
Theses

2014

Perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing West Australian Catholic secondary schools within the context of tertiary entrance examinations

Michael O'Neill
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

O'Neill, M. (2014). Perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing West Australian Catholic secondary schools within the context of tertiary entrance examinations (Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)). University of Notre Dame Australia.
<http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/88>

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 THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction: Theoretical framework

Crotty (2009) argued that in the research process there are four key elements centered on the following four questions:

- What methods do we propose to use?
- What methodology governs our choice and use of methods?
- What theoretical perspective lies behind the methodology in question?
- What epistemology informs this theoretical perspective? (p. 2)

Crotty's questions serve as a template for an overview of the research plan, albeit they will be addressed in reverse order. It seems more appropriate to first describe the epistemology underlying the research design which has informed the choice of the theoretical perspective, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and in turn consider how that theoretical perspective has shaped the methodology and methods used. Table 3.1 describes some of the possibilities open to the researcher based on the four elements of Crotty's questions (Crotty, 2009, p. 4). The researcher has highlighted aspects of each element in 'bold' type pertinent to the current study. Following this table, the researcher provides an explanation for the choice of an epistemological position, the theoretical perspective, the particular methodology and the various methods employed in the current study.

Table 3.1

Crotty's four elements of the research process.

Epistemology	Theoretical perspective	Methodology	Methods
Objectivism Constructionism Subjectivism <i>(and their variants)</i>	Positivism (and post-positivism) Interpretivism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolic Interactionism • Phenomenology • Hermeneutics Critical inquiry Feminism Postmodernism etc.	Experimental research Survey research Phenomenological research Grounded theory Heuristic inquiry Action research Discourse analysis <i>etc.</i>	Sampling Measurement and scaling Questionnaire Observation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant • Non-participant Interview Focus group Case study Life history Statistical analysis Data reduction Theme identification Conversation analysis

3.2 Epistemology: Qualitative research

The current study seeks to represent the perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing schools. In effect, it seeks to describe the 'gestalt' of effective schools, an organized whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts. As such, a qualitative methodological approach has been chosen. Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen (2002) stated that "qualitative researchers seek to understand a phenomenon by focusing on the total picture rather than breaking it down...the goal is a holistic picture" (p. 25). Denzen and Lincoln (2003) described the qualitative researcher as a *bricoleur* or maker of quilts. Both descriptions are relevant to a research project that seeks to stitch together the perceptions of leaders, teachers, parents and students to create a quilt of views on effective schools, which provides an image of key stakeholders' interactions and the individual part they play in the collective achievement of the high performing schools to which they belong.

Precisely because this current study seeks to observe the interactions and behaviours of human beings in an educational setting or situation, it is argued that a qualitative approach that respects context is an appropriate methodological choice, given that most human behaviour is "context-bound" (Ary et al. 2002, p. 424). The current study is 'situated' in the relatively homogenous context of high performing academic schools. Denzen and Lincoln (2003) define qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates observers in the real world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (p. 4). The purpose of the current study is captured by Denzen and Lincoln's observation and is indeed an attempt to make the world of high performing schools visible to others. The researcher in a qualitative study seeks to gain an insider's perspective and portray and interpret the actions and interactions of the participants in the study; namely, school leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing schools.

In a qualitative study, the gathering, analysis, and presentation of the data are largely done in a narrative form (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2009). Because of the narrative nature of their work, qualitative researchers tend to hold what has been called a constructivist view of the world (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such a view of the world requires the researcher to construct meaning from the gathered data and, in turn, to tell the story of the lived experiences of the participants in the study.

Creswell (2009), in his discussion of a social constructivist world-view, argued that all individuals “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (p. 8). As these meanings are varied and, by their very nature broad, the researcher seeks to represent their complexity, rather than narrowing meaning to a limited number of categories. Questions of inquiry are therefore general and often open-ended; designed to help participants reflect on their experience and talk about them. In a sense, the openness of the study does justice to its complexity and the objects of inquiry are not reduced to any single variable. This social constructivist epistemological approach is relevant to the current study which seeks to gain the perspectives of four different groups concerning the same phenomenon; namely, high achieving secondary schools. The semi-structured interview is therefore a useful tool for generating such conversations and observations; and, whether applied with individuals, or with focus groups, it enables participants to articulate meaning through a discussion with the interviewer or the larger focus group.

In semi-structured interviews, researchers must be conscious of their own context and experiences, employing strategies to ensure they do not impose their own interpretation on the participants’ views. Flick (2002), refers to this practice as the notion of reflexivity. Qualitative methods necessarily include the researchers’ interactions in the field with participants. Flick (2002), noted “researchers’ reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings and so on become data in their own right” (p. 6). In a sense, this notion of reflexivity is a reflection of human fallibility and an acknowledgement that in qualitative research the human investigator is the primary instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As fallible as humans are, Lincoln and Guba argued that because they are investigating human experience, they are the ideal instrument for the task.

Qualitative researchers, unlike quantitative researchers, do not start with a theory. Instead, qualitative researchers set out to inductively find a pattern or themes of meaning. This is an ongoing process from the beginning of the first interview, gradually linking reflections about what has been seen and heard, from one interview to the next. The qualitative researcher builds or *constructs* a hypothesis from ongoing data collection to a final point where a theory may be developed. Due to the nature of the current study, as described above, the researcher has chosen an interpretivist theoretical perspective.

3.3 An interpretivist theoretical perspective

Interpretivism has its roots in the work of Max Weber (1947, 1949, 1962). The central tenet of Weber's work is that the social sciences are focused on what he called *Verstehen* (understanding), in contrast to the natural sciences and their emphasis on *Erklaren* (explaining) or causality. Weber's sociological analysis, which utilizes the concept of *Verstehen*, examines society "in the context of human beings acting and interacting" (Crotty, 2009, p. 68). The current study strongly focuses on the 'roles' of groups in high performing schools, namely, principals, deputy principals, heads of departments, teachers, students and parents. The study seeks to ascertain how the interactions of the various parties contribute to the attainment of high academic achievement. It is argued, therefore, that an interpretivist theoretical perspective is ideally suited to such a study. Such an approach should help the researcher to come to an understanding of the contributions of different role sets, by first seeking to understand the individuals themselves, situating them within their role and their group. Cohen (2006) argued that *Verstehen* is also an effort to grasp the relevant meaningful, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and motivational qualities of the minds of individuals as well. The preceding literature review has shown that in any analysis of effective schools, researchers are certainly drawn to the cognitive, emotional and motivational interactions of individuals. It is also an understanding of individuals, and their interactions within groups and roles that has been a focus of the literature review of leaders, teachers, students and parents. This raises a challenge for an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology which has more often than not, been idiographic in its orientation. A resolution to that challenge is proposed in the discussion about data collection at a later point in this chapter.

Weber (1947) conceived of sociology as a science devoted to "the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects" (p. 8). The emphasis on social action is an important distinction for the current study because the action of participants is situated in the social institution of schools. The preceding literature review has shown that there is a dominant theme pervading much of the studies on effective schools; the primacy and power of relationships in the context of schools as social institutions. Tucker (1965), in an explanation of Weber's theory of *Verstehen*, argued that "although the individual act is the basic unit of analysis, it cannot be analyzed sociologically without consideration of the nature of the social relationship in which it was perpetrated" (p. 159). Such an observation reinforces another dominant theme in the

literature on effective schools, the importance of the development of community and the unique features of community social relationships that support effective schooling. The current study seeks to explore similar contributions and therefore its interpretivist perspective may help illuminate the social relationships within the communities of the nine schools studied. Weber's notion that interpretive understanding is derived from social action again confirms the suitability of the interpretivist perspective. Weber's concept of social action informs the current study because as the researcher lays claim to understanding the actors in a social context he/she is charged with the requirement to offer an explanation for that action and to develop a theory based upon it.

It needs to be pointed out that an explanation based on the understanding of an actor's social context, is not the type of explanation that is derived from positivist approaches based as they are on measurable and quantifiable procedures; rather, it is based on subjective understandings of human interaction. It should not be implied that because these understandings are subjective that they are lacking in veracity. Weber (1949) argued that understandings must be substantiated by empirical evidence which accords with the researcher's efforts in the current study to gather data from the field of the classroom and the school as perceived by key actors.

In collecting empirical evidence, Weber (1949) argued that the researcher must subject the object of his or her inquiry to an *ideal type*, which is a conceptual construct largely imaginary, in which the real is compared to the ideal, assessing the degree of difference between both. Weber cautioned that using such a heuristic device is only appropriate where researchers are attempting to describe goal-oriented conduct. The current study of high performing secondary schools acting with purpose and common motivation to attain particular academic goals seems well suited to Weber's *ideal type*. In the forthcoming analysis of findings, the researcher will endeavour to make comparisons between the schools in the study and the *ideal type*, that is, effective schools, constructed from the earlier literature review. As this process unfolds, such an understanding will be largely derived from the field notes and transcripts of interviews that have been recorded. Meaning will primarily be constructed from these 'texts' and therefore a brief discussion of that hermeneutic process central to the interpretivist perspective is appropriate.

3.4 Hermeneutic understanding

Any understanding of the spoken and written word is furthered by an appreciation of hermeneutics. Patton (1990) noted that hermeneutics “asks what are the conditions under which a human act took place or a product was produced, that makes it possible to interpret its meanings?” (p. 84). The variation of texts is possible because at the heart of all human existence is language, it describes action, cognition, it helps make sense of our lives (Crotty, 2009; Gadamer, 1989).

Eichelberger (1989) argued that an appreciation of hermeneutic theory implies that interpretivist researchers:

are much clearer about the fact that they are *constructing* “reality” on the basis of their interpretations of data with the help of the participants who provided the data in the study... if other researchers had different backgrounds, used different methods, or had different purposes, they would likely develop different types of reactions and focus on different scenarios. (p. 9)

Eichelberger’s caution is valid and in fact subtly foregrounds what Smith (2004) argued when he said:

For interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), one can say human research involves a double hermeneutic. The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world. (p. 40)

Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) argued that this complex notion of the double hermeneutic provides a necessary reminder that the researcher is required to “put the experiencing subject at the centre of the endeavour” (p. 220). Myers (2011) noted that “wherever we go we take ourselves along” (Appendix B-4) and thus, an appreciation of the phenomenological perspective can complement a hermeneutic understanding because it demands the researcher questions what is brought into any situation. Phenomenology attempts to provide a solution that can help free researchers from the constrictions that they carry with them.

3.5 Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl (1900, 1913) is widely recognised as the founding father of phenomenology. Holstein and Gubrium (2005) stated:

Husserl argued that the relation between perception and its objects is not passive. Rather, human consciousness actively constitutes objects of experience. Consciousness in other words is always consciousness-of-something. It does not stand alone, over and above experience, more or less immaculately perceiving and conceiving objects and events, but instead, exists always, already from the start-as a constitutive part of what it is conscious of (pp. 484 - 485).

This statement indicates that a qualitative study must place the subjective experience at the centre of inquiry. Husserl described this concept as 'intentionality' and argued that it is at the core of phenomenology. Thus the current study seeks to ascertain the essence of the experience of high performing secondary schools 'as experienced' by the participants: leaders, teachers, students and parents. What does such a school mean to the participants and how, through their experience does it appear to them? Moustakas (1994) captures this principle well:

Phenomenology focuses on the appearance of things, a return to things as they are given, removed from everyday routines and biases, from what we are told is true in nature and in the natural world of everyday living. (p. 58)

In effect, as was discussed in the preceding literature review, such a methodological inquiry attempts to give voice to those participants as they share their thoughts and feelings, and the researcher strives to be respectful to the participants' expressions of their experience, as Moustakas (1994) said, to establish "the truth of things" (p. 57).

Crotty (2009) sees an almost evolutionary development of hermeneutic theory into phenomenological theory at the hands of Husserl and his student Heidegger. This evolution is very much a response to the cautionary comments expressed by Eichelberger (1989) in the previous discussion of hermeneutics above. As Crotty (2009) states, "For Heidegger, hermeneutics is the revelatory aspect of 'phenomenological seeing' whereby existential structures and then Being itself come into view" (p.96). What this means for the researcher, in Crotty's view, is the reminder that culture provides a ready-made understanding of every day experiences. In the current study, the researcher has spent twenty-six years in the classroom and school, as a teacher and leader. Due to this experience, he might approach his data with a set of readymade assumptions based on his own lived experience of the roles of leaders, teachers, students and parents. Such assumptions must be put aside and the researcher must not rush into an immediate interpretation. Heidegger (1962) argued that:

The achieving of phenomenological access to the entities which we encounter, consists rather in thrusting aside our interpretative tendencies, which keep thrusting themselves upon us and running along with us, and which conceal not only the phenomenon of such concern, but even more, those entities themselves as encountered of their own accord in our concern with them. (p. 96)

The challenge that is presented to the researcher by Heidegger, to thrust aside *immediate* interpretative tendencies, involves a difficult process of suspending immediate suppositions. Husserl (1913) originally described the attempt at freedom from such suppositions, *Epoche*, a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain. In a sense, a reminder is issued to stay away from everyday habits of seeing things in a particular way. Husserl developed a phenomenological method to achieve the *phenomenological attitude*. He argued that the researcher needs to 'bracket' or put aside ways of living taken for granted. *Epoche* and bracketing are quite interchangeable terms and for the purpose of the current study, the researcher will refer to this process as bracketing for the remainder of the project. The phenomenological method of bracketing is achieved through what Husserl described as a series of reductions. Flowers, Smith and Larkin (2009) portrayed the method as follows:

Each reduction offers a different lens or prism, a different way of thinking and reasoning about the phenomenon at hand. Together, the sequence of reductions is intended to lead the inquirer away from distraction and misdirection of their own assumptions and preconceptions, and back towards the essence of the experience of a given phenomenon (p. 14).

This process of reduction described by the authors implies a very deliberate, reflexive, step- by-step approach.

Utilising Husserl's theory, Moustakas (1994) argued for the following process of reduction:

- The first step is to place the focus of research in brackets, focusing entirely on the topic and research question;
- Secondly, every statement is initially treated as having equal value;
- Thirdly, statements irrelevant to the topic and question are deleted, leaving only (the textural meanings and constituents of the phenomenon);
- Fourthly, the textural meanings and constituents of the phenomenon are clustered into themes and
- Finally the themes are organised into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon. (Adapted from p. 97).

Using Moustakas' description the researcher is, in effect, through a process of reduction, applying a 'cognitive filter', to capture the essence of experience.

Moustakas (1994) provided insights into how researchers might take what is clearly a complex philosophical process and apply it in a pragmatic fashion. However, it is the more recent work of Jonathon Smith (2004, 2008) and his colleagues Biggerstaff and Thompson, (2008), Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009), and Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, and Grainne Fadden (2010), whose work in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) that has provided the clearest application of an interpretive epistemology, utilizing the theoretical perspectives of hermeneutics and phenomenology.

3.6 Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Although Smith (2004) recognised that he did not invent the three terms that constitute IPA, each having its own long standing tradition, he points out that he was the first to put them together in this configuration. Smith (2004) argued that IPA "... can be described as having three broad elements. It represents an epistemological position, offers a set of guidelines for conducting research and describes a corpus of empirical research" (p. 40). It is phenomenological in its endeavour to portray participants' perceptions of objects or events (phenomena) but it also recognises the key role of the analyst (the researcher) and is thus strongly connected to the interpretative or hermeneutic tradition (Smith, 2004).

A strength of IPA is that it endeavours to offer practical guidelines on 'doing' phenomenological research (Smith & Osborne, 2008), recognising that phenomenological theory has been regarded by some as slightly inaccessible and therefore difficult to apply. For the current study of the phenomenon of high performing secondary schools analysing the perceptions of leaders, teachers, parents and students, an IPA approach is deemed highly suitable and may in a modest fashion help to broaden its applicability.

Smith (2004) argued that IPA has three characteristic features. It is idiographic, inductive and interrogative, a neat alliterative model. It is idiographic in that it starts with a focus on one case, moving to the next case and so on. Only when that process has been concluded is there an attempt to do a cross-case analysis. Each individual case is interrogated for convergence or divergence with others:

IPA concurs with Heidegger that phenomenological inquiry is from the outset an interpretative process. IPA also pursues an idiographic commitment, situating participants in their particular contexts, exploring personal perspectives, and starting with a detailed examination of each case before moving on to more general claims. (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 32)

Secondly, consistent with most qualitative research, IPA utilises techniques that result in a flexibility which can produce data that may not have been foreseen at the outset of the study. Open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews can produce unanticipated results which should not be dismissed, rather, they may be even more authentic, precisely because participants provided the data of their own volition, "... for IPA the inductive stance is foregrounded" (Smith, 2004, p. 43).

The third of Smith's characteristic features of IPA, is his insistence that it is an interrogative endeavour. Its integrity lies in its capacity to take the analysis of the case study and discuss it in relation to the extant literature, bearing in mind that the phenomenological process employed has by its very nature already subjected the data to a high level of scrutiny. Larkin, Eatough and Osborn's (2011) study provided a useful example of how IPA "can illuminate the importance of situating embodied personal experience in the context of meaning, relationships and the lived world" (p. 319) and, in doing so, reminded the researcher of Husserl's (1913/1982) urging to employ phenomenological reduction, "reduction here is not reducing down, but a leading back-to the phenomena" (p. 322). The researcher's attempt to heed Husserl's request to "get back to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1913/1982, p. 35) by freeing oneself of prior supposition and assumption is, in many ways, the first step in the interrogative process. Before interrogating the data and the literature, the researcher must interrogate oneself.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) noted that to establish truth in the phenomena to be studied, Husserl's advice ought to be sought:

stepping out of our *natural attitude* as he called it, in order to be able to examine that every day experience. Instead, adopting a *phenomenological attitude* involves and requires a reflexive move, as we turn our gaze from, for example, objects in the world, and direct it inward, towards our perceptions of those objects. (p. 12)

How the researcher might adopt a *phenomenological attitude* in an IPA study will be the focus of the discussion of the research methods employed in the current study, and particularly the process of data analysis outlined in Table 3.2.

3.7 Research Methods

The current study used a number of qualitative methods of data collection, semi-structured individual interviews, semi-structured focus group interviews, researcher field notes and reflective journaling. In addition, the decision was made to survey teachers in the nine schools. A Likert-type scale of 21 items was administered to teachers in each of the nine schools that enabled the use of descriptive statistics to inform the construction of semi-structured interview questions. The responses to these items concerning favoured strategies of teaching, perceptions about the culture of the school, and teachers' views regarding the leadership within the school, helped frame the interview questions for the semi-structured interviews. Teachers were chosen as they had the potential to provide a significant number of responses, in all 450 teachers replied to the survey. Results from the survey data helped complement qualitative findings in the discussion chapters.

3.7.1 Data Collection / Data Sample

Punch (2005) argued that qualitative research always uses some form of deliberate sampling commonly referred to as purposive sampling. With such sampling, a specific purpose or focus is kept in mind. The specific purpose of this study revolves around the four research questions presented earlier. Miles and Huberman (1994, in Punch 2005) present the researcher with a very clear guide "to check a qualitative sample" (p.188); namely, does the sample fit the conceptual frame, enhance transferability and produce believable descriptions?

With regard to fitting the conceptual frame, the purposive sample in this study included a broad range of Catholic secondary schools. In total, nine schools were included; five coeducational schools, two boys schools and two girls schools out of a total of forty eight in the Catholic secondary school system in WA (CEOWA, 2012). Eight of the nine schools were located in the metropolitan region and one school in the sample was a rural school.

The ICSEA score of the nine schools ranged from one of the lowest ICSEA schools in the Catholic system to one of the highest. The total student population of the nine schools was 7,712. Thus the selection based on number, demographic location, gender and ICSEA value arguably enhanced transferability.

In terms of producing believable descriptions, the following criteria were applied. Schools were identified in relation to their scores on tables produced by the Catholic Education Office of WA, which contained school median ATAR scores. Schools were identified on their consistency of achievement on this measure over the period of 2005 – 2010 and their capacity to achieve scores higher than their ICSEA measure would have predicted. Thus ‘success’ or ‘effectiveness’ was measured by a significant metric (the ATAR) described in chapter one, by schools’ capacity to sustain performance over time and most importantly, to achieve higher than their socio-economic peers. Effectiveness, as it pertains to this study, is thus defined in terms of the above criteria.

A purposive sample of leaders, teachers, parents and students was acquired for each participating school. The principal of every school was selected for an individual interview. The deputy principal with responsibility for curriculum was also interviewed in each school. Each school was asked to select five to six heads of subject departments (HODS) that had performed strongly in the TEE context. This selection covered a range of subjects. The principal was asked to select a representative sample of five to six teachers in their school for focus group interviews. The criteria for the representative sample was based a range of experience, a range of departments and reputation for effectiveness. The principal, in conjunction with the deputy principal, also selected a focus group of parents, some active in the school community, some less so. Immediate past students were invited to participate in the study via invitation by the school. These students were chosen because they could reflect on the journey of their learning which was now complete, particularly their last two years (Year 11 and Year 12). Schools were asked to select approximately five to six participants in each category for each focus group. In some cases for a variety of reasons this was not always achievable. Table 3.2 presents the data set used in this study.

Table 3.2

Study data set

School	Principal	Deputy Principal	HODS Focus Group	Teachers Focus Group	Students Focus Group	Parents Focus Group	School totals
A	1	1	4	6	5	5	22
B	1	1	5	4	4	4	19
C	1	1	5	5	6	4	22
D	1	1	5	9	4	5	25
E	1	1	5	5	5	5	22
F	1	1	6	5	6	5	24
G	1	1	5	4	3	4	18
H	1	1	4	5	3	5	19
I	1	1	5	4	4	3	18
Category Totals	9	9	44	47	40	40	189

3.7.2 Interviewing from within an IPA worldview

If, as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) have said, qualitative research makes the world visible, then the phenomenological lens gives that visibility clarity. In the present study the phenomenon is effective schools and the research participants are the leaders, teachers, parents and students within the schools identified in the study. In trying to attain the clarity alluded to above, this study has chosen semi-structured interviews with individuals and focus groups in order to gain a high definition picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Punch (2005) noted that “the interview is one of the main data collection tools in qualitative research.... It is also one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others.” (p. 168). This observation is particularly apt given that the present study seeks to capture the lived experience of its participants. However, Neuman (2000) argued that “the role of interviewers is difficult. They obtain cooperation and build rapport, yet must remain neutral and objective” (p. 276). Training of the interviewers and a concerted effort to reduce interviewer bias is thus paramount.

The paradox for the researcher is that while the interview is the ideal method for gathering the specified data of the current study, by its very nature it does not readily lend itself to the development of neutrality. Fontana and Frey (2005) supported Neuman’s observations when they noted that: “interviewing is not merely

the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers. Two (or more people) are involved in this process, and their exchanges lead to the creation of a collaborative effort called *the interview*" (p. 696). In an interpretative phenomenological study such as this, when adopting a semi-structured approach, the interviewer must be even more conscious of attempting to 'bracket' his or her own preconceived views during the interview.

3.7.3 Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

As previously mentioned, the current study used semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the principal of each of the nine schools in the study and the deputy principal who managed teaching and learning in each school. Electing to conduct face-to-face interviews is by its nature time consuming. Because of the busy schedules of both groups it was not always possible to interview the principal and deputy principal on the same day, which meant that a number of visits were often required to the school sites. However, the key leadership roles of principal and deputy principal (teaching and learning) justified such a commitment. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) said that in IPA, "we are aiming to design data collection events which elicit detailed stories, thoughts and feelings from the participant. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews have tended to be the preferred means for collecting such data" (p. 57).

The researcher felt that focus group interviews with principals and also deputy principals across the nine schools would not have garnered the rich and often more intimate conversation that individual interviews would afford the study. It was also felt that focus group interviews may have inhibited the degree to which individuals might freely express the personal beliefs they held in front of colleagues from other schools. Focus group interviews that brought together principals of high achieving schools might also have engendered a polite humility, not wishing to overstate achievements in case the participants appeared overly competitive or perhaps having an inflated sense of hubris. As it turned out, the face-to-face interviews did allow both principals and deputy principals to speak very candidly about their role and the teachers in their schools as will be evidenced in the findings and analysis chapters of this study. The researcher could have chosen to interview the executive leaders (principal and deputy principal) in each school together, but that may also have negated honest responses as the researcher sought to ascertain the views of

each individual about the importance of the role that their colleague played, in the achievements of their school.

The semi-structured interview which Smith (2008) described as the exemplary method for IPA research, suited the study on two levels. Firstly, because of the desire to utilise an interpretivist phenomenological perspective the semi-structured interview allowed the interviewers in the field, the flexibility to move 'off script' if they felt the participants' responses merited digression. The research assistants engaged in the study were instructed by the research leader to move 'off script', in order to follow what might be a rich vein in the response data. While such an instruction is an important part of the training of the interviewers it is a highly developed skill, relying on intuition and discernment, born out of a great degree of knowledge about the subject matter.

Interviewers are also required to be as overtly neutral as possible, particularly in an IPA study, in order to capture the authentic lived experience of the participants, and 'bracket' their own views. However, Fontana and Frey (2005) championing a greater empathic emphasis argued that "an increasing number of social scientists have realized that they need to interact as persons with the interviewees and acknowledge that they are doing so" (p. 696). Walking the fine line between pursuing what might be 'the truth of things' and the endeavour to stay relatively neutral is an enormous challenge. The choices that are made in such a process become, in a sense, editorial decisions on the run. In the current study, the interviewers all had significant experience as teachers and leaders in secondary schools and all had previous experience in qualitative research projects. Even so, variance in style of interviewing is possible when there is more than one interviewer in a study.

Golafshani (2003) argued that credibility in qualitative research "depends on the ability and effort of the researcher" (p. 600). As such, training of interviewers for 'inter-rata' consistency was paramount. Recognizing Patton's (2001) injunction that the 'researcher is the instrument' it was necessary to ensure that all researchers were working from a common understanding about the purpose of the study and a common understanding of the semi-structured research questions when interviewing individuals. It was also important to discuss the need to adhere to a *phenomenological attitude*. Interviewers met with the researcher on three occasions to engage in discussions concerning the purpose of the study, research questions

and analysis of pilot data before engaging with their own interviews. Thereafter, interviewers met with the researcher regularly to reflect on interview experiences, participants' responses to particular questions and emerging themes. Golafshani (2003) noted that "to improve the analysis and understanding of construction of others, triangulation is a step taken by researchers to involve several investigators or peer researchers' interpretation of data" (p. 604). Such triangulation is defined by Creswell and Miller (2000) as "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories of study" (p.126).

The second feature of the semi-structured interview that suited the current study was the development of interview questions for each group that were followed carefully by all interviewers. This allowed for a common approach to be taken across the eighteen individuals, nine principals and nine deputy principals in the study. Common interview questions meant that while the interviewers had the luxury of flexibility to pursue a tangent if they felt it useful, all participants had a script of questions they were instructed to complete which ensured comparability across all nine sites.

One of the difficulties of the face-to-face interview in a research study is that it has an intimate and quite private, almost confessional quality about it. Intimate contexts like this, might allow interviewees to either embellish responses, or perhaps to withhold particular aspects of responses, because of issues related to self-image and the fact that there is no other audience to challenge the presented observations. While there is potential for embellishment or withholding of information, the responses of principals and deputy principals would be triangulated, together with responses from heads of departments, teachers, students and parents.

It was felt by the researcher that the more in-depth nature of the face-to-face interview, particularly with principals and deputy principals and the potential richness of the responses far outweighed the negative possibilities of embellishment and withholding of information. Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2002), also observed that the individual interview allows the interviewer to completely give the interviewee and the situation his/her total attention, and because there is only one participant, the interviewer can afford to be a little more flexible than might otherwise be the case.

While Smith (2004) presented a strong case for the use of individual semi-structured interviews in an IPA study, he also recognized that the semi-structured focus group interview “is another area ripe for exploration” (p. 50). Contingent in making the choice to use focus groups is the topic being examined, the skill of the facilitator and characteristics of participants (Smith, 2004). Wilkinson (2008), Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) and Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010) make a compelling case for the use of focus groups in IPA studies.

3.7.4 Semi-structured focus group interviews

Because of the breadth of the study and the variety of stakeholders, it was deemed appropriate to utilize semi-structured focus group interviews with heads of departments, teachers, students and parents in each of the nine schools. In the context of the earlier reference to Weber’s (1947) concept of social action, it seemed only natural to interview heads of departments and teachers in focus groups, as their work is, by its nature, team oriented in faculty groups in schools. Students were identified as belonging to a particular high achieving cohort, so the dynamics of that cohort also suited a focus group interview. Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010), argued that the contextual emphasis of IPA “is an integral part of hermeneutic phenomenology. In these terms, person and world are not separate but instead co-constituting and mutually disclosing” (p. 99). As such, the world of the team that people belong to in schools is appropriately analysed in the subset of a focus group. It was felt that parents would feel more comfortable and perhaps confident being interviewed together rather than alone, which might have been an intimidating experience. In such a group their shared experience of parenthood and the naturally occurring ‘family’ group might come to the fore as they realised they were not so alone or different to others. What may have been lost by not interviewing individual representatives of each group was made up for, by a broader number of participants in each category and the opportunity to interact and sometimes ‘bounce off’ each other’s responses, co-constructing meaning. Examples of the co-construction of meaning are found in the discussion and findings chapters for each stakeholder group.

Wilkinson (2008) argued the case for the use of focus groups in IPA studies refuting suggestions that groups may inhibit participants and arguing that focus groups may actually facilitate disclosure because they are naturalistic. He wrote,

Compared with interviews, focus groups are more naturalistic (that is closer to everyday conversation), in that they typically include a range of communication processes – such as storytelling, joking, arguing, boasting, teasing persuasion, challenge and disagreement. (p. 187)

The focus group has the capacity to animate individuals in what may be at times robust debate or empathic affirmation and confirmation with others. Participants may also find that memories are triggered by the responses of others.

It has been argued that in semi-structured group interviews, interviewer bias is lessened, because the interviewer becomes more of a facilitator, moderator and less of an interviewer (Punch, 2005). The 'group' interaction can be highly stimulating and result in rich data for the researcher but he or she needs to be careful about the group culture or dynamic and ensure all participants engage with the questions in an equitable manner. This advice also needs to be applied to the interviewer who, in such an environment, might be tempted to participate more freely in the discussion. The interviewer must moderate those who are verbose, encourage those who are relatively reluctant to participate and gain a broad group perspective. However, where the purpose is phenomenological, to establish a wide range of meaning, the interviewer will be generally non-directive letting the responses to open ended questions develop into conversations between participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005). For, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) pointed out, "a qualitative research interview is often described as a conversation with a purpose" (p. 57).

Moustakas (1994) described such interactions referred to above in focus group interviews as interactions that produce intersubjective knowledge. Referring to Husserl's phenomenological view of the world, Moustakas noted:

For Husserl, the world is a community of persons. Each can experience and know the other, not exactly as one experiences and knows oneself but in the sense of empathy and co-presence. In such a process in which I present myself to you and you present yourself to me there is an interchange of perceptions, feelings, ideas, and judgments regarding the nature of reality. A continuing alteration of validity occurs as people articulate and describe their experiences. (p. 57)

This is an elegant phenomenological description of the dynamics of the focus group interview, as well as the complexity of 'how' the group presents to the interviewer and 'what' they present. It also highlights the extraordinary potential richness of such interchanges. In the current study, the use of digital recorders for all interviews provided the interviewers with a helpful technical tool as it was very difficult to

accurately capture complexity with handwritten notes when so many people are talking and responding.

As noted earlier, another advantage of intersubjective knowledge is that individual claims have been subjected to the scrutiny of the group. As Flick (2002) observed, “corrections by the group concerning views that are not correct, not socially shared or extreme, are available as means for validating statements and views” (p. 114). Another valuable attribute of the focus group interview is that opinions are expressed in discussions that correspond to the everyday life of the participants (Flick, 2002). This allows the phenomenological researcher to get as close to the lived experience of the participants as possible in the present study, especially as most of the interviews were conducted during school hours, on school sites, almost immediately as participants walked out of their classrooms.

For all its advantages, the focus group does need to be approached with some caution. Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grain Fadden (2010) noted that if focus groups are to be used in IPA research “the presence of multiple voices, the complexity of their individual and shared contexts and the interactional complexity of the discussion itself make it more difficult to infer and develop personal, phenomenological accounts” (p. 101). The researcher must be acutely aware of these dynamics and as Smith (2004) argued, it is important to approach the data with a two-fold analysis “once for group patterns and dynamics and subsequently, for idiographic accounts” (p. 50).

In summary, both semi-structured individual interviews and semi-structured focus group interviews, are each, in their own way, suited to the current study which seeks to explore the phenomenon of high performing schools. In order to utilize both approaches well in the context of an IPA study, specific use of field notes and journals, as well as clear procedures for data analysis, will now be outlined.

3.7.5 Field Notes and Journals

During the interview process the four interviewers were asked to keep field notes and a journal for later discussion at group meetings. The field notes and journal were kept in order to act as an ‘aid de memoire’ for ongoing research team meetings during the six month period when data were collected from the nine sites. The meetings provided all interviewers with the opportunity to share their experiences of

the interviews they had conducted and discuss any problems that might have been encountered with the focus group questions, or dynamics within a particular focus group. In addition, it gave interviewers a chance to talk about key themes that were starting to emerge in the interviews. Often the discussion centred around pragmatic issues such as school organisation of appropriate meeting rooms, difficulties with time to get all members of the particular focus group together in the school, and organizational support from the school hierarchy.

In advance of the first meeting, the researcher having trialled the interview questions, shared his digital recordings of his initial interviews with the other interviewers. The intention of this exercise was to share his reflections about the way the interview had been facilitated and invite observations from others. It also led to clarification of interview questions and discussion about the role of the interviewer as a facilitator. The researcher's field notes and journal reflections helped as an 'aid de memoire' to share his initial experiences with the interviewer group.

Due to the reliance on semi-structured interviews as the preferential data collection method, field notes were not as extensive as they might ordinarily be in an observational study. The interview requires the interviewer to be seen by the interviewee, to be an attentive listener. This accords with Neuman (2006) who commented that interviewers who engaged in extensive note taking during interviews run the risk of appearing disengaged from the interviewee or the group. Thus interviewers in the present study were not required to write extensive field notes. Attentiveness to the individual or the focus group was the primary concern of the interviewers in the field.

Much of the note taking and journalling was done after the interviewers returned from the site and again listened to the digital recording of the interview. In effect, the digital recording became the central set of field notes (Ary et al. 2002). Any notes the interviewers took were more in the nature of 'jottings' as opposed to detailed or verbatim records. Neuman (2005) argued that jotted notes "are short temporary memory triggers such as words, phrases or drawings taken inconspicuously" (p. 400), that the interviewer can refer to at a later date. In conjunction with a second hearing of the digital recording, some jotted notes take on a whole new inferential meaning, but the interviewer must avoid this in the field (Neuman, 2005). This is particularly true of an interpretivist phenomenological study where the researcher is intent on limiting personal bias.

One of the tools the researcher found particularly useful was the keeping of a journal that allowed for more analytic memos and personal notes to be recorded. Analysis does not begin once all the data has been collected, it is an embryonic process, it grows and emerges out of the earliest notes taken in the study. As Creswell (2009) argued with reference to analysis, "It is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos throughout the study...that may ultimately be included as a narrative in the final report" (p. 184). What appears as a small jotted note early in the collection phase can over time, almost through a period of gestation, or through serendipity, become a central finding in the research. Meetings between the researcher and assistants who shared their notes from the field nurtured this gestation and facilitated conversations that allowed central findings to come to the fore.

For the phenomenological researcher, it is also vital to use the journal to record personal feelings, frustrations, anxiety and even perhaps the formation of personal attachment to individuals, groups, or in this case, even privileging one school over another in personal bias. The journal must also be used to question the self. Why did I record that response? Is it because it concurs with my own view on the subject? If so, in an IPA study, the researcher must consider suspending judgment about such a response. Why did I ask that respondent to elaborate and provide him or her with more time to speak than others? As Miles and Huberman (1984) said:

Fieldwork is so fascinating and coding usually so energy-absorbing, that you can get preoccupied and overwhelmed with the flood of particulars - the poignant quote, the appealing personality of a key informant. You forget to think, to make deeper and more general sense of what is happening, to begin to explain it in a conceptually coherent way. (p. 69)

To take this observation about forgetting to think further, Neuman (2005) actually argued that field notes, jottings, analytic memos and personal notes are evidence of the researcher "thinking out loud" (p. 401).

This vigilant attention to reflexive thinking is crucial to the IPA approach to the interview. The documented notes and journaling ultimately lead to a clearer distillation of the essence of the participants' experience and will further assist the 'reductive analysis' at a later date in the project. In summary, in an IPA study the researcher must do everything in his or her power to manage the interview to the

best of his/her ability, and to create an empathic environment which will encourage participants to share their lived experience. If done well, the interview has the potential to produce text that is rich and as Smith (2008) has observed, in an IPA analysis, this will allow the analyst to learn “something about the respondents’ psychological world” (p. 66). In that endeavour a specific pragmatic IPA approach to data analysis is required and will now be outlined for both the individual interviews as well as focus group interviews.

3.7.6 Data analysis of individual semi-structured interviews using an IPA approach

Smith and Osborne (2008) describe a step-by-step approach to implementing an IPA analysis of data from individual semi-structured interviews. The intent of the process is to establish an “interpretative relationship with the transcript” (Smith & Osborne, 2008, p. 66). The authors also point out that any step-by-step approach is not meant to be highly prescriptive but acts as a guide for researchers undertaking IPA data analysis. An outline of the stages of data analysis which were employed in this study utilising a range of authors are illustrated overleaf (Bednall, 2006; Langdridge, 2007; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2008; and Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) approaches to data analysis.

Table 3.3 *Stages of IPA analysis*

Stage 1 Iterative reading and listening	Interview transcripts were read repeatedly. Recorded interviews were listened to repeatedly to ascertain nuance, emphasis and tone in the voices of participants. Stage one is an attempt to identify 'emerging' themes.
Stage 2	During this stage the researcher attempted to 'connect emerging themes' across participants and into clusters.
Stage 3	The analysis is continued again revisiting transcripts. Superordinate themes are identified. At this stage 'bracketing' needs to be employed to ensure bias is removed from the identification of superordinate themes.
Stage 4	In stage 4 the researcher followed Smith and Osborne (2008)'s process of analyzing superordinate themes across cases. In this study this meant identifying superordinate themes across the nine schools and presenting them in a table at the end of each findings and discussion chapter.
Stage 5	Stage five involved revisiting field notes and the reflective journal of the researcher to apply another layer of bracketing and assess the degree to which the 'discussion and analysis' of data reflected a degree of reflexivity, "effectively an attempt (and it will be just that-an imperfect attempt) to delineate the horizons of your world with regard to the topic at hand" (Langdridge 2007, p. 135). This involved revisiting transcripts and digital interviews yet again.
Stage 6	Finally, in order to avoid the limitations of a 'descriptive' summary of themes in a table form the final stage incorporates an attempt to bring the parts into a whole through the summary and recommendations chapter. This is an attempt to provide a summative narrative or "writing up" as Smith and Osborne (2008) put it "the meanings inherent in the experiences of the participants" (p. 76).

The approach to data analysis of interviews outlined above (Table 3.2) provided the researcher with a useful process on how to conduct an IPA analysis. It is important to provide a short elaboration of protocols that also came into play in the specific analysis of 'focus group' interviews in an IPA setting.

3.7.7 Data Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews with Focus Groups: Using an IPA Approach

While not dissimilar in approach to data analysis in individual interviews, Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Grainne Fadden (2010) offer a protocol that allows IPA researchers to deal with “some of the synergistic effects of working with groups and to permit both the experiential and interactional elements of focus group data to be explored side by side” (p. 101). The distinguishing feature of this protocol was the provision of questions that guide researchers in the analysis of transcripts with multiple participants:

How or why is language used? To emphasize, shock, disagree/agree, back up a point, amuse/lighten tone? What experiences are being shared?
What are individuals doing by sharing experiences?
How are they making those things meaningful to one another?
What are they doing as a group?
What are the consensus issues? (pp. 104 -105)

The authors point out that this model emerged from a particular set of data from their own study and that it should be merely used as a series of prompts for other researchers utilizing focus groups in an IPA study. Its emphasis on roles and relationships between participants in the focus group made it a useful protocol for the current study although it was not followed prescriptively.

In terms of the presentation of findings, it will be appropriate to present the narrative of principals and deputy principals together as executive leaders. Heads of subject departments would be the next group of findings under a middle management heading. Then the separate narratives of teachers, parents and students will be presented with appropriate references to the literature pertinent to each group. The second step will be the presentation of a “findings and discussion” section where the *‘bricoleur’* takes the individual narratives and pieces together the quilted characteristics of highly effective schools.

3.7.8 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the term used to describe the veracity of the qualitative process where matters such as credibility, objectivity and dependability are concerned. Golafshani (2000) argued that “reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in a qualitative paradigm” (p. 6004). Ary et al.

(2006) stated that “the integrity of qualitative research depends on attending to the issue of validity. The term most frequently used by qualitative researchers to refer to this characteristic is credibility” (p. 504). To ascertain whether the researcher’s observations, interpretations and conclusions are believable, Ary et al. (2006) also discuss five types of methods to enhance credibility: evidence based on structural corroboration, consensus, interpretive adequacy, theoretical adequacy and researcher bias.

This study sought to enhance structural corroboration by ensuring multiple types of data were provided through the four groups: leaders, teachers, parents and students which provide triangulation. Using multiple investigators (research assistants) also ensured investigator triangulation and ‘peer debriefing’ sessions with all research assistants took place, thus ensuring consensus. In order to enhance interpretative adequacy, participants were asked to review and critique a pilot report of findings to verify their responses. Theoretical adequacy was enhanced by the researcher’s ability to observe a full range of participants over an extended period of time in each school. The researcher employed ‘bracketing’ to limit research bias as mentioned previously in the discussion of the design. The researcher also kept a journal to aid reflexivity, the use of self-reflection to recognize one’s own bias. This helped secure objectivity.

Both the Likert-type scale and the semi structured research questions were trialed in a pilot before final administration. An initial trial of the Likert-type scale indicated a Chronbach alpha coefficient of $d = .71$, an acceptable level of internal reliability across the survey items. The semi structured research questions were trialed in a pilot before final administration. To enhance dependability a clear audit trail was produced with raw data of digitally recorded interviews kept in an electronic filing system. Transcripts of interviews and notes from field journals were kept separately in an electronic filing system and hard copies were also kept for review. A code–re-code strategy was employed. The researcher codes the data and then revisits the data after some time before re-coding again. This was done in an iterative process outlined in Table 3.2.

Research assistants were trained to achieve as much comparability as possible in respect to their understanding of the questions used in the semi structured interviews. The discussion of the ‘trial’ interviews was particularly useful in this process. All interviews followed the same core set of questions. Research assistants

were also reminded of their role as facilitators as mentioned earlier and to pay close attention to the dynamics of the group ensuring, wherever possible, equitable contributions of all members (Punch, 2005).

3.7.9 Instruments

A Likert-type scale of 21 items Appendix (1) was administered to all teachers in each of the nine schools. The items surveyed teachers' perceptions about their own practice, pedagogical preferences, assessment, the affective domain of their teaching, their observations of leadership, and the culture of the school. As noted earlier, this data was used as descriptive statistics to inform the construction of semi-structured interview questions.

A set of questions was developed (Appendix 2) for individual semi-structured interviews with principals and deputy principals and focus group interviews with heads of departments, teachers, parents and students to stimulate observations and discussion concerning the role that these stakeholders have in their contribution to the culture of the school and the school's high achievement in the tertiary exam context. The interviewers used the same set of questions designed for each group across all of the nine schools. As previously discussed, field notes and journals were kept by interviewers in the field. They also aided the identification of data-rich responses and the coding of central themes.

3.8 Procedure

Schools were contacted by letter and then by phone to invite them to participate in the study. The principal was the initial point of contact. Once the principal confirmed his or her willingness for the school to participate, a follow up letter outlining the study was sent to the school.

Schools were asked in advance to organize times within the day for researchers to visit the schools and interview the principal, deputy principal and focus groups of heads of subject departments and teachers. Schools were asked to allocate a 60 minute time slot for these interviews. Interviews with parents and past students took place after school hours to avoid work and university study commitments. A senior administrative assistant within each school coordinated these appointments. Schools were asked to provide a comfortable and preferably quiet space for

interviews to take place. The provision of this space put participants at ease and facilitated clear digital audio recording.

3.9 Limitations and Safeguards

Woods (1992) recognized that the researcher, while intrinsic to the study, must balance involvement, immersion and empathy on the one hand with objectivity on the other. Thus the process of 'bracketing' was important in limiting the possibility of an imbalance brought about by the researcher's natural human inclination to become either too immersed in the subject matter being addressed or as Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009) described it, unable to step outside of his/her 'natural attitude'. Safeguards were established to address this concern through the employment of an IPA methodology.

Due to the scale of the study, research assistants were used in some schools. As such, regular meetings were held with all research assistants to validate the interview procedure and to gauge feedback in the early stages of the research. A common set of questions was used in all interviews with each focus group in every school. As much as the researcher endeavoured to ensure a degree of comparability between interviewers, it is self-evident that differences may have existed due to the 'semi-structured' nature of the interviews and the unique personal response that one interviewer may take compared to another. Human individuality can never be completely controlled for.

Triangulation was invoked to help minimize issues related to inter-rater dependability. The researcher had a relationship with one school where he previously held a senior administrative role. To remove any question of bias, all the interviews in that school were undertaken by a research assistant who had no prior involvement in that school.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

All participants were provided with an information letter and informed consent agreement based on the The University of Notre Dame Australia's ethics approval guidelines. All participants were informed that their responses would be completely anonymous and confidential and that they may withdraw from the study at any time

without prejudice. Schools were informed that they would be de-identified in published results.

3.11 Summary

The study sought to represent the perceptions of leaders, teachers, students and parents in high performing schools. A purposive sample of nine schools was therefore chosen. In effect, the study sought to describe the 'gestalt' of effective schools through the disaggregated data of four component parts and as such, a largely qualitative methodological approach was chosen. The epistemology was constructivist and the theoretical perspective interpretivist, utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis as the chosen methodology. Data was analysed through qualitative thematic coding (see Table 3.2) to provide a coherent description of the phenomenon.