

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter One is an introduction to this thesis which bears the title ‘Western Australian Principals’ Theorizing on ‘Good’ Schools’, and which specifically focuses on the study of ‘Western Australian Government primary school principals' conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' school.’

The first section of the chapter outlines the background to the choice of topic and details the motivation leading to the pursuit of the research. This is followed by a clarification of the central topic and the presentation of a working definition of ‘good’ schools. Next the relevance of the topic to the general educational landscape is established. Following this, there is a presentation of a series of key questions related to the central research question.

The chapter then moves on into a consideration of the justifications for the ‘good’ schools research and draws connections to educational and social trends and issues. That justification is followed by an overview of the themes and subjects which define the scope of the study. Next there is a synopsis of the methodology. Finally, comes a brief conclusion which reflects on the purpose of the study and moves forward into an overview of the remaining chapters of this thesis.

#### **Background**

‘Western Australian principals’ theorizing on ‘good’ schools’ is an interpretivist study which examines the conceptions of ‘good’ schools held

by fifteen primary school principals. The motivation to conduct this particular research was generated by a discomforting school-based experience in late 1996. At that time, the researcher, who held the position of a substantive principal of a large primary school in Western Australia was living temporarily in the north of England. He was in the last months of a classroom teaching position in a small Church of England, grant-aided school on the outskirts of Blackburn. On Monday 11 November, five inspectors arrived at the eight-classroom school to conduct a week's inspection.

The team of inspectors, contracted by the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED) had already spent several weeks reading copious school documentation sent to them by the head-teacher. Thus, they arrived on Monday 11<sup>th</sup> primed on the school processes and armed with sets of criteria which allowed them to rank teachers and the school. Teachers would be ranked on a seven point scale, and the school on a three part classification – good, satisfactory and failing. For the staff this inspection was a debilitating experience. They had been preparing for eighteen months and had participated in a 'practice' inspection with the Local Education Authority (LEA). By the 11<sup>th</sup> November the teachers had rehearsed every lesson they would take during the week and the school library was stacked with borrowed books to make it look complete.

A week or so after the inspectors had left, the official report on the school announced that it was a 'good' school that "provides satisfactory value for money" (Oldham LEA, Inspection Report, 1996, p.7). The school deserved a

‘good’ report. The staff were hardworking, the atmosphere was cheerful, the parents were helpful and the lessons were varied and interesting. Anyone walking into the daily assemblies, or joining cricket practice, or going on an excursion to Hothersall Lodge (a nearby outdoor education centre) could see that this was a ‘good’ school. Yet, while the inspectors were conducting their investigations, the teachers were nervous, the children were subdued, the lessons were predictable and the atmosphere was bleak. Were the inspectors seeing a ‘good’ school?

The OFSTED experience raised the question in the researcher’s mind of what ‘good’ schools should look like. Was it possible for a team of strangers to use a set of criteria to measure goodness? Did those inspectors have a conception of a ‘good’ school that was different from that of the head-teacher or the parents? And where did ‘satisfactory value for money’ fit into the ‘good’ school equation? These, for the researcher, were all questions in need of some answers.

### **Central Topic**

The study reported later in this thesis investigated primary principals’ conceptions of ‘good’ schools. The choice of the word ‘good’ was deliberate. Firstly, it was the optimal word used by the OFSTED inspectors, ‘good’ being at the opposite end to ‘failing’ on the minimalist OFSTED spectrum. Secondly, the word was used because it is the descriptor in common parlance. It is a word regularly used in the literature as well as by politicians and by people on the street. It is a deceptively simple word, easy to use in

conversation, but impossible to describe. Moore (1959, p.7) puts ‘good’ into its rightful context:

My point is that good is a simple notion, just as ‘yellow’ is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot, by any matter of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is.

In similar fashion, the phrase ‘good’ school has universal application but highly individualised meaning. The ‘good’ school of the OFSTED inspection was very dissimilar to the ‘good’ school in the months before or the months after.

Ball (1997, p.334) grappled with the term ‘good’ in an enlightening paper – *Good School/Bad School: Paradox and Fabrication*. His perspective provided the ‘working’ definition used throughout the study:

What counts as good and bad, of course, rests on what qualities of institutions are valued. That valuing is to a great extent determined by the indicators and technologies of quality which are predominant at any point in time.

The study did not set out to determine what a ‘good’ school should really look like. As Moore and Ball have postulated, that is not possible, nor is it desirable. A ‘good’ school is a school that is valued by somebody. It is a school that fits the specific criteria that someone chooses to apply to it. Silver (1994, p.2) puts it simply:

A good school has always been one which, by some publicly available standard, has consistently achieved known or assumed goals.

Silver has deftly explained why a small school in outer Blackburn, whilst briefly performing in uncharacteristic fashion for the OFSTED team, could earn the title ‘good’. For the team, the school was a perfect match to the

criteria they carried with them. To the staff and, in particular, the head-teacher the ‘goodness’ had been wiped away. By January 1997 it had not returned:

No doubt you now feel as if you’d never been away – it must be great to be back!  
School is as ever – no focus, no energy, no idea ...! It’s almost as hard to get going again as it was immediately after the inspection ... (Smith, 1997, Jan 13).

The study reported in this thesis did not attempt to propose the perfect ‘recipe’ for a ‘good’ school. What it focused on was listening to the ‘voices’ of fifteen primary school principals in Western Australian schools and analysing what they said. It was research into their conceptions of what a ‘good’ school is from their particular viewpoint.

### **Relevance**

A study into ‘Western Australian government primary school principals’ conceptions of what constitutes a ‘good’ school’ is very relevant. There has been debate about ‘good’ schools since public schooling began. Much of this debate was on a local level with concerns for the local school. For this study, the emphasis was on the collective response to schooling at a district, state, national and ultimately international level. This collective response brings a degree of politicisation to schools and creates many dimensions for the ‘good’ schools debate. This politicisation had very early beginnings. Engel (2000, p.1), for example, has discussed American working-men’s parties of the 1820s and 1830s who “fought for public education as a means of promoting political equality”.

World War II is the starting point that this study uses to establish some historical context for examining the role of ‘good’ schools. The broad

background is restricted to England and Wales, the United States of America and Australia. Though administratively quite diverse, schools in these countries gradually lost their local identity and were drawn into the role of national significance. Instance and Lowe (1991) plot the changing responsibilities and functions of Australian schools as they gradually moved from the 1940s post-war reconstruction of society through a bountiful period of expansion and apparent wealth in the 1960s. The faltering OECD economies, damaged by the oil crisis of the 1970s, brought an end to Australia's educational expansionism and, hardly coincidentally, a collapse of radical education movements in the United States of America.

Governments in all four countries became more cautious and parsimonious as competition mounted for the public money. Schools were now looked upon as institutions that could generate an economic recovery and students were seen in terms of human capital. Central governments strengthened their controls over the education systems through legislation as expressed by the 1988 Education Act in Britain, or with astute use of Federal grants in the United States of America and Australia. By the 1990s the Thatcherite experiment with marketization of schools was well installed in all four countries.

The concept of 'good' schools has undergone many transformations, mostly as a result of political and economic pressure:

For the market liberals, the ideal society is of a Darwinian-Hobbesian market order, characterised by selfishness, competition and inequality. Competition is seen as a driving force of evolutionary progress (Marginson, 1993, p.70).

Looking beyond the political and economic relevance of schools in general, and ‘good’ schools in particular, it is also important to place schools in a social context. Chitty (2002, p.8) suggests that “ we have to be clear about the nature and purposes of the ‘socialisation’ element of education before the more precise obligations of schools can be examined.” In the main, schools carry out this role through the promotion of values. These values may be part of the curriculum, as they are in Western Australia, or they may be embodied in the school’s ethos.

The social influence of schools is pervasive and continuous. It may often pass unnoticed but it is fundamental in the fabric of education:

Through education people are endowed with certain individual potentials created by educational techniques that define and rank them. They are also formed as social beings in the social systems of education: the modes of inclusion and exclusion, the relations of equality and justice, the relations of power; the mono and multi-cultures; the systems of value and its measurement (Marginson, 1997, p.5).

In this study of conceptions of ‘good’ schools it is important to look beyond the academic curriculum and consider the social achievements of the schools. Rutter and his committee (1979, p.179), in their watershed report into secondary schools and their effects on children, highlighted the socialising role of the school as a key effect of organised education:

Children’s behaviour and attitude are shaped and influenced by their experiences at school and, in particular, by the qualities of the school as a social institution.

Schools, then, play a variety of roles throughout a wide spectrum of society. They are used by governments, influenced by sociological trends and manipulated by economics. It is important to identify how and where these

influences are operating. It is also important to understand that schools, in themselves, are dynamic and ever changing.

Two educators and authors have been particularly successful in identifying and demonstrating this complex phenomenon, the presence of which must be acknowledged in any study of schools. Ball (1997, p.317) describes schools as:

... complex, contradictory, sometimes incoherent organizations like many others. They are assembled over time to form a bricolage of memories, commitments, routines, bright ideas and policy effects. They are changed, influenced and interfered with regularly and increasingly. They drift, decay and regenerate.

According to Ball, schools are not institutions that are easily dealt with. It is because they are so complex and intertwined that they are so difficult to analyse, change or improve. To classify a school as being 'good' is not to isolate a few good features, for those features are interwoven with others. Ball indicates that identifying 'good' schools is difficult and imprecise. He also suggests that 'good' schools don't necessarily remain 'good' because they "drift, decay and regenerate".

Rose approached 'good' schools from a unique and practical viewpoint. His book *Possible Lives* (Rose, 1995) is the record of a journey that he took through America. Frustrated by the public perception that American schools were beset with incompetent and apathetic teaching, and populated with students who were violent and resistant, he embarked on his pilgrimage to find pockets of 'goodness' amidst the crisis. His book is peppered with examples of quality education which he describes as:

... everyday acts of courage and insight, the little breakthroughs, the mundane re-imagining of the possible (Rose, 1995, p.430).

Rose, like Ball, emphasises the fact that ‘good’ schools and ‘good’ teaching are recognisable but hard to define. There is not a ‘good’ schools template because, in reality, education is “bountiful, crowded, messy, contradictory, exuberant, tragic, frustrating and remarkable” (Rose, 1995, p.4).

‘Good’ schools are an enduring feature on the educational landscape. They are a constituent part of society, forming links to politics, economics and the myriad dimensions of everyday life. They are social constructions that are recognisable but difficult to define.

### **Key Questions**

Fifteen school principals were interviewed in the main data gathering exercise in the study reported here. The interviews were focused on the overarching quest of this thesis – **Western Australian government primary school principals’ conceptions of what constitutes a ‘good’ school**. In order to pursue this central inquiry, interviews were conducted around the framework of six key questions. Each principal interviewee was given the ‘aide memoire’ sheet which outlined these questions. The questions, which provided structure and stimulus for the discussion and data gathering, were:

- (i) Do principals develop concepts of good schools?
- (ii) How fluid are these concepts?
- (iii) How do these concepts measure up against those of the employer?

- (iv) Do these concepts of a good school face any threats or challenges?
- (v) Are concepts of good schools shared amongst colleagues?
- (vi) What examples are there of the actualisation of these concepts in this school?

Many of these questions were answered in the general text of the interviews, but the sheet was referred to at the end of each interview to ensure that the major issues had been covered. Data from the six questions were considered crucial for the research. Thus, question (iii) provided data about any possible tension between schools and the then titled Education Department of Western Australia. Question (v) was asked to determine whether ‘good’ schools was a topic at any of the formal or informal meetings that principals attended. Apart from these major interview questions there were two other questions asked of interviewees. These were the interviewee’s age and the age of the school.

### **Justification**

This thesis examining conceptions of ‘good’ schools is an important one for a number of reasons. In particular, it is appropriate to the political, social and economic conditions which have largely moulded the educational climate at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As has been noted, England and Wales, America and Australia have all experienced the same constriction of their economies and the same increased international competition in goods and services. The effect on education has been sweeping. Townsend (1996, p.128) considers that the resulting changes, which can be labelled ‘devolution’ and ‘restructuring’, “could well be considered to be the first

major shift in the way in which education has been administered since it became compulsory in most western societies in the 1870s and 1880s.”

### Restructuring

The world-wide recession of the late 1970s had no less an impact in Australia than elsewhere. It is this impact that needs to be considered throughout this study on ‘good’ schools for it is the character, quality and focus of schools that continue to be affected:

Faced with corporate collapses, a worsening balance of payments problem and economic recession, system after system moved to trim the bureaucracy, to distribute experts and consultants back to schools and regions, to renege on some working conditions, and to find ways to improve teacher salaries only selectively through such devices as award restructuring. In short, there is not enough money to finance the education efforts (Harman *et al*, 1991, p.20).

A perceived “lack of money” is the key to many of the changes that occurred throughout the government bureaucracy. It is the “lack of money” that turned attention towards being competitive in the global market place. Marginson (1997, p.210) argues that this need to remain viable in the world economy resulted in the “economisation of educational government.” This, in turn, created a new view of education whereby education was seen as an adjunct to national productivity. As a producer of ‘human capital’ schools became accountable for their outputs. They were also expected to become competitive in their own market place.

### Devolution

Part of restructuring was devolution. The process was deceptively simple. To reduce the central education bureaucracy, it was seen that personnel and responsibilities could be distributed to the schools. This was attempted throughout Australia by the various states, with limited success. For Western

Australian government schools, the final result was little new money, increased accountability and minimal devolved authority despite increased responsibility. Louden and Browne (1993, p.133) describe the apparent devolution as “new centralism” with Central Office policy generation, goal setting and performance monitoring becoming even more constricting on schools.

For ‘good’ schools, devolution meant that much of the valuing of schools was controlled by the government. A ‘good’ school could be conceived of as one which performed its duties and conformed to the policies. Devolution didn’t give much authority to schools to strike out on their own. School councils, part of the devolution agenda, were very much compromised in their powers.

### Marketization

Restructuring of the educational bureaucracy in Western Australia has allowed schools more freedom in some areas, one being the lifting of school boundary restrictions. This has been a slow change which, despite the revised Education Act (Education Department of Western Australia, 1999), still has drawbacks and uncertainties. Basically, however, parents have been given more choice as to which school their children can attend. As a corollary, schools are able to compete for students. Since every student is valuable for staffing and budget calculations, the more pupils the school enrolls, the more money the school receives. This could be seen as a step towards the privatisation of public schools because the opportunity for choice also comes with some enhanced powers to set higher levels of monetary contributions from parents.

At the time of the interviews for the study into ‘good’ schools reported here, namely, March to November 2000, these elements of marketization were in their embryonic stages. The changes would have had little actual impact on enrolments but would certainly have engaged the principals’ attention. For the issue of ‘good’ schools marketization is crucial. On the surface it may appear to be a perfect way for communities to create their local school as they would like it to be. Engel (2000, p.13) cautions that the reality may well be otherwise: “school choice in actual practice destroys the community cohesion necessary to build democracy and renders impossible community control of schools.” According to Engel (2000) the competitiveness of the market that forces schools to make themselves attractive to a wider range of customers, tends to isolate schools from local issues and needs. Those sorts of changes may not be ‘good’ for the school. Furthermore, the community living around the school could well be deprived of a place in a successful local school as marketization leads on towards privatisation.

There is real concern about the nature of ‘good’ schools as the market imperative begins to impair the flexibility and limited autonomy of public schools. It is this concern that motivated Rose (1995, p.4) to set out across America in search of schools, classrooms and teachers defying the “general loss of faith in public institutions” and rejecting the “idealisation of the private sphere and the free market.”

### Equity

A study into conceptions of ‘good’ schools is, by Ball’s definition, an investigation into what is valued in education. Ball (1997, p.334) believes

that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are established on the basis of “what qualities of institutions are valued”. By interviewing fifteen government school principals the aim was to discover what they value in their public school. As a community living in a democracy, and supportive of an egalitarian philosophy, Western Australians could expect that their government schools would demonstrate those values by which the community ostensibly abides. There are doubts whether schools in the early twenty-first century do reflect an egalitarian and democratic ethos. Elements of restructuring and devolution may work against the traditional ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity (Harman *et al*, 1991). Angus (1992, p.395) is quite fearful of the impact that school restructuring is having on individual and community values:

The neo-classical notion of equality of opportunity in the market-place is anti-egalitarian because it undermines a more fundamental sense of community by encouraging people to concentrate on their own personal gains and prospects within a competitive environment.

There is a sense that government schools have lost their way in regards to their social purpose. The issue of equity is a fundamental problem identified by many researchers, including Robson and his committee (2001, p.3) who conducted a twelve-week review into Western Australian government schools. The committee found that the trend towards privatisation was proving divisive and recommended that the focus of government schools should be on “the development of a socially-cohesive, stable and democratic society.” From a more international stance, Lord David Puttnam, head of the UK’s General Teaching Council, speaking in support of a strong state education system, urged the development of:

... an education system which teaches our young people basic human values; values such as compassion, tolerance and understanding (Western Teacher, Feb 1, 2002, p.3).

The study reported here on Western Australian Government school principals' conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' school, probed the role being played in the development of a value system which would appear to be the core business of a school.

### Outcomes

Restructuring goes beyond devolution and involves changes to curriculum and accountability. Western Australia has been operating with a new *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council, 1998) since 1998 with full implementation due by 2006. The *Curriculum Framework*, which is accompanied by outcomes statements, bears some resemblance to a National Curriculum, the project's original intention. The curriculum and outcomes are used by all government schools, whilst the private schools are legislatively only bound to using the *Curriculum Framework*. A feature of the frameworks document is that it has a strong 'values' component and a clear statement about 'inclusivity', both important aspects of the 'good' schools debate. This is a curriculum designed to promote a sense of egalitarianism, community and self worth.

Important also, and perhaps in a more dramatic fashion, is the impact of the outcomes focus. Whilst the curriculum subject areas are similar to those from the past, outcomes are new. The outcomes represent a centralising of the education objectives in a national sense. The Federal Government in Australia has used its 'vertical fiscal imbalance' (Lingard et al, 1995) to influence the development of a quasi-national curriculum and to institute an

Australia-wide system of national testing based on outcomes. A combination of school grants tied to school improvement, and of national testing in areas deemed important, has put much control of curriculum content and school programming into central political control. O'Donoghue and Dimmock (1998, p.170) describe this as politicisation:

This more political environment has been fuelled by the incursion of market forces into school management and by the redefinition of the meaning of school 'success', from criteria based on inputs and facilities to measures centred on student learning outcomes.

For Western Australia the student outcomes statements have created many challenges for teachers. Changing a classroom system of planning and monitoring is time consuming and stressful.

Ball (1998) and Rose (1995) both spoke about the natural 'complexities' and 'contradictions' of schools. No doubt outcomes statements will have added to those. The annual Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessments (WALNA) have also added to the strain. These 'national' tests are conducted with all school students aged 8, 10 and 12 years. The subjects tested, namely, spelling, reading, writing and mathematics, give some indication of the area of the school curriculum 'valued' by the Federal Government. It may be the case that WALNA testing has altered the school curriculum to focus on these test areas, especially in light of the fact that District Directors use the results of these tests in school appraisals.

### Teaching and Learning

The advent of the new curriculum in Western Australian schools has had some impact on teaching and learning. The curriculum, in promoting an outcomes approach, has created an environment which encourages

developmental learning, a focus on the individual child and an emphasis on the acquisition of values. Teachers are expected to be moving away from rote learning of knowledge and facilitating knowledge acquisition and retrieval skills.

On a school-wide basis teachers are expected to have entered into a more collaborative association with students, each other, the administration and the community. There should be a movement away from individual teachers working in isolated classrooms. On this, Fullan and Hargreaves (1991, p.2) state that teaching and learning will improve if efforts are made towards “involving teachers in their schools, supporting and valuing what they do, and helping them work together as colleagues”. Similarly, Ball and Goldman (1997, p.229) insist that schools should have stimulating and risk-taking environments which acknowledge ‘good’ teachers because “education’s regimentation and inflexibility drive out those creative individuals who could do most to challenge this inertia.”

The study into conceptions of ‘good’ schools has a vital interest in the status and performance of teachers. It is important to examine the principals’ perceptions of the role and performance of their teaching staff. Reynolds (1999, p.13) makes the point that “teaching has not been addressed with the same vigour as ‘schooling’.” His article in the *Times Educational Supplement* (May 28, 1999, p.13) bears a title which gives valuable direction to this study on ‘good’ schools, namely, “It’s the classroom, stupid”.

## Leadership

The study reported here rests broadly on a series of interviews with school principals. It has been assumed, based on experiential knowledge, that principals have some conception of what constitutes a 'good' school. At the same time, it is significant to this study, connd justification for pursuing the topic, that there is minimal literature on principals' conceptions of schools. One of the few articles to even touch on conceptions (Hoy *et al*, 1980, p.276), made a statement that might be pursued beyond this thesis: "Our experience demonstrates that a principal's perception of the health or climate of the school is frequently at variance with the perceptions of teachers."

Generally, a principal's leadership is seen to be a positive feature of effective schools. It appears, for example, top of the list in the 'Five Factor Model of School Effectiveness' (Tibbett *et al*, 1994, p.152). Sammons (1994, p.47) notes that "the importance of the head's leadership roles is one of the clearest messages from school effectiveness research." Hallinger and Heck (1998, p.158) make a strong statement about the principal's positive contribution and provide a scenario which was played out through interviews:

Schools that make a difference in students' learning are led by principals who make a significant and measurable contribution to the effectiveness of staff and in the learning of pupils in their school.

It was also recognised on commencing the present study that the conflicting demands of leadership and managerialism might emerge. With the devolution of responsibilities to schools, and the concept of the self-managing school, it seemed likely that the manner in which principals were coping with the changes would be highlighted. The great dilemma for

principals is the distraction of mundane office tasks which may be important in an administrative sense, but which contribute little to quality teaching and learning.

### School Effectiveness

Restructuring has been aimed at making nations more productive, efficient and competitive. In this struggle to economise and rationalise, the spotlight has fallen upon education which is seen as “an essential condition for achieving a competitive edge in the global economy” (Gray & Wilcox, 1995, p.6). Consequently, as we have seen, some of the methods of instruction and some of the modes of organisation have had to change. In particular, the spotlight has sharpened its focus onto school accountability.

Accountability in education is a vexatious problem solved partly by the introduction of an outcomes curriculum and state wide or national testing. A more esoteric solution has been to enlist the services of school effectiveness research and create measurement criteria that can be applied to all schools. In other words, school effectiveness findings are being used to define ‘good’ schools.

School effectiveness work has blossomed in the United Kingdom, America and Australia. Its genesis lies in the investigation of the characteristics of effective schools and the eventual production of a list common to all. Logic suggests that if the list contains elements that are common to successful schools, they must be indicators of the things that make schools successful. If this is so it must then be possible to identify ‘good’ schools by matching

characteristics with those on the list. It should also be possible to create a ‘good’ school by ensuring that the school can generate the required traits.

There is a large number of school effectiveness criteria that have been identified and, consequently, a large number of different lists. The lists do have common elements and some lists have become popular and heavily used. The Five Factor Model (Tibbett, 1994, p.152) is, as noted previously, one such core list:

- Strong educational leadership.
- Emphasis on acquiring basic skills.
- An orderly and secure environment.
- High expectations of pupil attainment.
- Frequent assessment of pupil progress.

This list constitutes useful data for discussions about ‘good’ or effective schools. However, this is only a minimalist list and there are factors on it, such as “frequent assessment of pupil progress”, that may not be fundamental to a ‘good’ school. There are also many factors not on the list that ‘good’ schools often display. As indicators or measures of ‘good’ schools, or even of effective schools, effectiveness indicators are flawed.

It is the use of a ‘reductionist’ approach that causes the greatest problem. Schools are highly complex organizations. Ball (1997, p.317) describes schools as sometimes contradictory, incoherent and drifting; Rose (1995, p.4) depicts them as exuberant, tragic, frustrating and remarkable; and Barth (1990, p.1) likens schoolwork to a tennis shoe in a laundry drier, “turbulent, heated, confused, disorientated, congested and full of recurring bumps.”

School effectiveness not only misses all these individualistic quirks that give education its character, but it refines out any critical aberrations from its own observations in its search for commonality. Its final pronouncements appear bland and predictable.

Barth (1986, p.294) summarises school effectiveness criteria as ‘list logic’, noting that it all:

... seems simple, straightforward and compelling. Its only flaw is that it doesn’t seem to work very well.

Despite the fact that school effectiveness research focuses on the macro systems level of schools, blurring over the messiness of nuts and bolts teaching, and concentrating on the mundane and utilitarian, its influence on school management has been significant. The OFSTED inspectors have listed in their *Framework for the Inspection of Schools* (1995, pp 16-22) examples of school effectiveness criteria against which they are to measure schools. These measures include expecting pupil attendance to exceed 90 percent, obliging teachers to use homework effectively, and requiring student test scores to reach a certain level. District Directors who inspect Western Australian schools also rely heavily on school effectiveness criteria which are outlined, checklist fashion, in a booklet entitled *School Performance: A Framework for Improving and Reporting* (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997). The six effectiveness criteria used in this booklet are: ‘School Performance’, ‘Teaching and Learning’, ‘Leadership’, ‘Managing Staff’, ‘Learning Environment’ and ‘Interacting with the School Community’.

School effectiveness criteria are influential in education because they are 'simple' and 'straightforward'. They are popular because they concentrate on things that "can be observed and measured" (Wilmott, 1999a, p.258). The criteria are easy to use because they look at "systems rather than teachers" (Elliott, 1996, p.215). School effectiveness criteria are most certainly compelling. Yet, and significantly for the particular study reported here:

School effectiveness researchers ... often talk of good or 'excellent' schools as if the definition of those were unproblematic (Reynolds, 1996a, p.144).

Perhaps the issues surrounding school effectiveness are the most powerful justification for a research project into principals' conceptions of 'good' schools. It would seem that there is a need to strike a balance with the straightforward logic of school effectiveness. The study reported here is an effort to glimpse the micro processes of classroom relationships, staff collaboration and the development of history and tradition (Simkins, 1994). In embarking on the research, it was considered that there was the possibility of going beyond the utilitarian to plumb the depths of what Barth (1990, p.150) calls the "loosely coupled world of schools".

### Human Judgement

As final justification for a study that investigates primary school principals' conceptions of a 'good' school there is the importance of the defence of human judgement. Restructuring and devolution generate the sense that education has become serious business with an economic bottom line. Theobald and Mills (1995, p.465) paint a grim international picture where "the push for accountability has been indistinguishable from the push for more standardised testing, which has been indistinguishable from the push

for better global position.” With such a welter of pressures and demands it is easy to lose sight of the character and importance of the individual school. It is necessary to see where schools really stand amidst the multi-national struggles and the political intrigue. Reynolds and Packer (1992) try to demystify the ‘human capital’ potential of the school:

- School influence is not as large as home or community influence.
- Classroom teaching is the important factor in variance between schools.
- School performance can vary quite rapidly over two to three years.
- Schools are not necessarily effective ‘across the board’.
- Schools may not be effective for all kinds of children.

This study is a chance to ‘get back to basics’ on the business of ‘good’ schools. There is a need to talk more about the people in schools and to talk more to the people in schools. Wilson (1996, p.224) urges educators to “assert again the importance of human judgement in the education of our young, in place of our over-reliance on rules and regulations.” To interview school principals about their conceptions of ‘good’ schools goes some way towards responding to Wilson’s plea.

### **Scope**

The themes and subjects for this thesis on ‘good’ schools spread across five main areas, namely, school culture, school effectiveness, school improvement, school accountability, and restructuring and devolution.

### **Culture**

There is an extensive body of literature dealing with this area, much coming from the 1980s when culture was considered an important issue in the daily

operation of schools. There would appear to be a renewed interest in the cultural aspect of schools, supported strongly by the work of Deal (1985) and Barth (1990). The elements of school culture include climate, ethos, values, vision and community.

Deal (1985, p.605) describes culture as “the shared values and beliefs, heroes and heroines, ritual and ceremony, stories and an informal network of cultural players.” Work in this area faces the problem that most aspects of culture are almost intangible. Beare (1989, p.172) goes so far as to suggest that schools themselves are really only “a conceptual entity which people collectively create and maintain largely in their minds.” Some aspects like attitudes and values can be measured with surveys or interviews, but other dimensions such as climate and tone almost defy measurement.

Beyond the philosophical concepts of schools and the rituals and symbolism within them, is the literature associated with the development of values and relationships. Also, there are connections drawn with curriculum, pastoral care and school management. Barth makes some strong contributions to this more practical area of schooling. Some of his work is in the form of homilies and he brings a keen focus to everyday operations in schools:

In schools, treading water is no longer an option. School people must either propel themselves in some direction, be towed, or sink (Barth, 1990, p.152).

Two other educator/authors belong in this culture area, namely, Ball and Rose. Both have been mentioned already and both have a keen sense of the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of schools. This specific theme of contradiction and ambiguity is well captured by Ball and Rose.

### School Effectiveness and School Improvement

If school culture is largely based on intangible feelings, school effectiveness is at the other end of the measurement continuum. School effectiveness is concerned with discovering the criteria that appear to motivate successful schools. This is an area where there is copious amounts of literature, including much that is critical of the ‘effectiveness’ movement.

School effectiveness research is central to the study reported here because of its claim to the identification of ‘good’ schools. Scholars in the school culture domain would refute much of what school effectiveness purports to do. Silver (1994, p.4) notes that the school effectiveness movement grew in “response both to a loss of confidence in what schools could do and to a growing disquiet about what they were doing.”

School improvement is often linked with school effectiveness but in practice they remain largely separate areas of research. Reynolds *et al* (1993) produced a clarifying article on the disparity entitled *Linking School Effectiveness Knowledge and School Improvement Practice: Towards a Synergy*. The basic difference between the two areas of research is that school effectiveness is concerned with schools at a point in time and school improvement is more concerned with schools as they are changing (Reynolds, 1996a).

### School Accountability

Though not a central focus of the study reported here, school accountability is related to the restructuring movement. With schools gaining more control of resources and planning, central authorities have enhanced their

technologies for audit and inspection. The common accountability regimes involve state or national testing which evaluate standards of teaching and learning, and forms of school inspection which verify school processes and procedures. MacPherson and Cuttance have done a lot of work with school accountability, especially in Australia. Cuttance (1995, p.107) has a strong belief that “only systems that are independent of the operational system for schooling are capable of assuring the quality of school systems.”

### Restructuring and Devolution

Covering the period from the 1970s up to the beginning of the new millennium, this area of study introduces the ‘economisation’ which “prepared government education institutions for marketization” (Marginson, 1997, p.210). Marketization, site-based management and increased accountability are just some of the significant changes which continue to alter the face of education. For Australia in particular, there has been a movement away from the once impregnable belief in equity. The privatisation of the government school system is a major trend, commented upon clearly by a review of the Western Australian state education system:

....there is a real risk that government schools could become a residual system, to the detriment of social cohesion in Western Australia (Robson, 2001, p.2).

There are numerous books and articles on restructuring and devolution including *The Struggle for Control of Public Education* (Engel, 2000) which deals specifically with the loss of democratic values in schools.

Restructuring has reshaped conceptions of ‘good’ schools.

## **Methodology**

Data for the research project was collected by interviews with fifteen school principals in government primary schools located in suburban Perth. All interviews were transcribed and then put through a process of 'open' coding. The coding techniques were those of grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and the process of coding is termed 'inductive analysis'. Coded texts were sorted into conceptual categories whereby the raw data was made more abstract and more comprehensible. It is from the conceptual categories that the five propositions at the heart of the study emerged. These are reported later in the thesis.

The gradual emergence of propositions allows this to be described as a qualitative emerging study. This was not an exercise to verify a theory but rather a tenuous leap into the unknown where there is no theory and precious little explanation (Strauss, 1987). The main research question acted as the organisational focus for the study.

Initial interviewees were chosen from amongst a pool of volunteers.

Subsequent interviewees were specifically or 'purposefully' chosen based on the possibility that each participant would "expand the variability of the sample" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.45). Initial interviews provided the data that further directed and refined the sampling procedure. This process is called "theoretical sampling" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.177). Sampling continued until no new data emerged. This was the point of "theoretical saturation" (Strauss, 1987, p.25).

Interviews were supplemented with focus group meetings, the collection of artefacts, journal entries, memos and reflections. Diagrams were used to help present conceptual data in a more visual form, and selective reading was undertaken as the emerging direction of the study became clearer.

### **Conclusion**

Through the 1997 White Paper on education, released by Blair's New Labour Government in the United Kingdom (Chitty, 2002, p.93), the Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) was confidently able to announce:

We know what it takes to create a good school! A strong skilled head who understands the importance of clear leadership, committed staff and parents, high expectations of every child, and above all good teaching (Gibson & Asthana, 1998a, p.206).

Like the school effectiveness research, from which the statement would appear to have developed, the DFEE stance was impressively simple and logical. The study reported here, which presents a glimpse of Western Australian principals' theorizing on 'good' schools, is challenging that simplistic stance by presenting the view from a different angle, that of leading practitioners. The results, it was always recognised, could be messy, since, as Ball puts it:

The epistemic assumptions of order, structure, function, cause and effect are variously mobilised to represent 'the social' and, in doing so, work to exclude many of the mobile, complex, ad hoc, messy and fleeting qualities of lived experience (Ball, 1995, p.259).

This introductory chapter presented an overview of the thesis. Background was given for the choice of topic. This was followed by a clarification of the central topic and the presentation of a working definition of 'good' schools.

Next there was a linking of the topic to the general educational landscape. A section presenting the study's major questions was then introduced.

Subsequently, there was justification of the choice of the study topic. This, in turn, was followed by a summary of themes and subjects represented in this study, and a brief description of methodology. Six more chapters follow.

Chapter Two presents the context for the research project. The initial focus for this chapter is a post World War II historical synopsis of the educational landscape in England and Wales, America and Australia. Themes of increasing globalisation, centralisation, marketization and privatisation are drawn out of this overview. The focus then narrows to Western Australia in the same period, but with an emphasis on the restructuring of state education since the 1980s. Issues associated with devolution are highlighted, the sense being that responsibilities have been devolved to schools but accountability and policy-making have become more centralised. Connection is made between these issues and the concept of 'good' schools.

Chapter Three is the literature review. It is structured into four parts – culture, school effectiveness and school improvement, accountability, and restructuring and devolution. Links are made between each body of literature and the associated influence on the concept of the 'good' school. Contrast is made between the effectiveness movement and the reviving interest in the influence of school culture. Special mention is made of the contribution made to the 'good' schools debate by the authors Ball and Rose.

Chapter Four is a comprehensive coverage of methodology. It introduces the theoretical underpinnings of the research and then describes the research

setting. This is followed by an outline of the study participants and an explanation of how they were chosen. The next section explains the procedures used for gathering data with an emphasis on semi-structured interviews. A description of how the data were analysed follows. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the establishment of trustworthiness.

Chapter Five presents the superordinate theme ‘Weaving the Fabric’. The chapter introduces the central proposition associated with this theme and establishes its relationship to the four subordinate propositions which are discussed in Chapter Six. The relationship between all five propositions is clarified by a diagram in the form of The ‘Good’ School Puzzle. Chapter Five then proceeds to discuss the six dimensions of ‘Weaving the Fabric’ which are ethos, positive school environment, authentic processes, caring inclinations and distinct school community.

Chapter Six is a coverage of the four subordinate propositions considered under the themes ‘Walking the Talk’, ‘Producing the Goods’, ‘Leading and Lagging’ and ‘Seeing is Believing’. After a brief review of the relationship of the subordinate and superordinate propositions, each of the four subordinate propositions is discussed in turn. Each proposition is introduced and then described, outlining the separate dimensions of that proposition. After all four subordinate propositions are presented they are drawn together in the conclusion. Throughout Chapter Six the threads connecting all four subordinate propositions to the superordinate proposition are reinforced.

Chapter Seven is entitled ‘Summary and Conclusions’. The first section is a summary of the research covering the purpose of the study and how the

study was conducted. This section includes a discussion of the limitations of the study. Next follows a discussion on the implications for other bodies of theoretical literature. That section is followed by the implications of the research for policy makers. This, in turn, is followed by a broad analysis of implications for practice. The analysis is divided into four subsections – curriculum, teaching, management and administration, and teacher education. The chapter concludes with a discussion on implications for further research.