Exploring the Relationship Between Principal Behaviour and Student Achievement

By:

Romina Barrese

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Theory and Policy Studies
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Romina Barrese 2014
ABSTRACT

Leadership is critical in initiating and maintaining school improvement, yet the nature of that leadership, and its impact on school improvement remains a contentious issue. The following case study investigates how the leadership behaviour of a secondary school principal in Ontario relates to the improvement of student achievement as measured by the grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). This case study was undertaken as a result of remarkably good performance on Ontario’s standardized literacy test over a period of four years. It takes into account the perceptions of both the principal and of teachers with respect to school culture and the subsequent effect on student achievement. Leithwood and Louis’ (2012) four core leadership practices; setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program guided the study’s framework.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Blair Mascall for breathing new life into this project. I am deeply grateful to you for your guidance in bringing clarity to my work, your support in helping me find answers, and for pushing me to dig a little deeper each time I came to you with a fresh revision. Just when I thought I could dig no deeper, you inspired me to delve further into the data and navigate the research in much more meaningful directions than I had thought possible. Thank you also to Dr. Susan Padro for getting me started in the proposal stage and to Dr. Carol Campbell for her detailed feedback and thoughtful consideration.

A very special thank you to my parents who have encouraged me to pursue not only this degree, but all educational endeavors in order to fulfill my love of learning.

Finally, to my husband Michael, a profound thank you for your unwavering confidence in me, your support, and for always providing a keen and thoughtful sounding board. Above all, thank you for supplying the extra motivation I sometimes lacked to see this project through to the end.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.................................................................................................................. ii  
Acknowledgements............................................................................................... iii  

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction........................................................................................................... 1  
Need For The Study.............................................................................................. 2  
Research Question and Sub-Questions................................................................. 5  
Significance of the Study....................................................................................... 6  

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Review of Literature............................................................................................. 7  
  Leadership........................................................................................................... 7  
  Leadership and School Culture......................................................................... 9  
  Leadership, School Culture, and Student Achievement................................. 14  
  The Conceptual Framework (Figure 1)............................................................. 19  
  School Context................................................................................................ 22  
  Students............................................................................................................. 23  
  Teachers............................................................................................................. 23  
  Administration................................................................................................. 23  

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Methodology......................................................................................................... 25  
  Data Collected.................................................................................................. 25  
  Sample and Sampling....................................................................................... 26  
  Instruments....................................................................................................... 26  
  Procedures........................................................................................................ 28  
  Ethical Considerations..................................................................................... 28  
  Treatment of Data............................................................................................ 29  

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Description of Sample......................................................................................... 30  
Findings................................................................................................................ 30  
  Setting Directions............................................................................................ 31  
  Developing People........................................................................................... 41  
  Redesigning the Organization....................................................................... 50  
  Managing the Instructional Program.............................................................. 54  

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Discussion and Analysis.................................................................................... 61
CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary and Conclusion ........................................................................................................71
Limitations of the Study ........................................................................................................76
Areas for Future Research ....................................................................................................78
References ............................................................................................................................81

Appendix 1: Table 1: Successful Fully Participating First-Time Eligible Students……..85
Appendix 2: Interview questions for teachers .......................................................................86
Appendix 3: Interview questions for principal .................................................................87
Appendix 4: Informed Consent Letter for teachers .............................................................88
Appendix 5: Informed Consent Letter for principal ............................................................90
Appendix 6: Administrative Consent Letter .........................................................................92
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction
In the early 2000s the key driving force in Ontario public education became what is commonly known as school improvement. It sounds simple enough, however underneath this generic, yet inviting term exist layers upon layers of policy, theory, and research. How to go about school improvement, and more specifically, school improvement by way of student achievement, became the foundation on which all school initiative plans were built upon. Accordingly, the province of Ontario established the Student Success and Learning to 18 initiatives, it established clear targets for student achievement across the province, offered a plethora of resources and funding to schools in an effort to meet those targets, and created teams of experts in the field to work directly with underperforming schools (Leithwood & Strauss, 2009). In the midst of this frenzy of activity from the Ministry of Education surfaced the phenomenon from my own practice as a teacher, that a specific school in southern Ontario had indeed undergone the metamorphosis into becoming a turnaround school. The school jumped 10% from 68% to 78% for overall success on the OSSLT for first-time eligible students in October, 2003 from the previous year. In one year alone the school had gone from below the provincial average to narrowly surpassing it by 1%. The numbers increased another 4% the following year and in March 2006, the school achieved its maximum achievement levels at the time of the study with 90% success rates for first-time eligible students.¹ This school had gone from what would have been widely considered an underperforming organization to a tremendous success in student achievement with respect to the OSSLT. It is this

¹ All OSSLT data courtesy of Education Quality and Accountability Office, (EQAO).
framework that best encapsulates this phenomenon. As the turnaround process unfolds in its various stages, successful leadership practices are performed according to the organizational context. These practices introduce school improvement initiatives that if carried out successfully, promote change in teachers’ practice, which ultimately leads to increased student achievement.

In an ever-changing world it is reasonable to believe our schools must also change to meet the many challenges and needs presented by our modern day society. Policy-makers are charged with the dual task of not only keeping up with change but also seeking to improve schools at the same time. The literature on leadership theory is vast. As theory gives way to practice, however, empirical evidence proves that the success of newly implemented policies is directly related to the leadership at the school level (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Many scholarly publications agree that leadership is critical in initiating and maintaining school improvement, yet the nature of that leadership, and its impact on school improvement remains a contentious issue.

**Need For The Study**

When embarking on school improvement initiatives, of which student achievement is an inherent part, policy-makers inevitably look to the leadership within a school to ascertain how schools implement policies. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the leadership behaviour of a high school administrator relates to the improvement of student achievement as measured by the grade 10 Ontario Secondary
School Literacy Test (OSSLT). The OSSLT is a provincial test developed by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and is based on the expectations for reading and writing that are outlined in the Ontario curriculum policy documents for all subjects up to the end of Grade 9. There are two components to the OSSLT – reading and writing which were combined on the test in 2006 to allow students to complete the test in a single sitting. The Ontario Provincial Government maintains that “…literacy is a fundamental life skill that is essential for young people if they are to achieve success in life” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Preparing Students for the OSSLT). By this assertion, the Ontario Government is drawing a parallel between success in literacy and success in life. Accordingly, public schools, which adhere to the provincial government’s guidelines in education, will undoubtedly want to improve achievement levels on the OSSLT if they wish to promote a student’s success in life. Furthermore, standardized testing allows for greater accountability and transparency for all stakeholders involved, including parents, students, teachers, school trustees, and administration both at the district level and school based. The OSSLT was first administered in 2002 and, since then, has been used as a benchmark from which the Ministry of Education in Ontario seeks to measure and monitor the standards of education in Ontario.

The way policy-makers design and impose policies regarding student achievement requires a closer examination of those leaders at the frontlines of policy implementation: the leaders of our schools. In particular, policy makers will need to know the relationship between student achievement and leadership. Researchers Heck and Hallinger (1999) go as far to say that “student achievement ought to be the dominant criterion for assessing leader effectiveness” (p.158). The scholarly literature shows evidence that specific
leadership styles can have considerable impact on student achievement. In a two-year study conducted in Chicago, Carlson and colleagues (1999) find that principal leadership can lead to significant improvement in student performance in reading using strategies including: strong commitment to the program; teacher accountability and support; intensive monitoring; creative investment in student learning; and increased time on task. Similarly, Gene Bottoms (2002) finds that high schools raise student achievement when leadership within the school make literacy – reading and writing for learning- a priority across the curriculum. The implications of these findings are important not only for policy-makers but for all stakeholders in education to raise student achievement levels which, in effect, leads to overall school improvement.

While school leaders are free to use various strategies to elicit improvement, researchers (Wilmore & Thomas, 2001; Goldring & Knox, 2002) emphasize the critical role school culture plays in promoting the school change necessary for student achievement. A school’s particular culture is as unique as the students who attend the school. The role of an effective principal depends on the culture of the school and how well he/she is able to meet the needs of the culture, shaping and redefining culture in the process. As Wilmore and Thomas (2001) argue “school leadership can be best measured by the way a principal uses him or herself to create a school climate characterized by staff productivity, student productivity…” (p.115).

In an assessment of the High Schools That Work initiative, a program that has been in place all over the United States since 1987, Bottoms (2002) finds that high schools raise achievement when they make literacy a priority across the curriculum. In addition, school leaders who required all teachers to engage students in reading and
writing, raised achievement levels not only in language arts but in other subject areas as well. These findings will have a substantial impact on how educational researchers view the role of leadership and its impact on school improvement, specifically student achievement. Furthermore, the connection between promoting literacy across the curriculum and student success supports Ontario’s Ministry of Education OSSLT policy and its assertion that literacy is a fundamental life skill. While many studies have concentrated upon the principal’s role in affecting change in the school culture in order to bring about school improvement, few have focused on student achievement and specifically, the impact the principal made on achievement levels with respect to literacy improvement and the OSSLT.

**Research Question and Sub-Questions**

The proposed study will be a case study of a secondary school in southern Ontario wherein achievement levels on the OSSLT increased significantly from the Fall Session in 2002 to the Spring Session in 2006.

**Main Research Question**

In what way does leadership behaviour of the principal relate to the improvement of student achievement in the grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test in a selected secondary school in southern Ontario?

**Sub-Questions**

1. According to the principal’s perception, what did she do to attempt to effect improvement on the culture of the school and how successful were these efforts?
2 According to the principal’s perception, what did she do to attempt to effect improvement in OSSLT scores and how successful were these efforts?

3 In the perception of teachers, what was the impact of that leadership behaviour on school culture?

4 In the perception of teachers, what was the impact of that leadership behaviour on student achievement?

**Significance of the Study**

The study is an effort to examine the perceived influence between the leadership behaviour of a secondary school principal and student achievement as measured by a provincial standardized test; the OSSLT. With this in mind, there are several factors at work. First, there is leadership itself, and the many facets that pertain to this role. The most current research in educational leadership reveals that leadership roles have, in fact, many layers. Traditionally, school leaders were seen as those who held formal positions such as principals and head teachers but, more recently, teachers who have specific expertise and/or experience have been acknowledged as possessing capacity for leadership. This revelation has resulted in distributed leadership and hence a new model of leadership (Foster & St Hilaire, 2004). Student achievement in relation to the OSSLT is largely unchartered territory in scholarly literature, and will thus provide policy-makers, academics, and educational administrators with valuable empirical knowledge to assess the potential impact school leaders have on student achievement.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Review of Literature

The following review will provide a discussion of the current knowledge concerning educational leadership, leadership and its relationship to school culture and, finally, leadership in the context of school improvement and student achievement. The understanding that principals have an impact on schools is widely agreed upon in the scholarly literature. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) in an exhaustive study of successful school leadership and how it influences student outcomes claim that ‘school leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning’ (p.5). As policy-makers continue to proclaim the necessity of school improvement, more and more often the role of the principal is placed under a microscope to ascertain what exactly she is, or could be, doing to influence school improvement and ultimately, student achievement. Principals are held accountable for the improvement in student achievement and pressure is applied to principal preparation programs to adopt outcome-based leadership practices, (Gonzalez et al., 2002) so that educational institutions will see the benefits of principals who have received training in getting results.

Leadership

In recent decades, educational research has become focused on exploring the nature of a principal’s leadership role (Trider & Leithwood, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1992; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Foster & St. Hilaire, 2004). Specifically, the literature examines a broad range of topics relating to the function of this role including a principal’s impact on school improvement, on school organization, on teacher morale, and on student
achievement. After reviewing the evidence, there is no question that principals have an impact on school reform and on student learning. The real debate enters the conversation when scholars try to determine what principals do to illicit student achievement, how they transmit their influence and ultimately how do principals affect their schools and students and to what extent. Much of the literature maintains that successful leadership can play a highly significant role in improving student learning; in fact, the total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of total school effects (Leithwood et al. 2004). This evidence supports the current focus on improving formal leadership practices as a catalyst to student success.

According to Thomas (1997), leadership is the “process of influencing thoughts, behaviours and feelings of others in pursuit of common goals” (p.2). Similarly, Foster and St. Hilaire (2004) assert that leadership is a “process whereby influence is exerted by one person (or group) over other people to structure and facilitate activities and relationships in organizations” (p.355). Both definitions provide insight to the role of a leader which is to exert influence to achieve certain goals. Where opinions begin to diverge is how, and by whom, influence is exerted, and to what extent influence has impact, if at all. Research by Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) explores these very issues further and finds that school leadership is mediated in its effects on school and student outcomes by in-school processes such as school goals, school culture, and teachers. The school leader’s direct impact on school and student outcomes was found to be insignificant, whereas the impact on the mediated effects were quite significant. It can be inferred then that the principal’s influence is mobilized through the actions of other organizational members. Typically, teachers provide the vehicle of influence that
principals require in order to reach students. One important aspect of the definitions provided above is the necessity of achieving goals, in that, standards or policies are set and relationships and activities are facilitated, usually by the principal, in order to meet those goals. Leithwood and Louis (2012) filter the principal’s role down to two main functions: providing direction and exercising influence. In practice “it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions” (p.4).

The manner in which school leaders perform these two functions are as varied and complex as the people performing them. Models of leadership, leadership qualities, and practices are discussed in the following section.

**Leadership and School Culture**

When one considers leadership and school effectiveness frameworks, it becomes apparent that what principals are doing to be successful really relies on how they are attempting to achieve results. How leaders attempt to exercise influence, set direction, motivate people, and redesign the organization speaks volumes for chances of meaningful, sustained success. The leadership approach an individual adopts may encompass qualities, characteristics, behaviours, and practices. Some, depending on the organization, are more effective than others. Leithwood and colleagues (2004) however caution researchers to be sceptical about the “leadership by adjective” literature. As they note: “sometimes these adjectives have real meaning, but sometimes they mask the more important underlying themes common to successful leadership, regardless of the style being advocated” (p.4).
Transformational leadership places the emphasis on the practices of the leader in his/her efforts to empower teachers as professionals. Wilmore and Thomas (2001) recognize that within this setting, teachers are afforded the luxury of making their own decisions and of taking an active role in the process of determining what is beneficial for the school; however, with this comes a great deal of responsibility. Accordingly, “ideological concepts” such as respect, trust, and caring must be internalized for this type of learning community to achieve desired goals (p.116). For Leithwood and his colleagues (1999) transformational leadership assumes that the central focus of leadership ought to be the commitments and capacities of organizational members. As such, “higher levels of personal commitment to organizational goals and greater capacities for accomplishing those goals are assumed to result in extra effort and greater productivity” (p.9). Occasionally transformational and charismatic leadership models are clumped together because both focus on how leaders exercise influence over their colleagues indicating more of a personal quality: “Both forms of leadership emphasize communicating a compelling vision, conveying high performance expectations, projecting self-confidence, modelling appropriate roles, expressing confidence in followers’ ability to achieve goals, and emphasizing collective purpose” (Leithwood et al., 2012 p.5). The similarities between these two forms of leadership end there, however. Transformational leadership really is about fostering an environment of change, bringing attention to a host of classroom conditions that may need to be changed if learning is to be improved (Leithwood et al. 2004).

With respect to Leithwood’s (2012) four core leadership practices: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the
instructional program, that grounded this study, it would appear that setting direction really forms the building blocks of reform and from which all other activities inside, and outside the school to a lesser degree, take their cues. So then, it follows that this category is crucial to the success of school-based reform and its first order of business; vision-building is integral. Leithwood and his colleagues (1999) identified eight research-based leadership practices at the school level associated with vision-building. Some of the more relevant include: helping to provide colleagues with an overall sense of purpose; espousing a vision for the school but not in a way that pre-empts others from expressing their vision; exciting colleagues with visions of what they may be able to accomplish if they work together to change their practices; using all available opportunities to communicate the school’ vision to staff, students, parents and other members of the school community (p.58). Despite all of this, Fullan (1991) states that “the practice of vision-building is not well-understood. It is a highly sophisticated, dynamic process, which few organizations can sustain” (p.83). Much of the empirical research in this area points to a two-pronged approach to vision-building; the first embodies a more theoretical dimension of the vision which addresses what the school could be, the second is a practical orientation; what are the strategies and what changes will have to be made to make this vision a reality. It is the game plan of the vision. Leithwood and colleagues have contributed a wealth of knowledge concerning transformational leadership and the qualities of charisma and inspiration, indeed there is considerable overlap in these concepts. Although charisma is not a prerequisite for transformational leadership, it is often associated with this model. It is important to address the issue of leaders who take on the job of building a shared vision with charisma and those who do not possess this
quality. Charisma is a perceived notion; followers inherently feel inspired by their leaders; these relationships form “by virtue of both the extraordinary qualities that followers attribute to the leader and the latter’s mission, the charismatic leader is regarded by his or her followers with a mixture of reverence, unflinching dedication and awe” (Leithwood et al., 1999). There are two types of charismatic leaders; they are either ‘visionaries’ or ‘crisis-produced’ (Leithwood et al. p.57).

As the model of transformational leadership evolved, the notion that the authority and influence rests solely with the individual in a formal administrative position has become obsolete. More and more, the literature demonstrates that transformational leadership can extend to all levels of the organization and that practices associated with this model can be widely distributed (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). In fact Chirichello (1997) emphasizes the importance of all organizational members when he defines transformational leadership as “…influencing relationship between inspired, energetic leaders and followers who have a mutual commitment to a mission that includes a belief in empowering the members of the organization to effect, through collaborative responsibility and mutual accountability, lasting change or continuous improvement that will benefit the organization’s clients” (p.3).

In a study conducted in The Netherlands and in Canada on the effects of transformational leadership on teachers’ commitment and effort toward school reform, the researchers found that transformational forms of school leadership have direct effects on teacher’s commitment to school reform and the extra effort they devote to such reform (Geijsel et al. 2003). Furthermore, it can be inferred that when teachers are committed to a reform and contribute extra effort, their interactions with students change, which
ultimately influences students’ outcome. However, the impact on student achievement may not be as significant as policy-makers would hope for. As part of a much larger study, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) again look at transformational school leadership for large-scale reform and find that their results indicate significant effects of leadership on teachers’ classroom practices but not on student achievement.

Similarly, using case studies in two secondary schools that were involved in formal school improvement initiatives, Foster and St. Hilaire (2004) found evidence that schools support multiple sources of leadership and diverse leadership activities geared to improving teaching and learning opportunities for students (p.364). Jackson (2000) refers to this as dispersed leadership which is flexible, responsive and context-specific rather than prescribed by roles which are inflexible and hierarchical. In this sense, leadership is stretched over a broad base. Jackson also acknowledges the necessity for schools to expand their leadership repertoires because leadership does not come automatically with the position, but ultimately, with the person who possesses leadership qualities.

Similarly, Leithwood and Duke (1998) contend that for participative leadership, “authority and influence are available potentially to any legitimate stakeholders in the school based on their expert knowledge, their democratic right to choose, their critical role in implementing decisions, or a combination of the three” (p. 38).

In a study to examine the role of communication for high school principals in the implementation of education reform, Siu (2008) claims that in response to education reform that involves the school management structure, secondary schools revamped their communication structures by practicing distributed leadership to enhance the flow of information throughout the schools and thereby facilitated the connections among people
Accordingly, effective school leadership should foster a spirit of collaboration and a participative culture so that teachers can interact and cooperate with colleagues to enhance teaching and learning. Similarly, Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, and Myers (2007), find that the distribution of leadership can be effectively accomplished through the use of collaborative structures such as teacher teams. They also find that teacher teams are more conducive to tapping into the expertise of the school’s staff for both problem-finding and problem-solving implications.

**Leadership, School Culture, and Student Achievement**

The following conceptual framework assumes that some or all of the impact attained by the school leader on desired school outcomes such as student success occurs through manipulation of, or interaction with, features of the school organization. This is consistent with the notion that leaders achieve their results through other people. One aspect of a school’s organization that is often neglected in improvement rhetoric is culture – that intangible element that permeates the life of school organization. Though one cannot quite put a finger on it, or define it precisely, all organizational members feel it implicitly. Deal and Peterson (1999 p.2) describe culture in the following way:

> “for decades the terms climate and ethos have been used to try to capture the powerful, pervasive, and notoriously elusive force. We believe culture provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to help school leaders better understand their school’s own unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything”.

Perhaps it is because of culture’s elusiveness that it continues to be an undervalued variable in educational research. Goldring and Knox (2002), however, have made successful inroads into this area with their investigation connecting culture and student
achievement. They find a positive connection between a school’s culture and student achievement and, indeed, culture may be an effective tool that is critical to the success of students. Although this study identifies six key traits of culture—including shared vision, traditions, collaboration, shared decision-making, innovation, and communication—Swheiker-Marra (1995) outlines twelve cultural norms and notes which were manipulated by the principal in order to affect change. For example, a main effect of a principal’s role was found for four of the twelve cultural norms including: collegiality, tangible support, caring/honest/humour, and open, honest communication.

It would appear that the linchpin between a teacher’s work setting and student achievement is culture, and specifically, strong collaborative cultures (Hargreaves et al. 2001). Professional communities in teaching are linked to effective classroom learning, strong professional confidence and feelings of self-efficacy, and teachers’ capacity to initiate and respond to change (Hargreaves, 2001). Although all schools have very unique cultures, Deal and Peterson (1999) claim there are general features common to all positive cultures. These elements include a strong professional community that uses knowledge, experience, and research to improve practice and core values of collegiality, performance, and improvement that engender quality, achievement, and learning for everyone (p.116). There is a strong sense that while the subtle aspects of culture such as shared vision, and feelings of self-efficacy are important, they are embedded in the concrete act of what teachers physically do together. Collaboration among teachers has the power to change a culture and ultimately enhance student performance. Hargreaves (2003) however, cautions against ineffective collaboration and contrived collegiality. He
notes that in the 1980s, efforts were made to *re-culture* schools so that members would be more collaborative and thus avoid the pitfalls of individualism and isolation (p.129). There was an entire shift in education to promote school teams who would work together to share resources and plan in small groups. But without the proper external or independent checks and balances, re-culturing may not lead to improved student achievement. Similarly, contrived collegiality according to Hargreaves occurs when “collaborative cultures are hijacked by hierarchical systems of control and collaboration among teachers becomes forced, or artificial.” (p.130) This condition may be an ailment of too much leadership intervention.

Studies of schools engaged in school improvement initiatives seeking to increase student achievement have concluded that school culture has more influence than any formal aspect of leadership. Goldring and Knox (2002) identify three levels to explain how culture guides interactions within schools. The first level consists of all things observable; for example, the way meetings are organized, or budgets decided. The second level contains the values a community believes in, which in turn support all the activities accomplished at the first level. The third level, the psychological level, is a collection of the assumptions gathered by a group over time and dictates how members interact; for example, how resources are shared between departments. Goldring and Knox (2002) also isolate six key traits of culture including: shared vision, traditions, collaboration, shared decision-making, innovation, and communication (p.33). Though Schweiker-Marra (1995) identifies twelve norms of school culture, some of which overlap Goldring and Knox, it is surprising that she does not mention the notion that
school cultures have a vision. Arguably the most important element of a school’s culture, vision provides the framework from which the mission statement stems, thus guiding all activity, academic or otherwise, within the school. Bottoms (2002) recommends that a school’s mission statement be “emblazoned on the front of every high school and in each classroom, referred to in every interaction with students, parents, and the community, and become the focus of all school improvement efforts” (p.18). As Schweiker-Marra (1995) asserts, many studies have concentrated on the principal’s role in affecting change in the school culture in an effort to elicit change, few of these studies have focused on the cultural norms that the principal influenced to bring about change.

This review of the literature began by acknowledging leaders have an indirect impact on students and student achievement. While much research has been devoted to identifying various leadership practices and their subsequent impact on student achievement, making a connection between leadership and student achievement requires the stepping stone of school culture. We must not underestimate the power school culture can have on those who share the same school walls for many hours each day. Humans are, after all, social creatures. Though Bulach and colleagues (1994) use the term climate in their study to discuss the school environment, the criteria are similar to other researchers’ (Goldring & Knox, 2002; Schweiker-Marra, 1995) understanding of cultural norms such as the elements of collaboration and trust. Interestingly, Bulach and colleagues did not find differences in school climate perceptions as a result of leadership styles. Based on the results of this research, it cannot be said that one particular leadership model is superior to another; in fact, any leadership style could result in good school climate (p.17). What they did find to be consistent evidence was that a good
climate relies on a suitable match between the leadership style of the principal and the
maturity level, that is, years of experience, of the faculty.

The principal must develop leadership skills in others so as to facilitate the
collaborative environment. If the transformational leader requires principals to create the
right culture by manipulating various elements of culture in order to influence student
achievement, then it follows that all other contributors to the school culture have an
important responsibility to help the process. Principals cannot be all things to all people.
All too often, they are placed in positions with tremendous responsibilities as both leaders
and managers of the school. In such roles, where they are perceived as the only leader,
principals are expected to juggle duties that range from creating the right school climate
to time-tabling. One solution to this problem is the creation of collective leadership
councils (Chirichello, 1997). This collective design for school governance promotes
shared power and responsibility and ultimately encourages teachers to take initiative in
their professional development and professional autonomy (p.10). As research
(Sergiovanni, 1992; Anderson, 2004) confirms, there are alternative forms of leadership
that must be further explored. It is a fair assessment that the days of top-down leadership
are effectively over. Although there still remains a gap in the research, current studies in
the field of educational administration are beginning to address this disparity in the
literature.
The Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: A framework guiding research on the effects of school leadership on student achievement (Leithwood, 2011)

School Improvement Initiatives

Successful Leadership Practices
- Setting Direction
- Developing People
- Redesigning the Organization
- Leading the Instructional Program

School Culture

Altered Teacher Practices

Student Learning and Achievement
Conceptual Framework

The guiding framework for this study is drawn from a very robust body of research and is well grounded in scholarly study. Leithwood et al. (2012) in a large-scale study examined how leadership influences student learning. The research was an effort to probe the role of leadership in improving student learning. One of the most significant assertions made from this study is that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (p.3). Based on this finding, scholars refocused their attention to the role of leadership, both formal and informal, and its impact on student achievement.

While principals are responsible for performing many duties, there is a set of core leadership practices that all principals seeking to improve student learning in their schools should consider in order to achieve any discernible success. These sets of practices are considered to be the basics of successful leadership: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. (Leithwood et al. 2004, 2008) Building on similar studies of school-based improvement, Fullan (1991) identifies six major themes essential to the reform process, they are: vision building, evolutionary planning, initiative-taking and empowerment, staff development and resource assistance, monitoring/problem-coping, and restructuring. Both Leithwood and Fullan offer a foundation into what it is that principles and other organizational leaders do to reform and ultimately improve schools and student learning. Quite often their practices and behaviours overlap, though it is Leithwood’s organization of practices that is used in this study and Fullan’s understanding of vision is discussed in the literature.
review. This study seeks to reveal the principal’s efforts to firstly setting the direction at the school by building a shared vision and fostering the acceptance of group goals, then developing people through individualized support, redesigning the organization by building collaborative cultures and modifying organizational structures to nurture collaboration and finally, managing the instructional program through staffing, monitoring progress, providing instructional support, aligning resources, and buffering staff from distractions and in doing so, finding the indirect effects on student achievement with respect to the OSSLT.

Although there are many sub-practices associated with each category, there are some that address the culture of the school both implicitly and explicitly. For example, fostering the acceptance of group goals may require a cultural shift in the mentality of those that are required to accept change and reform. There are two sub-practices however that speak directly to the cultural elements of an organization and are therefore an important part of this study. They are: building collaborative cultures and restructuring the organization to support collaboration as part of redesigning the organization. The importance of school culture cannot be underestimated. Deal and Peterson (1999) emphasize this reality;

“Just as culture is critical to understanding the dynamics behind any thriving community, organization, or business, the daily realities and deep structure of school life hold the key to educational success. Reforms that strive for educational excellence are likely to fail unless they are meaningfully linked to the school’s unique culture. (p.1)

So then, this framework establishes that the function of the four leadership practices and their combination to more or less varying degrees leads to some impact on school culture,
again, depending on the specific practice and how it interacts with the other practices, the impact on school culture can be considerable and meaningful.

**School Context and Culture**

The secondary school is located in an urban centre in south-eastern Ontario. At the time of the study the school’s student population was approximately 1300, a number that has declined over the years as a result of an aging community and growth in the board elsewhere. When it first opened in the early 1960s, Holy Cross, a pseudonym, was based on very high academic standards and offered a competitive athletic program. Over the years, focus on certain athletics has been coupled with a growing concentration on the arts including drama, music, and media arts. The school offers an abundance of university/college track courses. There is also an increase in failure rates, dropout rates, absenteeism (among staff and students), suspensions, and physical violence among students.

The school is organized into ten departments, including those pertaining to specific areas of curriculum and those in supporting roles. Each department is led by a curriculum chair who, according to O.E.C.T.A (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association), among other things, provides curriculum support to members of his/her department. This person can also provide resources and support to foster exemplary teaching and a collegial, collaborative work environment within a department. If requested by a teacher, a curriculum chair may help identify exemplary practices.

The school board has slowly expanded. In the past fifteen years, the population in neighbouring cities increased, necessitating new high schools in the board. There are
now seven high schools in the board, but the new schools boast new facilities, modern technology, and young dynamic staff members. The school also has difficulty keeping young teachers on staff. They are consistently given challenging timetables and are often declared redundant/surplus because of the high seniority of the staff.

**Students**

The student population has changed dramatically over the past 15 years. Formerly, the student population was predominantly white, middle to upper-middle class, with many families coming from recent European immigration. Students lived within the boundaries of the school and, commonly, within walking distance. Increasingly, the student population has become more ethnically diverse, accommodating many cultures and visible minority groups. However, overall, the population is of lower socio-economic status, drawing from new apartment buildings and townhouses in the area.

**Teachers**

Of the approximate 80 teaching staff, 10 have over 25 years seniority, 4 of which have over 30 years seniority. An additional 10 teachers have between 20-25 years seniority. The staff is indeed top-heavy and is the oldest in the board. An interesting trait of the staff is that approximately one-third of the teachers are former students.

**Administration**

The administration consists of a first-time principal, who is eligible for retirement, and two vice-principals, one male and one female. The male administrator is also eligible for retirement, the female vice-principal was formerly a facilitator at the board office.
The participants were asked to consider several elements of culture within their school. Among them: shared vision, traditions, collaboration, shared decision-making, innovation, and communication. During this principal’s tenure, there was definite force applied to the established cultural norms of the school that really stretched the organizational members’ view of what was and what was not culturally acceptable.

The Ministry of Education in Ontario undoubtedly has more than one purpose and carries out a wide variety of functions, among them developing broad-based initiatives both at the district level and at the school level. An important one in terms of this study, was the introduction of standardized testing in secondary school across the province to assess students’ literacy abilities in both reading and writing. Successful completion of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) quickly became a requirement for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (O.S.S.D). The results from the first administration of the test in 2001 showed Holy Cross to be well below both provincial and board averages. For many stakeholders involved including teaching staff, administration, parents, and students, these results sparked a concern that test scores needed to be improved thus prompting the success rates achieved by Holy Cross.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Methodology

The study used the case study methodology because it provides an in-depth exploration of a bounded event, (Creswell, 2005)—in this instance, improvement in school achievement as related to the principal’s leadership behaviour. In light of the main research question, the case study is the preferred strategy since the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. In this case the phenomenon occurred between the Fall of 2002 and the Spring of 2006. In addition, the researcher has an interest in describing and evaluating the events and outcomes of a specific case. An instrumental case study was used because the focus was the much larger issue of leadership effectiveness with respect to student achievement and the issue was explored within the context of a specific school. The case study used both qualitative and quantitative data.

Data Collected

The research for the study was conducted after the school experienced increased success rates on the OSSLT between the years 2002-2006. Therefore, the participants who were present during those years, were asked to reflect upon that time period. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants’ perceptions and opinions associated with leadership roles/behaviours and how they relate to student achievement was collected. Specifically, the principal’s role in the school as curriculum leader, strategies she used or implemented to improve OSSLT scores, and participants’ perceptions and opinions associated with the culture of the school, in terms of the
following criteria: shared vision, traditions, collaboration, shared decision-making, innovation, and communication. Finally, data was collected on participants’ perceptions regarding changes in school culture and the impact on student achievement. Data needed from available records includes OSSLT results between the years 2002 and 2006 to ascertain any change in level of achievement. The Ministry of Education of Ontario provides OSSLT scores for each secondary school on its website. Access is granted to the public.

Sample and Sampling

This particular school was selected because achievement levels on the OSSLT increased significantly over a 4-year period between 2002 and 2006. In addition to the principal, eight participants who comprise both teaching and non-teaching staff were selected, including the literacy teacher and student success teacher, English Curriculum Chair and Vice-Principal at the school. The remaining four teachers were selected at random out of a pool of approximately 70 teachers. The sample includes all personnel directly involved with the literacy and student achievement efforts at the school during this period and also includes a substantial representation of staff indirectly involved in this process. In this way, both perspectives were included in the data collection. Please refer to the attached interview guides for nature of information obtained.

Instruments

Key informant interviews were used to probe the views of a number of individuals including the principal, the literacy teacher, the student success teacher, the curriculum
chair of the English department, and four other teaching staff selected at random and not
directly involved with literacy initiatives. The format will consist of one-on-one
interviews and follow the interview guide approach whereby topics and issues to be
covered are outlined in advance but sequence of interview and working of questions
develop naturally during the course of the interview.

The interview guide for the principal was designed with the intention of starting
with very broad questions and eventually moving to questions with a more narrow focus.
For example, the first question asked the principal to describe her role in the school as
curriculum leader. This question established the tone of the interview. It allowed the
participant to reflect about her role in two facets: firstly, the role of leadership, and
secondly, the role of curriculum advisor. By the conclusion of the interview, the
participant was asked to draw any connections between changes in school culture and
whether these changes had an impact on student achievement. To further narrow the
question, the participant was asked to relate how this phenomenon occurred.

The interview guide for the teaching staff mirrored the design of the principal’s
interview guide in that the questions began quite broad and then successively narrowed to
pinpoint responses that directly correspond to the research questions. One marked
difference, however, is that the teachers were asked to reflect upon other sources of
leadership in the school, how these people displayed their leadership, and in what ways
the principal allowed for other sources of leadership.
Procedures

Permission to conduct the study was gained by contacting the director of the school board by letter. A separate letter was hand-delivered to the principal indicated in the study and recruitment letters were placed only in the mailboxes of selected teachers. In each letter, the purpose of the study and the nature of their participation were clearly stated. Also provided was the assurance that they may withdraw at any time, that the participants will at no time be judged or evaluated and at no time will they be at risk of harm. The participants were also informed that no value judgements would be placed on their responses.

All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed to paper. Each participant’s transcript was sent to him/her via email approximately two weeks after the interview. The participant then had the opportunity to review the transcript for approximately one week so that he/she could add any further information or correct any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview was kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with OISE/UT ethical standards, all respondents signed letters of informed consent stating the nature and purpose of the research and the procedures that will be used. Participants were also notified that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time, outlined possible uses of research results, and invited participants to request a summary of the study to be made available upon completion. All efforts were made to report information in such a way that individual persons, the school, and the
school board cannot be identified, although those within the school will know which school was studied, and be able to infer who some of the individual participants are, in spite of all precautions to protect the anonymity of participants, including the use of pseudonyms.

**Treatment of Data**

These research questions were informed by an analysis of the OSSLT results in both reading and writing scores. The scores are given in levels ranging from one to four and in overall percentages for the school. This analysis comprised a comparison of test results from the Fall of 2002 and those of Spring 2006. The interviews were transcribed and catalogued according to idea units or at least, a unit of general meaning. Idea units are defined as the groups of words and/or phrases which express a unique and coherent meaning clearly differentiated from that which preceded and followed (Schweiker-Marra, 1995).
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Description of Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>ROLE</th>
<th>EXPERIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>First Principalship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>Vice-Principal</td>
<td>Second school as vice-principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Student Success Teacher</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Program Support</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark</td>
<td>Teacher, Curriculum Chair</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Teacher, Curriculum Chair</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Teacher, Curriculum Chair</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>New Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Janet had been a vice-principal for a number of years in the same school board, and this particular school was her first and only principalship. The eight additional participants comprise both teaching and non-teaching staff. Four have been intentionally selected including a program support teacher and student success teacher, the English curriculum chair and one of the vice-principals at the school. They were selected for their expertise and direct involvement with the literacy initiatives that took place in the school at the time the study was conducted. The remaining four teachers were selected at random out of a pool of approximately 65 teachers. Their responses represent a wide array of perceptions according to the leadership and culture of the school and their impact
on student achievement. Both the school and the participants have been given pseudonyms in an effort to maintain anonymity.

**Findings**

As outlined in the conceptual framework, Leithwood and Louis’ (2012) four core leadership practices; setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program guided the study and thus findings have been organized using these headings. In some cases, the specific components for each practice are clearly visible as having occurred at Holy Cross but in other instances there is little evidence that the core leadership practices reached their full potential. The reasons for both cases will be further examined in the discussion section.

**Setting Directions**

From the discussions that follow, we get the sense that Holy Cross is made up of an older, tightly-knit, staff with top-heavy seniority and that these people place a great deal of importance on their traditions. The principal perceives the school’s traditions as both strengths and weaknesses of its culture. One of the first things she did when she came to the school was to get to know the community. She notes: “Most of the staff had been there forever and had done things the same way for a long time.” But she also points out that “if anything ever happened in the community they would support each other 100%.” According to the principal, one of the toughest challenges she faced in this role was motivating teachers at this school to accept change, given their history and their tenacity to tradition. She speaks specifically that she tried to get staff to realize that the
demographics of the student population had changed over time and that it was no longer
the majority of graduates that went on to either college or university, but rather, many
went on to trade schools or entered the workforce. Janet recognized a need that was
unique to the school at the grassroots level and initiated change that ultimately affected
the culture of the organization.

But to know what changed, we must first look at what the participants’ perceived
the culture to be prior to this principal’s posting. There are a few key respondents who
paint a picture of the very roots of this school’s existence, both in terms of its staff and its
students. According to Clark, the school’s culture is really based in its formation. He
states: “For a long, long time this school was seen as being very conservative simply
because it’s the oldest school in our board and as a function of that it had the oldest staff.”
Mary delves into the psyche of the school’s teachers further when she recalls the
transition in the early 1980s of becoming fully publicly-funded. As the only Catholic
high school in the area, Holy Cross was a school opened and operated by members of the
religious orders. She says: “We’re still having a struggle with autonomy; who we were
versus who we are in the sense of we used to call a lot of our own shots and now we’ve
got this ministry to answer to and we’re still kicking and screaming. It’s still in our
history that kicks and screams and so I think we bring a lot of that into our present day.”
She also points to yet another political change that proved to be a divisive force within
the school culture. She notes: “we also are a staff who went through the split of OECTA
from our administrators and so now we almost have a sense of they’re not one of us and
that again trickles down into the psyche.” Mary articulates a well-known, although
recent, cultural shift of “us and them” attitude in the workplace setting.
The principal also touches upon a very turbulent time in education in Ontario during the 1990s when many federations resorted to political action, either by work-to-rule or strikes, in reaction to various pieces of legislation. She says “we came from a period of several years of work to rule. Along with that many, many people started working in isolation. They hadn’t really talked to each other, yeah they say hello, they talk in the staffroom but they hadn’t really discussed professional issues in classrooms for a long time. So a lot of people were doing their own thing in the classroom.” Clark echoes this sentiment, “In the late 1990s and early 2000s with a lot of older staff seeing a lot of changes that people were not necessarily happy with, at least up until about 2003 you had a fairly demoralized staff.”

Janet began her tenure as principal in January of 2003. The first time the OSSLT was written across the province was in February, 2002, so then it is a fair assessment that the Literacy Test was a new phenomenon for all secondary school educators. She admits with some surprise that the first indications the school was experiencing very low test results were from the school’s data on the October 2002 test which would not have been made available until the following spring of 2003: “I think it took us the whole year to realize how poor those results were...so that 2003-2004 year was really the first time that we started things going.” Initially, she had not received pressure from the board to improve test scores, but eventually she did experience some pressure coming from the board and other stakeholders. She goes on to explain that one of her first acts as principal was to create a school goal involving improved literacy rates on the OSSLT: “I remember I spoke at the very first staff meeting of the year stating that literacy was going to be a focus for the year and each department had to submit a goal.” In terms of an actual goal
she states: “if I am being honest with you when we first started the goal, it was basically
to get more kids passing, and no, we weren’t into the 10% goal as opposed to the last
year. Ideally, to be at least at provincial average and when we started analysing the scores
I think one of our goals was to see improvement especially in the students enrolled in the
applied and workplace courses.” From these comments one can ascertain that there was a
general understanding that improvement was needed. Although, specific numerical
values were not attached to the goals for the OSSLT, the principal perceived the students’
performance on the test had previously been low and now there was an initiative at the
school to improve this condition of underperformance.

As part of establishing a shared goal, the principal persevered in changing the
staff’s perception that the OSSLT was an English department responsibility. The impact
that resulted was the understanding that all teachers had a vested interest in literacy,
however this shift in perception was slow to take root. Janet states: “I think the strategies
we worked on were basically trying to get more staff involved in helping students
improve, how to make it more cross-curricular. The literacy test up to that stage,
everyone I think saw it as this is an English department thing.” The vehicle used to
disseminate information regarding the OSSLT was the literacy committee. The principal
relates that after meetings with staff, curriculum chairs, and the parent council, the
consensus was that a literacy committee was necessary at the school. She describes the
first efforts in this way: “We did the first presentation which wasn’t that bad in terms of
making staff aware of what was on the literacy test. Our goal was to get teachers and
students familiar with the terminology used on the test, get teachers familiar with the
types of questions on writing and reading and hopefully they would include some of those in their own curriculum.”

One of the findings, in not just the principal’s responses but in those of all the participants, is the staff’s widespread willingness to accept literacy initiatives once OSSLT data began to emerge and the literacy goal became widespread. This however should not come as a surprise as Mary explains: “With an initiative like this, there is the level at which nobody would argue. Our students need support in becoming literate and a standardized test is pointing to that and little argument there.” The literacy initiatives presented at the school went hand in hand with accepting the change in the school’s culture. Embracing a culture of change proved to be more challenging for some while others accepted the new culture of change wholeheartedly. From the participants’ responses, it can be ascertained that there was tremendous motivation to buy into literacy initiatives. Rose attests to this transformation: “I think we all came together as a staff and we realized that we had to make some changes in our teaching especially for those students who need the extra help.” And with reference to the culture of the school she says: “There was a very proactive approach by the whole staff, so it did change the culture of the school because we were talking about literacy, we were preparing for literacy, and it became a focus for the whole school. I can see we have created a culture of people who want to improve.”

Building a shared vision and fostering an acceptance of group goals was mainly accomplished through curriculum chair meetings and general staff meetings. Although there was a strong emphasis that OSSLT success rates were to be improved and that this was to be the school goal, the origins of the principal’s practices were not grassroots at
the school level, but rather stem from school board and Ministry initiatives as many of the participants acknowledged. Richard, for example, responds to the drive for literacy improvement in this way: “I don’t know whether it would be attributable to her directly or to the board or to the province or some other entity, but she certainly was part of pushing it with staff and making it the top priority in the school.” And again, Rose, the student success teacher who was responsible for obtaining extra help for students who are at risk says: “There was a clear mandate from the principal and that’s communicated to the department heads and then the onus was then on department heads to communicate that to their staff in their meetings as to what the school’s goal was and how to meet it. Now, did every single staff member get it, I would say maybe not. But I think in general, people knew.” Beth, an English teacher describes the manner in which the principal set the direction with respect to the school goal in this way: “I think they (staff) were constantly hounded. I think people were reminded a lot and I do have a sense that it was the topic of conversations in department meetings.” So then, the picture that emerges is that the literacy test including mindful planning and successful results on the literacy test for all students including those most at-risk of not passing in particular those in the applied stream, was at the forefront of conversation across the board for the staff at Holy Cross.

When discussing all the initiatives that took place at the school with respect to the OSSLT and the success that followed, David also grappled with the question of the principal’s role in this phenomenon and how much could be attributed to her leadership. This is what he concludes: “Now, did all those things happen because she was told to do so by higher up administration? Maybe so, I don’t know how much of that was her own
initiative, I mean she is very good at doing what the board had asked, or at least, trying to make sure she has got all the things she’s supposed to be doing, covered.” Beth echoes this perception: “I think she did a good job of making sure everybody got the message that it was a school goal and it wasn’t just ‘oh here is what the board wants us to do’. But I don’t see her as doing much separate from the board initiatives.” When asked to differentiate which are board initiatives and what are expressly self-imposed, the principal reveals that ‘the school board first gets principals on board and then it is up to them to bring the staff on board.’ In addition, according to Janet there is an expectation that principals do have goals for their schools.

Several of the respondents perceived the initiatives implemented to improve OSSLT scores at this particular school were in fact province-wide initiatives that the organizational members had very little input on. When asked for an example, Mary provides this recollection: “The R.E.A.D (Read Everywhere And Daily) program was something that was mandated by the Ministry, province-wide initiative; people will do this so yeah people will do this. There was very little discussion around why it’s important and how would you like to and even feedback as to how best could we fit this into our day?” Mary goes on to explain the problems with sustaining an initiative when implemented in this way, especially for those departments that had difficulty with some of the logistics of the R.E.A.D. program. She says: “So specific issues as to the implementation were not listened to, were not even called for. So there was little input from the staff to how best to put it in place. So I think in the end that allowed for a lot of well I got bigger fish to fry in my class.”
Catherine also identifies the school board as the point of origin for many of the initiatives filtered down to the school level. These were not only numerous but all-encompassing strategies. Administrative professional development sessions given by the board to its principals and vice-principals specifically looked at improving literacy with the intention of disseminating that knowledge and building capacity at the school level. Catherine explains how that process unfolded: “so then we brought that back to our curriculum chair meetings and talked about the kind of things that maybe we could all do as a school and to take that ownership for that literacy piece away from just being an English teacher’s responsibility.” The board also established the role of literacy consultant in 2006-2007 who worked from grades 7 through 12 to help schools implement some of the strategies.

Despite the acute awareness of a school goal, the respondents do not perceive an overall vision coming from the principal. Clark and David, both curriculum chairs admit that while the principal may have had a vision for the school and where she wanted to take the school it was not articulated nor shared with the rest of the staff. Clark says: “I think that if she did have a vision she didn’t articulate it very well so she didn’t share it very well with the rest of the school and I think this has been a problem with the last couple of principals that we had.” Similarly David expresses uncertainty about the existence of a school vision: “Well shared vision requires a vision to be shared. So I don’t think there is much in terms of what her vision for the school was. Not a strong vision I would say no, no shared vision probably because there wasn’t a strong vision. I won’t say there was no vision though.” Also from Beth: “You need to know where that person stands and where that person intends to take the building. I never sensed with
Janet that there was a mission that when she arrived that it was her personal goal to take Holy Cross from where it was to another place that was hopefully better. I never sensed there was this bigger picture which I think is crucial.” According to the principal, her common vision, as curriculum leader, “was the improvement of student learning and in this particular aspect, is how to improve literacy in students, not only on a literacy test, but literacy period.” When asked if she thought the staff was aware of this common vision, the principal admits that the majority of staff did not get “on board” until after three years, in 2005, when data show the school was doing extremely well and things were becoming more routine. She also relates that the shared vision was not clearly communicated in her own words ‘we’re going somewhere but no one knows exactly where.’ But later on in the course of the interview, the principal explains that the shared vision was lacking, but done intentionally to move on and get things going. Part of the problem Janet explains is the challenge for any administration at this school is to get the staff to focus on the same thing together because they are “all over the place.” As a solution the board mandated mission statements from it schools to create a school vision, albeit, artificially, which the principal embraced wholeheartedly even dedicating part of a professional development day to the formulation of a mission statement.

There are many underlying factors that may play a part in this particular school’s lack of direction or the appearance of lack of vision stemming from the leadership. This condition has less to do with the perceived limitations of the principal and more with the board’s practice with respect to principal placement. Although not an official policy, at the time the study was conducted, the board maintained a practice of rotating principals out of their schools within a five year cycle. Those participants who have been at the
school for many years and have gone through many administrative changes are able to articulate this experience. For example, Clark, a veteran teacher, puts it this way: “A board that moves principals and vice principals every five years, there is no point to take on the big issues in a school because as soon as you take on those big issues it’s going to be a three or four year process to improve it, when you have done all the slogging all the hard work and you started to get things where you want them to go, you get moved and you got to do it all again.” Both Clark and Beth see yet another fault with the board’s process of first becoming a vice-principal and then being promoted to the principalship. Clark says: “She had been a vice-principal for a lot of years and I think for at least the first part of her time here I think there was a difficulty for her shifting from the idea of being a vice-principal person who runs daily operations of the school and deals with the day to day issues of the school to being the vision person.” As Beth explains, these two roles can in fact require very different personalities and skill set. “Many people would argue that Janet was a much better vice-principal. She was very organized. I think some people are visionaries and some people are not, right? Some people are managers and some people are visionaries and I guess maybe her strength and her values were in the managing of money and the organization of departments and structure. Maybe that was more her forte. She is not a visionary.” The transition between roles was further complicated by a unique circumstance at Holy Cross which Clark elaborates on: “They brought her in for half a year to be a vice-principal before they made her principal here. Which then made everybody see her in a vice-principal role first before the principal role and that was hard for her to do.”
In sum, there were a great many initiatives, activities, and coordinated planning accomplished at the school to establish and support the literacy test goal. The cross-curricular agenda paired with the concentrated effort in each department to implement skills that would support student achievement was crucial to the successful outcome during this principal’s tenure.

**Developing People**

There are three specific practices comprised in this category – providing individual support and consideration, offering intellectual stimulation, modelling appropriate values and practices. According to Leithwood (2012), “these practices aim to communicate the leader’s respect for his or her colleagues, as well as concerns about their personal feelings and needs” (p.60). Janet identifies Rose as being one of the key people she went to personally to get more cross-curricular involvement among staff. In terms of the literacy committee, Janet explains; “I think Rose did a bit of work of tapping some people when the departments didn’t come forward with anybody. You know, we’re all too busy we really don’t want to do it, she did tap a few people and we did get a really good representation on that.” Following the considerable improvement made on the 2003 OSSLT from the previous year, the participants also related that the staff was encouraged with these statistics. Referring to the statistical data Mary states: “that makes a pretty concrete goal, doesn’t it? It becomes less philosophical and more practical…and I think it did focus us.”

In accordance with her perception that there was little in the way of pedagogical discussion and not enough collaboration at the school, the principal made a concerted
effort to increase the amount of collaboration among teachers by initiating a mentorship program. Again, this was a unique condition at the school and the principal’s initiative was self-imposed from a grassroots need. This plan took place one year before the board mandated mentoring for new teachers. Janet shares the manner in which she introduced the program: “We started tapping people on the shoulder and saying you have got a lot to share, can you take this person on and the dialogue started happening between the experienced teachers and the new teachers and they started learning from each other.” And again, “We tried to encourage new teachers to take the Tools for Teaching to get them to go and come back and share their expertise.” Though Janet admits she was cautious about approaching people on staff directly, choosing rather to work through either the student success teacher or through curriculum chairs. She claims that things had been done a certain way at Holy Cross and because she had not been there long enough she did not want to upset the network structures. Despite Janet’s claim that accessing staff through curriculum chairs is the ideal because they know their staff better than sometimes she did, several participants, including curriculum chairs, believe she overlooked these established networking systems within the school. Clark relates this observation: “Four or five people, not many of them department heads who she consulted with on a regular basis many of them not that long at this school or that experienced even in terms of education and those are the people that she went to, to discuss issues and to collaborate with rather than going to what I would call the natural leaders of the school; the people that people actually listen to in the school.” Clark goes on to further explain the problems he sees with this pattern: “When you try to impose this artificial structure you go around the official structure which is the department heads. I think very often
things were presented to the department heads as already decided.” Beth echoes this sentiment when she explains the “traditional” leaders were not involved in the school success team, a board initiative. This was her perception: “I felt that it should be a curriculum chair and a staff member perhaps because I saw that part of the reason that program failed is because the so-called traditional leaders or the obvious leaders weren’t involved in the process.”

As early as 2003, staff members were asked to start thinking about activities they could incorporate into their lessons that would support literacy. These were the first initial steps to implementing the vision. The participants were asked to consider some of these strategies. The strategies were developed in staff meetings, curriculum chair meetings, department meetings, and by the literacy committee that was established soon after Janet became principal. This particular committee had a representative from each department in the school, who was ideally supposed to “teach the teacher” new literacy strategies in his/her department. Janet also indicates there was a literacy focus at every staff meeting with occasional presentations from specific departments. Classroom teachers approached the strategies in two different ways. They either chose to implement strategies not specifically associated with the literacy test but that were considered best practices and were considered to be good skills for students to have in any subject or, teachers chose to use strategies that were directly associated with the OSSLT. In both cases, the strategies used were drawn from the ministry, the board, departments and even from individual teachers. Laura indicated this was a department initiative and the teachers in the math department had been given a choice as to what strategies they wished to implement. In her case, she chose all of them: “Some of the strategies we introduced
that year were having students write math journals, they had to answer questions in sentences, they had to use different concepts like compare and contrast, we also introduced survivor guides which were summaries at the end of the unit…they had to define terms, we introduced word walls for different math terminology, and we had communication sections on tests and assignments, again where they had to use complete sentences.” The English department, on the other hand, chose a very direct approach to targeting literacy test scores. Beth says “we used the Think Literacy document as our primary sort of recommendation because I think in the past we have never really looked at our teaching practices as those that are researched based and that has become a real buzz word, right?” Similarly, Clark a classroom teacher with a great deal of classroom experience says “I developed a couple of skill exercises and then passed them on to the people in my department where they would be similar to the kinds of skills that kids would have to do on the literacy test.” Interestingly, even in a course where the subject area is very verbal and orally-focused according to Mary, there is still a great deal of preparation for the literacy test: “One of the first things that I do with students in grade 9 and further in grade 10 are opening exercises that really make them write and then read. So to me, that’s really important in terms of preparing them.” And again, she says “What they write, if they are going to deliver it orally, I always go over it with them to make sure that it’s sound and that it makes sense… so that’s one of the big ways in which I prepare for the literacy test.”

Professional development provided by the school board such as the Tools for Teaching and similar seminars function on a volunteer basis. The principal promoted the course by paying for it in part, out of her own budget if teachers wanted to attend. The
impact of the principal’s efforts to increase professional development and collaboration resulted in her experience with resistance from staff members. Janet says she experienced resistance in motivating teachers to register for such sessions and consequently found herself pressuring staff to participate. For example, the board offered opportunities for curriculum chair in-servicing and it also provided two to three days of release time for the curriculum chair to work with his/her department. Janet says “That was the beginning of the learning team. A lot of our staff procrastinated, and it wasn’t until I started saying we have to get this done, give me your dates, when are you going? You keep putting the pressure on a little bit more and more.” She continues to say that those who did get involved with professional development sessions found it very beneficial. But this of course comes at a tremendous disadvantage for teachers who are pulled away from their classrooms to partake in these sessions. Catherine acknowledges this dilemma: “As soon as you start taking people away from their classrooms for an afternoon they are still responsible for the work that happens in that classroom. They still have to plan, they still have to come back and face the consequences of whatever went on and do the marking and so you’re not really giving them time to concentrate on PD.” According to Catherine, the only way to go about this is to have “proper PD time” in the way of early dismissal whereby school is not in session. Catherine sympathizes with teachers and seems to understand the type of professional development that educators require. “The best PD is when people have a chance to get together with like teachers to do things that are meaningful and concrete that they can take back to the classroom. They don’t need to be talked at or to about the philosophy of this, that, and the other, they know that. They need opportunity to develop materials, curriculum, work on ideas together.”
In conjunction with the increased professional development initiative, schools organized their own literacy teams made up of teacher volunteers. At this particular school, teachers always met outside of class time, either before school or after school sometimes as frequently as once a week. As Catherine notes, the literacy team had a responsibility to “help in-service and share best practices, what had worked for them and each department had to take some responsibility for doing PD at staff meetings around literacy.” Although when asked how she perceived this type of professional development was received by other departments she says: “not overwhelmingly well I don’t think, and I’m not sure when some of the PD happened that was subject-specific if other departments found it particularly useful either. I didn’t get that sense.” She goes on to explain that the administration chose not to continue with that particular form of professional development that had been built into staff meetings. Interestingly, the principal views these professional development opportunities at staff meetings quite differently: “I think they hit the nail on the head when they tried to make it key areas where departments that aren’t normally thought of as literacy doing the presentation and there was some discussion about how other departments could do that.”

But resistance among staff took shape in numerous ways. With reference to the literacy initiatives, Richard notes: “In any staff of seventy to eighty teachers you’re going to get some who really buy into it and think it is important and others who buy into it only superficially and say they do it or do it in a very limited way.” Interestingly, Janet is fully aware that the early literacy initiatives were done in a limited or half-hearted way. Quite often she perceives the curriculum chairs as being the main culprits. “Curriculum chairs were supposed to pick at least one lesson a unit and I think they did that but it became
isolated. Okay, I did my one lesson I have done my job wash my hands, as opposed to what we were looking for is something done on a regular basis.” But she does acknowledge that if the chairs were unsuccessful in relaying initiatives to their departments it was quite often because the department members were not keen on it. In another example Janet reveals that she was aware staff members were not evaluating according to the Ministry mandated achievement chart (KUTCA - knowledge/understanding, thinking/inquiry, communication, and application) guidelines.

“I knew some people were cheating when they were doing it. They made it look like it was being done on paper but it wasn’t.” She also goes on to explain how some of this resistance was alleviated; “It became harder and harder as we progressed to cheat. They had to start getting on board and I think it was because of peer pressure.”

As one element of culture, the participants were asked to consider the principal’s practice in terms of sharing the decision-making process. Almost all of the respondents described Janet’s style of leadership as managerial and at times, autocratic; many use the term “micromanager”. Their experiences with this quality, however, vary considerably. Richard relates his experience of planning the actual day of the OSSLT. For him, Janet’s micromanaging in fact inhibits other sources of leadership in the school. He says: “There were times with the planning of the staff allocation, the room allocation for that day where she wanted to be over-involved in taking what we had already spent hours and hours planning and preparing and changing a few things here and there for really what I consider invalid reasons. It’s happened several times where you know she’ll put her hands in where she shouldn’t be really and it’s not her job to do the details of these things, it’s to assign it and let it be done and check it’s done effectively but not to redo it
and micromanage it.” He concludes with this reflection: “In that way, there was some not supporting other leadership, whether it’s myself or other department heads or teachers to speak at meetings and to emphasize different parts of the preparation for literacy test that’s a way she would have allowed and supported other leadership roles in the school.” When asked the same question David concludes that it is the principal’s managing that inhibits leadership in others. “She did have a tendency to micromanage for a number of things which micromanagement tends to speak to reduced chance for opportunity in some areas.”

The board establishes and fosters a relationship with its principals whereby the principal serves as an ambassador for the board’s initiatives. This relationship ultimately increases the principal’s accountability to the board. Mary describes this condition as follows: “Our former principal was a manifestor in getting tasks done. She was not to my mind a person who fostered leadership in other people outside of the mandated or in-place systems. She was a person who, given a task, would see to it that that task was carried out. So her leadership style I’d say was extremely practical. It was task-oriented, I think she will go down in history as somebody who didn’t bankrupt us, kept us on the straight and narrow, kept us accountable to the board. I don’t think she will go down in history as a great personal motivator, certainly not a nurturer or a connector or even a communicator. Those were not her fortes. She got jobs done.”

The only voice that proves to be an outlier for this theme is that of Catherine’s who offers an administrative perspective. According to her, this managerial style the principal adopts is sometimes a necessary evil: “Unfortunately, when you have a large school the management piece overrides the instructional leadership piece even if they
don’t want that to be the focus. If your school isn’t managed properly nothing else is going to happen in it.” Although she admits that this traditional model has other pitfalls and provides this insight into this particular principal’s position: “She felt she had to have ownership of the (literacy) piece because ultimately she felt she was accountable for it and she found it hard to let go of that because maybe she felt that reflected on her, again, she is answerable to somebody else who wants to know what she did and why she did it.” The circumstance of continually being accountable to the board creates another dimension to this principal’s leadership role which many respondents see as becoming stagnant, avoiding risk-taking, and ultimately, not dynamic. The principal was frequently described as cautious and conscientious, one who followed the rules and regulations, and making sure that her actions were always defensible. Clark says: “You could argue that it’s not very dynamic leadership because she is not willing to take risks where it’s appropriate and where maybe it would be beneficial to the kids.” On the other hand, perhaps this is what the board anticipates with such high principal turnover rates. Catherine relates this perception: “Sometimes you have to be prepared to take a risk and she really was not a risk taker; I didn’t feel she was a risk taker. She sort of towed the conservative line and didn’t really want to rock the boat which is fine, I mean the board doesn’t want their principals rocking too many boats either…she maybe needed to rock the boat a bit more than she did.” In previous years the principal recalls during times of job action in education, there was a brief period of half day designated professional development. Janet had pitched this idea to the board but it was quickly rejected and she had to work within the structure she found herself in. “There is a lot of politics now with
the Ministry as well. So, that didn’t necessarily happen and so we had to work within the structure that we had.”

Redesigning the Organization

There are four practices associated with refining and aligning the school organization including: building collaborative cultures, modifying organizational structures to nurture collaboration, building productive relations with families and communities, and connecting the school to the wider community. It is the first two where Holy Cross achieved great strides. Several times throughout the interview the principal returns to the point of what she considered a major weakness with the staff was a lack of collaboration. One of her greatest structural achievements was the reorganization of the school. Prior to Janet becoming principal, departments were loosely dispersed throughout the school. At the end of her second year, in 2004, when the timetable was in the process of being built for the following September, Janet physically organized all teachers into their respective departments. This was a tremendous undertaking not without its problems and backlash. Teachers who had been in the same classroom for years were shuffled around to accommodate the new departmental organization. After this, the Math department was located in one wing, the Canadian and World Studies department was in another wing, and so on. Getting people together physically was the first step to getting people together professionally. During her time as principal she placed a great deal of emphasis on meeting with colleagues and the benefits of these exchanges, but the real problem was how to promote collaboration. While Janet does seize moments for collaboration among her staff, she does so in an artificial and imposed
manner. “I think our greatest challenge is where do we get the opportunity and time to meet together and one of the few times had to be staff meetings. Some people didn’t like that, but that was the reality.” The principal also indicates that when she first arrived at Holy Cross there was little in the way of pedagogical discussion. “There were very few committees that were curriculum-related, most departments almost ran themselves. So that challenge was how do we bring people together just to talk to each other, just to feel more as a team together?” Interestingly, two curriculum chairs indicate how collaboration has increased within their own departments. For example, when Beth was asked to quantify the collaboration that goes on her department she says; “There is more than ever, I finally have developed that collegial nature, people are walking away from my meetings saying that was really effective, that was productive.” And again, David echoes this perception that within the department there is extensive collaboration. David describes collaboration in his department: “When I came it was already in place. The staff is very much collaborative-based. It’s not like I have to push very many people to do very much.” He credits technology with the ease of transferring knowledge among teachers. The vice-principal credits the curriculum changes that occurred in 1999 with the increase in collegiality in the workplace. She says: “Things are more collegial in secondary schools than they were before because the way the new curriculum was structured it meant people had to be more collegial otherwise the workload was just phenomenally ridiculous.” She asserts that this growing collegiality facilitated literacy initiatives. “I think that has definitely helped with the kind of initiatives we’re doing now because people are getting more used to working in teams and working as groups inter-departmentally.” Traditionally, high school teachers rarely, if ever, worked in a cross-
curricular approach because of the departmental organization of secondary schools. Interestingly, each of the sources of leadership view the amount of collaboration present at the school quite differently.

Another way the principal modified organizational structures was to implement changes to the types of courses offered at the school, such as offering more courses in the college and workplace streams. The impact of that was that she experienced resistance from those who still perceived the school as still largely academic in nature. She discloses that some were hesitant to get “on board”, and as a result she resorted to an autocratic style of leadership. “Now we almost had a mutiny in one of those curriculum chairs’ meetings and that year it didn’t go and finally the next year it came down to being a little more autocratic and sometimes it’s not a preferred style but sometimes if it’s not working and people are just bucking, it comes down to yeah, here it is you’re going to have to do it.” She goes on to explain that there were still teachers on staff that had trouble with that concept; expecting students to be like they had been years ago and that those who fell outside of that spectrum were not their responsibility. During the course of the interview she reflects upon this need to change this mentality: “How do you get teachers to buy into every student is your responsibility and that you try to have an effect on all students even the ones who don’t want to be there?”

The principal acknowledges that in terms of accepting change and new initiatives some staff were further ahead than others, and she saw this really as a function of subject-related departments. Some departments, according to the principal share more readily and collaborate more frequently than others. She often refers to herself as the curriculum leader in the school, and as such, it was her responsibility to increase collaboration, create
professional learning communities, and ultimately, increase the leadership potential in the school. The way she attempted to accomplish this tremendous task was by first requiring teachers to create common assessments. This process allows for greater accountability, transparency, and increases standardized practices at the school. She says: “Common assessments not only help teachers see the impact of their efforts but by doing common assessments, they have to talk to each other. They have to start the dialogue, it’s the dialogue that’s important, and how do you create these opportunities?

When the principal is asked to discuss the culture of the school during her tenure, the impression she gives is that she believes the culture did change but in stages and to varying degrees. In a general response, she believes that people over time, develop a trust in their administrators, and specifically her staff felt more at ease with her by the time she left. In her perception she worked considerably through the pre-existing networks of formal leadership, namely, the curriculum chairs. New initiatives were introduced via curriculum chairs, resistors were supported through the help of curriculum chairs, staff was accessed through curriculum chairs, and changes to cultural norms were tempered by curriculum chairs. According to the principal, “the change in culture were very small incremental steps in terms of the environment of belonging together as a community, working together and that still needs work, however I think there aren’t as many people working in isolation as there were before.” The principal credits a change in the mentality of the staff as her greatest impact, that more people understood the demographics of the school had changed their personal acceptance of a need for change.

With respect to reaching out to the greater community, Janet also has a clear understanding that as principal she is accountable to the parents of the school. “Part of
that is reporting the results to the parent council and trying to find reasons for those scores and sometimes when you say reasons a lot of people were giving excuses. The important thing is what do we need to do to improve it?” She expresses a clear drive and intense focus on the improvement of literacy scores.

Managing the Instructional Program

The final core leadership practice is managing or, more recently, improving the instructional program. Under this umbrella falls an additional five associated behaviours such as; staffing the instructional program; monitoring progress of students, teachers, and the school; providing instructional support; aligning resources; and finally buffering staff from distractions to their work. In terms of staffing, the principal discovered an interesting way of getting the resisters on board; she spear-headed a major cultural shift in terms of the school’s staffing. Elementary schools are typically smaller organizations than are secondary schools, and as a result of a smaller staff, they are more likely to develop professional learning communities, collaborate regularly, and meet throughout the day. During her tenure, Janet was directly responsible for hiring at least six elementary panel teachers. As part of her reasoning she says: “They were experienced teachers; they had been working on differentiated instruction because of their classroom. They had a lot to bring to our system and so to a certain extent those people were key in getting some of the resisters on board.” Janet was able to surreptitiously inject collaboration into the school culture just by hiring the right people. She expresses a sense of compassion with those resisters because she understands that quite often they needed
to know how the new initiatives were in the best interest of the students. This revelation points to the necessity of a shared vision; a prerequisite of successful leadership practices.

The principal spear-headed tremendous school-based instructional support for the OSSLT effort. Beginning in the fall of 2003, she initiated after school help sessions in preparation for the OSSLT. Information regarding this program was sent home to parents via the school newsletter and students signed up on a volunteer basis. Working with the student success teacher, Janet also facilitated a two day withdrawal of students who were at risk of not passing the test and/or those who did not have English that semester. These students were provided with intensive training sessions for the literacy test and were offered individual help with specific OSSLT questions, usually administered by program support staff. In addition, Richard, a key figure in student success rates on the literacy test, acted as a purveyor of necessary materials: “We helped to support teachers by ordering the resource materials for them, the workbooks or the resources from the web we printed out for them and for the pushing with departments, primarily English. I spoke to department heads and to the admin about we need to insist that each teacher in English does devote specific time to a specific format of literacy test.” In addition to these support people, teachers were equipped with useful resources. The Think Literacy documents, published by the Ontario government and written for the express purpose of assisting educators with OSSLT preparation, were given to every teacher. The principal states: “In fact, as a school we started implementing the Think Literacy document the year before the board mandated the implementation.” Sample tests were also provided for all students to take home and work on and the English department also started incorporating literacy skills in their grade 9 classes.
Rose, a non-classroom teacher involved with student success, supports the assertion that the principal was successful in ensuring a consistent and continuous school-wide focus on student achievement with respect to the OSSLT. She claims that many departments used sample questions from the OSSLT and provided direct examples from the test “many departments were doing that, for instance, the Religion department would use one of their own topics and ask the students to write an opinion piece. Other departments such as the History department, they had to write a newspaper report about something historical, so all of the items that were necessary for the OSSLT were being addressed in the different departments and I think that had a huge impact on the students being prepared and knowing the skills they needed for writing the OSSLT paper.”

In addition to the extra-curricular literacy support, Janet in conjunction with the literacy committee, also started a reading program at the school whereby everyone in the school, staff and students, would participate in twenty minutes of reading at the end of the first period one day a week. It was called D.E.A.R; drop everything and read. She outfitted each classroom with a large plastic tote and asked teachers and students to donate reading material to the bin that everyone would have access to. She explained that during her walkabouts around the school, she came to realize that not all staff were indeed dropping everything and reading. She was forced to question those individuals and reminded them that this was a focus for the school and that students needed to know that it was important, and that there was an expectation for them to do well on the OSSLT.

Teacher responses reveal that the impact of Janet’s initiatives and the way she went about them, led to increased awareness of accountability. When asked why, in her
perception, did the school perform so well on the 2007 literacy test, Laura, a new teacher, points to accountability. She claims: “I think everyone was working towards it; everyone was doing the literacy strategies, and there was accountability for those literacy strategies.” In terms of the principal’s role in improving test scores last year (2006 – 2007), she states Janet “made sure everyone was accountable for what they were doing…actually going through and implementing it, there’s always grumbling when you ask people to do more things but she kept at it.” Laura also recalls the amount of paper work curriculum chairs and other teaching staff were required to fill out indicating strategies they had used, the effectiveness of those strategies and improvements that would be made. The issue of accountability however is really imposed at the provincial level. From the perspective of the student success teacher, Rose relates the importance of the OSSLT, not only for the sake of literacy, but also as it relates to success in secondary schools. When the provincial government implemented the standardized test, it also mandated that passing the literacy test would be required to graduate from high school and meet O.S.S.D requirements. She states: “Because of the Ministry’s mandate, the mandate coming down from the board that all schools had to improve the OSSLT scores, there was a huge push to have literacy committees; that was really the start of it all. Then what started to happen was there was more of a link between the elementary and secondary panel, we needed to reach out to the elementary associate schools because they needed to know the importance of this huge test they had to pass in grade 10 in order to graduate.” In this way, the Ministry of Education built in accountability within the OSSLT framework.
Buffering staff from outside distractions seems to have been yet another challenge the principal and staff had to contend with during the course of their OSSLT improvement initiatives. The principal refers to sustainability issues with too many initiatives. When asked about the success of some of the initiatives she oversaw she remarks: “In that third year I think we were doing extremely well and it was too bad we didn’t get to carry on there, even for another six months here before everything else started going on because things were starting to become routine especially things that were getting built into each person’s classroom and curriculum area.” Janet perceives change as an inevitable force in education, but she continually goes back to the problem of teachers not having enough time to manage the change. In her perception; “Time is lacking. I wish as administrators, we all wish we had more time. We wish we had more PD days. We wish we had more opportunities to dialogue. As much as people have cut up the government and so on, I think they started going in the right direction but sometimes it’s just too much too fast at times. But what do you do? And I think that’s a reality: change that’s going to be constantly happening.” One of the major themes to emerge from the interviews, however, is the amount of initiatives which filter down from the Ministry to individual schools all over the province. All of the respondents claimed there were too many initiatives being dictated to them from the Ministry, and even more troublesome, in their perception, is the rate at which these initiatives are distributed. As a result, according to the participants there is not enough time in between initiatives to perfect them or allow for them to take root so that they become part of the school culture. This also leads to sustainability issues with such a high turnover rate of newly-implemented initiatives and difficulties with staff commitment to these directives. In
addition, principles are frequently moved around the board in five-year cycles posing a challenge to sustaining or improving initiatives.

All the participants in this study placed a high value on life-long literacy. As one respondent put it “I don’t think philosophically any of us would argue with the concept of reading for pleasure as part of a daily routine.” But as many noted, there are clear limitations to any initiative, worthy or not, when teachers are bombarded with too many directives and when the point of origin is not school-based. As Mary notes: “I don’t know whether we buy in the way we need to sometimes because there is a perception that this is a ministry hoop that we have to jump through rather than something that’s organically come out of the community as a focus need and that we need to address this now.” Similarly, Richard states: “I think teachers get tired of imposed structure or imposed new ways of doing things and having to jump through hoops when certainly there’s always room for improvement. Teachers sometimes get frustrated if they feel like all they’re doing is spinning wheels or jumping through hoops.” It follows that when there are too many Ministry-driven initiatives, all of them cannot be successfully implemented or maintained. David states “Anytime they tell me something new to do, my response is which of the previous things am I to stop doing? Because, implementation requires more effort in most cases than continuing it.” But there are so many new things that get implemented but not maintained. David points out also that Ministry-driven initiatives lack true innovation: “Innovation is something that should be useful and politically-driven pedagogy operates on the presumption that the previous government’s stuff is wrong so because it’s the previous government’s stuff they have to put their own stamp on everything.” Catherine makes the same observation in terms of
sustainability. She says: “Part of the problem with that, and of course it comes ultimately from the Ministry, seems to be bringing out an awful lot of initiatives that they want us to look at in a very short time, so if you start on another new initiative then something suffers. I don’t think we had the focus on the literacy for long enough to see sustained impact because then we had to start doing S.M.A.R.T (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-related) goals.” There is one key participant who articulates the inherent tension between implementation and on-going maintenance of Ministry-directed initiatives. Mary claims: “In terms of how it fit them for life literacy, it was not seen through that lens, it was more like this is the thing we have to do now and so it wasn’t addressed from getting it into the cultural level. It didn’t seep down into our cell tissue this is who we are, we’re literate people.” She goes on to recount her perception of the literacy implementation, “It was more like oh here’s the Ministry hoop we got to jump through. Everybody could you just please do this and we’ll give you all the practical things you need.” From the conversations surrounding culture at Holy Cross, there is strong evidence to support the conclusion that there were elements of school culture which reflect antagonism, both with the Ministry and with the board, isolation of teachers and departments; and a lack of ownership of the teaching process and of student achievement.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Discussion and Analysis

*According to the principal’s perception, what did she do to attempt to effect improvement in OSSLT scores and how successful were these efforts?*

*In the perception of teachers, what was the impact of that leadership behaviour on student achievement?*

*According to the principal’s perception, what did she do to attempt to effect improvement on the culture of the school and how successful were these efforts?*

*In the perception of teachers, what was the impact of that leadership behaviour on school culture?*

The purpose of the research questions provided above were three-fold. Firstly, the questions sought to illicit responses that would reveal what practices the principal demonstrated and from where those practices originated. Secondly, the manner in which the principal carried out those practices was also integral to the study and finally, the impact of both those considerations on student achievement and on the overall culture of the school.

Holy Cross was chosen as the site of this case study as it provided a phenomenological event of marked improvement on Ontario’s Grade 10 literacy test. The focus became the principal, her leadership role, and the leaders around her, both formal and informal, in relation to student achievement. In fact, student achievement had increased so dramatically in a five year time frame that it can be considered what Leithwood and Strauss (2009) refer to as a “turnaround school”. In their study, the turnaround process unfolded in three stages: declining performance, crisis stabilization, and sustaining and improving performance (p.26). It is the middle stage that is of
particular interest to this case study. Within the three stages there are a set of “core practices” (Leithwood 2012, Leithwood & Strauss, 2009) that successful transformational leaders exhibit at various times and in various contexts of the turnaround process. These include: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving (managing) the instructional program. Again, the principal in this study accessed some of the core practices and the subset of behaviours and competencies that are comprised in each category, but not all to the same extent. As will be shown the first three core practices were well-developed but the last one remains scant with little evidence of implementation. This situation gives rise to a whole new set of questions and material for discussion.

As with Leithwood and Strauss’ study (2009), the crisis stabilization stage at Holy Cross emerged when the government of Ontario mandated that the successful completion of the OSSLT would be required to graduate from high school. This was a clear turning point for underperforming schools as they were increasingly scrutinized and the extent of their underperformance would now be made public. Hargreaves (2007) sees that this “high stakes” literacy test and the publicly published results, ‘forced schools towards cynical solutions such as narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, and concentrating excessive attention on coaching those just below the cut-off point’ (p.16). Nevertheless, the literacy test and its accountability provided a reason for the staff at Holy Cross to rise to the occasion. The findings show Janet’s deep commitment to establishing the literacy initiative as the school goal and her approach was integral to the success of the literacy initiatives. This principal had taken the reigns at a critical point and her first order of business was setting directions. This leadership practice includes a sub-set of practices
such as: building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high performance expectations, and communicating the direction (Leithwood, 2012). The evidence (Leithwood et al., 2004) suggests these leadership practices account for the largest proportion of a leader’s impact, and the same holds true for Janet’s experience. Her greatest influence according to the participants and in her own estimation was setting the goal, and then overhauling the culture of the school to meet that specific goal.

As was established in both the literature review and the conceptual framework, setting direction along with all the sub-categories comprised in this practice can be considered one of the most important tasks a principal has in relation to school reform. According to the principal’s perception she facilitated numerous initiatives to improve OSSLT scores and as the data show, she was indeed successful. The staff, in their perception, also see Janet as having a big role in pushing the agenda. But this is where there is a departure between principal and staff. The difference between a vision and a goal is vast. As Leithwood and colleagues (1999) explain; “vision building is intended to create a fundamental, ambitious sense of purpose, one likely to be pursued over many years. Developing a consensus on goals focuses organizational members on what will need to be accomplished in the short term, in order to move towards that vision” (p.64). The participants in the study do not credit Janet with having a vision, and if there was one; it was not well-articulated. Interestingly, Janet admits that at times the vision was not broadly shared or defined and intentionally so. This allowed her to press on in achieving short-term goals while at the same time avoiding discussion and debate that might have delayed the process. Undoubtedly, there was widespread acceptance of group goals and the staff’s willingness to accept literacy initiatives was evident in all
participants’ responses. Why and how this came about will be discussed in the next section.

As in other studies (Leithwood & Strauss, 2009), leadership practices and influence relating to setting directions were narrowly distributed. At Holy Cross, setting the goal for the school and aligning it with the province’s goal was a unilateral decision, with very little input from the staff. A common criticism from the participants was that they had not been involved in the decision-making process and that the goal had the semblance of an edict rather than a shared vision. Interestingly, this perception did not undermine the success of the goal. Geijssel et al. (2002) suggest that transformational practices by school leadership have a direct effect on teachers’ commitment to school reform and the extra effort they devote to such reform. In this sense, it is fair to say that Janet did indeed exemplify some transformational practices. According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2008), people are motivated by goals which they find personally compelling as well as challenging but achievable. Personal goals with such properties are critical to the development of efficacy (p. 507). Thus, what initially began as a Ministry-driven mandate became a widespread school focus for this principal which she was intensely committed to. This level of commitment fostered the acceptance of group goal among the staff, and in turn raised the commitment levels of all those involved in the literacy test. This phenomenon was referred to over and over again as “buying in”. Here was a first time principal with a senior staff, working in isolation, cynical and impervious to Ministry mandates, yet the literacy initiative struck a chord; it was not only accepted but embraced. As reported by the participants, the importance of literacy could not be argued
and teachers immediately placed high value on this initiative bringing about an
unprecedented level of professional commitment to the school goal.

The purpose of the developing people leadership practice are twofold; firstly to
build the knowledge and skills (capacity) that teachers need to accomplish organizational
goals, and secondly to build the disposition that staff members required to follow through
and apply the capacity that was put in place. The staff received professional development
for literacy in the classroom at staff meetings, literacy teams and committees were
established, curriculum chairs were in-serviced on literacy initiatives, and the R.E.A.D.
program was put into place. Students who were at risk were provided with intensive
training sessions and afterschool help was available on a volunteer basis.

What became evident in the findings is that this process was in fact a slow
evolution. When the below-average October 2002 results were released early 2003, it
appears to have been a wake-up call for many of the staff at Holy Cross. With such a
strong tradition of academics at the school, these scores left many questioning, how could
this be? Janet was quick to access certain people on staff to start identifying areas of
need. For example, the student success teacher, Rose, was responsible in identifying
students at risk, mainly those in the applied stream. She also asked the program support
teacher to highlight some of the key types of questions that would be asked on the OSSLT
and train teachers in the language used so that they would be familiar with it and
incorporate those same questions into their curriculum. She tapped new teachers to
provide professional development at staff meetings, and she utilized the data to inform
next steps and best practices. Submitting new forms that tabulated assessment and
evaluation according to the achievement chart became standard practice at the school.
This principal excelled at communicating the goal at every opportunity, and set expectations as the process unfolded using concrete data both from EQAO results and from teachers’ assessment and evaluation records, as her guide and required teachers to use data as their guide for their own practice. But, as this mobilization of people was going on, some respondents who considered themselves to be the traditional ‘leaders’ in the school, perceived they were bypassed when it came to strategic input. This may be precisely because they were the traditional leaders in the school that the principal approached others in order to get new ideas and a fresh take on the school and in doing so, demonstrate to others on staff that this was not the school nor the students of yesteryear.

Redesigning the organization was an ambitious and tremendous undertaking by the principal. There are two sub-categories associated with the culture of the school and it is in these areas whereby Janet made considerable gains, they are; building collaborative cultures and modifying organizational structures to nurture collaboration. Some elements of the school culture reflect teachers working in isolation, antagonism with various levels of administration, and a lack of ownership of the teaching process and of student achievement. The participants reported having worked in isolation for quite some time after the political turmoil of the 1990s, by the time Janet retired however, some teachers reported an increase in the amount of collaboration and it having become more widespread across all departments. What may have started as an imposed activity by the principal having to create literacy-based activities according to the curriculum, may have been the catalyst needed to get teachers engaging in pedagogical conversation again. According to the principal, not all teachers believed they had a responsibility for
the learning of all students, as many pointed to the changed demographic of the school’s population drawing from lower socio-economic backgrounds and blamed societal ailments for low-performing students. The teachers with many years of experience were cynical of Ministry initiatives because according to them they had seen so many changes, too many initiatives with not enough time devoted to each to perfect them or allow them to become entrenched before the next came along. They were wary of governmental change because they perceive the provincial government prefers to put its own personal stamp on educational policy. One of the terms mentioned over and over again was the Ministry ‘hoop’ that teachers had to jump through or that the Ministry continually ‘moves the goal posts’ on teachers. But by introducing workplace and college-tracked courses that were popular with students, the principal really demonstrated that the demographics of Holy Cross’ student population had changed over time, and that all students were every teacher’s responsibility. Student success was not solely measured by strictly academic classes, but these students could make great strides in non-traditional, non-academic courses. Also, because of the literacy initiatives and growing literacy goals for the school, there was an understanding that there were in fact Ministry mandates that had merit.

The professional commitment and influence, however, did not stem solely from the principal herself, but from a variety of sources in particular the formal teacher leaders in the school such as some curriculum chairs, from program support teachers, and the student success teacher, and to some extent, from the informal teacher leaders who combined, exercised insurmountable and I suspect, far-reaching influence. This finding is similar to Leithwood and Strauss (2009), in that “formal teacher leaders were always
rated as having the greatest influence, suggesting that their content knowledge and instructional expertise were of prime importance to turnaround success.” Although participants report an increase in collaboration, there is evidence that in many cases it was under contrived circumstances such as at staff meetings or on release days, and to some extent collaboration was almost forced. Fullan (1991) places high value on collaborative work cultures as the “constant communication and joint work provide the continuous pressure and support necessary for getting things done…and if it’s your peers that have high expectations of you, then there’s all the more incentive to perform well” (p.84).

Janet attributes peer pressure as one of the reasons resistors had to get on-board. Getting swept up in the enthusiasm of not only the first signs of success but also the greater sense of purpose must have spread throughout the organization and fostered an even greater acceptance of group goals. The evidence (Hargreaves, 2003) of collaborative cultures and its impact on students is compelling. When teachers are encouraged to work together, share resources, and plan together, what starts to emerge are acceptable norms for the profession.

As mentioned above, the turnaround process offers three stages of which this study was closely aligned with the middle stage; stabilization. The last stage sustaining and improving the reform mirrors the last of the four core practices; managing the instructional program. As the turnaround process unfolds, leadership is supposed to be increasingly shared and collaborative, (Leithwood, & Strauss, 2009). This was not entirely the case at Holy Cross. For the most part, Janet exhibited a leadership style that was autocratic and managerial, which is not always conducive to fostering acceptance of a school goal. But as the participants explained even when she had transferred authority
and responsibility to someone else, she still wanted to micromanage that person or that situation. Prestine (1993) specifies characteristics of principals in schools that undergo restructuring as a willingness to share authority, the capacity to facilitate the work of staff, and the ability to participate without dominating. For Janet, this exchange of power and authority is complicated; she has a willingness to share but then ultimately she does not show she has confidence in others by micromanaging them. As the participants explained she felt solely responsible for policy implementation at the school, and that it reflected on her if they were unsuccessful. Similarly, Mascall (2007, p.59) states: “A distributed leadership model requires that formal leaders relinquish some of their power, allowing teachers to take that power and responsibility. Formal leaders need to be able to distinguish between the issues that are non-negotiable – items for which the formal leader makes the decision – and those that require greater involvement from members of the school community.” Striking a balance between those decisions that require some debate and input from others and those that must be acted upon unilaterally, is a difficult task for any principal and the participants indicate this was a struggle for Janet as well.

Managing and improving the instructional program requires time, effort, and resources, among many other necessities like singular focus. One of the most salient themes to emerge from the data across all the participants, whether it was an administrator, a classroom teacher, or resource teacher was the same issue of lack of time. Not enough time to meet with other teachers was one theme, but the other was not enough time to learn, implement, build, revisit and improve and finally sustain new initiatives. The participants felt bombarded with Ministry initiatives that are too numerous and get rolled out too fast. So, what seems to have emerged is a sense that
‘this too shall pass’ and a ‘just wait it out’ attitude. The absence of this core practice and its sub-categories does raise more questions as to why are they absent, or at least less prevalent? The answer, in part, really lies in the unsustainability of initiatives that are not allotted the appropriate amount of time to become entrenched as part of the everyday professional workings of the school. This would require the principal to ‘buffer’ staff from distractions to their work, and this may lead to greater complications for this individual with senior administration.
CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary and Conclusions

This case study was originally undertaken as a result of remarkably good performance on Ontario’s standardized literacy test in a secondary school over time. It was intriguing to look at the various people, factors, initiatives that played a part in this achievement. But aside from all the contributions made by countless individuals to make this day and this test a success for those students involved; there was still a nagging feeling that perhaps it may have been, in part, circumstantial. Several external factors took shape over the course of the five years that may have contributed to student success on the OSSLT. For the first time in 2006 the test changed its format from a two-day sitting to a single-day test. The test was modified to accommodate the shortened time-frame as was the marking scheme. Another noteworthy change external to the school was moving the test from October and pushing it to the month of March. This allowed for all students in a semestered school to receive at least some instruction in their grade 10 English classes, if not the entire course. The grade 10 English classes covered the majority of OSSLT preparation within school hours. For a high school structured on two semesters, as is Holy Cross, this would have allowed those students who potentially had not had any English instruction since the first semester of grade 9 to acquire some exposure to literacy test language and questions prior to the actual test day. The external changes to the OSSLT notwithstanding, from the data there emerged an understanding that there was a definite shift in the culture of the school and in the psyche of its members. This study was an effort to find out the root causes of the school’s success.
The guiding research question in what ways does leadership behaviour of the principal relate to the improvement of student achievement is admittedly humble in the context of leadership discourse, but its simplicity is deceptive, the interpretations are rather complex and multifaceted. The successful leadership practices exhibited by the principal include direction setting, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program, but not all to the same breadth and depth. When the provincial government in Ontario implemented the Grade 10 literacy test and mandated that its successful completion would be necessary to graduate from high school, it set the direction for all high schools in the province. This was not an initiative that had arisen from a need unique to the school. This was a goal, a very important, worthwhile, research-based goal. It promoted increased professional development and more curriculum-based committees, the reorganization of teachers’ classrooms into a physical department increased collegiality, sharing of resources, planning and ultimately the growth of professional learning communities. The collaborative culture that emerged was successful in achieving literacy initiative goals. It also provided an opportunity for the staff to re-examine their student demographics and how the school fit into the immediate community. This could have been part of a greater vision, something more far-reaching though less tangible; a vision that moves people to feel part of something great, but there is no evidence to support that the literacy initiatives and goals supported at Holy Cross were part of a greater vision. Yet, I am willing to venture this lack of vision the participants experienced has more to do with the inherent problems of current principal succession practices than with any personal fault of the principal. As Hargreaves (2005) states, “one of the most significant events in the life of a school is a change in its
leadership. Yet few things in education succeed less than leadership succession.” He goes on to explain that oversight, neglect, and the pressures of crisis management are to blame. Mascall and Leithwood (2012) examine the impact principal turnover has on schools and their students, and determine that rapid principal turnover – about one new principal every three to four years – does have a negative effect on a school, primarily on its culture and on student achievement (p.143). With respect to culture, schools that experience rapid principal turnover, according to Mascall and Leithwood (2010), experience a lack of shared purpose, cynicism among staff about principal commitment, and an inability to maintain a school-improvement focus long enough to accomplish any meaningful change. When the prospect of a move threatens principals potentially every five years and even more frequently in some cases, it does not allow for school leaders to invest in long-term plans because even if they are begun, they probably will not get the opportunity to see them through to the point when initiatives become fully entrenched in the culture of the organization. As Hargreaves (2009 p.10) notes: “Many principals leave or are transferred long before their work is done and before it has become embedded in the hearts and minds of everyone. When these principals look back on their careers, what they see is a trail of broken legacies.”

Janet began her career at the school as a vice-principal and then half way through the year became principal when the out-going principal retired. In some ways being at the school as a vice-principal worked to her advantage, allowing her to get to know the staff and students, and the community of parents and support staff, and also to understand the issues that were unique to the school before taking the lead role. In other ways, some of the participants saw this in-school transition as a disadvantage. In their perception, she
was unable to make that transition from the person who deals with the day-to-day issues primarily focused on discipline to the person who should, ideally, see the big picture and bring a broad over-arching vision to the school. Also, Janet had been a vice-principal for over ten years and this undoubtedly affected her leadership paradigm. The roles of vice-principal and principal are very different as one participant explained, and some are just not visionaries.

Although the OSSLT did not grow organically from the stakeholders at the school, the improvement of test results did and once the goal was in place, there was a deep commitment of seeing it through by both the principal and the staff, and so yes, there was a considerable impact on the school’s culture. Despite the considerable conflict and resistance, the principal did accomplish much. Everyone seemed surprised with the initial test results, this suggests that the staff were unaware the students were underperforming, or perhaps they did not want to know, but now they were faced with concrete evidence that demanded an explanation. The principal did two things early on to help change the culture at the school and that was first; to create an atmosphere of ownership and responsibility for the low test scores and second; she forced staff members at Holy Cross to reflect upon their own professional practice and consider how they could improve their instructional delivery and ultimately how the entire staff could better serve its current student population. The conflict and resistance really stems from having to come to terms with change and once the staff accepted that the school had changed, the students had changed, and the way teachers reach students had also changed, then they were ready to embrace the literacy goal.
As noted earlier, there are differences in the observations made by the principal and the teachers. Although one testimony is not more reliable or valid than another, they are to a large extent based on people’s perceptions. The participants’ claim that a lot had been done to achieve success and that Janet pushed the literacy initiatives yet they give her very little credit for her work placing greater responsibility with the school board and the Ministry. It is difficult to pinpoint why exactly the teachers feel this way, but perhaps it can be explained with the relationship the principal had with her staff. The staff knew the message of improved literacy was worthy but the messenger lacked charisma, she failed to inspire, nor did she connect with her staff on any emotional level, but she was effective. By the time she left, the school had achieved a 90% success rate on the OSSLT. She was interviewed by EQAO to share her secrets of success in a news release where she described how the school used EQAO results to inform professional practice and improve student literacy skills. In her own unique way of poking and prodding people along, she worked wonders at this school. Now was it a temporary phenomenon that will disappear with her? Had she built in enough capacity among the staff to keep the collaborative professional community going with the focus on improvement? One can only speculate what will happen next when the new principal comes in with his/her own agenda.

The leadership was distributed with superficial willingness and only insofar as it pertained to the OSSLT, in other instances, leadership was not distributed at all. For the first time in a long time, the staff was connected, in a physical sense and in a pedagogical sense. Holy Cross experienced a renaissance after what was a dark age in Ontario education. In the words of one participant, we are literate people, and what a travesty if
our students aren’t also. Teaching is a vocation; we are called to impart knowledge and motivate the learning process in others, but in exchange, we too require that same motivation from time to time to remind ourselves that in order for our students to be engaged, so must we be.

**Limitations of the Study**

Although the intended audience for this study is all interested stakeholders in education including the Ministry of Education, directors and superintendents, school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and various members of the community, it is not easily generalizable. The case study by nature, seeks to understand certain phenomena, therefore it is impossible to find identical situations in other school environments. Some aspects of the case study may be similar to other school settings; however, those who read the study should bear in mind it discusses unique personalities and a unique school culture. To establish or recreate the same conditions that existed in this school setting would be very difficult, but it may be possible to find similar variables such as taking a Ministry of Education initiative and seeing how it manifests in a school with a new principal and an experienced staff.

Another limitation apparent in this study is that it uses the OSSLT as its barometer of achievement. One may question its validity: does the instrument measure what it is supposed to measure? In this instance, does the OSSLT measure the reading and writing skills all secondary students should have obtained by grade 10? One may also question the reliability of the test. There is a lack of consistency of measurement over time because the test markers change from one year to the next and perhaps even one day to
the next. Furthermore, the OSSLT measures only a fraction of what students are taught in
the grade 9 curriculum. There are inherent flaws within standardized testing. According
to Paris and colleagues (1991), current achievement tests lack “instructional validity” and
“curricular validity” because the tests do not adequately reflect the content of most
classroom curricula nor the methods by which students learn (p.12). The OSSLT isolates
very specific reading and writing skills and takes a brief snapshot of a student’s ability at
a single point in time. As Boaler (2003) asserts, if achievement tests were to track
student learning over a period of time, policy-makers would get a clear picture of where
true school improvement is taking place.

Although there have been efforts to align the literacy test to reflect classroom
practices and pedagogy, can we be certain it measures what it is intended to measure?
The criticisms of standardized testing are numerous, including practitioners “teaching to
the test” or implementing such policies to drive a political agenda at the expense of true
student achievement. Yet the criticisms notwithstanding, if educators and administrators
use the results as a vehicle to start a dialogue on student success and literacy rates rather
than looking at the bottom line, then I do believe the data can be used in forming action
plans. So then, OSSLT results should be used to inform teachers of the areas of need in
their students. In this way, one of the limitations of this study confirms that it is not
certain whether the initiatives made for student achievement on the OSSLT changed
teaching practices enough to extend to other areas of the curriculum and whether or not
students benefitted in other ways.
Areas for Future Research

Dispersing decision-making processes to various members of a school can be an efficient and democratic way to increase organizational effectiveness. Rather than a hierarchical approach to leadership, this model is considerably more flat with a broad base of influence. There are many styles that fall under this umbrella including distributed leadership, participative, and democratic. Distributed leadership (Holland, 2002) is not a new concept (Sergiovanni, 1992; Jackson, 2000; Anderson, 2004; Foster & St. Hilaire, 2004), and typically refers to the role teachers have in sharing leadership with others in formal leadership positions. For Anderson (2003), teacher leadership means to “set directions and influence others to move in those directions…it is an interactive process with mutual influence between leader and follower (p.100). Anderson presents a dynamic relationship between teachers and principals whereby both parties have equal likelihood of influencing the other.

From the body of scholarly work, it is certain that leadership in schools today comes in many forms and from many sources. It is not necessarily the person who holds a formal position of leadership with the most authority and influence, sometimes the person with the most influence does not have a leadership position at all, and yet exercises a tremendous amount of power. So then, if principals want to be effective leaders they have to consider what they do and how they can affect those people and structures around them to increase student achievement and build capacity of the entire organization. In order for this to happen, practice and theory have to finally merge since principals continue to be rotated in a five year cycle and sometimes even more frequently.
This of course is done to the great detriment of the culture of the school and indirectly on student achievement.

Finally, too many Ministry initiatives with not enough implementation time or time for them to take root leads to problems with sustainability but even more alarming is that it erodes teacher morale and a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy making future policy implementation a recipe for resistance and a source of suspicion. When an initiative does not come organically from the staff, it poisons the opportunity for schools to develop their own initiatives, thus inhibiting their own professional development and enthusiasm for change. By not allowing teachers the proper time for new skills to ‘sink into their DNA’, there is a sense of futility and ultimately educators feel bombarded with initiatives that they feel they already do or they cannot possibly master with such exasperating time constraints. As part of new curriculum, teachers today are encouraged to scaffold culminating tasks for students; building up a multitude of skills for an overall mastery of a concept and the enduring understanding embedded within. In addition, teachers are required to provide material that is culturally relevant, engaging, and to build success criteria with students. These very principles can be applied to educators for policy implementation at the grassroots level, working from the bottom-up rather than proscribed initiatives that have great potential to be culturally irrelevant to the school, disengaging, and corrosive to teacher morale.

While the body of research on leadership in education, leadership styles and models is extensive, one aspect that is relatively thin in the literature is the leadership unique to Catholic schools. A potential area for research might be whether or not the leadership practices principles demonstrate in religious-based schools is different. Do
they lead with faith in mind? While I disagree that Catholic schools need to justify their existence, as some of the discourse in publicly-funded education would have you believe, if we are indeed providing an “education with a difference” we should really re-evaluate what that difference is, and what better place to start than with our leaders.
References


Leithwook, K., & Jantzi, D. (2006). Transformational school leadership for large-
scale reform: effects on students, teachers, and their classroom practices. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 17*(2), 201-227.


## Table 1

**Successful Fully Participating First-Time Eligible Students for the OSSLT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2
The following questions outline a semi-structured interactive interview protocol for an interview with the school’s teaching staff.

1 From your perception, what was the school’s goal for the test scores on the OSSLT?

1 What strategies did you use/implement in your teaching practices to improve the OSSLT scores?

1 How were you successful? How were you unsuccessful?

1 What adjustments/changes did you have to make along the way?

1 What role do you think the principal had in improving test scores?

1 How did she go about doing this?

1 Do you think there was a change in the school’s culture? If so, how did it change?

1 Of the many elements of culture: shared vision, traditions, collaboration, shared decision-making, innovation, and communication, do you think the principal had an impact on any of them?

1 Were they any other sources that would have changed the school’s culture?

1 How does student achievement lead to school improvement?

1 Do you see value in standardized testing?

1 Has your opinion changed with respect to standardized testing from this experience?

1 What are the other sources of leadership in the school?

1 How do these people display their leadership?

1 In what ways does the principal allow for other sources of leadership?
Appendix 3
The following questions outline a semi-structured interactive interview protocol for an interview with the school’s principal.

1. What was your goal for the test scores on the OSSLT?
2. What strategies did you use/implement to improve the OSSLT scores?
3. How were you successful? How were you unsuccessful?
4. What adjustments/changes did you have to make along the way?
5. Did you face resistance from staff, if so what did you do about it?
6. Do you think there was a change in the school’s culture? If so, how did it change?
7. Of the many elements of culture: shared vision, traditions, collaboration, shared decision-making, innovation, and communication, do you think you had an impact on any of them?
8. To what extent do you think you had an impact on the school’s culture?
9. Were you given any support for you initiatives – from whom, where, in what capacity?
10. How does student achievement lead to school improvement?
11. Do you see value in standardized testing?
12. Has your opinion changed with respect to standardized testing from this experience?
13. What do you see as your role in the school as a curriculum leader?
14. What is your philosophy of leadership?
May, 2007

To the participants in this study,

I am a graduate student in the Theory & Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/UT and am currently planning a research project that will require data collection for the purpose of a M.A. thesis.

The purpose of this study is to determine in what way leadership behaviour of a principal relate to the improvement of student achievement in the grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. The 2006 test results for your school showed considerable improvement in both reading and writing from previous years. This study seeks to explore the relationship between the leadership style of _____________________ and her impact on student success at ______________________. Approximately eight teaching and non-teaching staff have been selected to participate in this study.

This case study will be carried out at _____________________ under the supervision of Professor Susan Padro, Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

The procedure for data collection will use face-to-face interviews of approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked questions about your teaching practices to improve literacy test scores, leadership roles in the school, both formal and informal, and school culture. As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views, experiences, and the reasons you believe the things you do.

It is the intention that each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. Your transcript will be sent to you via email approximately two weeks after the interview. At this time you will have the opportunity to review the transcript for approximately one week so that you can add any further information or correct any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location. All efforts will be made to report information in such a way that individual persons, the school, and the school district cannot be identified, although those within the school will know which school was studied, and may be able to infer who some of the individual participants are, in spite of all precautions to protect the anonymity of participants. All raw data (i.e. transcripts) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. At no time will value judgments be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a teacher. Finally, your are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. You may also wish to contact the Ethics Review Office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3273 if you have any further questions.
Thank you in advance for your participation.

Romina Barrese  Dr. Susan Padro
M.A. Candidate, Theory and Policy Studies in Education Professor, Theory and Policy Studies in
Education OISE/University of Toronto OISE/University of Toronto
OISE/University of Toronto
Telephone: 416 923 – 6641 ext. 2651
Email: spadro@oise.utoronto.ca

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a
copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

Name: ________________________________

Signed: ________________________________ Date: ________________________________

Please initial if you consent to being audiotaped: _______

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: _______
Appendix 5

May, 2007

Dear ________________,

I am a graduate student in the Theory & Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/UT and am currently planning a research project that will require data collection for the purpose of a M.A. thesis.

The purpose of this study is to determine in what way your particular leadership style while you were principal relate to the improvement of student achievement in the grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. The 2006 test results for your school showed considerable improvement in both reading and writing from previous years. This study seeks to explore the relationship between your leadership style and the impact on student success at __________________________. Approximately eight teaching and non-teaching staff have been selected to participate in this study.

This case study will be carried out at __________________________ under the supervision of Professor Susan Padro, Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

The procedure for data collection will require a face-to-face interview with you of approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked questions about your philosophy of leadership, your role as curriculum leader, your efforts to improve literacy test scores, leadership roles in the school, both formal and informal, and school culture. As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views, experiences, and the reasons you believe the things you do.

It is the intention that each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. Your transcript will be sent to you via email approximately two weeks after the interview. At this time you will have the opportunity to review the transcript for approximately one week so that you can add any further information or correct any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location. All efforts will be made to report information in such a way that individual persons, the school, and the school district cannot be identified, although those within the school will know which school was studied, and may be able to infer who some of the individual participants are, in spite of all precautions to protect the anonymity of participants, including the use of pseudonyms. All raw data (i.e. transcripts) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. At no time will value judgments be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a teacher. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. You may also wish to contact the Ethics Review Office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3273 if you have any further questions.
Thank you in advance for your participation.

Romina Barrese  
M.A. Candidate, Theory and Policy Studies in Education  
OISE/University of Toronto

Dr. Susan Padro  
Professor, Theory and Policy Studies in Education  
OISE/University of Toronto

Telephone: 416 923 – 6641 ext. 2651  
Email: spadro@oise.utoronto.ca

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

Name: _____________________________________

Signed: _____________________________________  Date: ___________________________

Please initial if you consent to being audiotaped: ________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: ________
May, 2007

Attention:

Dear ______________________,

I am a graduate student in the Theory & Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/UT and am currently planning a research project that will involve a former principal and current teaching staff at a secondary school of your school district. In order to begin the project, I require your written consent.

The purpose of this study is to determine in what way leadership behaviour of a principal relate to the improvement of student achievement in the grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. The 2006 test results showed considerable improvement in both reading and writing from previous years. This study seeks to explore the relationship between the leadership style of _______________________ and her impact on student success at ___________________________.

The study involves the use of interviews in which participants will be asked about their opinions and perceptions associated with leadership behaviour and student achievement. Subjects will be well informed about the nature of the study and their participation, including the assurance that they may withdraw at any time. In addition they may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. Participants will at no time be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk of harm.

The information gathered from interviews will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, the school, and school district cannot be identified. All data collected will be used for the purposes of a M.A. thesis. All raw data (i.e. transcripts) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

If you agree, please sign the letter below and return it to me in the envelope provided. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (905) 723 – 5255 ext. 4004 or at rbarrese@hotmail.com. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Susan Padro at (416) 923 – 6641 ext. 2651. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Romina Barrese

Administrator’s signature

Date