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School Decline:

Predictors, Process and Intervention

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

The ramifications of school decline are profoundly serious for the students, staff and community of a school. School decline is the steady downwards spiral that some schools experience when a complex set of influences interact with negative and unresolved outcomes. This study explored the largely unresearched area of school decline and developed a set of potential predictors of decline that could assist in understanding, preventing or dealing effectively with school decline in the future. Grounded theory, selected as a methodology appropriate for exploratory research, was used to guide the process of data collection and theory development. Three schools, labeled by agencies and the media as being in serious decline or "failing", were selected for the study. Adults who were in significant roles in the schools during the decline periods were interviewed about their experiences. As part of the data analysis and interpretation a set of propositions was drafted and was sent to these interviewees and to fourteen educational advisors who work with schools at risk and in decline. The advisors' feedback on the propositions, analysis of school related documents, Education Review Office reports and Ministry of Education file documents provided rich additional data. The factors associated with the lead up to school decline, and the process of decline, are multilayered, contextual and complex. Each study school's experience of decline involved a unique combination and order of occurrence of common factors and influences. Many of the issues that predispose schools towards decline are associated with, and are exacerbated by, unethical or unprofessional attitudes or behaviour by individuals, and unprofessional practices within the schools and between neighbouring schools. Once decline begins it escalates and is difficult to stop. This thesis contributes towards the development of a theory of school decline by identifying potential predictors of school decline and by describing how decline begins and escalates. It also identifies factors that are associated with interventions being insufficient or ineffective. The theory of school decline provides insights for school leaders and educational agencies that may assist in the prediction and prevention of school decline in the future.

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