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Guiding principles for cultivating sustainable Christian school cultures in an era of change

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Abstract

This article presents a selection of findings arising from a recent study that analysed and investigated how sustainable Christian school cultures can be cultivated during changing times. The inquiry was positioned within the contextually bounded system of Christian schools which, according to the literature, have historically struggled to maintain core ideology and distinctiveness beyond the consolidation or mid-life phase of cultural development. The study was framed within a qualitative paradigm of inquiry that utilised a multiple case study design to investigate how principals within six Christian schools were seeking to cultivate sustainable school cultures that preserved core ideology whilst responding to change imperatives within an ever-increasingly complex and market driven socio-cultural milieu.

The research findings identified four guiding principles that leaders were using to cultivate sustainable Christian school cultures within these site specific settings. These principles formed a foundation upon which cultural meaning-making and core ideology, expressed as cultural processes and practices, may be sustained and perpetuated during a Christian school's organisational mid-life or consolidation phase of cultural development.

> *This preservation and perpetuation of core cultural ideology and values is therefore especially pertinent within Christian schools and colleges*

Research relating to the intentional cultivation of Christian school cultures that sustain core ideology whilst responding to change and contemporary socio-cultural realities have not been significant in both the range of studies undertaken or in the rigour of such studies to build and extend knowledge within this field (Belmonte, 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Willard, 2003). Within the organisational theory literature, a range of cultural development models have been developed that seek to highlight the critical imperatives of intentionally and consistently re-aligning the enterprise or institution with founding vision, identity and values. Whilst beyond the scope of this paper to explain in detail each model, some frameworks that may be of particular relevance to Christian educational institutions could include Berger and Berger's (1976) adaptations of Weber's (1947) cycles of movements; Edgar Schein's seminal work on the phases of culture (Schein, 1989, 2004); Collins and Porras' (2001; 1995) landmark study on preserving the core/stimulating progress paradox; and Limerick, Cunnington and Crowther's (2002) meta-strategic management cycle. Of recent times, a range of Christian authors, including Lowney (2005), Willard (2003) and Hirsch (2007), have also proposed ideas and perspectives that seek to identify and articulate the processes of maintaining a distinctively Christian ethos and identity beyond the first and second generations. Table 1 summarises these frameworks relating to the cultural phases of development within an organisation.

What is significant about each of these models is the imperative that leaders in each generational phase intentionally link back to and re-align their strategies and structures with founding vision and core ideological values. This preservation and perpetuation of core cultural ideology and values is therefore especially pertinent within Christian schools and colleges, as these institutions have historically struggled to maintain their cultural resiliency beyond organisational mid-life (Bartel, 2004; Belmonte, 2006; Dosen, 2001).

The current study: Method

To investigate how principals within Christian schools and colleges were seeking to sustain core vision, values and institutional resiliency, research was undertaken across a range of Christian schools that were entering into organisational mid life or consolidation phases of cultural development and had experienced leadership succession since their inception. The study adopted a qualitative paradigm

Table 1: Synopsis of theories of cultural development / dis-integration within organisations

Generation	Weber / Berger (1976)	Schein (2004)	Limerick et al. (2002)	Hirsch (2007)
1st generation pioneer generation	charisma	founding / early growth	founding phase	movement ethos
2nd generation prosperity generation	routinisation	mid life	consolidation and continuity	settling movement ethos
3rd generation perishable generation	rationalisation	maturity and decline	renewal phase: discontinuity and reconfiguration	institutional ethos

of inquiry that used a multiple case study design to specifically investigate how principals within six purposively sampled Christian schools were seeking to cultivate sustainable school cultures that preserved and perpetuated a distinctively Christian school culture and ethos whilst simultaneously responding to change, progress, growth and development within an ever-increasingly complex and market driven socio-cultural milieu.

The purposive sample of the six principals, who were the primary unit of analysis in this case study design, had suitably met the inclusion criteria protocols for the study and were selected "because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorising, about a still larger collection of cases" (Stake, 2003, p. 138). Significantly, five out of the six principals selected for this sample had more than 20 years experience in Christian education and three of these leaders had ten or more years experience within their current schools.

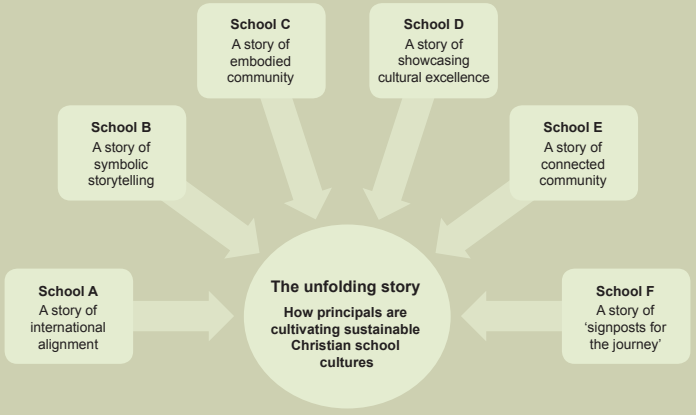
Complementing these principals' stories, and assisting in the triangulation of the data sets, a range of interviews were also undertaken at each school with board representatives, experienced and new teachers. These participants provided further insight into the personal stories of the principals and the contextualised processes, principles and practices that were being used to cultivate sustainable Christian school cultures in these settings.

Due to the contextually bounded settings where each principal was endeavouring to cultivate sustainable Christian school cultures, it was imperative that a suitable description of each site was articulated. In doing so, the researcher was able to map the specificities of each setting and use these data for meaningful analysis and generation of the "stories within the story". The research findings of the within case data revealed distinctive site based narratives that encapsulated the stories of how principals were cultivating sustainable Christian school cultures within these settings. Figure 1 highlights how the findings from each school informed and substantiated the unfolding story that emerged as a collective, multiple case site narrative within this inquiry.

These within-case findings were analysed across all case sites and the relevant categories and sub-categories from these findings contributed to an unfolding meta-story regarding the cultivation of sustainable school cultures in these schools. The study revealed that, within these contextually bounded settings, principals were cultivating sustainable cultures through the utilisation of a range of principles, processes and practices for sustainable cultural meaning making and capacity building. Specifically, the findings arising from the across-

> ***"Principals were cultivating sustainable cultures through the utilisation of a range of principles, processes and practices"***

Figure 1: Relationship of within-case and across-case stories analysed in this study



case analyses revealed four key guiding principles for sustainable Christian school cultures that were being utilised by principals in these contexts.

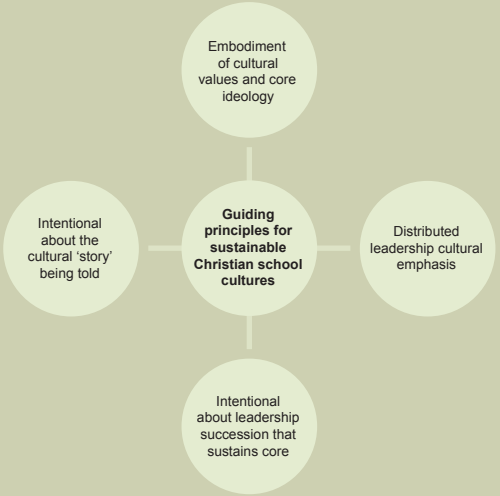
Results and discussion

Guiding principles were identified as a range of pre-dispositions regarding the role of the principal in the cultivation of sustainable Christian school cultures that enhanced culture-building and meaning-making capacities within these settings. These guiding principles were defined, within the context of this study, as "overarching and tacit assumptions that inform, enhance and promote sustainable cultural practice, action and behaviour". Figure 2 presents the four guiding principles that emerged regarding how principals, the key actors within this study, were seeking to cultivate sustainable Christian school cultures during changing times in these settings.

> *Sustainable cultures were cultivated when leaders ensure that the cultural story is always being told*

These guiding principles were evident across all case study sites and were deeply embedded within the site-specific settings where each school leader was enacting and actively demonstrating these principles. It is also important to note that these principles were not about a singular and individualised model of leadership that was the sole domain of one person, but rather a distributed and de-centralised commitment to leadership configuration and structure that actively and intentionally placed the onus of responsibility for cultural sustainability upon a range of school community stakeholders.

Figure 2: Guiding principles for the cultivation of sustainable Christian school cultures



Guiding principle 1: Intentional about the cultural story being told

The findings of this inquiry revealed the importance of the principal in both shaping and sustaining the Christian school's culture. The participants across all sites consistently made mention of the role of the principal as an integral, and in many cases, indispensable component in the cultivation of sustainable cultures. One participant described the role of the principal in cultivating sustainable cultures as "absolutely critical".

> [Principals need to] have a very clearly articulated vision of where the school is heading…It's our stake in the ground, basically that we try and link everything else to. So I see him as absolutely pivotal in that role. (Teacher, School C).

The across-case findings also found that the role of the principal in cultivating sustainable Christian school cultures was not merely about leadership per se but a particular and highly intentional leadership that focused upon the specific cultural elements and imperatives within a given school context.

> [The principal] has to be the paramount person He's the…leader…that's where your culture develops well. It doesn't actually develop from him but he grabs hold of the culture of the school to perpetuate that culture. (Teacher, School A)

> I think the role of a principal is paramount in the direction that a school goes…It is like you are one degree off. In a short period of time that doesn't really matter. Over time it does…I know the principal is a key person in any school, for tone, for direction (Principal, School E).

Numerous studies have also identified that it is the principal who is pivotal in shaping and modifying effective school cultures and that leaders need to be strategic, purposeful and intentional about cultivating cultural elements within their schools (Cranston & Ehrich, 2009; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The findings also revealed that principalship, within these contexts, was grounded upon an assumption that sustainable cultures were cultivated when leaders ensure that the cultural story is always being told. The within and across-case analyses highlighted that leaders were intentional in perpetuating their core cultural distinctives through the explication, re-iteration, and perpetual telling and re-telling of their organisational "sagas" or corporate narratives (Abrahamson, 2004; Clarke, 1975; Denning, 2005).

> It is not my role to merely tell the story…I must ensure that the story is being told. (Principal, School B).

The findings would suggest that these cultural storytelling imperatives can occur through verbal, symbolic, first hand / second hand narratives, written and / or oral forms, and tangible and intangible mechanisms and are not the responsibility of any one person and / or leader within a given school culture. Furthermore, the findings suggest that whilst some schools were more clearly exemplified as 'storytelling' cultures (as the within-case analyses of School B identified), the principle of ensuring the 'cultural story gets told' was a recurring theme for principals across each school participating in this study.

The within-case vignette from School B provided a portrait of how these storytelling principles and priorities were enacted and highlighted the critical role that consistent and well explicated story-telling of the cultural distinctives had upon the cultivation of School B's culture. Within School B, these opportunities for the telling of the cultural narrative were distributed, where possible to a range of storytellers.

> I only know the story second hand…I think it's inherent where possible that stories are told in a first hand narrative. So that's where…we use the [Hillview] heroes to be sharing those stories on primary assemblies, secondary assemblies, in staff meetings. And retell that with their passion and memory. (Principal, School B)

The intentional use of these organisational heroes reflected the manner in which the principle of telling the cultural story can be sustained and perpetuated to all members within a school community. Such a diffusion of the cultural story to many voices within these settings built the social capital of all participants and allowed for personalised expressions on an unfolding and collective narrative that was being told and celebrated across the school.

> I guess what I have seen over the years is that you need to tell a story, and you need to tell a story regularly…it needs to be celebrated as often as you possibly can…The job of a principal I believe is to guard that, it is not all my responsibility alone to see that happen…But the staff will not do that… unless they're encouraged in the journey by a leader, or leaders who share that regularly, with integrity. (Principal, School F)

This highlighted Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) assertion that if "we don't talk about our collective memories we will lose them" (p. 248). The findings suggest that, within these settings, the capacity for both sustainability and shared meaning-making within a school community entering the organisational mid-life phase of development was greatly enhanced when principals were intentional about the repeated and creative telling and re-telling of their cultural stories.

Such a priority is supported by Sergiovanni (2006) who contends that story-telling emphases assist in creating purpose, meaning and a "community of mind" within school cultures (p. 138) and assist schools in keeping the organisational narrative alive during each phase of cultural development. A range of other authors have also identified the importance of ensuring the story gets told during each phase of cultural development (Abrahamson, 2004; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Denning, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Limerick, et al., 2002) and research findings arising from specifically Christian school contexts further support the perpetuation of the core cultural narrative by both principals and other key actors in the school community (Belmonte, 2006; Long, 1996; Twelves, 2005).

However, other authors have challenged the assumptions that underpin the intentional perpetuation of a dominant cultural story by principals and have raised concerns regarding governmentality, agency, and suppression of alternate stories within such contexts (Argyris, 1999; Bates, 1986). Bates asserts that these contextually embedded cultural stories are "both constructed and contested" and that sometimes these dominant stories, rather than serving as cornerstones for cultural sustainability, can also act as "mechanisms of suppression" to protect the dominant hegemony.

> It is the maintenance and contestation of what is to constitute the culture of organisational life that provides the dynamic of rationality, legitimation and motivation in organisations. This dynamic is the praxis of administration. (Bates, 1986, p. 83)

Bates highlights the interpretive tension between maintenance and contestation that is an administrative reality within the cultivation of sustainable Christian school cultures. It is for this reason that principals need to ensure that the intentional telling of the cultural story remains collective, interpretive and well disseminated through a range of meaning-making cultural emphases that provide personal understanding to all stakeholders within the school community.

Guiding principle 2: Embodiment of cultural values and core ideology

The study's findings also reinforced the importance of principals embodying and exemplifying the core ideology that was being promoted in their schools.

"Story-telling emphases assist in creating purpose, meaning and a "community of mind" within school cultures and assist schools in keeping the organisational narrative alive"

> [Leaders] should have the vision and the values of the school, the Mission Statement…They should know it…so that the people who are following them…would look to them in their actions and their behaviours…and be able to follow that…They are really the shining light. They set by example. (Teacher, School B)

Similarly, a teacher at School E suggested the principal exemplified the values that he was trying to cultivate and sustain within this College community.

> [Our principal is consistently] modelling to the school…What he lives, his core values that he expects other families to have in the school, both as staff and as family members in the school, is exactly what he lives in his own personal life and I think that speaks volumes. (Teacher, School F)

"The ethical decision-making processes that were being demonstrated by principals were also perceived to be important considerations for cultural sustainability"

Not only were core cultural values being modelled by principals within these contexts, but the ethical decision-making processes that were being demonstrated by principals were also perceived to be important considerations for cultural sustainability.

> We may or may not agree with every decision made but it's never a values decision. So what does it matter? It doesn't mean that was the wrong thing…That wasn't a values decision; that was a business decision…But a values decision can be more destructive to a school when the values are not lining up with the values of the Bible…and that is where you see mischief and the school really struggling to find its direction. (Teacher, School C)

These findings further reinforced the imperatives of personal character, integrity and the embodiment of core cultural values within the life and leadership of principals. What was particularly revealing from the findings was that core cultural values and identity must be exemplified by some *body* or some *bodies*, and needed to go beyond nicely presented prospectus documents, mission statements, symbolic elements and promotional materials. Whether this was expressed through terms of endearment when referring to their staff members and their 'living' core ideology (observed in School C), or through the modelled examples that were representative of leaders at School B, D, and E; the imperative of *embodiment* was identified as a key factor in the cultivation of sustainable cultures in these settings. The leadership literature reinforces this principle.

> The leader's character is a strategic source of power for infusing the culture of his/her organisation [sic] with a code of ethic, moral vision, imagination and courage. Leadership excellence cannot be evaluated without an assessment of the leader's character. (Sankar, 2003, p. 54)

Sankar's observations are supported by other research relating to moral leadership, transparent and ethical principalship imperatives (Limerick, et al., 2002; Lingard et al., 2003) and the links between the personal character and authenticity of the leader and collegial and highly effective school cultures (Clement, 2003; Cranston & Ehrich, 2009; Duignan, 2006; Fullan, 2003; Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Guiding principle 3: Distributed leadership cultural emphases

Another principle identified was the collaborative and distributed nature of how principals were leading within each case school.

> [The reality of the contemporary role] of the head has changed. He's not only a teacher, he's [an] administrator. He's in the public eye. He's got to be a real people person. He's got to promote the school. A whole facet of things. It's so different. (Board Chairperson, School D)

> I think the principal is quite demanding in the sense that I think a good principal needs to be multi-gifted, multi-talented. There's probably more principals out there than there are ones that are gifted across the board. I think schools struggle when they have got principals who focus on particular areas to the detriment of other areas. (Teacher, School E)

This comment identified the multi-faceted role description of the modern day principal and the challenges that they encounter when seeking to cultivate sustainable school cultures in an era of change.

Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) analysis of contemporary schools contends that "no one has to distribute leadership in a school; it's already distributed" (p. 136).

> [Schools are not entirely dependent]…just upon a principal. I think definitely the management in a school—I think in a school the size of this one here at [School C], I probably would say of the middle management that [principal] has employed…(are) very important in establishing a culture. I don't think in a school of this size it necessarily comes down to one person, but obviously his leadership of that core group does a lot. (Teacher, School C)

> I think the key role of a principal is…more of a CEO role here. But…it's got to be transformational to start with…then moving into a distributed leadership where, I think, the size of schooling these days…it absolutely demands a team. (Teacher, School C)

The repeated manner in which distributed models of leadership were being adopted and promoted across these schools also reinforced that leading

a school was not a singular and individualised responsibility. The principal of School C elaborated on these distributed processes that cultivate cultural sustainability.

> I don't think [the principal is] the only person who has that responsibility. In fact I think it needs to be engendered that a wide group of people own the vision, know the values, know the way things tick around this place in particular and why it's worked in the past that way…But the leader plays a good part in making sure that ownership continues and is understood. (Principal, School C)

The collective commitment, particularly but not exclusively from a leadership team, to a distributed model that intentionally reinforces the cultivation of sustainable core ideology was, according to these findings, a highly effective strategy in the cultivation of sustainable Christian school cultures.

This commitment to distributed leadership is a well researched theme within the wider literature. The concepts of "transformative" leadership and "distributed" leadership emphases (Caldwell & Spinks, 2008; Gronn, 2009; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009; Macbeath, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2006), and the subsequent benefits that such models have upon staff agency, empowerment and retention (Gronn, 2000; Leithwood, et al., 2009; Sergiovanni, 2006), student performance (Leithwood, et al., 1999), and school culture and organisational distinctiveness (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Macbeath, 2009; Spillane, et al., 2001) are well developed themes in the educational leadership literature. The findings from this research supports these studies and reinforces that cultivating sustainable cultures within these contexts was not about a 'one man' approach to leadership but rather a collaborative and intentional commitment throughout the entire school community.

Guiding principle 4: Intentional about leadership succession that sustains core cultural values

A final guiding principle that arose from the across-case analyses was that, within these contexts, sustainable cultures were cultivated when principals were intentional about leadership succession that sustains the core vision and values. The findings revealed that the capacity for principals to develop aspirants who 'carry the flame' of the school's cultural distinctiveness and core ideology was perceived as an important feature in these schools' cultural sustainability.

> One of the most significant events in the life of a school is a change of leadership. Yet few things in education succeed less than leadership succession. (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006, p. 57)

The findings arising from this study reinforced that leaders within these contexts were intentionally seeking to make 'leadership succession succeed' and were seeking to cultivate leadership succession principles that were integrated with their core ideology and cultural distinctives.

The principal of School B asserted that leadership succession had always been an intentional priority of working with staff who "are coming up through the school and embracing the culture to carry it on". Whilst not intentionally limiting new successors to the role of principal only to "insiders" (Wenger, 1998), the intention was to ensure that cultural distinctives were sustained by any new leader within the school community.

> Whether it's from the accounts lady to the business manager. They'll try and have anywhere from three months to six months transfer…time. (Teacher, School B)

The rationale for such a transfer period at School B was based upon a commitment to guarding the distinctive cultural elements and a firm commitment to ensure these distinctives were not diluted by new leaders and staff within the school. A range of cultural artefacts were used through these leadership succession transitions including memorabilia, urns, a principal's Bible that was passed to each successor, and a 'raising of the standard' symbolic plaque. These symbolic artefacts combined with a highly intentional induction into not just the principal's roles and responsibilities, but most importantly to the school's distinctive cultural emphases.

> ***"Cultivating sustainable cultures within these contexts was not about a 'one man' approach to leadership"***

The intentional embedding of core cultural values as part of leadership succession processes were also evident at School C. The school had recently purchased two large crystal chalices, one for the board chairman and one for the principal, that were presented during an induction of the newly appointed leader. The principal's chalice was inscribed with the following statement:

> RAISING THE STANDARD
>
> Every principal of [School C] Christian College is entrusted with the responsibility of 'raising a standard'. A standard is a proud banner that openly declares the convictions of a group of people. [School C] was established to provide excellent Christian Education—For Character, For Excellence, For Christ. As this crystal chalice is passed from one principal to another, it represents an ongoing commitment to ensure that what was 'started in the Spirit is completed in the Spirit'.

The principal of School C explained the use of these symbolic elements and their role in ensuring that leadership succession remains grounded in the school's core ideology.

> We set these chalices up that were presented as ongoing mementos…when a new leader comes… they're charged with the responsibility of continuing to raise the standard and hold the core values, whether they're explicit or implicit. To seek them out and to take on the responsibility of not letting the vision slip. Not letting the standards go down… It becomes something that gets passed on from generation to generation. (Principal, School C)

These examples of the value of sustaining cultural distinctives during leadership succession reinforce Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) research which suggests that schools that are intentional about succession "build strong and broad professional cultures with firmly held and courageously defended purposes that will inoculate schools against mediocre and indifferent successors" (p. 76).

Whilst cultural symbolic elements are one expression of how Schools B and C were cultivating leadership succession principles that sustained core cultural distinctives, both schools were also highly intentional about cultivating leadership succession *management* rather than merely succession *planning* within their school contexts (Hargreaves, 2005; Schall, 1997). Both principals spoke of transition and induction phases during their succession into their principalship roles. These induction experiences provided both newly appointed principals with opportunities to orientate themselves to the rhythms and rituals of their specific schools and ensured that core ideology was being sustained.

> ***"Induction experiences provided principals with opportunities to orientate themselves to the rhythms and rituals of their specific schools and ensured that core ideology was being sustained"***

Furthermore, the principal of School C reinforced the importance of succession management when he described the distributed nature of his leadership structure and how such an approach is developing leadership capacity amongst his staff. The principal of School D concurred with these distributed initiatives and articulated how succession management was developed within his context.

> Obviously in a school, because you have stratification there will be a lot of things happening that demonstrate to middle management and to other staff what the next role up occupies. It is inherent; it is in the nature of the school. (Principal, School D)

The intentional manner in which core ideology is being sustained through the cultivation of succession management strategies and initiatives within these sites is also a well supported process in the wider literature relating to leadership succession and succession management (Garchinsky, 2008; Gronn, 2009; Hargreaves, 2005; Leithwood, et al., 1999; Schall, 1997; Wenger, 1998).

In contrast to the cultivation of cultural emphases and distributed approaches to leadership succession that were identified at Schools B, C and D, School F was specifically intentional about the naming and development of a successor from within the school setting.

> I think that's important for a community to know that a senior leader has a clearly anointed successor and that successor is a viable alternative who has the confidence of the community. So that's an intentional thing and when we appointed our deputy, he needed to be somebody who could viably step in and become principal should anything happen to me. (Principal, School F)

This intentional model of leadership succession adopts what the literature refers to as a planned continuity approach, whereby a successor is identified, appointed and groomed whilst the current leader is still in the school (Hargreaves, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Such an approach to leadership succession is highly intentional and reflects a planned and strategic approach to succession principles and sustained cultural distinctiveness. However, the literature relating to leadership succession would caution that the appointment of a 'chosen one' can have adverse affects within the school community, who may fear nepotism or favouritism; cloning of leadership styles and abilities; and the very real possibility that the appointed successor may ultimately leave the school before a leadership position becomes available (Garchinsky, 2008; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

> In some schools this is a very deliberate intent and they see that part of the process is the grooming of the next generation of leaders. I don't buy it. I subscribe more to 'chaos theory' on that issue!…I think a lot of leadership things are contrived. And who is making the decision about who is going to be the future leader? (Principal, School D)

This question reinforces the challenges of succession planning and succession management and highlights the complexities of seeking to suitably prepare aspirants for principal leadership roles (Cranston, 2007; Cranston, 2008; Gronn, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2006). Whilst many schools tend to overlook the principle of leadership succession and how such succession will ensure sustainability of core cultural emphases (Garchinsky, 2008; Hargreaves, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), the

across-case findings revealed that the importance of principals being intentional about sustaining core ideology through a range of leadership succession and leadership capacity building initiatives.

Conclusion

This article has presented a selection of findings relating to how principals are cultivating sustainable Christian school cultures during changing times. The research highlighted that the role of the principal in cultivating sustainable Christian school cultures was a multi-faceted, challenging and above all intentional one that was underpinned by a range of key principles regarding the cultivation and perpetuation of the distinctive cultural emphases and expressions within these site-specific contexts. The findings revealed that leaders were using four guiding principles to assist in cultivating sustainable cultures. These principles included: being intentional about the cultural story being told; embodiment of core cultural values and ideology; distributed leadership emphases; and being intentional about leadership succession that sustains core vision. TEACH

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> ***"The research highlighted that the role of the principal in cultivating sustainable Christian school cultures was a multi-faceted, challenging and above all intentional one"***