

Chapter 6 Discussion - The Nature of Success

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is a synthesis of the findings of the College Development Review together with the conclusions from the interviews and focus groups. The results have been applied to the three research objectives; namely to qualify the degree of success of Sandford Christian College's education, to describe an exemplary Christian school and to illustrate the impact of the College on the lives of the students.

The heart of this non-denominational, co-educational, church sponsored community of teachers and learners was their desire to fulfil their vision, namely that:

All their children should be taught of the Lord and great shall be the peace of their children.
(Principal's Newsletter, 1st December 2000)

6.2 The degree of Success of Sandford Christian College's education

The literature review considered the question - what was success? Tesse (2000) sought to grapple with the balance between the influences on success from both the home and that of the school, while Rose (1988), very significantly for this study, highlighted the balance between the influences of the church and the school. Neither was able to quantify the degree of influence on student outcomes of home, church or school. Davies (1994) argued that the financial health of the school was a valid measure of success, and specifically in the Christian schooling context, Hill (1991) questioned the use of student academic outcomes as a valid measure of success because competition between students based on final scores contradicted the Biblical ideal that emphasised teamwork above personal endeavour (1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Davies, 1993: 1).

The position on success taken in this study reflected Chan's (1972) stance, namely that the degree of success was the extent to which the College had achieved their stated aims and objectives. In Chan's terms Sandford Christian College has been very successful, though the school considered in 2000 was a very different community to that which was founded in 1979 (Australian Association of Christian Schools, 2000 - 2001: 41; Personal Communication, 2002: 41).

The primarily quantitative College Development Review found many of the measurable criteria were significantly above the Victorian state benchmarks. Notably, three of the criterion scores in the staff survey indicated they were successful by exceeding the 75th percentile of the state benchmarks. In this study, measurement of success *per se* has not been attempted, but key indicators, both positive and negative, have been used to illustrate, inferentially, the degree of success. The data has been grouped into three categories, *leadership, management* and *aims and objectives*.

6.2.1 Leadership

Leadership in the College was described as *approachable* and one that did not make excessive demands on the staff. Staff exhibited very high goal congruence with the organisation's vision. This compatibility of outlook between the employees and their leadership inferred that one of the keys to success could have been their extremely rigorous employment process that, over the years, has produced a highly unified faculty team (English & Drama Teacher, p. 1-3).

Consistent with the staff's high morale, they applauded the Principal's character. However, some felt that the leadership was too preoccupied with the issues of rapid growth, while a minority believed the leadership to be too hierarchical in its decision-making. These significant but minority findings did not detract from the overwhelmingly positive results but merely reflected the reality of tensions inherent in a rapidly growing organisation.

Australia's most detailed philosophical study of Christian schooling to date, asserted that most of the new Christian schools' leadership had battled with internal conflict between the church oversight and their school's leadership which was characterised by the church's patriarchal, authoritarian leadership style (Long, 1996a: 401). The result of this has been that their communities frequently experienced disruption caused by too frequent changes in the school's leadership (Davies 1993) and thus they were not regarded as successful schools (Twelves, 2000: 40).

In contrast, this research supported the assertion in the literature that outstanding leadership was a key characteristic of successful schooling (Bear, Caldwell & Millikan, 1989: 99) and the appointment of the right principal was a prerequisite for success (Caldwell & Spinks, 1998: 63; Gurr et al., 2003; Rutter et al., 1979: 203; Walsh, 1999: 3, 41). The Principal's ability to unite the staff (Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 3), his long Principalship (Diary, p. 111) and his integrity (AP Primary, p. 7-8; AP Secondary, p. 3; Business Manager I, p. 4; English & Drama Teacher, p. 2) all resonated positively with key attributes raised in the literature describing effective school Principals (Beavis, 1997: 292-293; Gardner, 1995: 203-238; Jones, 1992: 307; Rose, 1988: 199; Wallace, 1995: 17).

6.2.2 Management

Low *work place stress*, high *parents' satisfaction* and, from the staff's perspective, high *school morale*, were all indicators that Sandford Christian College was an excellent school. The parents' proactive involvement in the school community exemplified Magill's principle (1986: 58) that parents should feel supported by the school in their role of the nurture and education of their children. The parents also felt appreciated for their active involvement in their children's education, reflecting one of Weeks' (1988: 79) preconditions for successful Christian education. Most of the negative observations about the management seemed to have reflected tensions that would normally be anticipated in a rapidly growing school community.

Long (1997) had argued that the Australian Christian schools were stressful work places for staff, particularly because of the role conflicts he perceived had existed between the church and the school communities (Long, 1997: 25). Some Sandford staff did acknowledge that

they felt that there was too much stress in the work place; however, they said it was on account of excessive workloads (Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 11). According to the staff survey some felt that there was too little feedback on their performance. These issues, while important to acknowledge, did not indicate any fundamental structural flaw in the College and therefore by implication supported the view that Sandford Christian College was a much healthier place to work in than many other Australian Christian schools according to Long's thesis. The generally high school morale mirrored the effective workplace championed by Agyris (1964: 215), who noted that staff thrived much better in more collaborative environments where effective interpersonal relationships were seen as essential for success (Bolman & Deal, 1997: 15).

6.2.3 Aims and Objectives

Sheerens and Bosker (1997: 4) suggested that the *extent to which the school's desired level of output had been achieved* was a key measure of school success. This position was echoed in the Christian schooling context by Chen's study of Chinese Christian schools (1972: 3). Chen defined *success* in the schools he studied as the *extent to which the schools' stated aims and objectives had been achieved*. Here in Sandford Christian College the Past Student Survey focussed attention on this approach. The College's aims and objectives were (College Handbook, 2000: 2):

- a. *Demonstrates the love of God and teaches Biblical truths.*
- b. *Develop in students the desire to serve God and society, and the skills to exercise leadership.*
- c. *Nurture Christian values, standards of morality and ethics*
- d. *Promote excellence in all aspects of the school life.*
- e. *Assist students in discovering and developing, as fully as possible, their unique talents and capacities.*
- f. *Provide a curriculum relevant to the needs of all students.*
- g. *Offer experiences, which will motivate and challenge intellectually, aesthetically, physically and spiritually.*
- h. *Provide a secure and supportive environment where responsible relationships may be developed amongst all members of the school community.*
- i. *Develop self-disciplined young people who are optimistic, confident, articulate and resourceful.*
- j. *Encourage students to possess a zest for learning and an understanding that learning is a life-long process.*

Aims and objectives 'a-c' and to some extent 'g' could be grouped under the heading 'to promote the Christian faith'. Of the recent graduates from Sandford Christian College 90 per cent claimed that they were *born again* Christians when they left the school, but at the time of completing their survey, only 75 per cent were currently involved in a local church. Therefore, while the statistics were high, they demonstrate that there had been significant attrition in their Christian adherence over time. Thus reflecting moderate success as opposed to great success.

None of the American studies outlined in the literature review attempted a survey of past students. Chen's Chinese Christian schooling study was the only other research of this kind (Chen, 1972: 11). Unfortunately, the findings were not strictly comparable in most instances because Chen's survey focussed on attitudes to relationships, choice of husbands and marriage (1972: 226-7) as opposed to the College's aims, church attendance and significant memories of Sandford life. Nevertheless, some comparison was possible, in that Chen acknowledged that 95 per cent of one school's graduates claimed to be *born again* Christians (1972: 84) compared with Sandford's 90 per cent.

In more material terms, aims and objectives 'd-g' could be measured in terms of the first year 12 class's performance at the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in 2000, the year of this study. The results were very good, placing them on a par with similar schools that had been teaching the VCE for over ten years. Further, the College Development Review recognised that specifically, the primary grades, and the secondary departments of the Humanities and the Creative Arts had achieved a very high academic standard. The review also acknowledged that the College had become more academically orientated with the phasing out of the Personalised Accelerated Christian Education (PACE) packs.

In the United States, Parsons (1987) reported that any success for the new Christian schools would reflect poorly on public education (Parsons, 1987: 183). While this has not been examined here in Australia, there was an implicit sense from this research that this would also be true here, as dissatisfaction with public education was certainly a contributory factor to Sandford's success in the minds of the parents (Parent II FG, p. 2).

Little has been written about the academic standards of the new Christian schools (Peshkin, 1986: 155) and together with their relatively young age, many being less than 21 years old, explains why the data would be of uncertain validity (Ho, 1996: 32). Many of these schools were established relatively easily as they employed the PACE system (Smith, 1984: 157) that did not require many trained staff (Rose, 1988: 113-122). As the schools became established, the PACE system was eventually replaced by the more conventional teacher directed learning, which in Sandford's case, has been recognised as a contributory factor to the school's academic success (English & Drama Teacher, p. 5; Parent FG II, p. 9; Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 1-4).

The aims and objectives 'i and j' were aspirations for the creation of confident, resourceful young people with a love of learning. These criteria were attributes that would be ubiquitously expected from any successful school, but being difficult to measure, are considered in the next section that reviews the essence or intrinsic character of this College. As a whole, on the limited evidence available at the time of the study, the aims and objectives of the College were being achieved and to this extent the attributes discussed form part of the nature of the success of Sandford Christian College.

6.3. The Essence of Sandford Christian College

The first section of this chapter considered the degree of success of Sandford Christian College's education. This section addresses the second research objective; namely the goal to discover the essence or the central meaning of Sandford that has made it successful. After a detailed consideration of the qualitative and quantitative data, the most frequently occurring themes that addressed this objective were teased out, compared with the literature, and finally grouped together into five relatively discrete sub-sections. Together they portrayed a picture that was the essence of Sandford Christian College:

1. The origins and vision
2. The Principal's leadership
3. The teachers' Christian ministry
4. Christian objectives above the academic
5. The creation of a distinctive community culture

6.3.1 The Origins and Vision

Origins and vision were firmly preserved in the dynamic role the College had with their covering church. This symbiotic relationship was one of the key ingredients of the essence of Sandford Christian College.

Ever since Sandford Christian Fellowship became the governing body of the school five years (Diary, p. 111) after its foundation, vision has always been to the forefront of the leadership's agenda (Council Chairman, p. 3; Senior Minister, p. 5). The Senior Minister was passionate about the importance of vision for any successful venture. He was not embarrassed about claiming the fact that he had a clear vision, which was not dampened by committee deliberations (Senior Minister, p. 3), nor derailed by vocal parents of the day (Council Chairman, p. 9).

The Senior Minister was single-minded, fiercely independent (Business Manager I, p. 4), yet tempered by being widely consultative (Business Manager II, p. 6). He was also realistic as he seriously considered the speculation he heard as to whether, in the future, the increasing number of churches being served by the College might not demand a greater say in the College's future directions (Senior Minister, p. 8). This would generate a very different dynamic because until the time of this study, the whole leadership of the College had been contained within the Sandford Christian Fellowship. Further, the Senior Minister as a visionary leader was very astute in that he recognised that the vision for the College had to be big enough for visionary people. He has continued to stretch the community; he has *encouraged them to think the unthinkable* (Chait et al., 1996: 1).

The Principal, and the Senior Minister had an excellent relationship, forged over many years in the leadership of their church. It seemed that the Principal applied the Senior Minister's vision for the College very naturally, and at times it was hard to distinguish who was the greater visionary between the two of them. The Principal's vision was optimistic, as illustrated by his views concerning the new Christian schooling movement's prospects into the future, believing that the passion for the Christian distinctive was still very strong across the nation's Christian schools (Principal II, p. 5), despite the voices of fear that the passion might decline (Riding, 1997: 58-61). This optimism reflected Walner's confidence in Christian schooling's ability to maintain their mission because, like Walner, the Principal actively based Sandford's education on Biblical principles (2000: 3).

These two leaders were described as risk-taking visionaries, both intent on building strong teams that maximised delegation, thus giving themselves time to reflect on the broader issues more than the day to day operations of their communities (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992: 49; Gardner, 1995: 36, 286; Gurr, 1996: 12, 116). From the researcher's perspective, immersed in the community, it is highly likely that these visionary characteristics have positively influenced the rapid growth and success of both the church and the College.

Long (1996a) believed that big schools, by definition, can't be successful. He challenged the notion that *big is better*, believing that the Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, well known for their support of a *big is good* theology, have tended to produce unsuccessful schools with authoritarian leadership (1996a: 391). He believed that these church schools had adopted an American 1970s model of church growth that generated big visions for their church schools as well as their churches. Sandford Christian College appears to fit Long's description, namely, a Charismatic church sponsored school with a vision for 1000 students by 2006.

However, there was no evidence of a trend towards authoritarian leadership and many indicators to suggest that it would remain a very successful school in spite of the intended growth.

The College community certainly had concerns about the size of the individual classes; however, there were very few that really wanted to hold the school at 300 or 600 students, because their vision was to impact as many students as possible in order to fulfil their dreams (Council Chairman, p. 7). The Principal sincerely wanted to offer as many new places to students as possible, for two reasons. Firstly, to minimise those students on waiting lists that were regularly lost to non-Christian schools (Principal II, p. 3) and secondly, to finance and equip an ever-improving College, in which greater numbers enhanced its financial viability (Principal I, p. 2).

The College was recognised as a dynamic community that had, and would, see significant growth as a result of its clearly articulated vision.

6.3.2 The Principal's Leadership

A further dimension of the essence of Sandford Christian College was the Principal's role. The Senior Minister saw him as indispensable to the College's success (Senior Minister, p. 1, 9). He was the visionary for the College in the same way as the Senior Minister was for the church (Council Chairman, p. 11). The Principal was seen by the staff as *God driven*, *God's man* and *God anointed*; all very emotive, vision-minded terms that naturally positioned him in as their leader (Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 7). Perhaps these accolades explain why the *staff dared not walk all over him* (Infants Teacher, p. 6)?

The Principal was both a successful spiritual leader (English & Drama Teacher, p. 8; Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 5, 9) as well as being an educational leader, a dual role frequently described in the literature (Bolman & Deal, 1993: 54; Starratt, 1993: 47). Davies (1957: 9) went further, saying that the principal of a school was responsible for *bringing the pupils to a faith in God through Jesus Christ*. The Principal did not claim such a pivotal role for himself though he did acknowledge that Christian parents were attracted to Sandford for the spiritual values permeating the whole curriculum (Principal II, p. 10). Nevertheless, many acknowledged their belief that the Principal's appointment was most certainly to perform a spiritual role as well as one of educational leadership (Council Chairman, p. 11; Diary, p. 109; Personal Communication, 2002: 41; Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 7). His style embodied elements of both the good spiritual practice of taking time to pray before major decisions and sound educational approach of seeking advice before taking decisions (Council Member, p. 4; English & Drama Teacher, p. 8; Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 7-8).

The Principal displayed, what most recognised, as a collaborative and visionary leadership style (Primary Curriculum Co-ordinator, p. 1) that effectively led the community to become increasingly connected with each other and to develop a bond between himself, the leader, and his followers (Abbott, 1999: 14; Sergiovanni, 1996: 33). As if in acknowledgement of his effective team building, the Assistant Principal Secondary, admitted to adopting the Principal's leadership style himself, as he so admired the Principal's consultative, approachable ways that left people with a genuine sense of being heard (AP Secondary, p. 3-4). The staff universally appreciated their Principal; one telling line being that *they never felt that the boss was going to chop their head off* for daring to raise a question in a staff meeting

(Staff FG II, p. 15). The Assistant Principal Primary corroborated this perspective; illustrating the theme of collaborative leadership by reporting that in Sandford it was acceptable for staff to disagree with the leadership at times (AP Primary, p. 7).

It would be hard to imagine these comments from the staff about their vibrant relationship with their Principal, if in fact the dominant culture was one of a controlling, authoritarian leadership. The theme of authoritarian leadership has been widely reported in the new Christian schools' literature, with accusations that such leadership stifles individuality (Parsons, 1987: 135), promotes fear and confusion (Long, 1996a: 88), while perpetuating the classic bureaucratic, hierarchical model of administration (Andersen, 1990: 32; Davies, 1993: 1). There have been no fearful accusations about the leadership style here, but rather a recognition that the school's leadership had developed collaborative structures that were clearly appreciated by most staff (Twelves, 2001: 72; Wallace, 1995: 16).

There were however a minority of staff who expressed displeasure at not being included in the decision-making processes (Staff FG I, p. 2) which agreed with the Principal's own admission that he sometimes *played his cards close to his chest* (Council Member, p. 5). He indicated that he was already aware of the situation and was thinking about ways to include some of his staff more than had been done in the past (Principal I, p. 14). This scenario illustrates the staff's freedom to express their concerns and also the Principal's responsive, collaborative style that showed he was willing to seek advice widely before taking decisions.

The Principal's 15 years in the leadership of the College at the time of the study demonstrates success in itself and implies a sense of stability that pervades the essence of Sandford Christian College (Diary, p. 111). Further, the Senior Minister commented on the consistency in the Council Chairman, who had served even longer than the Principal (Senior Minister, p. 8). This ethos contrasted markedly with the reported average term of a new Christian school principal of less than three years. According to Parsons' research, this high turnover was due to Senior Ministers of the oversight churches running their schools with the same authoritarian manner used in their churches, a style the more educated school leaders were unaccustomed to dealing with (1987: 132).

Subsequent to Parsons' work in the United States in the mid 1980s, Long (1996a) has confirmed that a similar pattern was still prevalent in Australia in the mid 1990s. Laffin (1995) also commented on the Australian new Christian schools observing that, there was frequent tension between principals and their boards, to the extent that some were *seriously dysfunctional* (Laffin, 1995, cited in Beavis, 1997: 290). Therefore, the Principal's long service and excellent relationships with his College council were all the more significant and can be used to argue that Sandford Christian College's leadership had been successful in breaking this pattern of dysfunctionality, apparently common in other schools. Arguably, the excellent relationships here (Twelves, 2000: 83) have perpetuated the principalship and that, in itself, has led to further elements of success as the staff and wider community have not had to adjust to frequent changes in style.

6.3.3 The Teachers' Christian Ministry

The staff reported their respect for their principal's decisions even when they did not agree with them (Infants Teacher, p. 6) and one staff member felt that the College was the most *positive place* they had ever taught in (Staff FG II, p. 8). These sentiments relating to the high quality of the relationship between the teachers and their leadership correlated with Barth's (1990: 15-18) study that found this aspect of community life frequently reflected school success. For the most part the teachers felt that working in Sandford Christian College was more than a job; it was their Christian ministry (Infants Teacher, p.1). This was the third attribute of the essence of the College that gave it its distinctive feel.

Just as the Principal was seen to be God's appointment, the teachers felt that each of them had a calling from God to the school. There was an emphasis on employing teachers (Staff FG I, p. 1) who could make their contribution to Sandford Christian College, their Christian ministry (Council Member, p. 16, 17). In other words they would see their role in the College as part of their vocation that, along with their church commitments, consumed their whole lives. They did not believe it would generate a conflict of interest with their Christian ministry in their church but rather a natural complement to it (Business Manager I, p. 6). This approach resonated with John Calvin's 1559 ideals that education should be a ministry of the church (Gangel, 1984: 103).

The level of teacher stress in Sandford Christian College, as evidenced in the staff survey, was lower than the government school benchmarks. Any stress shown was attributed more to the phenomenal growth of the school, rather than to the nature of the dual roles as teachers and Christian ministers. This was evidenced by teachers apparently volunteering the dual role rather than being coerced into it (Staff FG I, p. 4). There was no evidence of the *intolerable internal conflict* with its consequential stress reported by Long (1996a: 432), however some stress was generated because of the teachers' desire to be able to do even more for their students than time permitted (Secondary Sport Teacher p. 10).

The teachers, who spoke of their sense of calling to the school as their Christian ministry, supported the view that their role was far from onerous but rather fulfilling. They spoke of being able to speak openly of their faith in God, which they had longed to do in government schools but had been prevented from doing so by the school authorities (Staff FG I, p. 8). The teachers were seen as exhibiting a genuine love for the children as shown in their *exuberance and enthusiasm* for their work (Senior Minister, p. 10). The parents really appreciated them, seeing them *as wonderful, approachable* people, in whom they had utmost confidence, knowing that their children were safe (Parents FG II, p. 2) and the leadership referred to the teachers as the students' *mentors and heroes* (Business Manager I, p. 6; Principal II, p. 13).

The teachers' Christian ministry was evidently a distinctive feature of the essence of Sandford Christian College. The teachers' dual role of spiritual and educational leadership was seen as highly effective for achieving the College's stated goals (Senior Secondary FG, p. 10).

6.3.4 Christian Objectives above the Academic

The fourth core attribute of the essence of the College was their desire to offer *something distinctly Christian* (Business Manager I, p. 5). In reference to this, the Business Manager described, in marketing terms, the College's central attraction to new families; it was the fibre of the place, not just a façade (Business Manager I, p. 5; Business Manager II, p. 3). This approach was certainly an effective marketing strategy, as one of the council members described how he became a new parent after his search for a school with a Christian distinctive that placed its spiritual values before academic results (Council Member, p. 2).

The philosophy of putting the Christian objectives above the academic engendered a healthy tension within the College (Riding, 1997: 58-61). There were sections that bemoaned the fact that the school had to make up lost ground in terms of the academic outcomes of the students (Parent FG II, p. 9; Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 1-4), yet others had been attracted by their understanding that Sandford's academic standards exceeded the top private schools of the city (Parent FG II, 12). Perhaps the reality was that the College was set in a compromise state, neither purely spiritually focused nor academically rigorous (Bollar Wagner, 1990: 20). This was Bollar Wagners' thesis that the American Christian schools she studied were in a transition and not able to meet their students' expectations because of the demands of society for certain levels of conformity. The compromise she described had to do with the values associated with competition and materialism and the degree to which the schools she studied were conforming to accepted norms as opposed to maintaining the *total institution* or isolation from society.

If this thesis of compromise were true in Sandford, there would be a sense of failure and disappointment at the level of compromise they had had to settle for. This was not detected within Sandford Christian College, but rather that they were very *open to what God wanted*, and excited about their part in *putting them in the hands of God*. In other words they firmly believed that they were impacting their society with the Christian faith (Infants Teacher, p. 7-8). It was the researcher's perception; from his immersion in the community, that there was no sense of failure engendered by their accommodation of some societal norms, but rather that they had been successful towards their College aims and objectives (College Handbook, 2000: 2).

Within the community there were those who were fighting for some degree of the *total institution* concept. These people feared that as the school grew, they would no longer know everyone with whom their children might be mixing. One of these parents expressed their concern that families coming in from non-Sandford Christian Fellowship churches would be *diluting the College community*, demonstrating the high value they placed on the Christian objectives of the College (Council Member, p. 8-9). The students also appreciated the spiritual priorities held by the school, deploring the fact that some of their secondary school teachers had not prayed with them as much as they had been used to in the primary grades (Junior Secondary FG, p. 2).

Overall, the College could be described in a positive light as offering a Bible-based, Christ-centred curriculum along the lines described by Gangel, (1984: 89, 90), Magill (1986: 58) and Riding (1997: 6).

6.3.5 The Creation of a Distinctive Community Culture

The final characteristic of the essence of Sandford considers the community's desire and ability to create their own specific community culture. This echoed a similar sentiment from the literature, where school's consciously generated *the ethos they wanted* (Tucker, 1990: 20-21; Twelves, 2000: 74). In this research there were more than 50 references to *creating community culture* from across the thirteen interviews and seven focus groups. For example, the Senior Minister's reference to *setting up the environment and culture that they wanted* (Senior Minister, p. 6) was in tune with Andersen's belief that the principal should be proactive in this regard (1990: 43-37). Much of the literature focused on the link between home, church and school in this community building process (Kew, 1993: 76; Rohrer, 2000: 1; Starratt, 1994: 10) which echoed with the College Council Chair's analogy of the strength of *the threefold cord* that symbolised mutual partnership across home, church and school in espousing commonly held beliefs and values (Council Chairman, p. 5-6).

The caring Christian community that had been created attracted parents (Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 6) who described it as *heaven on earth* (Parents FG I, p. 16), but some were afraid they might lose this special quality with increased growth (Infants Teacher, p. 3; Parents FG I, p. 1; Principal II, p. 6; Staff FG I, p. 8; Staff FG II, p. 13). They were certainly conscious of their very distinctive characteristics that were jealously guarded. According to Deal and Peterson these could be maintained so long as the community continued to focus on *people rather than profits* (1999: 1-63).

Sandford's closed enrolment policy that only took children from Christian homes was one of the ways that they guarded their culture. The Principal believed in the power of their community culture to such an extent that if a family were to reject their Christian faith, they would voluntarily take their children out of the school despite the resultant disruption to their child's education (Principal I, p. 2).

The parents were grateful that their College culture reinforced family values (Parent FG II, p. 11), encouraged the students to critically evaluate their own standards (Junior Secondary FG, p. 9) and positively impacted the children to the extent that their self-confidence was greatly improved (Senior Secondary FG, p. 1, 3, 12, 13). Their culture also moved with the times as the school began with an extremely insular image that alienated some parents but as time went by, the longer standing parents could measure the changes for the better. This largely had to do with key staff changes and the goal to actively prepare students for secular tertiary education (Parent FG I, p. 2). The strong sense of unity amongst the teachers and between teachers and parents was also a recurrent theme throughout the study, building a distinctive element of their community culture (AP Primary, p. 5-6) that resonated with the work of Cox (1998: 5) and Vanderhoek (1993: 13).

There were some detractors of their distinctive Christian culture. Some felt that individuality was stifled (Junior Secondary FG, p. 9), tying in with Parsons' thesis of the new Christian schools in the United States (1987: 135), while others reported that there were some poor staff student relationships (Primary Student FG, p. 11). There were also some intangible negative feelings in parts of the community, for example, that there were *no meaningful relationships*, despite all the talk to the contrary, between the covering church and the school community (Primary Curriculum Co-ordinator, p. 4). These negative observations were reported by very few and did not seem to dampen the enthusiasm of the majority of

stakeholders who believed that they had succeeded very well in developing a culture to be proud of, and that was attractive to potential parents (Principal II, p. 5).

6.4 The Impact on Past-Students

This final section addresses the third research objective; namely to illustrate the impact of the College on the lives of their graduates. Here in Sandford Christian College, the Senior Minister of the sponsoring church felt strongly that he did not want the College's graduates going out into *little Christian ghettos*, destined for mere survival. His vision was for the College graduates *to engage their culture* (Senior Minister, p. 7). In other words he wanted the young people he helped to mould to change their world with their Christian example.

Christian schooling in the United States propounded similar goals. For example, the graduates from the school studied by Peshkin were, by and large, what they expected, namely, *patriotic people of good character* (1986: 4). A further study reported the aspiration to produce graduates that will be *fine upstanding citizens* (Rose, 1988: 143). Parsons uncovered a more strident objective that the new Christian schools would ultimately *change the state and health of the nation* (1987: 6). On a similar theme, but in Hong Kong, Ho reported that graduates from the Christian schools studied *were holding key positions in all sectors of society* (1996: 32).

The past-student survey of Sandford Christian College was ambivalent on the subject of their roles in adult life. The majority of the respondents from the early years students were engaged in *home duties* and the more recent graduates were largely still in *secondary or tertiary educational instructions*. Though the school had come of age at the time of the study, having turned 21 years of age, the graduates were still very few in number and only in early adulthood, suggesting that repeating the research exercise in the future would be more beneficial.

Consequently, this study's past-student survey could not measure such lofty ideals as reported by Peshkin and Parsons and dreamed of by Sandford's Senior Minister, but it has begun a process of critical evaluation of student outcomes essential for the continuing development of the movement. The key measure of how Christian the past-students remain into adulthood is one that will attract further study as it is the avowed aim of most Christian schools (Nordin & Turner, 1980; Rose, 1988). Until these studies are published, research will have to focus more on reports of the impact on current students. For example, the Assistant Principal Primary at Sandford was very concerned that her students should have *the tools to go into the world and to evangelise*, implying that the majority would be *born again* Christians in order to do this. She measured this *by checking up* on them on the Monday mornings to see how many they had impacted with the gospel on the weekend (AP Primary, p. 11).

The literature does not appear to have examined the potential link between the statistics of *born again* Christians on the one hand and their success in *changing the state and health of a nation* on the other. The literature is silent, but there is a clear implication that those graduates who are claiming to be *born again* Christians, will be of *good character* (Peshkin, 1986: 4), and be in a position to *change the state and health of their nations* (Parsons, 1987: 6). Therefore, unless the new Christian schools do produce graduates who literally *change* their societies for good, results of future past-student surveys may be disappointing if they

reveal a lesser community impact than at first envisioned, thereby showing that their goals had been too idealistic.

In contrast to this dilemma, the most consistent finding from the past-student survey was the belief that the school had been successful in its aim to nurture Christian values, standards of morality and ethics in its students. Thus, it would appear to have answered one parent's expressed need for *harmony* in the life of their children by championing both the nurturing environment of the home and school (Coleman, 1987: 5; Kew, 1993: 76; De Ruyter, 1999: 223). In Sandford's case this harmony has been extended to include the sponsoring church as well (Bollar Wagner, 1999: 106; Rose, 1988: 26).

This evident coherence between the school, home and the church aligned with the observations of Nordin and Turner (1980) who saw the Christian schooling movement as communities that were listening to a *different drummer* and that *marched resolutely* towards the *values of their past*. However, in stark contrast Astill (1998) concluded the school had had no direct effect; the student's home environment being paramount in the instilling of personal value systems (Astill, 1998: 43). Therefore the success should be seen in the parents' satisfaction that their children's school is supporting their personal values systems, rather than hoping to establish a causal relationship at this stage, between the school and their graduate's value systems. It would be very hard to tease out the relative impacts of home, church and school, but it would be a very worthwhile study.

Wherever the truth lies, the past-students overwhelmingly believed that their old school had been consistently successful in nurturing the Christian values and standards of morality and ethics in its students. The question remains, and is habitually asked in the new Christian schooling movement circles, for how long will this be the case, especially in the light of the growing size of these schools (Deal & Peterson, 1999: 1-63)? Riding's (1997) study considered this question in his case studies in similar schools in South Australia, concluding that the schools he studied *were close to living up to their ideals* (Riding, 1997: 76). Only time will tell, but so far the impact on Sandford's past-students seems to be clearly positive in the minds of the students.

In this discussion of the positive impact of Sandford Christian College on its past-students, a recurring theme, reported particularly by the older graduates was the feeling that the discipline system had been too heavy-handed and that there was insufficient sensitivity afforded to individuals' needs. The literature clearly supported the parents' desire for well-disciplined schools (Lankshear, 1992: 60, Long, 1996c: 24, Rose, 1988: 199). Therefore, was this finding from the impact survey a negative or a positive? The past-students' did not like the perceived heavy-handed discipline, but perhaps their parents did. Here again a repeat survey at say five and then ten-year intervals, would provide a much clearer picture. Nevertheless, the written responses to this survey did demonstrate that the negative images do last a very long time in the minds of the past-students, serving as a salutary reminder to the current leadership that what they do today will be impacting them for many years to come.

A further cause for concern from the past-students' survey stated that the curriculum was perceived to be inadequate, not having been broad enough for all types of students. These sentiments carried a remarkable resemblance to those of the church based tertiary Colleges in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. In this case, the church leaders confessed distrust in their academic staff, and as a consequence they gave little tangible support for academic initiatives with predictable consequences (Cunningham, 1994: 27-28).

There was no evidence of any distrust in Sandford's academic leadership, especially as the Senior Minister of the church had such a long and excellent relationship with the Principal (Senior Minister, p.1-3). Nevertheless, Sandford past-students' criticism of their school's curriculum correlated with discussions earlier in this chapter that in the past, academic rigour had been given less prominence than the spiritual aspects of the students' learning (Parent FG II, p. 9; Secondary Sport Teacher, p. 1-4).

Hill (1991: 1-4) offered a rationale for this in his observation that learning which emphasised the gaining of marks for higher education entry and subsequently better jobs, encouraged students to develop self-centred, consumer orientated value systems. He felt this illustrated tensions within the movement that pit the striving for academic excellence against the goal of modelling the Christian lifestyle. This theme had been developed by Bollar Wagner (1990: xi-8, 20) in her contention that the new Christian schools in the United States represented a *compromise* with popular culture and as such their schools existed merely as a *transition culture* taking young people towards their *goal of no competition, forbearance, forgiveness and the fruits of the Spirit* (Galatians 5:22-23). She felt that though the schools had lofty ideals, her overriding thesis about the movement was a negative one of *compromise*. If this were true then the tension between the striving for academic excellence on the one hand, and the Christian ideals on the other would result in neither being effectively achieved.

There was no evidence that the past-students of Sandford were concerned about *compromise*. The teachers in Sandford Christian College certainly stressed their lack of resources, particularly in the early days of the College, and some felt that they were stretched so thinly that they could not adequately meet the students' needs (Infants Teacher, p. 4; Staff II FG, p. 13). However, overall there was no evidence that Sandford had adopted Bollar Wagner's *compromise* position, but simply there was recognition that whilst on the one hand the school had had very real resource concerns in the early years; on the other hand, there was overwhelming appreciation for the fact that the school had been achieving its aim to nurture Christian values. The wide variation in the survey data's values, merely reflected the perception of some of the past-students' disappointment with their curriculum options, which would hardly be surprising in a small growing school in the process of extending to year 12.

The school was still young at 21 years old, with the result that many of the past-students surveyed had barely reached adulthood when they responded. Further, the sample size was small (although the selection process was the best that could be conducted with the limited database), and the response rate of 38 per cent (similar to the Chinese Christian schooling survey of 41 per cent [Chen, 1972: 12]), whilst acceptable, still left many opinions unknown. Despite these drawbacks, the findings bore significant resonance with other aspects of this study and therefore added significance to the overall findings.

6.5 Summary of Discussion - The Nature of Success

This study has sought to accomplish three research objectives; firstly to quantify the degree of success of the College's education, secondly to describe an 'exemplary' Christian school and lastly to examine the impact of the College on the lives of their graduates.

In answer to the first objective, to quantify the degree of success of the College's education, Sandford Christian College has achieved excellent academic results. These results were accomplished by leaders who were described as approachable and outstanding and people

who had inspired unity across the College community. The staff exhibited high morale and in their survey three criteria scores exceeded the state benchmarks 75th percentile. While the students had enjoyed great academic success there had been a demonstrable promotion of the Christian faith, illustrating a further measure of their success, namely, the achievement of their aims and objectives.

The second objective to describe an 'exemplary' Christian school, was realised by the search for and description of the *central meaning or essence* of the College. The College owed much to its original foundations, the significant role of their principal of over 15 years, and the calling of its staff into Christian, as opposed to secular, ministry. The championing of their Christian objectives while still achieving excellent academic outcomes and the active creation of a distinctive community culture described the *essence* of Sandford Christian College.

The discussion concluded with a deliberation on the third objective, illustrated here by the Senior Minister's vision for their graduates; namely that he did not want them going out into *little Christian ghettos*, destined for mere survival. His vision was for the College graduates *to engage their culture that is to change their world for good*. The past student survey found that they were achieving very gratifying results, but at 21 years old the College was still too young to be able to generate sufficient data to adequately quantify their past students' outcomes into adulthood.

6.6 Suggestions for Further Study

This study, confined by a single case study, was not designed for generalisability but rather to present an example of a school community that was deemed to be successful. Nevertheless, the research has suggested a number of study opportunities that would enhance the wider understanding of the new Christian schooling movement here in Australia:

1. A repeat study on Sandford Christian College, in order to ascertain a chronological perspective on key performance indicators. A range of measures undertaken from the School Development Review methodology could be considered over time alongside a further qualitative study revisiting some of the concerns raised.
2. A broader study, applying the School Development Review methodology to a sample of Christian schools from different streams, in order to identify strengths and weaknesses of the various different governance models being applied by the different schools. Such a study could be linked with the regular registration and accreditation audits currently established for the new Christian schooling movement. This could reduce the mistrust of the movement in some quarters and increase the accountability for federal and state funding.
3. A further Past Student Survey across a number of schools and over increased number of years could be administered. This study would go to the heart of the new Christian school's *raison d'être*. It should seek to identify to what degree the schools have been achieving their stated aims and objectives now that many of them have come of age.
4. How do Christian Schools prepare their graduates to engage their culture with their Christian faith? This study would be designed to address the objective of the Senior

Minister of Sandford Christian College whose vision was to see his graduates *engage their culture*. A largely qualitative study could be undertaken of the adult lives of those who have graduated from the new Christian schools. This could be modelled on the work of Chen (1972) in China, but applied here in Australia.

5. The leadership role of principals in selected Australian Christian schools. Such a study could model Gurr's (1996) study of ten principals and 30 teachers' perceptions of the leadership role in Victorian state schools with a view to identify principal's priorities that, in turn, could be used to measure the performance of Christian school principals.

6.7 Reflections on the Study

The employment in this study of the School Development Review methodology combined with the qualitative techniques worked extremely well. Each part balanced and complemented the other creating a synergy that multiplied their single effectiveness. The focus of the methodology was the researchers partial immersion in the College community. From this position of trust, he was able to focus on the detail that, much to his surprise, was of genuine benefit to the College leadership as they sought to improve their performance as an exemplary Christian school. The focus of the methodology looked forward and has helped to develop a deeper understanding of the new Christian Schooling movement.

During the data-gathering phase, the researcher was greatly encouraged by the honesty and openness of all the participants. Initially it was nearly impossible to assemble any parent focus groups by public invitations in the College newsletters but there was a very keen response to the subsequent targeted personal invitations. The parents came together with a great community spirit, delighted with their school but not afraid to air their concerns. The students' focus groups were also characterised by a great team spirit. The older ones were largely self-selected and the younger ones, who were targeted by their teachers for their ability to openly discuss issues both articulated their joys and disappointments so well that it was hard to draw their debates to a polite conclusion. The staff groups who were entirely self-selected and were similarly open and energised gatherings of team players that really enjoyed working together in the school but were not shy about expressing where they felt improvement were still required.

It was an exhilarating and humbling experience to conduct the in-depth interviews on account of the participants' transparency illustrated with so many personal anecdotes. They all loved their school, appreciated their principal enormously and, adding triangulation, recognised similar areas of concern. The staff community was remarkably stable with most new appointments being predicated by their phenomenal growth in student numbers.

The majority of the analysis was conducted while the researcher was serving as a principal in another Australian Christian school. This provided frequent opportunities to test the findings of the research in a different environment. It has been gratifying to see the impact of some of these in initiatives instituted in the researcher's own school community and to witness their subsequent successful outcomes.

It has been an honour and a privilege to be a small part of the Sandford Christian College community and to have been given the opportunity to extend the understanding of the new Christian schooling movement here in Australia.