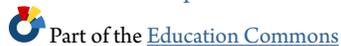

Theses

2014

What are the professional and personal needs of beginning Western Australian Catholic school principals during the first four years of their appointment?

Debra Sayce
University of Notre Dame Australia

Follow this and additional works at: <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses>



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Publication Details

Sayce, D. (2014). What are the professional and personal needs of beginning Western Australian Catholic school principals during the first four years of their appointment? (Doctor of Education). University of Notre Dame Australia. <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/100>

This dissertation/thesis is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



Chapter One: The Research Defined

1.1 Introduction to the research

The context in which school education is delivered in Australia is in a state of change (OECD, 2013). There has been the increasing influence of global emphasis on the performance of schools, within and between education systems, between schools, and between countries (Pont, Nusche & Hopkins, 2008). In addressing these various contexts, the Australian Government has brought about a raft of educational reforms in order to improve educational standards and the quality of the schooling experience (Harrington, 2013).

These reforms include the development and implementation of a national curriculum, national testing and national standards for teaching and leading. This reform agenda also has a focus on increasing the autonomy of school principals in leading their school communities. However, this autonomy is accompanied with increasing levels of accountability and high stakes public testing that is affiliated with school funding and school improvement (Harrington, 2013). The increasing levels of accountability are placing considerable demands on the school principal. In responding to the changing nature of school leadership, educational authorities need to redefine and broaden school leaders' roles and responsibilities. Moreover, there are increasing global concerns that preparation of school leaders to meet the burgeoning demands of contemporary schooling is inadequate (Dempster, Lovett & Fluckiger, 2011). These issues are reflected in the OECD report on school leadership which states: "there is a growing concern that the role of school principal designed for the industrial age has not changed enough to deal with the complex challenges schools are facing in the 21st century" (Pont, Nusche & Hopkins, 2008). The changing nature of school leadership requires

educational authorities to address the recruitment, development and sustainability of school leaders (Mulford, 2003).

The Catholic school principal, in addition to contending with a moving educational landscape, is required to meet the needs of a leader within the educational apostolate for the Catholic Church (Nuzzi, Holter & Frabutt, 2013). The Catholic Church itself is facing a range of challenges in its missionary role. With increasing secularisation and its inherent conflict with gospel values, the once faithful are now questioning religious relevancy in their lives (Rieckhoff, 2014). The Catholic Church is also facing a shifting landscape with decreasing numbers of clergy and religious, low Mass attendance and parish life participation (Pastoral Life Office, 2011) and the impact of institutional sexual abuse within the Church (Sullivan, 2013).

It is within this dual backdrop of increasing accountability demands and challenges within the Catholic Church that the beginning Catholic school principal embarks on his/her leadership role. Beginning principals enter their journey to leadership as classroom teacher, and acquire their educational knowledge, understanding, pedagogical and leadership skills through a range of schooling experiences. The transition from classroom practitioner to school principal is not simply reliant on an accumulation of pedagogical skills over time. The skills required of school principalship range from small-scale classroom, educational and management practices, to large-scale leadership skills that are required to make real a whole school community's educational goal (Chapman, 2005; La Pointe, Darling-Hammond & Meyerson, 2007). In order for the beginning principal to lead his or her school community with confidence and alacrity, the beginning principal requires considerable support and attention due to the demands

and challenges of the principalship combined with their inexperience in this key leadership role. This research aims to examine the leadership experiences and self-perceptions of beginning Catholic school principals in Western Australia. Central to this research is the belief in the positive influence of quality school principalship on student learning outcomes (Hattie, 2009; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008).

1.1.1 Personal statement

The motivation for this research dates back to 2005 when I joined the executive team at the Catholic Education Office in Western Australia in the role of Assistant Director, Religious Education and Faith Formation. In this role, I was given the responsibility of working with beginning principals in the induction program focusing on developing the Catholic identity of schooling. During the course of the programs and subsequent interactions with beginning principals, I heard their many stories of joy and dismay as they journeyed through the first years of their principalship. These interactions drew my attention to the various elements of the principal induction program. I began questioning the program's usefulness in supporting the 'new leader'. In my role, I undertook reviews of principals during various stages of their contractual period. Invariably, principals in their first review would talk about their feelings of being under-prepared, overwhelmed and challenged with their role as leader and yet, at the same time, they professed a strong desire to serve in Catholic education as school principal. It was these stories that motivated me to examine the professional and personal needs of beginning principals in order to consider ways the Catholic education system could develop and support its new principals.

1.2 Research participants

Thirteen beginning principals participated in this research into the professional and personal needs of newly appointed principals in Catholic schools. Of the 13 participants, there were seven female and six male participants; nine were primary principals and four were secondary principals; and two were in their second year, ten were in their third year, and one was in their fourth year as principal.

The schools were located across the four dioceses in Western Australia: three participants from the Broome diocese; two in the Geraldton diocese; five from the Archdiocese of Perth; and three from the Bunbury diocese. The schools varied in size: the three primary schools in the Broome diocese had between 40 and 100 students; the primary schools in the Geraldton and Bunbury dioceses had between 90 and 120 students and the four secondary schools had between 800 and 1110 students.

1.3 Identification of the research question

The primary research question sought to explore: What are the professional and personal needs of beginning Western Australian Catholic school principals during the first four years of appointment as principal? In order to address this primary question, three specific research questions were investigated. These were:

1. What technical and managerial skills do beginning principals need to acquire?
2. What cultural and personal relationships do beginning principals need to develop?
3. In what ways do beginning principals integrate the role of principalship with their self-awareness?

1.4 Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to explore the professional and personal needs of newly appointed principals to Catholic schools in Western Australia. Underpinning this purpose is the belief that by understanding the needs of new leaders in both the professional and personal realms, educational authorities can look towards strengthening leadership preparation and ongoing programs in order to support and develop potential leaders and those serving in the role.

1.5 Design of the research

The methodological organisation of this qualitative research utilised an instrumental case study approach. Instrumental case study is the study of one case in order to provide an insight into a particular issue or phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case study explored the professional and personal needs of beginning principals. In order to better understand the needs of the beginning principals, three perspectives within the case study were investigated. The three perspectives examined gender issues, school location sites and school types. Data collection methods entailed the use of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, document analysis and researcher generated field notes. An interview guide was used as the basis for the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed *verbatim* by the researcher. The transcriptions were made available to the participants, as a process of member checking (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The documents that were analysed included leadership framework programs for aspirants and principals, Catholic Church documents pertaining to Catholic education, school newsletters and brochures, and policies relating to principalship requirements. Research generated field notes were written during and after the interviews offering additional information to participants' responses. The data were managed and analysed

using Miles and Huberman's interactive model (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This model consisted of three main components: data reduction; data display; and drawing and verifying conclusions.

1.6 Significance of the research

The significance of this study into beginning Western Australian Catholic school principals lies in the challenge confronting educational authorities to recruit, support and sustain educational leaders. In identifying the particular professional and personal needs of beginning principals, there is an opportunity to provide appropriate professional support that is specifically designed for new leaders, thus enabling them to do their job well. In addition, the study can offer insight into the professional development, preparation and formation of aspiring principals. It is anticipated that the empirical data collected from the research will highlight appropriate forms of professional development for leaders, and provide opportunities for examining succession planning for leadership not only in Catholic schools, but also other educational systems and sectors.

1.7 Limitations of the research

There were two limitations identified and explored in this research. The first limitation was the perceived power differential of the researcher and the invited participants. The researcher held a senior leadership role in Catholic education in Western Australia. At the time of the study, the researcher was the Assistant Director, Religious Education and Faith Formation. Due to the influential nature of the researcher's position in Catholic education, participants may have experienced a loss of autonomy and felt inhibited in revealing their true thoughts or experiences during the interview process. To counter-

balance this potential perceived power differential, the researcher made every effort to present herself as a doctoral student when interacting with each participant. She sought to conduct the interviews at the participant's schools, dressed more as a student rather than a professional visitor, stated that she was on leave from work and indicated that she was conducting the interview on personal time. In addition, she informed the participants that, in her role as Assistant Director of Religious Education and Faith Formation, she would not undertake any principal reviews or formal school visits with those participating in the research.

The second limitation had to do with the number of participants involved in the research. The entire population of 30 beginning Catholic school principals appointed between 2003 – 2007 were invited to participate in the study. Only 13 beginning principals chose to do so. This participant size may be perceived as being low. The number of participants, however, reflected the wider cohort of beginning principals at the time of the research. The participants represented both male and female principals. The participants included the three geolocations of Catholic schools: rural, remote and metropolitan. The participants included both primary and secondary schooling contexts.

1.8 Definitions

1.8.1 Beginning principals

Beginning principals are in their first four years of their principalship.

1.8.2 Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia

The Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia [CECWA] has the delegated responsibility from the Bishops of Western Australia to govern Catholic education (Hickey, Bianchini, Saunders, Holohan & Sproxton, 2009).

1.8.3 Catholic Education Office of Western Australia

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia [CEOWA] is considered to be the executive arm of the CECWA, carrying out the operational responsibilities and activities as determined by the CECWA (Hickey, et al., 2009).

1.8.4 Catholic school principals

Catholic school principals are employed by the bishop of the diocese and fall under the responsibility of the Director of Catholic Education.

1.8.5 Catholic schools

Catholic schools in Western Australia are Catholic educational institutions catering for children from the ages of four to seventeen years old.

1.8.6 Metropolitan schools

Metropolitan schools are considered to be located within the major cities in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a).

1.8.7 Remote schools

Remote schools in this study are considered to be located between the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia [ARIA] values $5.92 \leq 10.53$ (Australian

Bureau of Statistics, 2013a). For the purposes of this research, these schools are located in the Broome diocese.

1.8.8 *Rural schools*

Rural schools in this study are considered to be located between the ARIA values $0.2 \leq 5.92$ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a). For the purposes of this research, these schools are located in the Bunbury and Geraldton dioceses.

1.9 **Outline of the thesis**

The structure of the thesis consists of seven chapters. Table 1.1 provides an overview of this structure.

Table 1.1

Overview of the thesis structure

Chapter	Title
Chapter One	The Research Defined
Chapter Two	Context of the Research
Chapter Three	Review of Literature
Chapter Four	Research Plan
Chapter Five	Presentations of Research Findings
Chapter Six	Discussion of Research Findings
Chapter Seven	Review and Conclusions

1.10 **Chapter outlines**

Chapter One: The Research Defined introduces the research. It provides a brief introduction to the research background, research participants, primary question and the

three specific research questions that underpinned the study. The chapter also provides the purpose of the research, a personal statement from the researcher as to her motivation for conducting the study, and key definitions pertaining to the investigation. Further, the chapter provides an overview of the research design that includes methodology, and the significance and limitations of the research. Finally, the chapter provides a summary of each of the seven chapters of the thesis.

Chapter Two: Context of the Research presents the six dimensions of the context that underscore this inquiry into the professional and personal needs of beginning principals. These dimensions are: one, the nature and purpose of Catholic schooling, which highlights the role of the school in the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church; two, the governance of Catholic education in Western Australia, including the oversight of the Bishops of Western Australia by virtue of their canonical responsibilities; three, the geographical setting of schools in Catholic education, which accentuates the enormity and diversity of the state; four, the demographic data of Catholic schools in Western Australia; five, Catholic school principalship in Western Australia which emphasises the domains of leadership by which the school principal leads; and six, the background to the three perspectives structuring this inquiry.

Chapter Three: Review of Literature is comprised of four themes that informed this research into the professional and personal needs of beginning Western Australian Catholic school principals. These four themes include: beginning principals; dimensions of principalship that included gender, school location and school type; preparation for principalship; and the religious dimension of Catholic school principalship. These four themes bring into focus the conceptual framework that underpins the inquiry.

Chapter Four: Research Plan maps out the research approach that was utilised to investigate the inquiry. The theoretical framework drew its epistemology from a qualitative foundation, utilising interpretivism as its theoretical perspective. Specifically, the interpretive lens that the inquiry utilised came from a symbolic interactionism perspective, and highlighted the personal perspectives of the participants involved in the research. The methodology employed in the research was an instrumental case study design that sought to explore the perceptions, both professional and personal, of beginning principals. From a potential cohort of 30 beginning principals, 13 volunteered to participate in the research. These 13 participants formed a purposive sample of beginning principals. The method of data collection and management are explained. Issues of trustworthiness are considered and ratified and important ethical considerations for this research are discussed.

Chapter Five: Presentation of Research Findings presents the collected data in terms of the three perspectives of the case study: gender, school locality and school type. Within each perspective, data are presented in order to address the three specific research questions of the research. For each specific research question, the data are analysed with a view to exploring emerging themes within each perspective. Participant perceptions and tabulated summaries of data are then provided.

Chapter Six: Discussion of Research Findings provides an interpretive and analytical discussion of the data presented in Chapter Five. The data presented for each of the three perspectives are analysed alongside relevant literature according to each specific research question. Comparisons are made within each perspective.

Chapter Seven: Review and Conclusions reviews and interprets the results of the research findings in the light of the stated purpose of the inquiry. Following a restatement of the research design each of the three specific research questions is answered. A conclusion to the research is then presented outlining the possible contributions the research makes to the scholarly debate. Lastly, implications for the profession are addressed along with suggestions for further research.