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Developing tomorrow's school leaders: The Western Australian Catholic education
Aspiring Principals Program

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Chapter One: Research Defined

1.1 Introduction to the Research

The Western Australian Catholic education system (the system) faces a problem. Of the 161 Catholic school principals that comprise the system, 70 or 43% will reach or exceed retirement age by 2020 (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The problem, however, lies not in the retirement plans of existing principals. Rather, the problem relates to the capacity of the Executive arm of the system, the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA), to create a pool of role-ready, resilient aspirants to replace existing principals as they leave.

The system faces four complications with regard to the development of this aspirant pool. The age profile of some traditional aspirants, assistant principals in primary schools and deputy principals in secondary schools, is similar to that of the existing principal group (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). The CEOWA Executive anticipates that retirement of assistant and deputy principals at the same rate as existing principals will dilute the aspirant pool (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013). Moreover, some potential aspirants are simply not interested in principalship (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2013; d'Arbon, 2006; Pritchard, 2003). Additionally, some potential aspirants consider aspects of the principalship unattractive and, as a consequence, experience diminished interest in the role (Bezzina, 2012; Cranston, 2005b; d'Arbon, 2006). These unattractive role aspects, also referred to as disincentives in the literature (Bezzina, 2012; Cranston, 2005a; d'Arbon, 2006), include the multi-faceted, intense and stressful nature of the role that demands leadership and management of an array of technical and administrative tasks that must often be completed in time and resource-poor environments (Chapman, 2005; Draper & McMichael, 2003; Fraser & Brock, 2013; A. Harris, Muijs, & Crawford, 2003; Pounder, Galvin, & Shepherd, 2003; Tekleselassie & Villarreal III, 2011). Finally, some potential aspirants actively pursue and attain principalship with no formation other than that provided by the apprenticeship experience of their assistant or deputy principal roles. A possible consequence for this group is unpreparedness for a complicated and demanding role that requires the consistent application of leadership capabilities to ensure success. Ultimately, for some beginning principals in this category, premature exit from the

profession is the outcome (Clarke & Wildy, 2010; Sayce & Lavery, 2010; Wildy & Clarke, 2008).

To further explain the consequences associated with the apprenticeship model of development as the sole pathway to principalship, it is important to highlight five research conclusions. Firstly, for some aspirants, beginning principalship in this way creates a turbulent period of adjustment associated with the move from a role that is comfortable and familiar to one that is foreign and unpredictable (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; A. Walker & Qian, 2006; Wildy & Clarke, 2008; Wildy, Clarke, & Slater, 2007). Secondly, beginning principals may encounter a role that is more complex than anticipated and experience consternation when faced with the tensions and dilemmas emanating from principal-level decision-making (Wildy & Clarke, 2008; Wildy et al., 2007). Thirdly, beginning principals may be confronted by the challenges created by role intensification in a time-poor environment (Chapman, 2005; Draper & McMichael, 2003; Fraser & Brock, 2013; A. Harris, Muijs, et al., 2003; Pounder et al., 2003; Tekleselassie & Villarreal III, 2011). Fourthly, beginning principals may experience isolation from both former and new peers (Wildy & Clarke, 2008; Wildy et al., 2007). Finally, beginning principals may be adversely impacted by negative encounters with staff, parents and school community members (Riley, 2014; Wildy & Clarke, 2008; Wildy et al., 2007).

One measure devised and implemented by the CEOWA to mitigate the issues associated with the anticipated *en masse* retirement of existing principals by 2020 is the Aspiring Principals Program. This two-year principal preparation program aims to create a pool of aspirants with the knowledge, skills and networks required to rapidly adjust to the rigours of novice principalship (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2014e). The program attempts to achieve this aim in four ways. The program strives to provide aspirants with a thorough understanding of Catholic principalship role components and the capabilities required for effective performance. Important in the development of these understandings is the use of a 360-degree psychometric tool to identify aspirant leadership capabilities. Aspirants, equipped with data provided by the tool, work with a trained coach to form capability improvement goals. To achieve these goals, strategies developed within coaching sessions are enacted through the role of the aspirant before being evaluated and refined. Moreover, the program guides aspirants through a process to develop a

leadership vision statement. Amongst other outcomes, the vision development process challenges aspirants to identify their leadership values and clarify their attraction to principalship. Program activities also provoke aspirant reflection regarding principalship disincentives before exploring mitigation strategies. Finally, the program attempts to enhance aspirant self-efficacy to commence principalship by, amongst other measures, providing opportunities to build support networks. These networks comprise aspirant principals, program colleagues, coaches and CEOWA support staff with line management authority or knowledge pertinent to principalship (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2014e).

1.2 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research was to explore aspirant perceptions of Catholic principalship before, during and upon completion of the Aspiring Principals Program together with the influences provoking discernible perception changes. Specifically, four aspirant perceptions were explored by the research: Catholic principalship role components and the capabilities required for effective performance; factors enhancing interest in principalship; factors diminishing interest in principalship; and self-efficacy to commence principalship. Data for the research were collected from the eight aspirants who commenced the program in January 2011 and graduated in December 2012.

1.3 Researcher Motives

I am employed by the CEOWA as a Learning and Development Consultant. In this role, I work with other consultants to design and deliver nine leadership programs that cater for the needs of CEOWA and school-based leaders at every level of the system. One of these programs is the Aspiring Principals Program. I was motivated by the prospect of using research findings and conclusions to refine the program's structure, content and activities, thereby enhancing its quality as a medium for the preparation of Western Australian Catholic school principals. By making improvements, I hoped to improve the capacity of the system to meet the demand for well-formed, resilient aspirants triggered by the anticipated *en masse* retirement of existing principals by 2020. Additionally, I hoped that research findings and conclusions would assist local, national and international designers of

principal preparation programs considering modification of existing or design of new programs.

1.4 Specific Research Questions

Four specific research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What were aspirant perceptions regarding Catholic principalship role components and the capabilities required for effective performance before, during and upon completion of the Aspiring Principals Program? What influences provoked discernible perception changes?
2. What were aspirant perceptions regarding the factors enhancing interest in Catholic principalship before, during and upon completion of the Aspiring Principals Program? What influences provoked discernible perception changes?
3. What were aspirant perceptions regarding the factors diminishing interest in Catholic principalship before, during and upon completion of the Aspiring Principals Program? What influences provoked discernible perception changes?
4. What were aspirant perceptions regarding self-efficacy to commence Catholic principalship before, during and upon completion of the Aspiring Principals Program? What influences provoked discernible perception changes?

1.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The research was qualitative in nature and used interpretivism, specifically symbolic interactionism, as its theoretical perspective. Collective case study was chosen as the research methodology. Qualitative interviews were the primary tools used to collect data for the research. Specifically, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the eight aspirants from the 2011 cohort of the Aspiring Principals Program. The first interview was conducted prior to the start of the program (January 2011). The second interview was conducted at the end of the program's first year (December 2011). The third interview was conducted at the conclusion of the program (December 2012). Four additional materials, listed in Table 1.1, were collected from aspirants and used to triangulate interview data during the data analysis process.

Table 1.1
Triangulation Materials Collected from Aspirants

Triangulation materials	Collection point
Researcher field notes generated during aspirant interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview one: Pre-program (January 2011) • Interview two: Mid-program (December 2011) • Interview three: End-of-program (December 2012)
Aspirant journals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journal one: Mid-program (December 2011) • Journal two: End-of-program (December 2012)
Aspirant leadership vision statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collected at the end of the program (December 2012)
Aspirant cover letters and application forms for principalship vacancies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collected as aspirants applied for principalship vacancies during the latter half of the program's second year

The data analysis process used for the research was the Miles and Huberman (1994) interactive model of data management and analysis. Specifically, when analysing collected data, three interactive stages were used: data reduction; data display; and drawing and verifying conclusions. The data display stage involved the creation of tables reflecting the draft themes emerging from the initial analysis of data and eight 'thickly described' (Geertz, 2000; Lincoln, 1995) case study narratives; one for each aspirant involved in the research. Case study narratives, presented in Chapter Five: Research Results, are largely comprised of the 'natural language' (Saldaña, 2013) of aspirants in the form of quotations extracted from interview transcripts. Each case study narrative is organised using sub-headings representing the four specific research questions used to guide the study. Data tables and aspirant case study narratives were then subjected to cross-case analysis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), the results of which are examined in Chapter Six: Discussion. The cross-case analysis process used a number of 'tactics' recommended by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) including comparison and contrast of identified themes with the established body of knowledge provided in Chapter Three: Literature Review. A description of the study's theoretical framework, including data collection and analysis methods, is detailed in Chapter Four: Research Plan.

1.6 Significance of the Research

The research is significant for three reasons. Firstly, from the perspective of the CEOWA Executive, the research is important for enhancing system succession planning capability and therefore deserves study “in its own right” (Punch, 2014, p. 122). Specifically, the findings and conclusions of the research have the potential to refine the program, thereby enhancing the capacity of the system to prepare a pool of role-ready, resilient aspirants to replace existing principals as they transition, *en masse*, to retirement by 2020. Secondly, research findings and conclusions may assist local, national and international designers of principal preparation programs considering modification of existing or design of new programs. Thirdly, the results and conclusions of the research have the potential to contribute to the existing body of theory pertaining to principal preparation.

1.7 Limitations of the Research

The study has two limitations. Both limitations are the result of the researcher being a CEOWA employee responsible for the design and delivery of the Aspiring Principals Program. Firstly, there existed potential for development of a ‘power differential’ (Grbich, 2012; Stangor, 2011) or a relationship of unequal power between the researcher and the eight aspirants involved in the study. Specifically, because principals are appointed by the CEOWA, the researcher was concerned that his system-level role may generate perceptions amongst aspirants that he may enhance or adversely affect their promotional prospects as a result of comments tendered during the data collection phases of the research. Secondly, because of the dual program designer-convenor and researcher roles, there existed potential for readers of this thesis to perceive researcher bias.

Consequently, four measures were adopted to mitigate power differential and researcher bias. Firstly, the researcher strictly adhered to the ethical requirements of both The University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee and the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia Research Ethics Committee. Secondly, a neutral and experienced qualitative researcher was contracted by the CEOWA Executive to conduct interviews, transcribe audio recordings and ‘member check’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) transcripts with aspirants prior to forwarding them to the researcher for analysis. Thirdly, the researcher participated in a rigorous

CEOWA peer-review process with senior members of the organisation over the course of the study. The peer-review process was designed to ensure the quality and integrity of the research, especially the data collection and data analysis processes. Fourthly, aspirant case study narratives, one of the forms of data display (Miles & Huberman, 1994) used during the data analysis phase of the research, were subjected to a member checking process to ensure that aspirant perceptions were accurately represented. A complete description of the measures adopted to mitigate both research limitations is provided in Chapter Four: Research Plan.

1.8 Thesis Outline and Chapter Summaries

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters, an overview of which is provided in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2
Thesis Chapters

Chapter One:	Research Defined
Chapter Two:	Context of the Research
Chapter Three:	Literature Review
Chapter Four:	Research Plan
Chapter Five:	Research Results
Chapter Six:	Discussion
Chapter Seven:	Review and Conclusions

This is Chapter One: Research Defined. This chapter detailed the purpose of the research, reasons for undertaking the study, the four specific research questions used to guide the project and an overview of the methods used to collect and analyse data to respond to these questions. The significance of the research, research limitations and the measures applied to mitigate limitations were also introduced. Finally, an outline of thesis chapters was presented.

The upcoming chapter, Chapter Two: Context of the Research, is comprised of three dimensions, designed to familiarise the reader with the setting in which the study was conducted. The first dimension focuses on the geographical and structural

overview of the Western Australian Catholic education system. The second dimension discusses the purpose and structure of Western Australian Catholic education leadership programs and locates the Aspiring Principals Program within this structure. The third dimension traces the development of the Aspiring Principals Program from its inception in 1999 through to its current version. Additionally, this dimension provides an overview of the current version of the program including its theoretical underpinnings, selection process, structure and components.

Chapter Three: Literature Review is comprised of four sections. Each section presents literature relevant to one set of aspirant perceptions explored by the research. The four sections are: Catholic principalship role components and the capabilities required for effective performance; factors enhancing interest in principalship; factors diminishing interest in principalship; and self-efficacy to commence principalship. The literature presented in this chapter culminates in the formulation of the four specific research questions that, collectively, were used to guide the study.

Chapter Four: Research Plan explains the methodological components that informed and directed the conduct of the study. Specifically, this chapter presents the theoretical framework for the research including its epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. Additionally, the research participants, measures adopted to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and data analysis processes are described. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the ethical considerations associated with the research and a design summary.

Chapter Five: Research Results is comprised of eight, thickly described case study narratives; one for each aspirant involved in the research. Aspirant narratives reflect the draft themes identified through the data analysis process described in Chapter Four. Case study narratives are largely comprised of the natural language of aspirants in the form of quotations extracted from interview transcripts and are organised using sub-headings representing the four specific research questions used to guide the study.

Chapter Six: Discussion offers an examination of the themes emerging from the cross-case analysis of aspirant case study narratives and data tables generated through the data analysis process. Specifically, each of the four sections of this

chapter discusses the themes associated with one set of aspirant perceptions explored by one specific research question. The discussion uses a number of ‘tactics’ recommended by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) including comparison and contrast of themes with the established body of knowledge provided in Chapter Three: Literature Review.

Chapter Seven: Review and Conclusions provides a response for each of the four specific research questions used to guide the study. Research conclusions, based on these responses, are then presented along with a proposed integrated model of principal preparation for the consideration of local, national and internal program designers. The model has the potential to be generalised to other contexts with the caveat that it be subjected to research to determine its efficacy. Finally, six recommendations, three suggestions for further research and six potential additions to the existing body of theory pertaining to principal preparation are made.

1.9 Chapter Conclusion

The CEOWA Executive anticipates that by 2020, 43% of existing principals will reach or exceed retirement age. This situation tasks the system to ensure that aspirants, the next generation of principals, have the knowledge, skills and networks required to cope with the challenging and multi-faceted nature of the role that is often enacted in time and resource poor environments. One measure implemented by the CEOWA, to achieve this aim is the Aspiring Principals Program. Despite the existence of the program since 2000, research is yet to be undertaken to determine its efficacy as a medium for the preparation of principal aspirants. It is hoped that exploration of aspirant perceptions regarding Catholic principalship as they experience the phenomenon of the program will provide findings and conclusions necessary to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the program. Additionally, these findings, conclusions and subsequent recommendations may contribute to the existing body of theory pertaining to principal preparation and assist program designers in other systems and sectors as they seek to design new or modify existing programs.