

2002

## Year 12 Students' Perceptions of Deputy Principals' effect on the Religious Culture in Catholic Secondary Schools

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### Recommended Citation

Novacsek, R., & Godfrey, J. R. (2002). Year 12 Students' Perceptions of Deputy Principals' effect on the Religious Culture in Catholic Secondary Schools. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 27(1).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2002v27n1.3>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol27/iss1/3>

# **YEAR 12 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DEPUTY PRINCIPALS' EFFECT ON THE RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research on how Deputy Principals affect the religious culture of Secondary Catholic Schools is extremely limited. Deputy Principals may play a crucial role in shaping the culture of schools in many ways, religious and otherwise. This study examined Year 12 students perception of the effect Deputy Principals have on the religious culture in their schools. Year 12 students have an insight into the role of Deputy Principals as they have more extensive school experience than the other high school grades; the nature of their interaction with Deputy Principals is more varied; and as they approach the conclusion of their secondary education, they are more likely to be informed and candid in their responses. A sample of 315 students from four Western Australian Catholic schools of varied settings completed a 30 item questionnaire on a four point Likert scale with items targeting students' perceptions of Deputy Principals' effect on the religious culture of their schools. Apart from not giving Religious Education greater priority in timetabling Deputy Principals were perceived as having a positive effect on the religious culture of their schools. Notably they were perceived as good models and were seen as giving the religious nature of their schools prominence.

Deputy Principals are significant contributors to the culture of Catholic Schools. Though little academic literature has been written on the part played by Deputy Principals in culture creation (Ribbins, 1997), the Deed of Agreement (1997) signed by all secondary Deputy Principals and by the Catholic Education Commission's representatives makes it very clear what is expected of the Deputy Principal. The Deed of Agreement (1997) claims that in order to be effective, the Deputy Principal needs to demonstrate theological, educational, pastoral and administrative competency and leadership.

The perceptions that students have of Deputy Principals are an important indication of the Deputy Principals' influence on the culture of their school (Keefe & Howard, 1997). Year 12 marks the conclusion of secondary education in Western Australian schools. They almost exclusively earn school leadership positions such as Head Boy and Girl, Prefects and House Captains. The implication is that the student population, the teaching staff and the school administration see their seniority and experience as being significant (O'Brien & Wylie, 2000, p. 37). As Kilvert (1997) claims, "students define in quite powerful ways the culture of a school" (p. 57) and one can reasonably conclude that Year 12 students in the Catholic school setting have a marked influence on the

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

culture of their schools. Their perceptions, therefore, are consequential.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to establish whether Year 12 students in four secondary Catholic schools of varying backgrounds perceive that Deputy Principals have an effect on the religious culture of their schools. Such information will add to the limited research previously conducted on the nexus of culture and leadership in Western Australian Catholic Secondary schools.

### **Clarification of Terms.**

For the purposes of this study, culture is defined as the entity formed from human action when people are brought together for a common purpose. It includes interpersonal relationships, peoples' actions and reactions, patterns of behaviour and all that is intended and unintended. Religious culture, therefore, is the entity formed from human action when people are bonded together by the sharing of common religious beliefs, values, behaviours and attitudes of a religious nature.

This definition implies an interactionist approach for this research. An important feature of the interactionist approach is the attention it gives to the perspectives of the players under study. The intent of the study is on understanding, if only in part, what lies at the kernel of Catholic education – religious culture. It is concerned with how religious culture is constructed through the 'human action' of significant educational leaders of four Catholic secondary colleges – the Deputy Principals. These 'human actions' are studied through the 'perceptions' of another important group – the Year 12 students.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Educational leadership studies have predominantly focussed on the role of Principal with only minimal research on Deputy Principals (Ribbins, 1997). Literature on Catholic Deputy Principals is even more inadequate and the paucity of the research is further exaggerated when

applied to the Western Australian setting. The lack of research on the role of Deputy Principal is unfortunate (Koru, 1993), especially in the context of culture study because not only do Deputy Principals maintain the norms and rules of school culture, but Deputy Principalship precedes and lays the foundation for Principalship. Evidence that newly appointed Principals feel alienated and experience conflict because of varying perceptions of their role and school culture (McMillan, 1994) suggests that Deputy Principals require better grooming for Principalship in the role they play in promoting a positive school culture.

Researchers have compiled impressive evidence on school culture and show there is a strong correlation between good student achievement and motivation as well as with teacher satisfaction and productivity in schools with a positive school culture (Fyans & Maehr, 1990). The significant role the Catholic school Principal plays as the leader of a faith community is rarely addressed in the research (Convey, 1992, p. 186).

Flynn (1993) explored the core beliefs, values, traditions, symbols and patterns of behaviour of 6000 students from 50 Catholic high Schools in NSW and the ACT. Additional data was collected from the parents and teachers from these schools. Though no direct comment is made regarding the role of the Deputy Principals there are some pertinent comments relating to the Principal. Flynn (1993) studied Year 12 students' perceptions of Principals' pastoral, community, educational and religious leadership. These students perceived their Principals place a high priority on the religious mission of their schools (4.3 on a five point scale). The second highest ranking was the educational mission of the school (3.87), then community building leadership (3.69), then school leadership (3.58) and finally the lowest rating being pastoral leadership (3.09). It is interesting to note that pastoral leadership rated so lowly. Flynn suggests that this is due to much of the student

pastoral work being delegated to other staff members such as year coordinators, counsellors, teachers and careers counsellors. Though no mention is made of Deputy Principals it is fair to say that the Deputy Principals play a large pastoral role in secondary Catholic high schools.

The Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (1997) sees Flynn's (1993) research of the culture of eastern Australian secondary Catholic schools as being so significant, that it recommends that similar studies be encouraged on Western Australian Catholic schools.

In summary, Convey (1992) and others believe that culture can be fashioned intentionally by administrators such as Deputy Principals and by students:

A school's culture develops intentionally [such phenomenon as] the vision and leadership of its administrators . . . [and] the shared values of the entire school community . . . Students help fashion a school's culture, however, the adult members of the school community are its major architects. (p. 180)

Convey's words reinforce the premise underlying this research: Deputy Principals do affect the culture of their schools and students also play a significant part in the shaping of school culture.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample and Subjects<sup>2</sup>**

In an attempt to gain a representative sample, four of Western Australia's thirty-six Catholic senior secondary schools were chosen to participate. Schools were chosen to ensure a wide spectrum of views; consideration was given to the history and traditions of the different schools. For example one of the schools is administered under the auspices of a religious order, another is the product of a recent amalgamation of a boys and girls school, a third has only recently had its first population of Year 12 students finish their schooling and the fourth was founded in the nineteen seventies. The regional setting and

the associated socio-economic climate were also factors leading to these schools being selected. One of the schools is a boarding school in a large rural regional centre. Of the remaining three schools, one is a recently established school in Perth's northern suburbs, another is situated in one of Perth's inner suburbs and another is located in a low socio-economic region of Perth.

The four schools range in size from approximately 700 students to 900 students with corresponding Year 12 populations of 90 to 160. Gender balance is not a major issue as all the schools are co-educational and the Year 12 gender distributions of each of the schools are generally even. The sample comprised 315 students representing almost seventy percent of the sampled schools' Year 12 students.

### **Design**

It could be argued that every function and action a Deputy Principal carries out in his/her daily duties impacts on students' perceptions and ultimately on their role in culture formation and culture maintenance. Given the significance of culture to all schools and particularly the religious nature of culture to Catholic schools, the religious dimension of the Deputy Principals' role has been given emphasis in this research. Therefore these three broad variables were investigated;

1. Administrative practices of Deputy Principals.
2. Deputy Principals as religious models and witnesses.
3. Deputy Principals and religious education.

These were further refined into a variety of sub-groups.

### **The Administrative Practices of Deputy Principals Variable**

The 'administrative practices' variable deals with the day-to-day and long-term administrative practices of Deputy Principals and how these impinge on the religious culture of the school. This variable was divided into two further sub-groups, 'timetabling' and 'attitudes to religion' and

how they affect school culture. Timetabling is one of the most important roles Deputy Principals carry out. In terms of culture, the priorities Deputy Principals use in constructing the timetable implies a good deal about the school and once operating, the timetable plays a part in maintaining the school culture. It is such a significant part of the Deputy Principals' role that four items were assigned to the research instrument. The remaining items focussed on day-to-day administrative practices and students' perceptions of whether they believed Deputy Principals had any influence on their attitudes to religion generally.

### **Deputy Principals as Religious Models and Witnesses Variable**

Significant to the variable 'Deputy Principals as religious models and witnesses' is the concept of plausibility structure (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 158) that is whether Deputy Principals' actions are consistent with the values of the Catholic school. Its focus is on how Deputy Principals are good witnesses and models of their faith. It is worth noting that one of the eligibility criteria for appointment to the position of Deputy Principal is practical membership of the Catholic Church (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia [CECWA], 1999). Therefore, emphasis here is on whether the Year 12 students believed their Deputy Principals witness the values and practices espoused by the Church such as taking part in worship and treating individuals with dignity and Christian concern. This area was sub-divided into three more specific components of the Deputy Principals' role. The first sub-group, Pastoral Care, focus on whether Deputy Principals cared about the young people in their charge, how students perceive Deputy Principals handle outcasts and whether students felt they are seen as individuals by the Deputy Principals. The second examined the influence Deputy Principals had on students' values. The third sub-group aim at Deputy Principals' 'religious practice' and included items on Deputy Principals' activity in school religious ceremonies and

the emphasis they place on the religious nature of their school.

### **Deputy Principals and Religious Education Variable**

The emphasis in the third variable, 'Deputy Principals and Religious Education', is on the subject area of 'Religious Education'. It is decreed by the Catholic Education Office that students have at least 160 minutes of Religious Education a week (CECWA, 1999). Perceptions relating to this time allocation and the Deputy Principals' attitude to Religious Education reflect a great deal about the culture of the school. One area examined here is the influence Deputy Principals have on teachers' and students' attitudes to Religious Education and whether it was perceived that Deputy Principals themselves took Religious Education seriously. Another emphasis is on Deputy Principals' direct involvement in the Religious Education programme in the capacity of teacher and whether students believe that they would be fortunate to have Deputy Principals as teachers and whether they felt that Deputy Principals should teach Religious Education. The third area of focus related to Year 12 students' perceptions of Deputy Principals' knowledge and expertise in the area of Religious Education.

### **Instrument**

The Year 12 students completed a 30-item questionnaire on a four-point Likert Scale consisting of responses strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. Each of the three variables is assigned 10 items that are randomly numbered. Rotation of the items is not employed to avoid students patterning their responses. Five items are reversed to discourage response set in the results. These reverse items were distributed over the three variables.

### **Data Analysis**

The software, *Ed Stats*, (Knibb, 1995) was used to analyse the data. For each item, the strongly agree response was ascribed the highest numeric value of four, agree response scored three, disagree a score of two and strongly disagree a score of one. The exceptions to this were the reverse

scoring items. The analysis involved the following stages: reliability co-efficient, discrimination indices, comparison of the frequency counts, means and standard deviations of the items and the variables and correlations co-efficients.

The total questionnaire was evaluated for reliability using a Cronbach Alpha coefficient. And the discrimination value of each item was calculated. Discrimination is the correlation between the value for one item and the total on the other items. Items with discrimination values below 0.3 were considered for rejection or revision.

Once the data was checked for reliability and discrimination it was analysed using frequency count percentages to grasp an overview of how Year 12 students perceive Deputy Principals affect the religious culture of their schools.

Pearson correlation coefficients were used to measure the strength and direction of relationships between questionnaire items. Multiple linear regression was also used to estimate what percentage of the total variance of an item's results was due to the effect of more than one other item.

## RESULTS

### Questionnaire Statistics

#### Discrimination Indices

Four items had discrimination values below 0.3 and needed to be considered for elimination. It was decided to only eliminate two of these items from the measurement instrument.

Table 1

#### Means and standard deviations for the variables

Variable	Item N	$\bar{X}$	SD
Administration	6	2.40	0.79
Models and Witnesses	11	2.68	0.81

### Reliability

The initial Cronbach Alpha calculation produced a reliability coefficient of 0.85. Further analysis showed that this overall coefficient could be improved if results for two items were not included. As these items were not deemed vital to the study and produced low discriminating indices (see above) they were deleted from further consideration. The resulting Cronbach Alpha coefficient is 0.88 indicating high internal consistency of the instrument.

### Respondents' Statistics

#### Frequency Counts, Means and Standard Deviations

The means and standard deviations were calculated for each item and also for the three variables (see Table 1). The first variable examined was 'administration'. This variable dealt with the administrative practices of the Deputy Principals and how these impinge on the religious culture of the school. An average of 45% of the students responded strongly agree/agree for this variable suggesting that in their opinion the Deputy Principals' day-to-day and long term administrative practices have little effect on the religious culture of the school.

Religious Education	9	2.79	0.77
Total Questionnaire	26	2.65	0.81

Only 55% responded that the ways in which Deputy Principals organise their schools are a positive influence on what students think of religion and 60% believe that Deputy Principals are too involved with the daily administration to influence what they think of religion.

There was also a low positive response to the Deputy Principals' timetabling the best periods (43%), and the best rooms (40%) for Religious Education classes. Even though 60% of the students strongly disagreed/disagreed that the best teachers were timetabled to teach Religious Education only 49% acknowledged that Religious Education should have the best teacher.

The 'administration' variable had the lowest mean (2.40; Table 1), in fact, all six items in this variable had mean values below the total mean. Out of the entire questionnaire, the reverse item 3, 'Deputy Principals are too involved with day-to-day administration to influence what I think of religion' had the lowest mean (2.23) and student responses were most varied for item 24, 'the best teachers should be timetabled to teach Religious Education' (SD = 0.90). On the whole the low mean scores and frequency counts indicate students view the Deputy Principals' administrative practices as having little effect on the religious culture of the school.

These results are in contrast to the high positive response (76%) that Deputy Principals care about the students in their

school. Hence, rather than the former low responses indicating areas of neglect by the Deputy Principals, they may be due to the increase in the efficient pastoral care performed by year coordinators, class teachers, school counsellors and careers advisers. These staff members carry out the routine pastoral care of the students and

only more serious matters - often requiring some form of disciplinary action - would be referred to the Deputy Principals. Flynn (1993) observed a similar pattern of responses when discussing Principals (pp. 200-201). This could also explain the discrepancy observed between the high percentage (81%) of the students who strongly agreed/agreed that Deputy Principals positively reinforce the Catholic/Christian values of the school but only 59% believed Deputy Principals were good examples of Christian people and 59% could not discuss moral issues with Deputy Principals.

In the sub-group 'religious practice' of Deputy Principals, 78% acknowledge that Deputy Principals place importance on the religious nature of their school. This is also corroborated by the high strongly agree/agree responses to items pertaining to the Deputy Principals' religious actions and commitment. Deputy Principals are seen to play an active part in the running and organising of Masses, liturgies and other religious occasions (74%) visiting Religious Education camps and retreats (61%) and attending Mass regularly (70%).

In summary, the responses for the variable 'religious models and witnesses' suggest students consider their Deputy Principals are good models for religious leadership who place importance on the religious dimension of their school. This is supported by the Deputy Principals' care of the students and through their active participation in religious events.

The final variable, 'Religious Education', had the highest mean (2.79) and the least spread of scores (0.77; see Table 1). The item, 'I would expect Deputy Principals who teach Religious Education to have a good knowledge of the content', had the highest mean (3.27) and the item, 'Deputy Principals have a good knowledge of

religious issues' (SD = 0.63) had the least varied responses for the questionnaire.

The sample acknowledged that Deputy Principals see religious education as an important subject (82% strongly agree/agree) and treat Religious Education as seriously as any other subject (73%). The most positive responses in the entire questionnaire were those relating to Deputy Principals' expertise in the pedagogy of Religious Education. For example 90% of students perceived Deputy Principals to have a good knowledge of Religious Education content, religious issues (83%) and Catholic Church teachings (80%).

It is interesting to note that even though the students accepted that Deputy Principals have the expertise and commitment to teaching Religious Education, only 34% would consider themselves fortunate to have Deputy Principals as their Religious Education teacher. Furthermore the item whether Deputy Principals should teach that subject only evoked a 44% positive response. This again could be a reflection of the Deputy Principals often being cast in the role of disciplinarian. In terms of the Deputy Principals' effect on how seriously Religious Education was taken as subject, the perception was that there was less influence on the students' attitudes (66%) than the teachers' attitudes (72%). This is not surprising when you consider Flynn (1993, p. 231) noted that 68% of his student sample "maintained that R.E. classes are not taken seriously by students".

Flynn (1993, p. 291) claims that even though students held a "very favourable professional image" of their teachers, they "no longer perceived their teachers to be sponsors of their faith development but rather in terms of their role as professional educators". This may be extrapolated to the Deputy Principals being seen by their

students as administrators rather than faith developers.

### Correlations

The correlation coefficients were calculated to determine relationships between items. The results indicate that item 1 'Deputy Principals positively reinforce the Catholic/Christian values of my school' had the greatest number of significant relationships with the remaining items. Most notable amongst these were items 2, 9, 11, 14 and 19 (see Table 2). Relationships between the dependent item 1, 'Deputy Principals positively reinforce the Catholic/Christian values of my school' and five independent items dealing with the Deputy Principals' involvement in school Masses, liturgies and religious ceremonies (item 2); their knowledge of Church teachings (item 19) and religious issues (item 9); caring about the students (item 14) and good examples of Christian people (item 11) were explored using simple correlation and multiple regression analysis (see Table 2). Coefficients between 0.40 and 0.70 show "moderate correlation" and indicate a "substantial relationship" between item 1 and items 2, 9, 11, 14 and 19.

The square of the simple correlation values indicate that 27% of the variance in the Deputy Principals' reinforcement of school Catholic values is predicted by the Deputy Principals' participation in school Masses and other religious celebrations, 26% by their knowledge of Religious Education issues, 20% by their knowledge of Church teachings, 19.8% from the care for students and 19.3% from being good examples of Christian people.

Table 2

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## Simple and Multiple Regression on Selected Items

Dependent Variable: Deputy Principals positively reinforce Catholic/Christian values

Independent items	Simple correlation r
2 Involvement in Religious Ceremonies	0.522
9 Knowledge of Religious Issues	0.510
11 Good Examples of Christian People	0.444
14 Caring about Students	0.445
19 Knowledge of Church Teachings	0.448
Multiple Correlation Coefficient	0.640

Note.  $p < 0.01$

The multiple correlation coefficient between the dependent item 1 and independent items 2, 9, 11, 14 and 19 is 0.64 hence the predictor items together accounted for 41% of the variance in scores of Deputy Principals' positive reinforcement of the school's Catholic/Christian values.

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results of this study suggest that Deputy Principals can improve the religious culture of their schools. As Saphier and King (1985) observe, "cultures are built through the everyday business of school life" (p. 72) and as much of the Deputy Principals' role involves day-to-day administration, timetabling and the smooth running of the school they are significant players in school

culture formation. The pertinent question here is; what effect does the administrative role of the Deputy Principals have on the religious dimension of school culture?

Students considered that Deputy Principals placed importance on Religious Education as a subject. However this importance is not

reflected in timetabling. For example the perception was that the best teachers, periods and rooms were allocated to subjects other than Religious Education. It was also noted that students believed that Deputy Principals were too involved in day-to-day duties to influence what they thought of religion. Largely, students view the Deputy Principals' administrative practices as having little effect on the religious culture of the school.

An implication here is that greater consideration should be given to the subject Religious Education when timetabling. Deputy Principals should also endeavour to interact more with the students instead of being seen as too busy in day-to-day administration. Flynn (1993, p. 54) notes when researching Principals, the day-to-day and incidental interaction with students is significant and claims that successful Principals "spend more than 80% of their time each day in brief unplanned encounters . . . tour the school to monitor events and communicate with staff and students." Deputy Principals are inevitably busy people and it is often the case that they have little

opportunity to move amongst the students. One suggestion is that Deputy Principals should be prepared to delegate more of their tasks to middle management providing more time for student - Deputy Principal contact. Another is that Deputy Principals could be given a greater time allowance for such interaction.

Culture includes the shared beliefs, values, customs and attitudes that bond a group together (Lancaster, 1992, p. 30; Maxwell & Ross Thomas, 1991, p. 80). Millikan claims (1987, p. 43), "a central factor of culture is the interpersonal sharing of special experiences and values". This study indicates that 20% of the Deputy Principals' reinforcement of school Catholic values is predicted by the Deputy Principals' knowledge of Church teachings and 26% by their knowledge of religious issues. The Deputy Principals were perceived by the Year 12 students as having a good knowledge of Catholic Church teachings and religious issues. Deputy Principals should continue to be diligent in this area of their work.

The Deputy Principals shared in the special experiences of Masses, camps, retreats, liturgies and other religious celebrations. It is noteworthy that the study indicates that 27% of the Deputy Principals' reinforcement of school Catholic values is predicted by the Deputy Principals' participation in school Masses and other

religious celebrations. Flynn (1993, p. 291) found that such events were significant factors contributing to Year 12 students' religious development. It is crucial to Catholic education that Deputy Principals maximize their perceived strengths in these areas.

Lancaster (1992, p. 30) cites role modelling as an important aspect of school culture for a cultural leader. This study shows that Deputy Principals are good role models and witnesses by caring about the students, attending religious occasions, treating Religious Education as an important subject and positively reinforcing the religious values of the school. Consequently the 'Religious Education' and 'religious modelling' aspects of the Deputy Principals' roles were seen to have a positive influence on the school religious culture. Again Deputy Principals should strive to maintain their focus on these aspects of their work.

It is essential that the actions of the Deputy Principals reflect a culture that incorporates the aims and values of the Catholic Church, ensuring a plausibility structure exists. If Catholic schools are to have a religious culture that supports the developing faith of students, then Deputy Principals and other employees need to espouse and act out the Christian message.

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