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THE PHENOMENON OF SPECIAL CHARACTER IN NEW ZEALAND STATE INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

A NATURALISTIC STUDY OF TWO CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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in
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ABSTRACT

This is a case study research project within a naturalistic research paradigm. It explores the nature, meaning and significance of the Special Character of New Zealand State Integrated schools. Utilising qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis, it focuses specifically on the cultures of two urban, single sex, Catholic secondary schools.

In the area of Catholic education, the theoretical framework for the research draws from a range of Vatican documents, contemporary international research in the field of Catholic education and the experience of the researcher as an educator in the New Zealand Catholic education system. In terms of theories of organisational culture, it has been influenced by the work of Beare, Caldwell & Milliken (1991), Schein (1992) and Neville (1994).

Under the Private Schools Conditional Integration Act, 1975, a Catholic school in New Zealand is a State Integrated school, providing an education with a Special Character. As such, it has both secular and religious purposes. As a State school, it delivers the New Zealand national curriculum in common with all secondary schools. As a Catholic school, its purpose is the development of the religious knowledge, faith and spirituality of its students within the specific context of the religious and educational tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. Under the Act, the maintenance and preservation of its Special Character is a legally binding responsibility for each school in partnership with the Crown.

Exploring the culture of each research school, this study examines those features that give rise to its distinctiveness and substance to its Special Character. It investigates the meaning attributed to the term ‘Special Character’ and considers issues arising from these perceptions. The process of Special Character transmission is outlined and its implications are discussed. These areas are explored through four major emergent themes, including cultural confluence, the significance of founding traditions, cultural transmission process and shared spirituality. Finally, in the light of the distinctive features that constitute the Special Character of the Catholic secondary school culture and the processes that both maintain and preserve it, a Grounded Theory of Special Character culture is proposed.
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In particular, I wish to thank Dr Mollie Neville, my Chief supervisor, for her enthusiasm for learning that characterises whatever she undertakes; an inspiration when I doubted myself and my ability to complete this thesis. For her humour, wit and gentleness with me when I erred on the side of ‘preaching’ rather than ‘searching’ and her steadfastness when my work was a muddled challenge for any reader. I appreciate her attention to detail, especially in relation to split infinitives, and most importantly, her consistent encouragement and belief in me.

To the participants in the two research schools, I owe much for their willingness to trust, to share honestly and for the hospitality this researcher experienced during each visit. In spite of the rush and demands of busy school life, they always welcomed me, giving me a privileged opportunity to learn about their school and lives. I wish them every blessing and success as they continue to work for their students and their communities.

I wish to thank my employers of the Auckland and Hamilton dioceses for their consistent support for this research, particularly for granting me study leave in 1999 to complete analysis and writing. Their assistance allowed me to focus my efforts and energy on fulfilling my dream.

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