

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

The Principal's Microcosm: An Exploration of the  
Interplay Between the Leader's Meaning System  
and School Self-Renewing Processes

- Volume I -

A dissertation submitted by  
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## Abstract

Despite research on the school principalship having evolved over past decades, the prevailing standpoint has largely remained an outsider's perspective upon external behavioural manifestations of principalship. Whilst valuable in their own right, such models of research accord little importance to the effect of thought and intention on behaviour.

The purpose of this research was to articulate the notion of a principal's "microcosm" as a means of capturing the dynamics of meaning making in the principalship, when the cognitive world of the principal and the actual work of school leadership interact. The functional context was the expectations of catholic school authorities that schools will engage in processes of continuous self-renewal.

Following comprehensive analysis of recent theoretical and research literature, a preliminary framework for the principal's microcosm was generated. A single-investigator, multiple-site case study methodology was utilised to conduct the field research, which was carried out in a provincial city of an Australian state. Three principals were selected as the subjects for in-depth exploration and analysis over a period of 16 months. A range of qualitative research strategies was employed, encompassing formal and informal interactions with the three principals and selected members of their professional communities. On the basis of the field study, a refined framework for the principal's microcosm was developed.

Four major conclusions were identified. First, the notion of microcosm offers promise as an explanatory and analytical tool for focussing upon the complexities of change in school settings. Second, metaphor was observed to be integral to microcosm and its usefulness for comprehending leader behaviours was identified. The third conclusion concerned the potential of the construct microcosm for facilitating leader development through assisting individual leaders to reflect upon and to critically examine personal meanings embedded within their own professional practice. Finally, this research makes a contribution to clarifying the nature of catholic education itself.

## Certification of Dissertation

I certify that the ideas, analyses, and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award.

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Signature of Candidate

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Date

### ENDORSEMENT

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Signature of Principal Supervisor

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Date

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Signature of Associate Supervisor

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Date

## Acknowledgments

I express my sincere appreciation to my principal supervisor, Professor Frank Crowther, and to my associate supervisor, Assoc. Professor Don Rice. In reality, I consider that both Frank and Don acted more as co-supervisors. Frank provided both challenge and support in relation to the conceptual foundations and clarification of the dissertation. Equally, Don Rice provided invaluable support and challenge, especially in assisting me to clarify early drafts into this final form.

The three principals ("Elizabeth", "Jim", and "Frank"), opened their thinking and their schools to enable this research to be undertaken. As practitioners, they are all effective leaders in Catholic education.

I also express my appreciation to my wife, Elizabeth. In addition to preparing all Interview Transcripts, she has provided the challenge, the support, and the love needed to allow me to complete this dissertation.

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