CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the research design and methodology of the study. First, the theoretical underpinnings of the research are described and justified. Secondly, there is a brief description of the research setting. This is followed by an outline of the study participants and how they were chosen. Next is a section on the procedures used for gathering data with emphasis given to semi-structured interviews. A copy of the aide memoire is included in this account. This is followed by a description of how the data were analysed. Finally there is a section on the establishment of trustworthiness.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The choice of focus for this thesis dictated the theoretical framework for the research. An enquiry into 'Western Australian Government primary school principals' conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' school' enters the realms of value judgements. That there is a dearth of studies on 'good' schools, yet a burgeoning industry in 'effective schools' research, can partly be explained by the imprecise and contestable interpretation of the meaning of 'good'. To discover 'effectiveness' requires some reference to graded outcomes. To discover 'goodness' requires something other than a positivist philosophy and quantitative methodology.

Attempting to discover principals' conceptions on 'good' schools is not an impossible task. What is needed is a method of investigation that allows interpretation of social phenomena in a manner that is flexible yet

trustworthy. Such methodology exists in the form of post-positivist, naturalistic, qualitative research.

In choosing the term 'good' as the central focus for the research, there was a need to anticipate ambiguity in the evidence and unpredictability in the results. It was expected that there would be anything but linear progress towards an expected outcome. The methodology of such qualitative and naturalistic studies is based on a philosophy that tolerates ambiguity (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p.211) and disputes the premise that there is a single truth about such matters. This is a methodology that has, in fact, opened up the possibilities of examining, in some organised fashion, the complexities of human beliefs and understandings. In this case naturalistic, qualitative research allows us to probe particular and personal views of 'good' schools and to perhaps lay the foundation for some valuable common understandings. These common understandings form the interlocking propositions in chapters five and six of this thesis.

The epistemological direction of this study, then, is based on the understanding that human knowledge is imprecise, changeable, and created out of a myriad of values and experience. Reality is a social construction whereby humankind has created meanings for "objects, people, situations and events in an attempt to understand the nature of their world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.36). These meanings, according to naturalistic philosophy, are temporal, being modified or replaced as greater understanding develops. The belief is that no ultimate truth is achievable, only current shared agreement.

The phenomenological stance adopted in the research project reported here is the antithesis of the more rigid, positivist approach to knowledge. The positivist paradigm sees reality as singular, tangible, fragmental and value-free (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p.37). Such a theoretical position is more akin to the creation of 'effectiveness' indicators which are distilled in a scientific and mechanistic fashion. This gives effectiveness characteristics a solidity and universality that the articulation of 'goodness' is unable to provide. Hence this current research did not set out encapsulate the universal meaning of the 'good' school, but it strove to capture a fleeting snapshot of its expression. There is, in this research, a "focus on understanding the meaning events have for the person being studied" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.3).

As a naturalistic, qualitative piece of research, this dissertation has an 'emergent' quality. On commencement it was impossible to know what the outcomes would be, especially since there was little similar research to guide the way. This study of 'good' schools is research into what people think, and involved an inductive process of discovery rather than a careful confirmation of an expectation or a theory. It is a study that required the researcher to be 'open-minded', although certainly not 'empty-headed' (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p.204).

With no theory to prove, it could be postulated that the study is simplistic and meandering. This is not the case because the data were rigorously sorted into categories, patterns and themes (Janesick, 1994, p.215). The research propositions which finally emerged were incrementally focussed as the research progressed and were continually grounded in the extensive

collection of data. A qualitative study such as this one is far from simplistic. It has a theoretical scaffold "ideal for phenomena that are potentially complex and about which little is known with certainty" (Lancy, 1993, p.6). Naturalistic, qualitative research is able to produce propositions that are unique, specific to the location of the study, and non-transferable. This is an interpretive approach in which "the real interest is in how the participants made sense of what happened" (Maxwell, 1998, p.84).

Qualitative research has a hermeneutic sense about it. Hermeneutics is a method of interpretation of the social world which proposes that, in examining elements of a system or text, the element cannot be understood without an understanding of the whole. Similarly, gaining an understanding of the whole is impossible without examining the character of the individual elements (Blackburn, 1996, p.172). The concept of a hermeneutic circle was fundamental to this study on 'good' schools because it represented the methodology, whilst also encapsulating the phenomenon, which is the school itself. To discover what constitutes a 'good' school it is necessary to move constantly backwards and forwards between the parts and the whole. The repetitive or iterative movement gradually builds new meaning, but the new meaning is absolutely dependent on the parts from which it came. Carspecken (1996, p.95) describes this process of seeing the whole, seeing the parts, and seeing the whole again as a "movement from the tacit (intuitive and undifferentiated) towards the explicit (delineated and differentiated) and then back to the holistic."

In summary, the research into the concept of 'good' schools was all about "the routine daily lives of people" (Fettermann, 1998, p.473). As such, it was never going to be precise, predictable or transferable. It was bound by its context and, as such, can be termed naturalistic (Punch, 1998). It is not value-free because the values of the participants mediate and shape what they believe in (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The research has not produced results that are universal and clinical for "the images of others inscribed in writing are most assuredly not neutral" (Van Maanen, 1998, p.1).

The Research Setting

This research was conducted in Western Australia, the largest of the Australian States. Western Australia is more than 2.5 million square kilometres in area and covers about one-third of the Australian continent. It has a diverse range of landscapes and climates, varying from cool temperate Southern Ocean coasts through to the tropical far north. Much of its inland region is arid and very sparsely populated. By 2000 the population of the whole state was only 1.9 million (Regional Development Council, 2002). Nearly three quarters of the Western Australian population live in the capital city, Perth, and the surrounding suburbs. The central business district of Perth supports very little residential housing, with the bulk of the population residing in the suburbs which stretch to the north and south of the city. Some of the outer suburbs are more than 20 kilometres from the city centre.

With a brief chronology of European settlement, Perth, the focal point for this research, has a short educational history. Few existing schools are more than a hundred years old. All but four of the schools which feature in this thesis on 'good' schools were built in the last fifty years. Several of the

schools were built in the last ten years and are situated in the developing northern corridor. One school was yet to be completed at the time of the interview.

All of the schools used in this research are owned and run by the Department of Education, an agency of the Western Australian government. At the time of the interviews there were 200 primary schools operated by the government and they were organised into sixteen education districts, four of which were in the Perth metropolitan area (Information Services Directorate, 2002). The government schools, which enrolled approximately 71 per cent of the student population at the time of the research (Robson, 2001, p.33) exist alongside a system of private schools, most of which are administered by the churches. Government schools are, in essence, free, while private schools charge a varying range of fees. Parents have a choice of schools although such choice is often dictated by ability to pay or ability to travel. There is some evidence of competition between the government and private sectors of schools, with an increasing drift of enrolments towards the latter. (Robson, 2001, p.32). The government, through its moves towards devolution and restructuring, has created a growing entrepreneurial spirit amongst its Departmental school principals.

Selecting Participants

The schools chosen for this research were selected initially from amongst 26 schools that replied to an emailed invitation to participate. All of these original candidate schools were from the Perth District , an administrative block of 60 primary schools and associated high schools and support schools, coordinated by two Directors operating out of a District Office. After a

number of interviews had been conducted, mostly with principals in these

Perth District schools, the scope of the sample was widened to include one

school from the Fremantle Education District and seven schools from the

fast-growing Joondalup District. In total 15 interviews were conducted, all of

them taking place between March and November 2000.

Fig 1 Profile of Participants

Interview Date	Principal's Name (Pseudonym)	Age	School Name (Pseudonym)	School Enrolment	Age of School	Education District
27.03.00	Trent Deakin (TD)	Early 50s	Townshend PS	650	4 years	Joondalup
29.03.00	Paul Darkin (PD)	Mid 50s	West Bloomfield PS	180	21 years	Perth
03.04.00	Ian Wray (IW)	Early 50s	North Trenton PS	320	102 years	Fremantle
04.04.00	Aaron Mustard (AM)	Late 40s	Dewberry PS	300	95 years	Perth
03.05.00	Win Hegerty (WH)	Early 60s	Burnley PS	500	65 years	Perth
12.05.00	Dianna Tander (DT)	Late 40s	Mt Nardon PS	170	47 years	Perth
01.06.00	Trent Kallahan (TK)	Late 50s	Watari PS	230	31 years	Perth
06.06.00	Ronni Latham (RL)	Late 40s	Merrivale PS	149	95 years	Perth
17.08.00	Sam Skilton (SS)	Early 50s	Barnsley PS	750	10 years	Joondalup
29.08.00	Barnaby Treen (BT)	Mid 40s	Sunset Beach PS	349	Opened Feb 2001	Joondalup
08.09.00	Barb Gaynor (BG)	Late 40s	Lancelot PS	260	16 years	Joondalup
15.09.00	Calvin Jones (CJ)	Mid 30s	Chatham PS	495	10 years	Joondalup
29.09.00	Steven Urlich (SU)	Early 50s	Glenbowden PS	360	21 years	Perth
13.11.00	Mark Peters (MP)	Early 50s	Edgeworth PS	900	6 years	Joondalup
17.11.00	Kel Yardley (KY)	Early 40s	Loisville PS	930	7 years	Joondalup

The fifteen participant principals provided a range of backgrounds, ages and

perspectives. Some, like Win Hegerty, had experienced a long career through

a variety of rural and urban schools. Hegerty retired a month after her

interview and was thanked for her service at a large function attended by

Department of Education personnel and fellow principals. Trent Kallahan

was also a long serving principal contemplating retirement. Ronni Latham,

on the other hand, was a substantive deputy principal when she was

interviewed as acting principal of Merrivale Primary School. Ironically, on

the day of her interview she found out that she had won her school in merit

selection, her first permanent principalship. The youngest participant was

Calvin Jones, who had been principal at the large Chatham Primary School

for two years. His previous appointment had been in a country school in the lower southwest of the State. Jones was very confident and articulate during his interview and he showed an ability to sustain a complex argument. Equally impressive was Barnaby Treen, who had been appointed principal of the yet-to-be-opened Sunset Beach Primary School. Treen was interviewed at the Joondalup District Office, his headquarters, while his school was still in the construction phase. Treen's school opened for the start of the 2001 school year with an initial enrolment of 349. This enrolment grew rapidly, in the course of that year to around 700 students.

Just as the participants varied, so did the schools. The newest and largest schools were in the Joondalup District, well north of Perth. Sunset Beach was the furthest north, but there were similar fast growing northern schools at Edgeworth, Loisville, and Townshend. Most of these schools in the outer northern suburbs were staffed by merit selection. This meant that staff were selected by interview and were consequently matched to the philosophy of the school. These schools tended to have younger entrepreneurial principals and, on average, younger staff.

Most schools closer to the city, and located in the Perth Education District, were smaller and older than those in Joondalup. Watari Primary for instance, was 31 years old and its principal, Trent Kallahan, had been at the school for eleven years. Watari had a static student population of just over 200 children and it was staffed by older teachers who also had been at the school for an extended period of time.

The only school from the Fremantle District that was used in the survey was North Trenton. This school had just celebrated its centenary. It is located in a beautiful old stone building which is cramped onto a small rocky playground and serviced by congested parking in a narrow street. The elevated outlook takes in views of historical houses and the Fremantle harbour. North Trenton's principal, Ian Wray, had only just been promoted to this post and he was easing his way into the culture and traditions of his 'new' school.

The fifteen schools chosen cannot be characterised as a representative sample. Rather it was a purposive sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p.40). Purposive or theoretical sampling is a technique in qualitative research, which allows the researcher to choose sites which may increase the scope or range of data exposed. Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p.45) call this 'expanding the variability' of the sample. Thus, whilst it is not possible to generalise from the findings of a qualitative study such as this one, care has been taken to ensure that there is some range of school sizes, some variety of socio-economic backgrounds, and some mix of male and female principals.

Procedures For Gathering Data

The bulk of the data for this study came from the transcripts of interviews with school principals. Other sources of data accessed or created were documents, observer notes, memos, journals, and focus groups.

Individual Interviews : Initially, although individual interview was to be the main mode of data collection, no fixed number of interviews was planned. Twenty five had appeared to be an upper limit that could be handled, but in the end fifteen proved sufficient. By the fifteenth interview, conducted with

Kel Yardley in mid-November, 2000, little new data were being produced. Strauss (1987) terms this the point of 'theoretical saturation'.

Only one interview was held with each participant. Appointments were made by telephone, and at that time the general outline of the one-hour interview process was outlined. Each participant knew that the topic of the interview was 'good' schools, but no one was unaware of the specific questions that might be asked. The researcher specifically requested that no 'homework' be done on the topic. Two principals out of the fifteen did subsequently make notes for the upcoming interview session. Both of these interviews were quite stilted and difficult, especially since one principal had made notes about 'good principals' rather than 'good' schools.

All but two of the interviews were conducted at the participant principal's own school. The two off-site interviews resulted from principals being temporarily relocated, one being in charge of a yet unbuilt new school and the other having been temporarily seconded to the position of District Director. These two interviews were held at the District Office and in the researcher's own school respectively.

Interviewing principals in their own schools had numerous advantages, including allowing the researcher to experience the climate and atmosphere of the different schools. Quite extensive notes were made about the various school environments and about the various artifacts that were seen. These observer notes highlighted the uniqueness of each school site and helped complement the transcripts of the interviews. The notes taken following a

morning interview at the large Chatham Primary point towards efficient

management and attractive school appearance:

> Children at recess when the interview finished. I wandered around before I left. School is ten years old and looks modern and welcoming. All children in school uniform. Lots of bush surrounding the school. Undercover area enclosed. Oval being well used. Children's behaviour looked good. (CH 150900)

All on-site interviews were conducted in the Principal's office. This

generally gave a comfortable, quiet and uninterrupted environment, although

there were exceptions, especially at Burnley Primary School, where a

building program outside the office door made conversation difficult. The

familiar environment of the principal's office promoted confidence amongst

the interviewees, several of whom were visibly nervous about the process

before the interview started. Once underway, however, all principals were

easily able to discuss their conception of 'good' schools for the allotted hour.

After setting up the recording equipment, which consisted of a small tape-

recorder and a separate boundary microphone, a few minutes were taken to

outline the proposed structure of the interview, hand over a copy of the 'aide

memoire' questions and generally create a calm, non-threatening

atmosphere. There was specific mention made of the intended length of the

interview and emphasis was put on the fact that the interview was to be more

of a 'conversation' than a series of questions and answers.

The 'aide memoire' consisted of two identical laminated A4 cards, one for

the interviewee and one for the researcher. On the cards were six broad

questions dealing with the research topic: 'Western Australian government

primary school principals' conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' school'.

142

Each main question had several subsections consisting of clarifying questions. In each interview the 'aide memoire' sheets were referred to in the last ten minutes of the conversation. The sheet provided a checklist to ensure that the six important questions had been covered in the discussion. In no cases did the researcher have to resort to using this sheet to stimulate responses, and in most instances the general interview had dealt with most of the six questions before the sheet was reviewed at the end.

The 'aide memoire', which had been prepared to encourage some commonality of coverage in each interview, appeared to serve the purpose well, and remained unchanged throughout the interview phase. It was as follows:

(i) **Do principals develop concepts of a 'good' school?** Is it part of the process of being a school leader?

(ii) **How fluid are these concepts?** Do concepts of a 'good' school change over time, or from place to place? Are they altered to suit the current political conditions?

(iii) **How do these concepts measure up against those of the employer?** What is the influence of the Education Department's policies, the District Director's visits, or the numerous meetings and memos? Is there any tension here? Why?

(iv) **Do these concepts of a 'good' school face any threats or challenges?** Are there any pressures on the established concepts that may emanate from global educational trends, curriculum changes, Departmental policies, community attitudes, and staff reactions?

(v)   **Are concepts of good schools shared amongst colleagues?** Are 'good' schools something that is talked about at meetings? Are there fellow principals who hold similar concepts similar to yours? Can you identify other 'good' schools?

(vi)   **What examples are there of the actualisation of these concepts in this school?** Is the concept visible in the students' behaviour, the staff rituals, the reporting policy or the condition of the buildings? What is happening to support the concepts held? Are the concepts shared at meetings? Is there evidence of documents, charts, plans or signs, in and around the school, that articulate and support the concepts of a 'good' school?

At all times the interviewer attempted to assume the attitude of an interested and unbiased listener. It was necessary to make the whole process resemble an everyday conversation and to try and avoid leading the discussion in preferred directions. Use was made of Carspecken's (1996) list of responses to be adopted by the interviewer. These included bland encouragement, low-inference paraphrasing and active listening. Carspecken suggests that, towards the end of the interview, there is a need to introduce medium-inference paraphrasing in order to create discussion on some of the general perspectives that were emerging from the analysis of previous interviews. In the concluding segment of the interview high-inference paraphrasing was used to directly challenge the participant on some specific aspects of the 'good' schools' debate. To a degree, the 'aide memoire' assisted in this task of high-inference paraphrasing.

Though appearing to be quite a simple exercise, the interview is a highly complex affair, fraught with problems. Apart from the technical difficulties which can be (and were) experienced with the recording equipment, it was a challenge to allow the subjects to be "at ease and talk freely about their points of view" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.97). In particular, it was the attitude of the interviewer that was a critical aspect of the process. Using a human as the research instrument does bring in the problems of social interaction and in the interview "the way one responds to the interviewee is much more important than the wording of your questions" (Carspecken, 1996, p.158).

In the course of the 'good' schools interviews the researcher found it tempting to participate in the spirit of the discussion, or manipulate the discourse into a certain direction. Observer notes from the interview with Aaron Mustard, highlight the 'social interaction' aspects that create danger of bias or manipulation:

> Aaron seemed nervous about the interview and it took a while to fire up. The whole time it was a process of silences and my attempts to tie the whole thing together. (DB 040400)

Observer notes were made during the course of all the interviews. These notes were predominantly summaries of what was said, details of body language and attitude, and descriptions of artefacts that were complementing the interview. The observer notes were useful during the interview because they helped frame further questions. They were also indispensable after the interview when they provided clarification and substance to the interview

transcripts. The notes helped to recreate the atmosphere of the interview and gave clues to meanings and motives.

Each interview was transcribed in full. The transcription was returned to the participants for checking and modification. Very few of the transcripts were changed but the opportunity was made for the removal or addition of any material. As each transcript was completed analysis of the content commenced. In a qualitative research such as this, data analysis contributes to the actual direction the data collection and the research itself will take. It is also important to commence data analysis promptly to avoid creating a backlog of difficult and demanding work.

<u>Documents</u>: Various documentary material was gathered whilst the interviewer was in each school conducting the interviews. Examples of such documents included photographs of significant events, policies, surveys conducted with staff and parents, planning papers, examples of children's work, and communication booklets and leaflets. From Glenbowden Primary, for instance, came an edition of the 'Glenbowden News'. This four page newsletter gave an insight to some of the values and attitudes which provided the moral framework for the school. It speaks of the classrooms as being "a buzzing, interesting, active-learning environment with excellent teaching occurring."

Strauss (1987, p.1) speaks of documentation as an enrichment for interview data, providing the "conceptual density" that is required for authentic research. Thus, whilst not all schools supplied supporting documentation there was always a rich display of artifacts in foyers and on the walls of

offices and reception areas. Such displays enhanced the understanding of each particular school. In North Trenton, it was a framed aerial photograph of the school showing the centenary gathering of all the students in 1998, that caught the visitor's eye. This was a school which valued its history. At Dewberry Primary there were pictures of special events, highlighting a specialist program in performing arts. At the Mt Nardon School the waiting room was enlivened with pinup boards covered in children's art, whilst at Merrivale School there was a little museum featuring a beautifully preserved school report from before WW11, together with other cultural and historical memorabilia

Observer notes, memos and journals:

i   Observer notes. These were largely generated during the interview sessions. They contained the main discussion points from the interview, as well as comments about body language and illustrative expressions. These observer notes were valuable during the interview to help frame questions and recall comments. Observer notes made during the interview with Steven Urlich included the following cryptic entries:

> Interaction between parents and teachers.
> Parents – role in a good school. As partners.
> Leading and lagging * Do parents set agenda? (GB 220900)

The rough observer notes, made at each interview, were rewritten and supplemented with other details gleaned about the school. These additional details included comments about the physical appearance of the school, school processes, school history, socio-economic levels and special school projects. The supplemented observer notes for Burnley Primary School, where the original 65 year-old buildings were being renovated and extended,

helped provide the 'thick descriptions' (Punch, 1998, p.192) so important to qualitative research. One of these notes was as follows:

> The new entry was still a mass of building materials. Office areas were huge. Computers were still not working. Went into Win's office. All new equipment but still the old principal's table. Started the interview. Distracted because Win kept looking over my head at the building chaos outside. (BN 030500)

By the end of the interview process the observer notes for each school, together with web-based school summaries taken from the internet and the transcripts of the interviews, were placed into files, one per school. The observer notes complemented the data from other areas and were essential components of the analysis procedures.
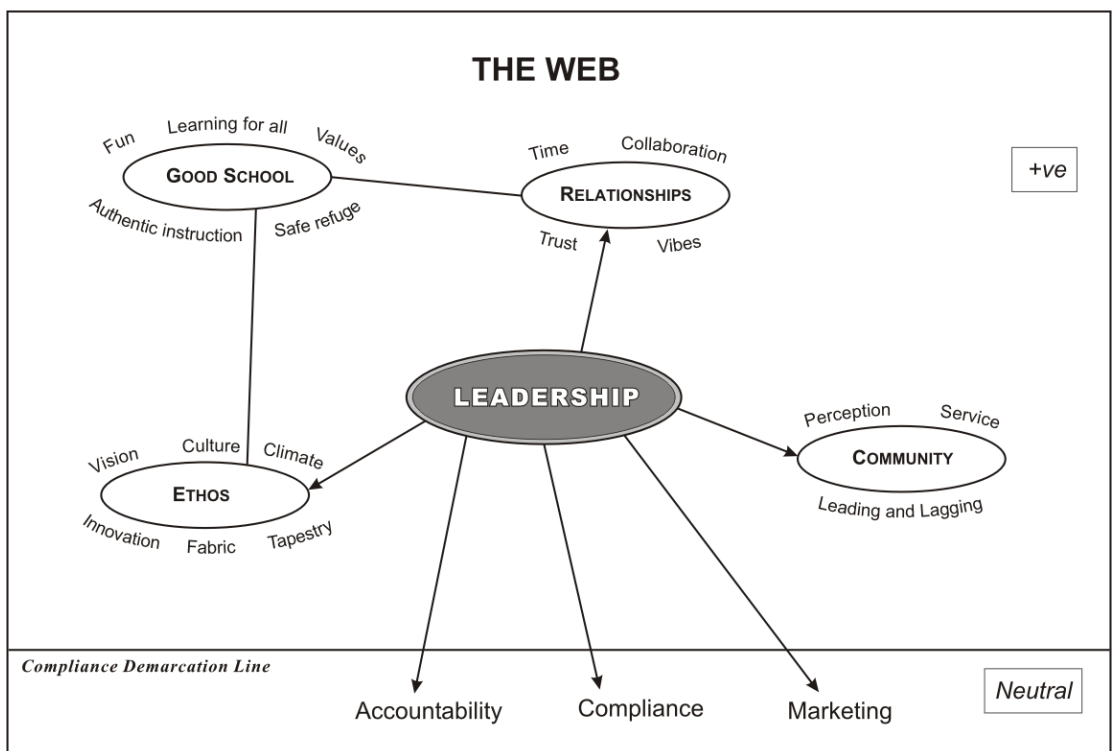
ii   Memos. Memos were kept separately from the observer notes because they served an entirely different purpose. Whereas observer notes recorded details of what was seen or heard in a way that avoided analysis or opinion, memos became 'ideas' about the data. Strauss (1987) explains that memos can begin merely as operational notes or even reminder notes, but would progress from these personal annotations to become speculative and analytical. He urges that researchers "write memos regularly – often from the first days of a research project – and in close conjunction with the data collecting and coding" (Strauss, 1987, p.109).

A memo written in October, 1999, prior to the commencement of interviews falls into what Punch (1998, p.206) categorises as a 'personal' memo:

> Declining standard of teachers. Seems almost impossible for a teacher to be sacked. Similarly it seems almost impossible for a teacher to be celebrated. There are thousands of good things going on in schools but we don't hear about them. (M 171099)

By mid-November, 2000, the memos had become "substantive' (Punch, 1998) and besides involving conceptual discussion, had complex attempts at diagrammatic presentation. Diagrams, according to Fettermann (1998, p.496), are very valuable to qualitative research because they help highlight patterns and clarify themes. The following is an example (M 191100)of one such diagram developed :

Fig 2 Diagrammatic Memo

THE WEB

Fun Learning for all Values

GOOD SCHOOL

Authentic instruction Safe refuge

Time Collaboration

RELATIONSHIPS

Trust Vibes

+ve

LEADERSHIP

Vision Culture Climate

ETHOS

Innovation Fabric Tapestry

Perception Service

COMMUNITY

Leading and Lagging

Compliance Demarcation Line

Accountability Compliance Marketing

Neutral

Memos provide a means whereby the researcher can record all manner of ideas and inspirations. It allows progression beyond mere description and encourages the development of hunches and insight (Strauss, 1987).

iii   Journals: Two journals were compiled to provide additional 'experiential' data. As Strauss argues (1987, p.11), they "provide a wealth of provisional suggestions for making comparisons, finding variations, and sampling widely on theoretical grounds." The two journals are each records

of a significant period spent in unique school environments. They were entitled the 'Endeavour Journal' and the 'Duxbury Journal'.

The Endeavour Journal was based on developments at the researcher's own school, Endeavour Primary, one of the newer schools in the Joondalup Education District. The appointment of the researcher to this school was coincidental to the commencement of interviews for the 'good' schools study. Through a series of unfortunate occurrences Endeavour primary had been without a long-term principal since February 1997 and by February 2000 had been classified by the District Director as an 'under-achieving' school. Creating a journal based on the subsequent developments in this school helped give perspective to many aspects of 'good' schools raised in interviews and developed through the literature. In particular, Endeavour Primary displayed interesting dimensions of apparently 'good' schools such as ethos, vision, leadership, collaboration and change.

The Endeavour Journal commenced on 27 June 2000, recording the first visit to the school by the researcher after his mid-year appointment:

> Place has got potential, lots to do. Temporary principal says there were power bases and they needed to be broken up. Seems to have done that. Still more changes to staff next term. School needs stability. Could be worse. (En 27060o)

For this complex, unusual and interesting primary school the return to leadership stability did help create at least the illusion of progress. Regular journal entries recorded the various triumphs and tribulations of the school. The last entry, two years, 13000 words and thirty six entries after the first, suggested that the achievement of 'good' school status was still a long way off.

> Generally we all need to work harder as a team. It isn't happening yet. We should have had block meetings more often but we just don't seem to get time. (En 230602)

150

The Duxbury Journal was produced over the course of only one year, 1996. This journal contains the embryonic inspiration for the 'good' schools research. It records the researcher's perceptions of primary school life in two disadvantaged, but seemingly 'good' schools in the North of England. The entries to the Duxbury Journal were made on a daily basis and, although the researcher was teaching in the schools, the perspective was also that of an 'outsider'.

Initial entries in the Duxbury Journal document a two month appointment in a LEA controlled public school near Manchester. Though the school's ethos and character seemed 'good', teaching was difficult:

> Afternoon a disaster. Did games. Kids argued, fell over, cried, refused to participate, terrible sportsmanship … bell went. Nowhere near ready. Have to pack up earlier in future. Left school shattered. (Du 290296)

Later entries documenting a nine month appointment to a grant-aided church school near Blackburn, reveal less hardship and a similar basic goodness in the school's management and philosophy. In November the school was inspected, and the OFSTED week proved to be a traumatic and epiphanic event:

> At school by 8.00. Probably the last there. All inspectors there. Awful sense of foreboding. Quick meeting, assembly then away … They are scaring the teachers. Don't seem to want to find good things … hell-bent on criticism. (Du 111196)

Both the Endeavour and Duxbury Journals record experential data that has been used extensively to help frame this thesis.

iv   Focus Groups: In a qualitative study such as this, where the topic is so broad, the task so value-laden, and the background reading initially so

sparse and non-specific, it is valuable to discuss the research plan and the subsequent findings with other teachers and principals. Fortunately, the researcher belonged to a long-established collegiate group. Collegiate groups consist of about 10 to 15 educationalists, who have formed themselves into clusters to meet regularly under a semi-formal set of guidelines. Most collegiate groups meet four to six times a year and engage in professional development and shared problem-solving.

The researcher's collegiate group provided an ideal forum in which to discuss the viability of conducting research on 'good' schools. The thirteen-member group was also invaluable in helping to develop the 'aide memoire'or interview guide that was subsequently used in the fifteen interviews with school principals.

Throughout the three years of the research and recording process for this thesis, the collegiate group remained an indispensable 'sounding-board' for the researcher's developing understandings and propositions. With the research nearing completion, and with final propositions formulated, the collegiate group provided the personnel for a final focus group meeting.

All participants were presented with a draft summary of the research findings some weeks prior to the meeting. The tentative propositions formed the basic agenda of the meeting, each being discussed in turn. The researcher acted as facilitator, notes were made and the whole session was tape-recorded. After this meeting, the notes and transcript of the interaction were used to further modify the draft conclusions of the research. This final focus group session

was extremely valuable in that it confirmed the veracity of the general findings. The meeting also brainstormed potential areas for further research.

Besides using his collegiate group as a focus for development and refinement of his thesis on 'good' schools, the researcher also made several presentations to larger groups of professional educators. One of these presentations was made to a principals' conference in the Perth Education District. This talk was entitled 'School effectiveness and improvement – the grand delusion'. Another presentation, given at a Statewide conference of Western Australian Primary Principals, gave greater focus to the exact topic of the research, being entitled 'Good schools – where perception is reality'.

These talks, and an associated round of presentations on the OFSTED inspection system, had similar benefits to those provided by the focus group. The preparation of the material helped crystallise ideas and the subsequent discussion helped raise the level of conceptual understanding. The debates were also excellent 'reality-checks' when enthusiastic academia overwhelmed apparent reality. Focus groups put the study into perspective and helped correct any tendency towards 'nearsightedness' (Bogden & Biklen, 1992).

Data Analysis

The interview process creates an almost overwhelming amount of data. A one-hour 'conversation' becomes a typed single spaced transcript that spreads to ten or twelve pages. The immediate challenge, which begins after the transcription of the very first interview, is to reduce this plethora of text to something manageable and meaningful. To delay the start of the data

analysis is unwise and unhelpful because future interviews and future purposive sampling of interview sites are dependent on the information that is gleaned from the data. For more practical purposes, delaying data analysis creates an intolerable workload for the researcher.

The reduction process generates the creation of patterns, clusters, themes and categories. It involves looking into the data for similarities and regularities, building "a firm knowledge base in bits and pieces; asking questions, listening, probing, comparing and contrasting, synthesizing and evaluating information" (Fettermann, 1998, p.498). In essence, the analysis is a hermeneutic circular deconstruction and rebuilding. The raw data is broken down into its constituent parts then recombined into something different and more complex. That construction, in its turn, is shattered and rebuilt, gradually producing a higher level of understanding. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) compare this data analysis process to the playing of the piano accordion. Pulling the sides of the accordion apart creates the conditions under which a tune can be played as the sides are squeezed together. Different tunes can be played conditional on the fact that the accordion is pulled apart each time. Similarly, pulling apart the interview data allows the researcher to create a variety of new conceptual 'tunes'.

The 'tunes' or conceptual patterns created in the deconstruction and reconstruction process, must be new. Harvey (1990) refers to the rebuilding phase of data analysis as 'reconceptualisation' because the various pieces of data have created something original and something that was unknown before the research began. Data analysis in qualitative research should allow

the researcher to "spring free from being captured by the respondent's views of events" (Strauss, 1997, p.160). The researcher must also avoid the trap of trying to fit the data into an existing proposition or theory. This isn't an exercise in "jamming your data into preformed conceptual schemes" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.162). Original material collected from interviews must form the groundwork for the emergent propositions that are the heart and purpose of the qualitative thesis.

The theoretical underpinning of the data analysis method used in this 'good' schools study is grounded theory. Grounded theory has its origins in the work of G.H. Mead and the 'Chicago School' of Sociology, in the period 1920-1930 (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). However, grounded theory as a documented research process came into being as a result of the efforts of Glaser and Strauss in the mid 1960's. Their first description of the method was contained in a book they wrote, aptly titled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This book was published in 1967 and it was followed in quick succession by several other texts on grounded theory written separately by each of the researchers. One of the more valuable of these subsequent books is *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) written by Strauss in collaboration with Juliet Corbin. Much of the grounded theory research conducted by Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, which formed the basics of the process, was related to studies of dying patients in hospitals. It was a method of research which could deal with complex social issues and it was an alternative to the enduring emphasis on quantitative methods more suited to theory verification.

Grounded theory is not, in itself, a theory. It is a method of data analysis applicable to social research where no preconceived theory is available or desired. It is a document series of tasks and stages which, when completely worked through, can produce key concepts and central propositions. The concepts produced from the data are termed codes. Codes are arrived at by selecting an element of data and asking "What is this an example of?" (Strauss, 1987 p.61). The initial skill is in being able to break down the original data into basic meaningful parts. These may be words, phrases or sentences. The next task is to classify these basic elements into a series of categories or codes. Though the classical process of grounded theory has three levels of coding, this current research on 'good' schools, only uses the first level, termed by Strauss 'open' coding. Open coding is described as breaking down, examining, comparing and categorising data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.61).

The element of 'comparing' one piece of data with another explains why the grounded theory process is called the "constant comparative" method. The ability to compare and conceptualise becomes easier with practice and is also enhanced by professional experience in the sociological area being studied. This tacit, professional or experiential knowledge, is termed "theoretical sensitivity". Theoretical sensitivity allows the researcher to develop a wide range of hunches or concepts about what the data means.

Turning to this particular thesis on 'good' schools, it is possible to isolate the stages in the grounded theory process that were used to expedite the transition between individual principal interviews and the eventual formation

156

of five key propositions. Paramount in this process was the initial emphasis that 'good' schools was an emergent study. In the beginning there were no assumptions as to what would be discovered, no theory to be proven, and no particular books or journals to be read. The challenge was to keep an open mind.

There was, however, a good deal of experiential knowledge. The researcher is a school principal of long standing. His career spanned many schools in a variety of areas, including England. On his return to Australia, the researcher had been merit selected to a challenging position in what had once been a 'good' government primary school. Seventeen years teaching, together with a subsequent twenty-year career as a principal, gave a depth of knowledge that provided a high level of 'theoretical sensitivity'. The researcher may have come to the 'good' schools' topic with an open mind, but he did not come with an empty head. He also came as a well qualified observer, able to activate the three basic techniques for gathering information, "experiencing, inquiring and examining" (Wolcott, 1992, p.22).

The 'experiencing' element of this information gathering triumvirate had come from a long and varied teaching career. The 'inquiring' section was the fifteen interviews conducted with a purposive sample of fifteen government primary school principals. These interviews provided most of the raw data that was the basis of the final propositions. Some secondary data were gleaned from an ever-widening collection of literature which largely reflected issues raised in the interviews. Grounded theory was the 'examining' process used to translate the interview data into fundamental

reconceptualisations (Harvey, 1990, p.23) or codes. These new concepts were further refined into categories and proposition statements.

For this 'good' schools thesis each of the fifteen central interviews was transcribed in full. The transcriptions were then checked for accuracy with the interviewee. Once checked, the data could then be examined and broken down into separate elements. This was a laborious and difficult task as there were around, on average, more than four hundred lines of text for each interview. Generally, separate data items consisted of anything from a few words, to several lines. Kel Yardley's interview, for example produced five hundred and twenty two lines of text. These lines, in turn, were converted into eighty seven phrases or sentences, each of which needed to be translated into concepts or codes. Thus, line 46 to line 54 in Yardley's transcript produced four key concepts, namely; 'relationships', 'caring', 'enjoyment', and 'safe haven':

> And I am not just trying to hide my head in the sand but if teachers aren't prepared to put ***relationships*** first and let the kid know that they like them and the kid trusts the teacher to be a ***caring*** and warm provider to them, then everything else happens after that and nobody learns from people they hate. Adults don't learn from people they dislike. If you encounter some bloke that thinks you're an idiot then chances are you close your mind to everything he says or does, or whatever. And it's the same with kids. So essential they have to like where they are and ***enjoy*** the school and enjoy the people that are around and feel ***safe*** and provided for. And then everything else happens after that.

From these nine lines of text, deconstruction produced five critical phrases:

> Line 47 [teachers should be] … prepared to put *relationships* [with children] first…
> Line 47/48 [teachers] …let the kid know they *like* them …
> Line 48 … the kid trusts the teacher to be a *caring* and warm provider…
> Line 49 …nobody learns from people they *hate*.

> Line 52/53 [children] … essential …to *like* where they are and *enjoy* the school and *enjoy* the people that are around and *feel safe* and provided for …

These phrases were set out on one column of a page. There was also a column which identified the line, and a column which was headed 'comment'. The notes in the 'comment' column attempted to identify a concept which related to the text. In the final analysis some of these initial concepts were discarded or combined with others.

Key Phrase	Line	Comment
[Teachers should be] …prepared to put relationships [with children] first…	47	*Relationships* Need to have the correct atmosphere in a school before you can get anything done. Children can't learn if they are not comfortable
[Teachers] …let the kid know that they like them…	47/48	*Relationships* Relationships between the teacher and the child. Child has to feel liked and valued

Initially each transcript produced a wide variety of new concepts, or comments, each of which was recorded on a separate (20x12mm) card (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p.35). As the analysis of transcripts continued, however, concepts began to repeat themselves. Soon the concept cards were filled with repetitive concepts originating from a variety of sources. By the fifteenth interview, no new concept categories were being created. In grounded theory, this eventual diminution of new material is termed 'theoretical saturation.' (Punch, 1998, p.220).

By the time theoretical saturation had been reached, there was a boxed set of seventy nine separate concept card groups. All of these initial or basic concepts, had originated from the 'empirical indicators' (Strauss, 1987, p.25), which were the key words, phrases or sentences of the transcripts. This is the fundamental basis of grounded theory which "emphasises the need for

developing many concepts and their linkages in order to capture a great deal of the variation that characterises the central phenomena studied during any particular research project" (Strauss, 1987, p.7).

The seventy nine separate concepts formed the first part of the data analysis process used in this study. The concepts were written onto one side of the coding cards, whilst the various notes that the researcher had created, filled the reverse side. A concept such as number two 'Leadership', occupied a group of nine cards, whereas concept number seventy six, 'School Plan', occupied only two cards. Some concepts such as 'Resources' and 'Making the Time' only had a couple of entries on a single card. It was obvious that some of these initial codes needed to be abandoned, because they were not significant, or because they should be combined with other codes which they were replicating. Combining and perhaps abandoning concepts proved stressful and difficult. Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p.35) suggest that a researcher using grounded theory must have a great tolerance of ambiguity.

Grounded theory involves various stages of coding and recoding in order to reach a higher level of abstraction. Eventually this recoding leads to the development of a core category central theory. The research on 'good' schools only used the first level of grounded theory coding, which Strauss terms 'open coding'. Open coding is the first stage of 'one-upping' (Punch, 1998) and it involves the initial coding and then categorising of data.

The seventy nine concepts developed from the analysis of fifteen interview transcripts in the first part of the open coding process needed to be recombined into a smaller number of categories. This was done by

amalgamating or eliminating concepts already identified. Categorising is similar to conceptualising. It follows the rules laid down for open coding by Strauss and Corbin (1990). There is a need to ask questions about the data – What is this? – What does it represent? These questions were asked in relation to all the concepts developed. As an example, concept four was 'Parents Expectations'. If the researcher asked the question, 'What is this?' a new category may suggest itself. In this instance the new category was 'Leading and Lagging'. 'Leading and Lagging' represents a higher order concept which is more abstract than the original concept. 'Leading and Lagging' was a category which could draw together a large number of lower order concepts.

Data analysis operating under the auspices of grounded theory, is both regulated and complex. The method of analysis is designed to unpack data into the smallest meaningful units, then recombine them using a process of constant comparison. This action will produce a range of new and more abstract insights about the phenomena under scrutiny. Grounded theory is a process that is based on induction rather than deduction, allowing the final propositions to emerge from the original data collected. Strauss (1987, p.278) describes the emergent nature of grounded theory as being akin to an 'act of faith' which must be made, otherwise "the game is over before it begins."

For this thesis on 'good' schools, the 'act of faith' meant engaging in little prior reading, though, as noted in previous chapters, the trauma of an OFSTED inspection and the inspiring writings of Ball and Rose, gave some

broad perspective to the task at hand. The emergence of concepts from the transcripts and the eventual creation of five key categories provided some reward for the researcher's 'act of faith' and 'tolerance of ambiguity'.

The completion of the one-stage data analysis process for the study on 'good' schools, the creation of five key categories or themes, was facilitated by the development of propositional statements about each key category (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Material could only be admitted to that category if it could satisfy the requirements of the statement (Carspecken, 1996). Thus, the propositional statement encompassing of the category 'Leading and Lagging' was; 'Principals consider that a 'good' school nurtures a symbiotic relationship with its local community with a view to meliorating educational change'. Many of the initial concepts derived from the transcripts of interviews could be clustered around this key category. These included 'Parents Expectations', 'Leading and Lagging', 'Values', and 'The Societal Web'. Similarly, other concepts were drawn around the four other propositional statements.

Thus the process used to create the five key categories of propositional statements in this thesis on 'good' schools consisted of initial data collection, creation of concepts, development of broader categories, and final formulation of the five key propositional statements. Each of the clusters of data was formed by asking the question – What is this an example of? Some concepts, which appeared to be quite significant at the start of the data analysis process were abandoned because, in the end, they did not contribute to the final propositions.

Whilst the process of creating concepts and categories was taking place, the researcher was creating memos which were both reflective and constructive. A memo from 16 July, 2000 expresses frustration with trying to keep the conceptualisation of transcripts abstract enough:

> My categories are often not concepts. They are more explanations and rewordings. I need to go <u>up</u> a conceptual level. The category needs to point to a <u>concept</u> not a summary (M160700).

By November of the same year some progress had been made and memos were posing some eventual propositions that might be emerging:

> <u>Ethos</u> comes up over and over. Need to sort this term out from culture/vision/climate. Ethos seems like a really useful term. I like the term, 'good vibes'(M191100).

These memos form part of the audit trail for the 'trustworthiness' of qualitative research, but more specifically they aid the development of higher order concept-categories and eventually the propositions. Memos made during the coding phrase of data analysis hint at possible similarities between pieces of data and general directions in which the whole research is heading. Some memos took the form of diagrams and in this format they were exceptionally valuable.

The grounded theory process, whilst appearing linear and lock-step, was anything but that. At any one time several different activities were being carried on. Whilst analysis of initial transcripts was being done, more interviews were being planned or conducted. Data analysis helped to direct the future format of interviews and future purposive sampling. The emergence of basic concepts created areas for literature research especially in response to reflective memos. There was a constant movement between

the 'dipping' into the data for intensive analysis, and skipping over the transcripts and codes for broader generalisations (Punch, 1998). In the end it is the sustained immersion and continual overlapping that makes grounded theory such a powerful process, and which creates such a fertile environment for the emergence of propositions.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative or naturalistic research methods and philosophies, as applied to this particular research into 'good' schools, do not easily meet the trustworthy criteria which are applied to quantitative studies. Quantitative research has processes in place that guarantee findings to be externally and internally valid, reliable and objective. Sampling procedures, in particular, are much more rigorous and defined than those in qualitative projects.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p.49) describe qualitative research as seeking "to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning". This is a very different philosophy to that offered by the positivistic, quantitative approach. The differences are dramatic according to Lincoln and Guba (1995, p.37). Qualitative research is able to cope with the idea of multiple realities, whereas the positivists search out a single truth that can be applied in all situations. From this major philosophical difference comes the quantitative preoccupation with the ideas of general universal laws and the ability to discover them. The philosophical difference creates a methodological difference in that quantitative research is primarily concerned with deduction whilst qualitative research relies mainly on induction.

Thus, qualitative research, heavily preoccupied with constructed meaning, eager to use the researcher as the instrument and happy to accept context-bound hypotheses, appears to be vague and lacking in discipline. It is unable to apply the traditional trustworthiness checks to its work. This is not to say it isn't trustworthy – it is trustworthy in other ways.

Lincoln and Guba (1995) suggest alternative terms of trustworthiness that should be applied to qualitative research. These terms are "credibility", "transferability", "dependability" and "confirmability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p.240). These categories are more in keeping with the philosophy of naturalism and mirror trustworthy terms in quantitative research. "Dependability", for instance, replaces "reliability". There can be no "reliability" in the qualitative process because naturalistic research admits to being time and context-bound and thus not able to be replicated under different contextual conditions.

For this thesis on 'good' schools there was a determined attempt to generate "credibility". This was approached in two distinct ways. First, there was prolonged engagement where the researcher took time to generate an understanding of the culture and context of schools in general, and of the interview schools in particular. In theory, this extends experience with the phenomenon being examined, minimises distortion in results and produces a depth of knowledge. This 'good' schools research involved a series of fifteen interviews, each of a minimum period of one hour. Additional time was spent on site studying the physical context of the school itself. Then the interviews were transcribed and subjected to coding and categorising.

Coding became another prolonged engagement with the data. Finally, there were focus group interviews, clarifying discussions with respondents and discussions with academic and professional colleagues. All this, as well as experiential knowledge, provided a high level of understanding of culture and context, and hence, high level credibility.

To supplement prolonged engagement, the aspect of triangulation added to credibility. Triangulation involved the matching up of data through other sources and by other methods. For this thesis, triangulation was provided through the use of documents collected in the interview process. There was also the researcher's own journal of developments observed and experienced at his own school over a two year period. Triangulation looks at trying to check that data have been delivered without bias or corruption. Using several sources of data increases credibility.

The 'good' schools study used peer debriefing to further enhance credibility. In the forums of presentation of papers associated with the research and regular discussions of results at professional meetings, the propositions developed by this study were exposed to the questioning of 'disinterested' peers. The presentations and meetings involved in a range of personnel, including university tutors, Department of Education officials, District Directors, and fellow principals. Peer debriefings test the inquirer's biases and challenge working hypotheses.

Negative case analysis improves credibility of a research paper because it challenges all propositions that are discovered. This technique involved pursuing examples that appear not to fit the evolving propositions. Grounded

theory accommodates this technique through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling became apparent towards the end of the interview cycle as principals were selected on the basis that they could add something different to the research. The search for different sites became more and more deliberate as the researcher sought to "specifically collect data to fill the gaps in the theoretical formulation" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.141). In the end there was a wide variety of types of schools and categories of principals covered by the interviews. Despite seeking out quite radical sites to challenge the developing propositions there was very little change to the final outcome. Principals' conceptions of 'good' schools appeared remarkably similar notwithstanding the variety of environments and circumstances.

Member checking was the final technique used to enhance credibility. Here all facets of initial data , analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions were rigorously checked with respondents and panels. The respondents were able to review their personal input as well as comment on the veracity of the study's overall findings. The member-check panels (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p.315) made up of educational leaders, and often described as focus groups, were given copies of the researcher's tentative final report. Meetings of these panels discussed all aspects of the findings and gave feedback that melded the final presentation of this study. Member checks are seen as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p.314).

A second "trustworthiness" characteristic of qualitative research is "transferability". This aspect is examined in place of "external validity" which can only be applied to quantitative approaches. The naturalistic philosophy doesn't encompass the concept of universal truth but instead suggests that propositions discovered are time and context-bound. This 'good' schools thesis has produced results that are credible for the schools and principals involved. The question of whether such results can be transferred to other similar contexts, or to all contexts, is for others to judge. The research project reported here has provided 'thick' description of contexts and processes in order that other researchers might consider applications of the findings to their own situations. Such application should be more in the form of new research rather than direct transfer of findings. Transferability is a vexing question in qualitative research.

Perhaps the notions of "dependability" and "confirmability" represent the most formal of the trustworthiness measures applied to qualitative research projects. Lincoln and Guba (1995) emphasise the importance of the "audit-trail" whereby raw records give a comprehensive foundation to the study findings. For all qualitative research, and specifically for this thesis on 'good' schools, there is an extensive cache of information which has been refined and assembled into the final product. This information includes field notes, personal notes, journals, schedules, memos, diagrams, tape recording transcripts of interviews and copies of documents. The long trail from the first tentative notes to the final carefully crafted propositions must be intact and available in order that the research can be confirmed as dependable.

In the end, qualitative research can aspire to credibility and dependability. By its own philosophy, it would never claim to be 'valid' other than for its own unique and specific setting. We must accept that "no amount of member checking, triangulation, persistent observation, auditing or whatever can ever compel; it can at best persuade" (Lincoln & Guba, 1995, p.329).

Conclusion

This chapter dealt with the research design and methodology of the study. First the theoretical underpinnings of the research were described and justified. Next there was a description of the research setting, and an explanation of who the participants were, and how they were chosen. This was followed by an account of how data were gathered, with an emphasis on semi structured interviews. A copy of the 'aide memoir' was included in this account. The chapter went on to present details of data analysis and to examine the process of grounded theory. Finally there was a brief section on the establishment of trustworthiness.

The next two chapters will present the findings of the research in the form of five propositional statements. These statements will be linked to one key proposition indicating what principals conceive to be at the heart of 'good' schools. A description of this superordinate proposition will be the sole focus of Chapter Five.