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Perceptions of Leaders, Teachers, Students and Parents in high performing West Australian Catholic secondary schools within the context of Tertiary Entrance Examinations.

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

As for most of the developed world, Australia is no different in its scrupulous evaluation of school performance data. Annually much attention is given to data surrounding the performance of students, teachers and schools in high stakes Tertiary Entrance Examinations as students seek to qualify for a variety of university programs. So called 'league tables' are produced measuring school performance on a number of criteria which differ marginally from state to state. Such tables identify both successful and less successful schools. Notwithstanding the limitations of such comparisons and the fact that success is a relative term there is a great deal of interest in the factors that contribute to the attainment of success in the Tertiary Entrance Examination context.

This qualitative study identifies and interprets the factors attributed to the success of nine selected secondary schools in the Catholic Education System of Western Australia that have consistently outperformed other 'like' schools (as measured by their socio-economic index) in the context of the state Tertiary Entrance Examinations. The schools in the study differed on factors such as socio-economic status, gender composition and geographic location.

The purpose of the study was four-fold. Firstly, to identify characteristics of leaders in schools that have been identified as 'successful'. Secondly, to identify characteristics of teaching that has resulted in high achievement in the Tertiary Entrance Examinations. Thirdly, to identify characteristics of the student contribution to their schools' success; and finally, to identify the contribution and perceptions of parents in the selected high performing schools. Significantly, the study sought to obtain a 'gestalt' of effective schools by exploring whether the perceptions of each group contributed to a holistic

understanding of the factors defining a successful school, in the context of the Tertiary Entrance Examination success.

The qualitative research methodology utilized individual semi-structured interviews to gain data from principals and deputy principals in all nine schools. Semi-structured focus group interviews were employed with regard to heads of subject departments, teachers, students and parents across all nine schools. Within the qualitative epistemology, the theoretical perspective employed was an interpretative phenomenological analysis. The data collected was analysed using open coding. The use of four data sets allowed for data triangulation that provided a multi-dimensional and layered portrait of effective schools.

Schools striving to attain the epithet 'successful' might make use of findings as a valuable commencement point. Practical strategies for authentic whole school improvement that sustains student achievement are presented.

Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere in whole or part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committees.

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Most of all I dedicate this thesis to my family. To my sons Daniel and Sean I am always amazed by your talents, strength and persistence. You have been an inspiration to me. To my wife Irene you have been my constant source of encouragement and I cannot begin to thank you for your love and patience.

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