trenton Primary School is a typical example of a school with a sound reputation. It was the only school chosen from the Fremantle Education District and it was sited in a historical and substantial part of that port city. The school was 102 years old and well supported by its community. Principal Ian Wray had been promoted to the school just over a

year before the interview. He had inherited a school with the strongest of reputations. He was able to cite many instances that alluded to this reputation:

> We had the mayor come in and speak to us on something or other and he said -"The reputation of this place is great. This is one of the best schools in the area." – and of course you say – "Yes" (IW, 299).

Wray was very aware of the value of a strong reputation and he was also aware that reputation was merely perception. He explained his job at North Trenton as being to ensure that "the reality actually meets the perception" (IW, 290).

Reputation appeared to be linked partially with school age, especially if the school was located in a high socio-economic area. Hegerty, on the verge of retirement from the 65 year old Burnley Primary, noted that building extensions and renovations would complement the high standing in which her school was held:

> They used to take one look at the physical building and then they'd go elsewhere. It's not an attractive school. It will be an attractive school. We have a good reputation in the community (WH, 125).

Kallahan's Watari Primary School is another well-established school that has built a reputation of excellence. Once again, the history of the school has probably helped, together with the socio-economic strength of the area in which the school is sited. Like Wray, Kallahan sees something ethereal about his school's good reputation and he continues to work hard to sustain it:

> We have a very, very good reputation. Almost anyone who comes to us tells us they've heard about us and they say that this is a really good school. I think sometimes more than we

> deserve. But it's interesting the power of perception" (TK, 83).

Principals are aware that 'seeing is believing' and that schools rely on positive perceptions to sustain their reputations. They are also aware, as Wray was, that "perceptions are harder to shift than facts" (IW, 47).

It may be difficult but it is possible to change perceptions of schools. Change has been achieved at Yardley's Loisville Primary. As Yardley tells it, parents initially took their children away from Loisville mainly because of a perceived problem with discipline, and perhaps also because of the low socio-economic profile of the district. The arrival of Yardley at the school, building on the work of an outstanding interim principal, changed people's perceptions and children began to return. Yardley sees regular evidence of the new perception:

> When people do come in and enrol they say – "We left and we've been at the Baptist School over there … we've heard really good things, so we are coming back." - I reckon in the last two years we've had a hundred do that (KY, 349).

Yardley's school worked very hard to re-establish basic values. First, they tackled bullying to demonstrate that they were concerned about safety. There were also intensive programs in pastoral care for which the school has received numerous awards. Finally, they base their school ethos on the importance of 'belonging' and the value of 'hope' (KY, 156).

Barnsley Primary School went through a similar cycle to Loisville. When the school opened in 1990 it was very small with only 125 students. It was in a new northern estate where land and some of the housing was relatively cheap. Although the school was well run, popular perception was of a

depressed suburb without prospects. This reputation was evident when Skilton arrive in 1994. The staff worked hard to improve the image of the school and rebuild the reputation. In 2000, when the interviews for this research project were conducted, the school housed 750 children and parents were eager to buy into the area to attend the school (SS, 108). Skilton makes the important point that reputations cannot be built on image alone. His comments are constructive in regards to the process of building towards a 'good' reputation:

> After you get things together as far as the image of the school is concerned, and establish a culture, the focus is then more and more turned to the educational program within the school, and that's where your school's reputation is established (SS, 61).

Reputation is a positive indicator of the quality of a school. A sound reputation does not develop from image and publicity, it is a product of substantial achievements in teaching and learning.

Second property of 'Seeing is Believing':
Quality Teaching and Learning

Latham, entering into the first days of her first substantive principalship, agrees with Skilton about the difference between 'image' and reputation. Latham's Merrivale Primary is 95 years old. Its good reputation is long established and intertwined with the venerable traditions and values. For Latham's school the image of charming buildings and magnificent grounds is not "the be-all of education" (RL, 125). Her astute and well-educated parents are more interested in the academic program and want her to "bring out those things like curriculum" (RL, 66).

Wray also promotes his school's teaching and learning. When prospective parents come he spends time with them in classrooms engaging in "talk about the sort of programs that were going on" (IW, 189). Jones sits with parents in his office at Chaltham Primary and talks to them about "the school's philosophy in terms of where it's moving" (CJ, 195). He also talks about information technology and the Curriculum Framework. Kallahan finds that his parents, having heard about his school:

> …were particularly concerned about things like work ethic. They had heard that our standards for work ethic were high. We don't accept – at least this was the reputation – we don't accept tawdry efforts. The standards are high, the benchmarks are high (TK, 123).

The reputations of 'good' schools are based, in the words of Peters, on "the nature of the programs in those schools" (MP, 20). School after school in the research sample for this thesis alluded to the quality programs that they were operating. Many of these programs were aligned with values and self-esteem, but there was always a reference to the basics of learning and the love of education. Treen believes a 'good' school "is one that has elements of fun in it that direct the learning" (BT, 6), Deakin talks about developing "a friendly but working environment" (TD, 63), and Tander wants her school to develop "an environment that talks about excellence" (DT, 116).

Not only do schools with strong reputations promote environments conducive to learning, they concentrate on the learning itself. Urlich's school has "high expectations of students in terms of learning and working independently" (SU, 100). Jones sees a 'good' school in terms of "the quality of its learning programs" (CJ, 2), and Skilton speaks of how "we sort of promote our school through our kids' success" (SS, 257).

Schools with ‘good’ reputations are successful schools. It may not be always high academic success, but the emphasis is always on creating successful learners. In Mustard’s own words:

> A good school is one that provides the basics. You’ve got to have your basic skills, and then you have to provide all the other things that make a rounded person (AM, 24).

Reputation, in the final analysis, is built on the quality of the teaching and learning. This sound reputation, fashioned over a period of time and embraced by the local community, is an aggregation of a variety of significant educational programs.

Third property of ‘Seeing is Believing’:
Marketisation

Schools with ‘good’ reputations are schools that are well supported, and well sought after, by the community. Changes to philosophy, policy and regulations in the form of devolution, curriculum and a new Education Act (Education Department of Western Australia, 1999) have progressed the case for government schools in Western Australia to become more competitive. Marginson (1993, p.201) sees this as an Australia-wide and international trend.

> The relationship between public and private schooling is a competitive one. Policy rarely acknowledges it but public debate makes it clear.

Not only is there competition with the private sector but there is competition between public schools. The new Education Act (1999) has enabled parent choice of schools, increased powers for school councils, and generated more flexibility in the collection of payments and contributions for attendance. Along with a host of other amendments, the Act opens up the possibility for

popular schools to attract even more students. Less popular schools stand to lose at least the more affluent and mobile families. The market-place philosophy will affect how all schools operate and perhaps redefine 'good' schools. For the moment, all schools are making efforts to improve the way they are perceived.

Many of the principals interviewed for this research raised the issue of competition. Jones was uncertain about how the choice scenario would unfold and whether it would be good for education. He muses that:

> The choice agenda that's being pursued by government is certainly getting out there. I'm not sure that's a healthy thing for schools or not, to be quite honest. I don't know if excellent schools are well-marketed schools. I don't know if marketing is an indicator of excellence (CJ, 284).

Deakin, whose school already receives a good deal of publicity and promotion, seems more confident that the move to a more competitive environment is a step in the right direction:

> So from a head office perspective, they're trying to provide us with the opportunity to be more flexible, to service the needs of our parents, so therefore become good schools, or show that we are good schools. Even to the concept of marketing our schools – and we should be all marketing our schools (TD, 224).

Deakin goes on to suggest that government schools should market the government system as an alternative to the private system, rather than being competitive amongst themselves.

Yardley, who continued to work hard to change the reputation of Loisville Primary, spoke strongly about the power of advertising and publicity:

> If you just keep publicising that stuff it's almost a self-appointed prophecy. We keep telling parents how good we are … and they believe it and they become the strongest advocates (KY, 378).

With staffing and budget dependent on enrolment, all schools are being pressured to maximise their student intake. A strong reputation is a powerful drawcard and media publicity creates interest, but there are many other things that 'good' schools do to expedite parent choice. Mustard, whose Dewberry Primary School had a vast new front office attractively decorated with children's art, believed that "you should be advertising when people walk in" (AM, 198).

Observer notes, created when the researcher visited schools to conduct interviews, record that two schools, Mt Nardon and Merrivale had large promotional signs attached to front fences announcing vacancies and displaying enrolment information. Most schools had, or were developing, prospectus documents to give to families who were 'shopping' for schools. At Watari Primary, visitors are greeted by a large, permanent 'Welcome' sign, on which the school sponsor's name was significantly more prominent than that of the principal.

At the time of the interviews for this thesis, legislative changes allowing greater flexibility in sponsorship and marketization had barely taken effect. Most schools were relying on their appearance and their programs to win the public's attention. Interesting, Skilton, whose Barnsley Primary school had attracted parental support for its educational programs cautioned that parental decisions on choice of school needed to be based on more than publicity:

> You need your kid to be there for a term or more to establish the substance of what is happening within the school (SS, 104).

For many schools and most parents the best information about the schools was based on reputations, the occasional newspaper report and a conducted tour of the facilities.

Fourth property of 'Seeing is Believing':
Attitude

The interviewees for this study had a lot to say about how parents needed to be treated when they visited a 'good' school. As noted previously, the front office gave an immediate first impression. Many schools used this area for displays of work or to display artefacts from the school's history, or from school achievements. Schools were careful with the staff they selected to run the office and these staff were given appropriate professional development to enhance their skills. Treen, who had been acting principal in four schools in the space of two years, was very aware of shortcomings in the welcoming nature of school reception areas. Apart from the flowers, or music, or art, Treen suggested that the attitude of the people was the key.

> You put it down to just dealing with people. The difference a smile makes, and a 'good morning' makes, is phenomenal. And that's why I think registrars play such an important part in the process because they either make you immediately feel comfortable, or immediately feel uncomfortable" (BT, 91).

Principals talk about getting a 'feeling' about a school when you first come in through the door. This is related to the establishment of an ethos and a vision which spreads its pervasive influence to every part of a 'good' school. Skilton suggests that creating the right atmosphere in the reception area is one of the first things a principal should attend to when setting up in a new school:

> Anyone coming into a school immediately gets the feeling about whether the school is a good school … and it does

> start with first impressions. It does start with whether the reception is a welcoming one (SS, 9).

Approachability appears to be another attitude that attracts parents to a school. According to several principals being able to speak to the principal seemed to rank very highly. Kallahan spoke of his experience in this regard:

> They were very impressed when they had the opportunity to talk to the administration, and the administration seemed to be able to empathise with the people (TK, 144).

The key word in Kallahan's description is perhaps 'empathise'. Hegerty notes that "part of a good school is that both principals and teachers do listen" (WH, 25). Urlich agrees, saying that "taking individuals into consideration and listening to them is critical for a good school" (SU, 4). Yardley terms these welcoming, friendly and responsive gestures to be part of "authentic relationships" (KY, 2). It is to be assumed that these relationships occur between teachers, parents and children.

The children play an important role in the marketisation or promotion of a school. Mention has already been made of the student ambassadors at Townshend and Barnsley schools. The children don't have to be official welcoming committees, they just need to reflect the same friendly approach as is modelled by the staff, as Wray outlines:

> We had a big campaign with the kids that when you see someone on the school grounds that you always say "Hi" (IW, 204).

Tander promoted the idea of sending parents out into the playground and have them interact with the students as a way to get a true impression of the school:

> Go and talk to the kids. Stand in the playground and see how they talk to each other and what they do (DT, 288).

All schools gave prospective parents the ‘50 cent tour’ (TD, 59) of the school. These tours looked mainly at resources, but a number of principals said it was essential to go into classrooms (TD, 64). It was perceived as valuable if the classroom teacher briefly acknowledged the visitors. Kallahan said his teachers were “very positive when they met new people” (TK, 222), whilst Wray’s teachers “had that warmth and friendliness” (IW, 200). It was notable that, for most schools, the principal tried to be available to conduct the tour.

Attitude was seen as a critically important element of first impression at a ‘good’ school. It was the feeling parents got of “being well received” (SS, 80). Also, seen as important, were parents being “listened to” (RT, 4). A ‘good’ school, in the opinion of Mustard, needed to be welcoming and the staff ‘approachable’:

> I’m kissing babies and shaking hands. Going out speaking to people after school and all that sort of thing … Just to be approachable (AM, 342).

It is clear that principals considered the ‘attitude’ of school staff, students and community members to give a critical first impression about a school. The principal played a key role in promoting and modelling this ‘attitude’.

Fifth property of ‘Seeing is Believing’:
Appearance

Despite being classified, along with the “50 cent tour”, as one of the ‘superficial’ (TK, 212) things about a ‘good’ school, every principal interviewed had devoted money and energy to improving the appearance of their school. This is one of the endless paradoxes of schools. “Those sort of seeming to be unimportant things, but they’re so important” (IW, 140).

Skilton draws the clear distinction between the shallowness of image and the difficult-to-establish depth of reputation. Yet he concedes that image can be a first step on the road to 'goodness':

> I think initially the image of the school is what you try to establish and, in time, reputation comes. Not because of the look of the school but it's more the substance of the school, and that takes time (SS, 65).

Much about schools is perception, hence, the theme 'Seeing is Believing' which encompasses this proposition. Mustard puts the perception factor clearly when he suggests - "If you look good then there's an expectation that you'll be good" (AM, 187). Latham, whose school is well appointed and favourably sited, is realistic about the value of her school's appearance "Look, I don't think this is the be-all of education, but the reality is people do make judgements about the school on its appearance" (RL, 124). Jones agrees: "They look at the gardens, they look at the quality of the buildings, they do make judgements about the feel of the school" (CJ, 272). Darkin believes a school's "nice physical environment" allows you to "get your people" (PD, 66).

Although most principals in the study linked appearance of the school to the attitudinal characteristics of 'welcoming', 'friendly', 'hardworking' and 'caring', and although most could draw a connection with 'image', a few made bolder statements. Treen supports the idea that "… the effect of the environment and surrounds on children, has an effect on what they do back in the classroom" (BT, 119). Peters too believes that "The built environment … can enhance the learning programs " (MP, 23).

Principals have the conception of 'good' schools as places where staff work hard to present themselves and their school in the most welcoming and attractive way possible. It is an initial step in winning over parent support and beginning to build a sound reputation.

Sixth property of 'Seeing is Believing':
Public Opinion

'Good' schools do attempt to market themselves well because they know it is a way of 'getting your people'. It is also a way of keeping the people you already have and boosting their morale or "communal self-esteem" (KY, 385). Most importantly, however, it is structuring and enhancing the school's reputation.

As noted earlier, reputation is 'what is generally said' about something. A school's reputation is what the community, or some other group, says about that school. A 'good' school, in the eyes of parents, is a school with a 'good' reputation. Reputation is only part of the 'good' schools' picture but it is a very potent part. Ball and Vincent (1998, p.389) translate the reputation into 'the grapevine' and suggest that:

> Some people referred to the grapevine as a highly reliable source of information and certainly, more so, than information given out by the school, which is seen as packaging and public relations.

Schools have limited control over what is said about their schools, but they need to be well prepared to influence the 'grapevine' where they can. Initially they must address all the important indicators parents are looking for. These indicators extend from the values and ethos that form the school's philosophical foundation, to the signage in the school grounds which show parents the way (IW, 140). All these indicators, together with a host of other

past and present incidents, form the basis of community knowledge about the school. It is the discussion of this knowledge that creates and modifies the school's reputation as Tander is well aware:

> And let's face it. Parents talk to each other … they can measure it in terms of what used to happen and what doesn't happen any more (DT, 321).

Sometimes public opinion is based on incorrect public and professional perceptions. Wray speaks about a previous school that was not well supported because parents and even teachers, misunderstood how an Intensive Language Centre worked. "Public perception was [that] it was a bad school and I had people on staff saying they wouldn't send their kids here" (IW, 39).

Kallahan commented on how his school's reputation continued to grow spontaneously due to the regularity with which the parents continued to speak about it:

> Our parent body does most of the public relations perception and they talk to other people, and other people talk to other people, and it's amazing (TK, 86).

Wray tells how he had parents talking to him about North Trenton Primary even before he'd taken up his new appointment there:

> I mean I had parents telling me that before I came, "Oh, you're getting a great school. This is a great little school and we do great things here" (IW, 276).

Principals endeavour to influence public opinion by the regular publishing of newsletters, by public performances, by talks at assemblies, and by being approachable and supportive. Hegerty, the most experienced principal interviewed, was cognisant of how difficult it was for schools to capture public opinion and gain control of their reputation. In her view:

> Different people had different expectations. There were the ones who wanted very high academic standards. The ones who wanted their children to be happy. There were the ones who didn't care about the rest of the school, just wanted the best for their child. They're all quite different and they're all quite challenging (WH, 21).

'Seeing is believing' has highlighted a challenging area into which the policy of marketization is plunging schools. The 'good' school will promote the quality of its teaching and learning, realising, as Rose (1996, p.430) did, that:

> The vantage point from which you consider schools – your location physically and experientially – will affect what you see and what you can imagine.

Trent Deakin, appreciated that parents enrolling their children into the brand new Townshend Primary school wouldn't be able to comprehend the educational value of his classroom blocks. To allay their fears he showed them the classes in action. That vantage point improved the view. Where 'good' schools are concerned 'Seeing is Believing'.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the four subordinate propositions which have emerged from this study of 'Western Australian Government primary school principals' conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' school'. Discussed, in turn, were the themes 'Walking the Talk', 'Producing the Goods', 'Leading and Lagging' and 'Seeing is Believing'. Each theme was presented from the viewpoint of the inherent properties of its associated proposition.

'Walking the Talk' examined the role of dynamic leadership in the creation of the 'good' school. The perception of the principal interviewees was that such leadership, apart from being energetic and bold, needed to focus on the

creation of a school vision, the building of good relationships within and outside the school and the development of programs in quality teaching and learning. It was noted that many aspects of school life are fraught with ambiguity and that leadership needed to be comfortable with this unavoidable property.

'Producing the Goods' turned attention to accountability issues for schools and highlighted the trend towards child-centred approaches to teaching and learning. It was seen that there is some tension between an economic and political push for accountability in numeracy and literacy, and a curriculum based emphasis on self-directed and developmental learning. School-based accountability programs appeared to have helped alleviate some of the perceived problems with the growing trend towards external testing. Principals had developed their concept of a 'good' school as being one which projected transparent accountability outwards into its community. Upward accountability, to the Central Office, was seen as a less valuable but bureaucratically necessary obligation for all government schools.

'Leading and Lagging' dealt with the issue of school and community relationships and addressed them as being symbiotic. This meant that the school and the community groups though unalike in character, were able to interact in a manner that was collaborative and beneficial. 'Good' schools appeared to be the ones that were moving towards just such a relationship. In creating this symbiotic relationship 'good' schools were more likely to be able to address educational change.

‘Seeing is Believing’ covered the characteristic of reputation. It was believed that ‘good’ schools had ‘good’ reputations. The interviewees were aware that school reputations are not easily earned. It was suggested that various properties of school life helped build a reputation, including the physical appearance of the school, and the attitude of the people who occupied it. There was the clear realization that a ‘good’ reputation could not be sustained without quality teaching and learning. Challenging to ‘good’ schools was public opinion, over which schools had little control. ‘Seeing is believing’ had strong connections to school marketing and also to the concept of school ‘fabric’. Parent’s choice is often influenced by intangible characteristics that may be a product of school ethos and values.

Chapter Seven follows. It is entitled ‘Discussion of Results and Conclusion’ and is divided into five sections. These sections are: a summary of the study; a discussion on generalizability of the study; implications of the study for the body of theoretical literature; implications of the study for policy; implications of the study for practice and finally implications for further research.