

School community leadership: the perspective of primary school principal.

Abstract

This article focuses on the principal's role in school community leadership. In doing so it provides an account of a study that explores this issue in the context of Catholic primary schooling within one rural diocese in Australia. The impetus for this study was a realisation that while there is a policy expectation within the diocese that the principal nurture the school as community, meeting this expectation was proving to be challenging. Consequently, this study sought to document principals' perspectives on the Catholic primary school as community and their role as school community leaders. Here the intention was to develop a more informed and sophisticated understanding of this dimension of school leadership leading to recommendations for further policy and practice for primary schools within this diocese.

Introduction

"Community" is one of the keywords of education which educators continue to invoke. In the early 1900s, Dewey promoted the view that classrooms should be genuine communities. A century later, Sergiovanni (1994) proposed that the metaphor for school should change from "formal organisation" to "community" (p.xx) with schools being organised "around relationships and the felt interdependencies that nurture them" (p.4). Today, phrases such as *community decision-making*, *community standards*, *learning communities* and *communities of practice* are widely used in education, suggesting an underlying, unquestioned idea that schools should be communities of some sort as well as integrated with larger communities of which they are a part.

This idea of the school as community is reflected in the concern for school development within one rural diocese in Australia. Within this diocese there are thirty-four primary schools and, for over a decade, there have been policy expectations that these primary schools function as communities (Catholic Education Office, 2002, 2004). Most recently, the draft policy document *Foundational Beliefs and Practices of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Lismore: The Essential Framework* (Catholic Education Office, 2006) identified "community" as one of five foundational beliefs and practices in diocesan schools. However, the implementation of this policy direction has proved problematic. In

conversations with principals following the release of this policy document, it became obvious that both individually and collectively, these principals did not have a clear understanding of the Catholic school as community and the role of the principal in community leadership. Consequently, this study was designed to develop a more informed and sophisticated understanding of the primary principals' perspectives on the Catholic school as community and the role of the principal in community leadership with the intention of informing policy and practice.

The Literature Review

Initially in this study, a review of the literature clarified the research problem and led to the identification of the research questions. This review of the literature acknowledged the binary relationship between leadership and community within the community leadership role of principal in the Catholic school. This relationship between community, leadership and principalship is illustrated in the conceptual framework that ultimately guided the choice of literature to be reviewed (Figure 1).

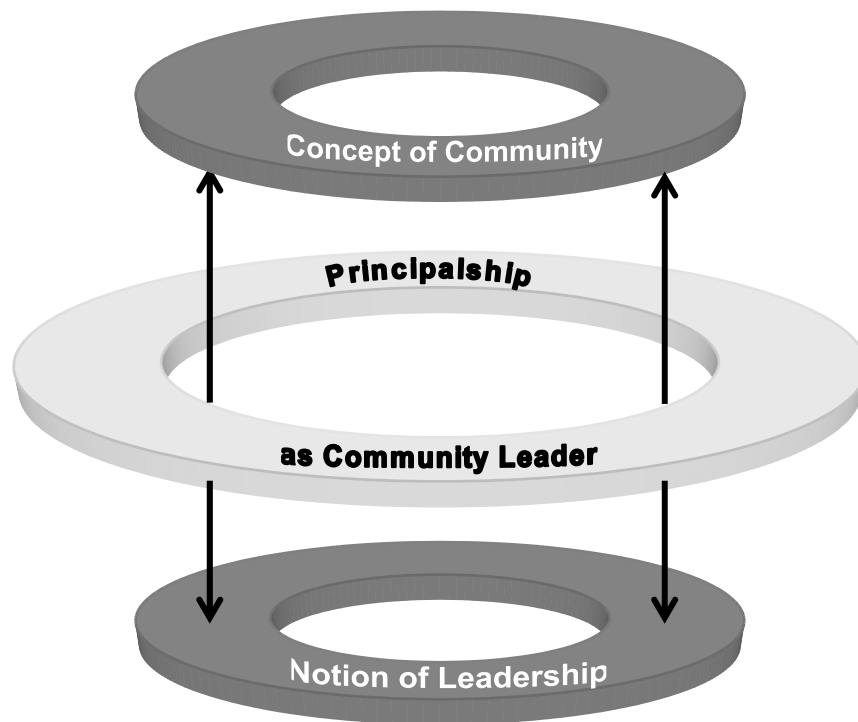


Figure 1: The conceptual framework informing the review of the literature.

Community

The link between school and community has a long history in educational literature (Beck, 1999) and has been primarily influenced by theoretical developments in the discipline of sociology. Over time, three models of community have been advanced in sociology. The German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies (1957) is credited with the initial identification of the first two models of community. Put simply, Tönnies identifies a continuum between “gemeinschaft” (community) and “gesellschaft” (society/organisation) (p.17). Community as “gemeinschaft” is characterised as “a real social relationship of obligation or mutual dependence” (p.20). Often this “gemeinschaft” community is characterised by a “family spirit” (p.55) in which human beings “are related through their wills in an organic manner and affirm each other” (p.48). Alternatively, the theory of the “gesellschaft” community describes an artificial collective of human beings that while superficially resembling the “gemeinschaft” in so far as the individuals peacefully live and dwell together...in “gesellschaft” they are essentially separated in spite of all the unifying factors (p.74). In the “gesellschaft” community each person is competitively working towards a personal agenda, rather than cooperating with others for the common good. Moreover, interactions become more impersonal with connections becoming more contrived or contractual in nature.

Since Tönnies' early work, the gemeinschaft and gesellschaft models of community have found both supporters and critics within sociological literature. Emile Durkheim (1984) who supports a gesellschaft model of community is highly critical of a gemeinschaft model of community that would strive to preserve homogeneity at all cost, even if this meant the imposition of repressive and coercive punitive laws to preserve “the bond of social solidarity” (p.31). On the other hand, Etzioni (1993) criticises the dysfunctional nature of the gesellschaft community and advocates a contemporary interpretation of the gemeinschaft community model that involves the exercise of rights and responsibilities in a spirit of solidarity and mutual concern, as members balance personal needs with the common good.

Recognising the limits of both the gemeinschaft and gesellschaft models of community in contemporary society, scholars in recent times have tentatively offered a third model of

community that seeks to integrate the two previous models with the intention of minimising their excesses. This third model of community is said to be informed by the moral philosophy of personalism that places the person at the centre of a larger society (Macmurray, 1961). Beyond this centrality of the person, personalism also supports themes of subjectivity, autonomy, human dignity, community, participation and solidarity (Whetstone, 2002). While the centre of attention in personalism is the Other and not just the Self, the valuing of the Other is in response to a “self-realisation of the personal” (Macmurray, 1961, p.158). “It is only in relation to others that we exist as persons; we are invested with significance by others who have need of us; and borrow our reality from those who care for us... what rights or powers or freedom we possess are ours by the grace and favour of our fellows (p.211).” Whilst there is some support in the literature for a personalist model of community, the literature also notes the difficulty of applying personalism to today’s postindustrial world. As Whetstone (2002) asks “Is personalism realistic? Is the standard it sets too high for imperfect human beings who exist in a world that is far from perfect?” and “What leadership paradigm might help people to engage in productive work to approach [the personalist] perspective?” (pp. 386-387).

Thus despite this theoretical development community remains a contested concept with, at least, three models of community being advanced. The model of the “gemeinschaft” community represents the traditional understanding. However, in response to changing times, scholars have advanced both “gesellschaft” and personalist understandings. Given these contesting models of community, it would be a mistake for educators to assume “that within our culture the notion of community is nonproblematic” (Starratt, 2003, p.67).

Leadership

Despite a growing knowledge and research base on leadership this activity remains an elusive concept (Leithwood & Riehl, 2004). For much of the 20th Century, leadership was associated with traditional forms of industrial leadership (Shriberg, Shriberg & Lloyd, 2002). In short, this paradigm “saw leadership as the property of the individual; considered primarily in the context of the formal group, and, equated concepts of management and leadership” (p.203).

By the 1970s, this understanding of industrial leadership was challenged as theorists became aware that the reality of leadership in postindustrial society did not readily relate to this construction of industrial leadership. In the first instance, Greenleaf (1977) questioned the abuse of power and authority in the modern organisation and recommended Servant Leadership based on the hallmarks of cooperation and support. Reflecting on Greenleaf's contribution to the field, Johnson (2001), has identified the strengths of the servant leadership model in terms of altruism, simplicity and self awareness. However, this same writer also notes its weaknesses in terms of seeming unrealistic, encouraging passivity, not working in every context, sometimes serving the wrong cause and being associated with the negative connotation of servant. It is also argued that servant leadership can be subject to manipulation by followers (Bowie, 2000) and can be threatening to those wielding or seeking power in hierarchical structures (DiStefano, 1995).

Parallel to the theoretical development of servant leadership, Burns (1978) recommended Transformational Leadership as an approach to organisational change. Transformational leaders influence through charisma and inspirational motivation, challenging followers to be creative in problem-solving and providing a learning environment. Here vision is deemed all important and to be effective the transformational leader needs to be not only visionary but also capable of instilling this vision in others and inspiring them to achieve this vision. Although, in theory, an altruistic form of transformational leadership is possible (Bass,1995), critics argue that transformational leadership can be used for immoral ends; "If the vision is flawed or the leader neglects to stress principled behaviour towards the vision, then the results can be tragic" (Rasmussen, 1995, p.297). Here there is also possibility of transformational leaders ignoring or downplaying the contribution of others (Kelley, 1992). Moreover, followers may be open to manipulation and even become too dependent on the transformational leader as a charismatic leader (Johnson, 2001).

Following criticisms of models of servant leadership and transformational leadership, theorists have, most recently, called for the application of the moral philosophy of personalism to leadership in a postindustrial society. For example, Whetstone applies a personalism to leadership by recommending the integration of servant leadership,

transformational leadership and postindustrial leadership. Here it is argued that servant leadership is consistent with personalist themes including the “centrality of the person”, “subjectivity and autonomy”, “human dignity”, “the personal and community” and “participation and solidarity” (pp.386-387). To offset the association of servant leadership with weakness and the possibility of followers manipulating their leader, Whetstone recommends a synthesis of servant leadership and altruistic forms of transformational leadership and postindustrial leadership. Here personalist leadership is deemed to be:

A theoretically superior approach is a combination in which the morally tough servant leader adopts certain behaviours of the altruistic transformational leader. To inspire followers with strength and sensitivity of a transforming vision, the servant leader would use proven transforming techniques such as developing a vision, enlisting others, fostering collaboration, strengthening others, planning small wins, linking rewards to performance and celebrating accomplishments. The leader would focus on the vision jointly formulated and refined, avoiding manipulation by any party through a mutual commitment to participation, solidarity of community, and respect for each person grounded in the philosophy of personalism. (p.391)

Thus despite this theoretical leadership, leadership remains an elusive concept as contemporary theories of leadership represent authoritative opinion that is not supported by scholarly research (Onsman, 2002). Moreover, despite the plethora of writing in the area, leaders in frontline human service organisations, including schools, continue to be challenged by internal and external forces and research indicates “the need for a reinterpretation of leadership thinking and practices” (Duignan, 2003).

Principalship

Given this theoretical confusion identified above it is hardly surprising that principalship, itself, is deemed to be in a moment of transition. Traditionally, principalship has been associated with heroic leadership. For example, the story of the formation growth of Catholic schools relies on the myth of the hero’s journey. Consequently:

Successive generations of Australian Catholic apologists and scholars have called the attention of the Catholic and wider community to the significance of the triumph of the Catholic heroes who stood firm against hostile forces.

These forces threatened to undermine, not just the formation of Catholic schools, but the very right of the Catholic community to survive and thrive in Australia. (Ryan, 2001, p. 219)

By the 1980s, the idea of 'principal as hero' was further strengthened as in the new form of managerial leadership emerged within education (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999):

Managerial leadership assumes that the focus of leaders ought to be on function, tasks or behaviours and if these functions are carried out competently the work of others in the organisation will be facilitated. Most approaches to managerial leadership also assume that the behaviour of organisational members is largely rational. Authority and influence are allocated to formal positions in accordance with the status of those positions in the organisational hierarchy. (p. 14).

A decade on, principals are described as 'managers of change' struggling with demands for educational reform and school restructuring (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1997). Here the principal plays a significant role in the provision of quality education; "principals are seen as the fulcrum on which the quality of restructured school depends" (O'Donoghue & Dimmock, 1998, p. 14). Moreover, it is recommended that the principal as heroic leader adopt a transformational style (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1997; Ehrich & Knight, 1999).

In recent times, there has been a shift in understanding as scholars recognise a new world order that is "uncertain, ambiguous, constantly changing" (Scott, 2003 p. 18) and argue against heroic leadership in the style of the transformational leader. Influenced by a post industrial paradigm of leadership new models of principalship have been advanced. Here successful principalship is associated with "an interactive, reciprocal and evolving process involving many players, which is influenced by and, in turn, influences, the context in which it occurs" (Mulford & Johns, 2004, p. 56). This model of

principalship involves establishing “reciprocal contributive relationships with their communities” (Limerick & Cranston, 1998, p. 40). Moreover, there is a greater appreciation of the importance of ethical frameworks and moral decision-making in educational leadership (Starratt, 2003).

This account of post industrial leadership offers what could be termed a personalist perspective on principalship. For Grace (2002), a school community which is grounded in a personalist model allows for a sensitive response to the diversity of persons and their “expected levels of involvement” (p. 28) consonant with Christian values and the rhetoric of Church documents. However, in extensive research in the United Kingdom, Grace also found that while the majority of schools in his study espoused Christian values, “there was some evidence that a more utilitarian discourse was beginning to emerge” (p. 132). In particular, this research found that the dominant leadership style among head teachers was that of the heroic or “strong” leader (p. 145), characterised by “commitment of purpose, clarity of vision and strength of character” (p. 146) with a strong mission focus. While the head teachers clearly rejected the traditional hierarchical model, their style was also “individual in emphasis and in some senses heroic in nature” (p. 146). Consequently, it was hard for these head teachers to make the transition to “new forms of shared, consultative and collegial leadership” as required in a personalist perspective. Although, a significant number of the head teachers wanted to move to “more consultative and collegial forms of leadership” (p. 147), it was not an “easy option” (p. 149) as it is not yet normative in Catholic school communities. Consequently, Grace’s research identified a gap between the rhetoric and reality of personalist values in Catholic schools and Catholic school leadership.

In short, this review of the literature alerts us to the contested and elusive nature of community and leadership in a post industrial world. In doing so it explains why principalship is deemed to be in transition. The changing socio-cultural context, has prompted the movement away from heroic, managerial leadership to new appreciations of principalship as post industrial leadership. A conceptual model of the key ‘learning’ in respect to this literature review is found in Table 1.

Table 1 Conceptual Model of Key Learning in Literature Review

	Models of community	Leadership paradigms	Principalship
Pre-Industrial Society	“Gemeinschaft” – real and organic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kinship • Traditional values • Ritual & ceremony • Co-operation 	Premodern leadership – heroic leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heroic traits • Adventurous life 	Heroic headteacher
Industrial Society	“Gesellschaft” – abstract and mechanical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contractual relationships • Contingent values • Superficial unity 	Industrial leadership – functional and mechanistic (heroic/strong) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transactional • Hierarchical • Self interest • Competition 	Principalship as managerial leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal-setting • Needs identification • Priority-setting, • Planning • Budgeting, • Implementing • Evaluating
Post-Industrial	Personalist model – creative and self-transcendent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centrality of persons • Unity of persons • Heterogeneous group • Intentional equality • Disinterested care • Common good • Symbolic language and communication 	Post industrial leadership –integration of servant leadership and altruistic transformational leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing relationships • Collaboration and service • Ethical decision-making • Moral courage 	Principalship as post industrial leadership: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture building, • Shared decision-making, • Policy development and implementation • Relationship building within community. • Ethical and moral frameworks • Inner management

This review of the literature confirmed that problematic nature of the school community leadership and assisted the researcher to identify the two research questions. In particular, two research questions were identified:

Research Question 1: How do principals conceptualise the Catholic primary school as community?

This research question sought to discover how principals understood the concept of community as applied to primary schools within the diocese. This question

acknowledged that the principal's behaviour is influenced by their perspectives on what characterised the school as community. Moreover, any guidance or support offered to principals in their role as community leaders must be based on knowledge of how they made sense of being in or out of community.

Research Question 2: How do principals describe their leadership role in building the Catholic primary school as community?

This research question assumes that the principals in this research study as experienced practitioners had valuable knowledge, skills and attitudes in respect to their leadership role in school community development. It also accepts Fullan's (1991) claim that successful innovation is based on what might be "most accurately labeled organised common sense" (p.xii).

With these research two questions in mind, this study was situated within a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism.

The Theoretical Framework

Emanating from within the sociological research tradition, symbolic interactionism offers a way of studying "how individuals engage in social transactions and how these transactions contribute to the creation and maintenance of social structures and the individual's self-identity (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2006, p.500). Symbolic interactionism also advances a new understanding of role identity within social situations. In this theoretical perspective, roles or behavioural expectations are framed as "a set of rules" that are governed by negotiation (Charon, 2004, p.168). "The enactment or performance of the role is variable" given that "there is some choice in whether or not to perform this role and that there is the opportunity to reject expectations attached to a position occupied or to modify performance called for" (Stryker, 2002, p.79).

In short, symbolic interactionists highlight the role played by symbols in the process of social interaction and role negotiation. Symbols, in the form of language and other gestures, are "social objects used by the actor for representation and communication" for thinking and social interaction (Charon, 2004, p.48). Symbolic communication, including the use of words, facilitates "joint action" by "collectives" (p.17) or the social organization

of different acts by diverse participants. Thus a social situation is deemed problematic if individual living and working together have not developed a shared symbolic language that, in turn, serves to facilitate symbolic communication and joint action by the collective. A social situation will also be problematic if there are not shared expectations of roles. Without such clarity, individuals experience “role conflict” (Stryker, 2002, pp.73-76) as they face excessive or contradictory role expectations. In addition, role conflict for the individual across the organisation will result in “role strain” as reflected in the “continual problem of maintaining continuity of social roles that underlies the stability of social structure” (p.76).

The Design of this Study

The decision to situate this study within a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism had implications for the design of this study. As an interpretive research method, symbolic interactionism is concerned with coming to understand the “common set of symbols and understandings that have emerged to give meaning to people’s interactions” (Best & Kahn, 2006, p.255). To this end, symbolic interactionism accepts two principles of investigation (Charon, 2004). Firstly, symbolic interactionism is primarily concerned with understanding what the actors themselves believe about their social world. Secondly, this research is conducted in the ‘real world’ and adopts careful, critical, systematic and objective approaches, in order to be accurate and consider the perspective of the actors.

In line with symbolic interactionism, the design of this study involved two stages: an “exploration” and “inspection” (Charon, 2001, p.208). The exploration stage was designed to gain an understanding about the principals’ perspectives on ‘what’s going on around here’, by describing in detail what was happening in the social situation and hence becoming more acquainted with the situation under review. Within this study, the exploration stage involved a questionnaire completed by 15 principals representing Catholic primary schools in the diocese. The inspection stage represented a second step in data gathering and involved isolating important elements within the situation and describing the situation in relation to those elements. Within this study, the responses to this questionnaire were further explored in two semi-structured interviews with six

principals from across the diocese as well as a ‘follow up’ focus group interview with all six principals together in the one group.

Following data collection within these two stages, the researcher adopted a three step approach to interpretation (Neuman, 2006). The first step, a first-order interpretation, involved learning about the research problem from the meaning ascribed by the informants to the study. The second step, the second-order interpretation, involved looking for patterns or themes emerging from the data. The third step, the third order interpretation involved the researcher in considering the general theoretical significance of the research findings.

An overview of these multiple data collection and analysis methods provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of the Multiple Data Collection and Analysis Methods.

RESEARCH STAGE	RESEARCH STEP	RESEARCH METHOD	DESCRIPTION
Exploration	Step 1	Open-ended Questionnaire	34 primary principals from each Catholic primary school are invited to participate. 15 principals accepted to invitation and completed the open-ended questionnaire.
	Step 2	Data analysis	Transcription of questionnaire data, categorisation, identification of key areas for interviews. (1 st order interpretation)
Inspection	Step 3	1 st interviews Research Journal	6 Catholic primary school principals.
	Step 4	Data analysis	Transcribe interviews, code data, themes. (2 nd order interpretation)
	Step 5	2 nd interview Research Journal	6 Catholic primary schools principals. Review previous transcripts, pursue descriptions of leadership for community building
	Step 6	Data analysis	Transcribe interviews, code data, themes. (2 nd order interpretation)
	Step 7	Focus group interview Research Journal	6 principals engage around key themes identified by the researcher
	Step 8	Data analysis	Transcribe interviews, code data, themes. (2 nd order interpretation)
	Step 9	Data interpretation	Assign general theoretical significance of findings (3 rd order interpretation)

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS ANSWERED

The use of multiple research methods and this three-step iterative process of data interpretation within this research study resulted in a “rich picture” of principals’ perspectives on the Catholic primary school as community and their leadership role in building this community.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: How do principals conceptualise the Catholic primary school as community?

In response to this research question, the data suggest that while community related issues take up an inordinate amount of their time, the participant principals evidenced poor conceptualisation of community. It appears that the principals assume a *gemeinschaft* understanding of community, while acknowledging that schools are, in reality, experiences of the *gesellschaft* model. However, embedded in the data are indications of an emergent personalist approach as some of the principals note the importance of subjectivity, autonomy, respect, participation and solidarity within the Catholic school as community. However, these personalist views were not consistently held and consequently, it is argued that the conceptualisation of community is an unfinished task for these principals.

In order to take up this unfinished task it appears that principals will need to acknowledge that the many problems they identified regarding school as community actually renders the concept of community problematic. Given the many concerns the principals identified, it seemed a challenge to construct their schools as community. While there appeared to be consensus among the principals that unity and common ground, being of one mind and ensuring minimal conflict were at the heart of their conceptualisation of community, the other four themes they named appeared to speak to a reality that was contrary to this ideal. The data suggest that there is a serious decline among parents and, to lesser degree teachers with regard to the social capital, community of memory, participation in the local parish community and commitment to

common beliefs, identified in the literature as being essential for community. Embedded in the data are clear indications of social, cultural and religious change impacting dramatically on the possibility of community within Catholic primary schools. However, the principals found it extremely difficult to acknowledge this problematic reality. It would seem that acknowledging the concept of community as inherently problematic is an important step for the principals in their journey to effectively conceptualise it and construct appropriate responses.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: How do principals describe their leadership role in building Catholic primary school community?

In response to the second research question, this research study has found that an industrial model of leadership remains dominant. Here principals' responses evidenced an understanding of leadership centred on an heroic approach. For these principals leadership is, more often than not, associated with having clarity of vision and mission and an ability to bring this vision and mission into reality. However, a new post industrial leadership paradigm is emerging and there were gestures in the data towards a personalist model of leadership. Some principals also spoke of their commitment to an ethical and moral leadership that relies on core values. From a practical perspective, principals named making time, conversation, dialogue, parental partnership, and relationships building as their strategic directions for building community. However, in their interviews, the principals appear ambivalent as they move between industrial and post industrial descriptions of leadership. In struggling to provide a coherent account of their leadership, the principals appear hampered by the limits of their theoretical understanding of their leadership role. In addition they note the challenge of balancing administrative tasks and community leadership in the busy school day; their poor communication and conflict resolution skills; as well as an inadequate theological formation that restricts their leadership capabilities within a Catholic school. It should also be noted that poor guidance from the Catholic education office together with the lack of opportunity to safely share concerns regarding school community with colleagues further limits their capacity for community leadership.

Propositions Resulting From This Research Study

This research study has explored the issue of school community leadership in Catholic primary schools in one rural diocese. It has done so by inspecting how community is conceptualised and how the building of it is described. Based on the findings of the study, it is proposed that:

1. The Catholic Education Office develops policy, guidelines with regard to the Catholic primary school as community
2. Role-making processes are required to clarify and document the role of the Catholic primary school principal as community leader.
3. The professional development of principals should include regular, confidential opportunities for social interaction and learning.
4. The professional development of principals should educate and challenge them to develop more adequately theorised understandings of school community leadership in Catholic schools.

Conclusion

This paper provides an account of a study that focused on principals' perspectives on their leadership role in Catholic primary school community development within one rural diocese in Australia. In the first instance, the findings of this research study confirm the contested nature of the school as community and the elusive nature of leadership in contemporary society. In particular, this study found that while there was a strong commitment to the 'ideal' of the *gemeinschaft* community, principals actually lead within a *gesellschaft* reality. While a few principals voiced tentative thoughts in respect to a personalist model of the Catholic school as community, there did not seem to be a strong commitment to this version. At the same time, the findings of this study suggested an ambivalent

leadership style as the principals 'swung' between traditional 'heroic' industrial leadership and contemporary collaborative forms. Reading these research findings through the lens of symbolic interactionism, this study recommends the ongoing commitment to the development of policy in respect to the Catholic primary school as community and a role-making process to clarify the role of the principal as community leader.

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