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

A qualitative, collective case study

by

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A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The Aspiring Principals Program is a two-year principal preparation program convened by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia. The program targets selected primary school assistant principals and secondary school deputy principals aspiring to principalship of Western Australian Catholic schools. The eight aspirants who commenced the program in January 2011 and graduated in December 2012 participated in the research. The purpose of the research was to explore aspirant perceptions of Catholic principalship before, during and upon completion of the 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.

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. Three qualitative, semi-structured interviews (pre-program, mid-program and end-of program) were the primary instruments used to collect data for the research. Data analysis took the form of the Miles and Huberman (1994) interactive model of data management and analysis.

The research suggested that the program assisted aspirants to develop a holistic understanding of Catholic principalship role components and requisite capabilities; clarify their attraction to the role; identify, experience and mitigate disincentives; and confirm or achieve high self-efficacy to commence principalship. As aspirants participated in and completed the program, they attributed discernible perception changes to the influence of three program-related features: a well-facilitated, coherent, rigorous and systematic curriculum; development of support networks and interaction with network members; and active learning experiences.

However, the research revealed seven program deficiencies. Firstly, the program did not adequately address the requirement of the principal, as leader of the role

component, Catholic identity, to develop the school as a faith community by providing opportunities to reflect, pray and participate in sacramental and liturgical celebrations. Secondly and thirdly, the program provided aspirants with a superficial understanding of the role components, teaching and learning and community engagement and development. Fourthly, the program omitted to emphasise vital responsibilities associated with the role component, school improvement such as the need for the principal to distribute leadership to develop staff leadership capacity. Fifthly, although the program was effective in equipping aspirants with the knowledge and understanding required to effectively lead and manage the role components, stewardship of resources and school improvement, it largely ignored that pertaining to Catholic identity, teaching and learning and community engagement and development. Sixthly, the program did not address the principles of strategic planning, important when ‘charting the course’ for the achievement of school vision. Finally, the program did not prepare aspirants for disincentives emanating from the reality of principalship appointment. This was especially the case for aspirants preparing to depart Perth to commence principalship of Catholic schools in country and remote areas.

As a result of the research, an integrated model of principal preparation was proposed for the consideration of local, national and international program designers. The model, designed to achieve the goal of enhanced aspirant self-efficacy to commence principalship, is comprised of three integrated pieces: program design principles; program theory; and active learning experiences. The research also culminated in six recommendations, three suggested areas of further research and six possible, although highly contextualised, additions to the existing body of theory pertaining to principal preparation.

Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from any thesis submitted for previously completed degrees. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree at another tertiary institution. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment. All research procedures detailed in this thesis received the approval of The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) Human Research Ethics Committee and the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) Research Ethics Committee.

I acknowledge the generosity, assistance and support of the members of the Western Australian Catholic education community who contributed to this research. Specifically, I pay homage to the eight aspirants from the 2011 cohort of the Aspiring Principals Program who agreed to participate in the research and selflessly and wholeheartedly shared their perceptions of Catholic principalship. I extend my gratitude to aspirant principals who supported their participation in the program and the research. I thank the facilitators of program modules, especially CEOWA support staff, program coaches and guest principals who willingly volunteered their time and openly shared their experiences with aspirants. I acknowledge the members of the CEOWA peer-review group who worked unselfishly with me to ensure that the research was conducted ethically and with precision. I thank the CEOWA Executive who emphatically supported the research, especially the Executive Director, Dr. Tim McDonald, the Director of Religious Education, Dr. Debra Sayce and the Director for School Improvement, Dr. Tony Curry. I also acknowledge the former Executive Director, Ron Dullard for his initial support of the research. Finally, I express my appreciation to my CEOWA colleagues who supported and encouraged me, notably Helen Brennan, Kayci Carpenter, Christine Garstin, Jim Green, Frank Italiano, Shaun Mayne, Trish Miller, Marnie Platt, Kelly Smith, Brendan Spillane, Jonathon Woolfrey and Georgie Wynne.

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16 December 2014

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Glossary

Acting principalship

An active learning experience whereby an assistant principal or deputy principal from the Aspiring Principals Program assumes the role of principal for a period of time, usually as a result of the incumbent principal undertaking leave. Periods of acting principalship are usually enacted in aspirant schools.

Aspirant

An assistant or deputy principal participating in the Aspiring Principals Program who desires future appointment as principal of a Western Australian Catholic school.

Assistant principal

Second in charge to the principal in Western Australian Catholic primary schools. In most primary schools, the assistant principal is both teacher (80%) and administrator (20%). Most primary schools employ at least one assistant principal. The number of assistant principals employed per school, however, depends upon student enrolments. That is, the higher the number of students enrolled in a school, the greater the number of assistant principals employed.

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL Standard)

A document used to inform the content and activities of the Aspiring Principals Program. The AITSL Standard describes the responsibilities of the principal and is endorsed by Australian State and Territory Ministers for Education for use in all Australian government, Catholic and independent systems, sectors and schools.

Coach

A practicing Western Australian Catholic school principal who works with an aspirant to develop leadership capability improvement goals and achievement strategies based on 360-review data compiled prior to the commencement of the Aspiring Principals Program. The aspirant then implements, evaluates and refines strategies as they enact

their leadership role and lead a QCS school improvement project during the program's second year. Prior to undertaking this role, principals receive coach training and are accredited by an external body.

Deputy principal

Second in charge to the principal in Western Australian Catholic secondary schools. In most secondary schools, the deputy principal is both teacher (20%) and administrator (80%). Most secondary schools employ at least two deputy principals. As is the case for assistant principals in primary schools, the number of deputy principals employed in a secondary school depends upon student enrolments.

Disincentive

A factor or influence that diminishes aspirant interest in applying for Western Australian Catholic principalship vacancies.

'Inside Leadership'

A semi-structured question and answer session convened by a practicing principal at the conclusion of each face-to-face module associated with the Aspiring Principals Program. The program convenor encourages guest principals to discuss their conception of the role, successful and challenging leadership experiences and resultant learning. Guest principals are male and female; novices through to significantly experienced; sourced from country, remote and metropolitan schools; and are drawn from both co-educational and single-gender schools.

Internship

An active learning experience whereby an aspirant from the Aspiring Principals Program 'shadows' the principal of a school for a period of time. Internships are usually organised for aspirants seeking appointment as principals of Western Australian Catholic schools in remote locations.

Leadership vision statement

A program activity whereby aspirants use a series of 10 questions to identify and reflect upon their leadership values. Aspirants then use responses to formulate a statement that

encapsulates a vision for their leadership. Structured activities over the course of the program provide opportunities for aspirants to reflect upon, share and refine their leadership vision statements.

Life Styles Inventory (LSI)

The psychometric tool used within the Aspiring Principals Program to provide aspirants with 360-degree data regarding their leadership capabilities. The LSI is completed at two points: prior to commencement and upon completion of the program. Aspirants, between these two points, use LSI data when working with coaches to formulate capability improvement goals and develop, implement, evaluate and refine achievement strategies.

Principalship

The work of the principal, the senior leader and manager of Western Australian Catholic schools.

Self-efficacy

An individual's belief in his or her ability to accomplish a stated goal. In the context of this research, self-efficacy refers to an aspirant's belief in his or her ability to commence Catholic principalship.

Self-efficacy sources

Sources that bolster aspirant belief in ability to commence Catholic principalship. There are four self-efficacy sources defined by Bandura (1986): mastery experiences; control of resultant physical and emotional reactions; vicarious experiences; and social persuasion. Mastery experiences occur as aspirants repeat effort to overcome challenging situations and, in doing so, experience success. Controlling the physical and emotional reactions that arise during mastery experiences such as stress can assist aspirants to recognise and modify reactions and, over time, mitigate their impacts. Vicarious experiences occur as aspirants observe colleagues achieving goals through perseverance and, as a result, form the belief that they too have the capacity to succeed in comparable situations. Social persuasion occurs when aspirants receive praise from

others and, as a result, form the belief that they have the capability to achieve stated goals.

Support networks

Enhance aspirant self-efficacy to commence Catholic principalship. In the context of the research, three support networks exist: ‘collegial’, ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ support networks. Collegial support networks, comprised of program colleagues, aspirant principals, coaches and ‘Inside Leadership’ guest principals, are potential sources of vicarious experiences and social persuasion. Top-down support networks, comprised of Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) support staff with specialist knowledge or line management authority that facilitate program modules, are potential sources of vicarious experiences and social persuasion. Bottom-up support networks, comprised of staff, students, their parents and members of the broader school community, are potential sources of social persuasion. Aspirants build collegial and top-down support networks as they participate in the program. Bottom-up support networks are established and developed as aspirants enact their leadership roles and experience periods of acting principalship or internship.

The Aspiring Principals Program

A two-year principal preparation program convened by the CEOWA and funded by the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) School Personnel Committee. The program is the main succession-planning mechanism of the Western Australian Catholic education system. The program aims to develop a pool of role-ready, resilient principal aspirants for Western Australian Catholic primary and secondary schools.

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Western Australia (The Bishops’ Conference)

The body responsible for the formulation of system vision, provision of quality Catholic education to achieve it and system governance. The Bishops’ Conference is comprised of the Archbishop (Tim Costelloe) and Auxiliary Bishop (Donald Sproxton) from the Archdiocese of Perth and the Bishops of Bunbury (Gerard Holohan), Geraldton (Justin Bianchini) and Broome (Christopher Saunders).

The Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (The CECWA)

The ‘board of management’ of the Western Australian Catholic education system. The CECWA is comprised of 17 people appointed by the Bishops Conference. The CECWA receives delegated responsibility from the Bishops Conference for system governance including legislative compliance. Compliance is achieved through the generation of policy statements and procedures governing the operation of all 161 Western Australian Catholic schools. The CECWA is also responsible for guiding the achievement of system vision.

The CECWA standing committees

The CECWA generates 38 policy statements and procedures governing the operation of all Western Australian Catholic schools through six standing committees, the members of which are selected for their expertise in specific fields. The standing committees are The Catholic Education Aboriginal Committee; the Finance Committee; the Parent Advisory Committee; the Religious Education and Curriculum Committee; the School Personnel Committee; and the School Resources Committee.

The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA)

The Executive arm of the CECWA. The CEOWA is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the 38 CECWA policy statements and procedures in all Western Australian Catholic schools. The CEOWA also provides principals with policy-related advice and support to assist them to achieve the vision of the Bishops’ Conference at the level of the individual school. The CEOWA also performs an essential compliance function by reporting, on behalf of schools, to local, state and federal government authorities as required.

The Leadership Framework for Catholic Schools in Western Australia (The Leadership Framework)

A document used to inform the structure, content and activities of the Aspiring Principals Program. The Leadership Framework describes the work of Western Australian Catholic school principals through four, interrelated domains: Catholic identity; stewardship; education and community. The Leadership Framework also

describes four capabilities required of principals when leading and managing through these domains: personal; professional; relational and organisational capabilities.

The Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009-2015

A document written by the Bishops' Conference that articulates their vision for the Western Australian Catholic education system.

The Quality Catholic Schooling (QCS) Framework and school improvement tool

A framework and tool mandated by the CECWA School Personnel Committee for use in all Western Australian Catholic schools to evaluate and improve all processes, activities and the quality of services offered to the school community. The QCS Framework and school improvement tool also informs the content and activities of the Aspiring Principals Program.

The Western Australian Catholic education system (the system)

Comprised of the Bishops' Conference, the CECWA, the CEOWA and 161 Western Australian Catholic schools. Catholic schools are geographically located in the Archdiocese of Perth and the Dioceses of Bunbury, Geraldton and Broome. The system educates 73,000 students and is serviced by 5,500 teachers and 3,500 non-teaching staff.