

**WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPALS' THEORISING
ON 'GOOD' SCHOOLS: AN INTERPRETIST STUDY**

By

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ABSTRACT

Educational restructuring processes have occurred in many countries around the world. Not only have these processes changed the way schools and school systems are organised and administered, but they have also affected the way schooling is perceived. In particular the school has become an important element in the national struggle to remain competitive in the global economy. Consequently it is likely that the conceptions of 'good' schools held by government, big business and the community at large are at variance with the conceptions held by educators in general and school principals in particular.

This thesis arose out of an experience with an OFSTED inspection whereby school effectiveness criteria appeared to dictate the identification of 'good' schools. Similar measurement criteria influence the inspectorial procedures for schools in Western Australia. The use of such measurement technologies raises two important questions. The first concerns the nature of the descriptor 'good'. The thesis postulates that 'good' is a value judgement and that what is seen as good is what is valued. This gives rise to the second question – good for whom?

To examine these questions this thesis takes the form of a qualitative emergent study essentially generating data from semi-structured interviews with fifteen primary school principals in Western Australia. Other data were provided through collected documents, focus group discussions, journal and memo writing, and a study of the relevant literature. Data analysis was conducted using the framework of grounded theory.

Emerging from the data were five propositional statements, each assembled under a descriptive theme. It was illustrative to arrange these themes in the diagrammatic format of a 'good' school's puzzle, each thematic piece interlocking with another. The puzzle has one central piece, without which the other four pieces cannot satisfactorily be assembled.

The central piece of the 'good' schools' puzzle is the superordinate propositional statement presented under the theme 'Weaving the Fabric'. This proposition refers to the need for 'good' schools to be based on sound values and beliefs. These values and beliefs can be termed the school ethos. Complementing this key theme are the other four subordinate propositional pieces; 'Walking the Talk', 'Producing the Goods', 'Leading and Lagging', and 'Seeing is Believing'. The propositions assembled under these themes relate to leadership, accountability, change and reputation.

This thesis takes the stance that the school is a philosophical manifestation rather than a physical or material construct. The thesis uses as touchstones Stephen Ball's paper entitled *Good School/Bad School: Paradox and Fabrication* (Ball, 1997), and the educational journey of Mike Rose illuminated in his book *Possible Lives* (Rose, 1995). These seminal texts complement the data collected in this current research and highlight the ephemeral, changeable and paradoxical nature of schools. Such

characteristics, echoing through the thesis, carry a message which is both explanatory and cautionary, especially in regards to current attempts to quantify the output of individual schools. State and national testing of students, and inspectorial assessment of teachers and educational institutions, need to be approached with prudence and understanding. The core values of a school, it is proposed, are better indicators of a 'good' school than academic outcomes.

This study creates a variety of implications for education. At the level of theory this thesis rejects the current belief that school effectiveness research criteria can be used for the purposes of school measurement and school improvement. At the level of policy the thesis has implications in regards to accountability, marketisation, parent choice and merit-selection of staff. For education generally, there is support given to the underlying principles of the new *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council, 1998) which is being introduced into Western Australian schools. The thesis urges teachers to consider the importance of values and beliefs to their teaching, whilst also promoting techniques of developmental learning. In regards to principals and school leaders there is encouragement to collaborate, and reassurance that the complexity and 'messiness' of schools is a natural characteristic of worthwhile education. Ultimately this thesis proposes that the concept of 'good' schools continues to be contested by educators, rather than be monopolised by others with economic and political agendas.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any university. I also certify that to the best of my knowledge this dissertation does not contain any material previously written or published by another person without due reference being made to this fact in the text.

David J Bryant

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The submission of this thesis concludes a long journey that originated in a small school on the outskirts of Lancastrian Blackburn. It was a journey inspired by dynamic Headteacher Helen Smith, who, with her amazing staff, ran the best of 'good' schools. An epiphany if ever there was one.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
DECLARATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
FIGURES	ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction	1
Background.....	1
Central Topic	3
Relevance	5
Key Questions	9
Justification.....	10
Scope	23
Methodology.....	27
Conclusion.....	28
CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTEXT	32
Introduction	32
England and Wales	33
Unites States of America	45
Australia	57
Western Australia	72
Conclusion.....	88
CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW	91
Introduction	91
Ball and Rose and the Meaning of ‘Good’	92
Restructuring	99
School Effectiveness	106
School Improvement	114
Accountability	116
School Culture	122
Conclusion.....	131
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	132
Introduction	132
Theoretical Underpinnings	132
The Research Setting.....	136
Selecting Participants	137
Procedures for Gathering Data	140
Data Analysis.....	153
Trustworthiness	164
Conclusion.....	169

CHAPTER FIVE: THE SUPERORDINATE PROPOSITION.....	170
Introduction	170
Weaving the Fabric.....	172
Ethos	176
Positively-oriented school environment	182
Authentic processes	187
Caring inclinations.....	191
School community.....	195
Conclusion.....	196
CHAPTER SIX: THE SUBORDINATE PROPOSITION.....	199
Introduction	199
Walking the Talk	200
Dynamic leadership	202
Enabled vision	205
Challenge of ambiguity	209
Productive relationships	213
Quality teaching and learning.....	217
Producing the Goods	219
External testing.....	220
Self-assessment.....	227
Transparent accountability	232
Child-centred teaching and learning.....	236
Leading and Lagging.....	240
Nurturing relationships.....	242
Symbiotic relationships	247
Educational change.....	251
Seeing is Believing.....	253
Sound reputation.....	256
Quality teaching and learning.....	259
Marketisation.....	261
Attitude	264
Appearance	266
Public opinion.....	268
Conclusion.....	270
CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	273
Introduction	273
Summary.....	274
The Research Findings and Matters of Generalizability	290
Implications of the Research Findings for Theoretical Literature.....	292
Implications of the Research Findings for Policy Makers	296
Implications of the Research Findings for Practice.....	301
Implications for curriculum.....	301
Implications for teaching.....	303
Implications for leadership	305
Implications for teacher education	307
Implications of the Research Findings for Further Research.....	310
Conclusions	312

REFERENCES	315
APPENDICES.....	328
Appendix I – The Endeavour ethos document 270609	328
Appendix II – The West Bloomfield Parent Survey	330

FIGURES

FIGURE 1	Profile of Participants.....	138
FIGURE 2	Diagrammatic Memo.....	149
FIGURE 3	The ‘Good’ Schools Puzzle.....	171