

# Chapter 1 Putting Them in the Hands of God: A Successful Christian School in Australia

## 1.1 Background to the Study

The new Christian schooling movement of low-fee protestant schools was described by Long (1996a) as the fastest growing non-government schooling system since the 1960s. In 2004 the Australian Association of Christian Schools' (AACCS) home page reported that:

*AACCS represents at the national level two group members, namely Christian Schools Australia (130 schools) and Christian Parent Controlled Schools (85 schools) as well as 39 independent Christian schools<sup>1</sup> (AACCS, 2004).*

The vision for and the establishment of these schools reached Australia in the 1950s from the United States and Western Europe (Magill, 1986: 59). The most rapid period of growth was from the mid-1970s until the late 1980s. It is a schooling system that has received little study and consequently is arguably little understood (Long, 1996a: 12). This study sought to understand the *central meaning and essence* (Creswell, 1998: 32) of one successful Australian Christian school.

The inspiration for this study came from Rose's seminal 1988 study - *Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan: Evangelical Schooling in America* - based on research in two contrasting growing Christian schools in upstate New York which clearly portrays the American mores of the time as sheltering their young from the broader societal influences regarded by their parents as evil. In contrast, this study - *Putting Them in the Hands of God: A Successful Christian School in Australia* - depicts a more confident, progressive and outward looking tradition and also seeks to address the lack of evaluation of this approach in Australian research.

Though the title of this study was based on Rose's work it has been more closely modelled on Peshkin's research titled *God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School (1986)*. His work, like Rose's, was also undertaken in the United States and focussed on an in-depth study of one successful Christian school sponsored by a Baptist church. There has not been a comparable study in Australia other than the researcher's Masters thesis that examined the leadership and management in three successful Australian Christian schools (Twelves, 2000). This current research project has attempted to redress this imbalance further with a single case study of one successful Australian Christian school.

Peshkin stressed the *total world*, signifying the all-consuming nature of the life of those in the community he and his associates had studied. In Australia, this study has attempted to uncover the central meaning or essence of Sandford Christian College<sup>2</sup> to the extent that the researcher *could pass as an insider* having internalised the cultural features of the setting (van Manen, 1990: 177-178).

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<sup>1</sup> Substantial direct quotations in this study are presented in italics as a discrete paragraph. Phrases or words that are direct quotations incorporated in the text are indicated by italic font.

<sup>2</sup> Sandford Christian College is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the participants.

The College Principal's Newsletter weekly proclaimed in the words of Isaiah 54: 13, *that all your children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be the peace of your children* (Principal's Newsletter, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2000). The College's first stated faculty outcome was to *demonstrate the love of God and teach Biblical truths*, while the first stated student outcome, was to *develop in students the desire to serve God and society, and the skills to exercise leadership* (Appendix 4). Further, their first headmaster stated that the College's objective was to:

*train Christian youth to the height of individual, God-given abilities, responsibilities, and citizenship with integrity and self discipline and to do all this for the greater glory of God* (Deuteronomy 6: 5-7<sup>3</sup>, College Handbook, 1981).

The researcher's previous experience included serving as a deputy principal and later as a principal in Australian Christian schools. During this period he began to see how the model of the new Christian schooling movement could fulfil the students' expectations, the parents' aspirations and fundamentally impact society for good. This could be achieved by working with local churches and local families in the all round education of their children. This period in his life ignited a passion for Christian Education that has sustained and directed him through this research project (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 14). Essentially, the researcher's passion for Christian Education is aligned with the goals expressed in the American context by Parsons:

- *Short-term purpose - to give youth a moral as well as an academic education*
- *Long-term purpose - is to ultimately change the state of health of the republic* (Parsons, 1987: 6)

In order to collect the data, the researcher attended *Sandford Christian College* for approximately two days per week for the second semester of 2000. He went into the community to see how a successful Christian school functioned daily, but with no preconceived ideas as to why it was successful. He was simply determined to understand, from a grounded theory perspective, the nature of the success of this rapidly growing, medium sized, church sponsored, co-educational, kindergarten to year 12 school.

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

Glesne and Peshkin (1992: 14) advocate that the researcher needs a passion for what they study and enough motivation to carry them through the process. This can often be in the realm of the researcher's customary work place. Strauss and Corbin (1990: 35-36) claimed that the criterion of personal experience could often be a good indicator of the potential for a successful research enterprise. This research topic was inspired by the researcher's experience as an Australian Christian school principal. The search for success in Christian schooling was both an interest founded in the researcher's professional experience, and an important area for research.

The objectives of this research were a logical extension and adaptation of Peshkin's unanswered research questions (1986: 13-15). Peshkin wanted to:

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<sup>3</sup> The style employed throughout this thesis has been based on Snooks (2002).

- a) Measure the impact of the school he was studying and to do so he recognised that he had to examine *the students that had left the school, settled into activities (work, marriage, post school friendships and child rearing etc), which would characterise their lives as adults* but he recognised that the school he was considering was too new to support such a measurement.
- b) Examine the relationship between the school's religious doctrine and its educational practice, in essence *to compare the 'God-centred' Christian school with the 'man-centred' public school.*
- c) Make clear *what an 'exemplary' Christian school is like, of the variety that is Independent Baptist and affiliated to the American Association of Christian Schools (AACCS).*
- d) Conduct a *personal field trip to discover another culture.*

Nearly two decades later in the Australian context, this study, entitled ***Putting Them in the Hands of God: A Successful Christian School in Australia***, aimed to gain an understanding of the College's unique features, its impact on past and present students and the perceptions of success by members of its own community. Peshkin's study described the success of Bethany Baptist Academy in the words of one of their 14-year-old students:

*Everybody I know knows that I go to this school. If they see me doing something wrong, they'll think, 'Well, why pay so much to go to a school when it does not make you a better person?'* (Peshkin, 1986: 179).

Sandford Christian College's declared aim was that *all their children should be taught of the Lord* (Principal's Newsletter, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2000). The aim of this study was to measure their achievements and to understand their success. In order to address these questions the following research objectives were developed:

- 1. To quantify the degree of success of Sandford Christian College's education, comparing the 'God-centred' Christian school with the 'man-centred' public schooling by applying the School Development Review methodology of the Office of Review of the Department of Education.**
- 2. To describe what an 'exemplary' Christian school is like of the variety that is non-denominational, co-educational, church sponsored and affiliated with the Australian Association of Christian Schools (AACCS).**
- 3. To describe the impact of Sandford Christian College on the lives of the students who have left the school and settled into activities (work, marriage, post school friendships and child rearing etc) which characterise their lives as adults.**

### **1.3 Significance of the Research**

This study has combined both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methodologies in a single case study school that had been nominated as successful by a panel of experts. The

significance of the research was not to debate the meaning of successful Christian education, but taking that as a prerequisite, to understand the *central meaning and essence* of one school community in the context of the three research objectives presented in the previous section.

The study has been divided into three broad areas. First, the largely quantitative School Development Review was applied to Sandford Christian College. This Victorian government school review mechanism has enabled the school community to obtain some objective measurement of their performance against state benchmarks. The second element in the research design focussed on qualitative grounded theory that sought to see new understandings emerge as the research progressed. Finally, there was an historical aspect to the study, represented by the Past Student Survey that sought to assess the impact of the College on the student who had passed through into adulthood.

This research is expected to benefit the community by adding to the understanding of Australian Christian schooling, providing a description of success through the measurement of achievement on key indicators, a comparison with a large government school system and by providing insight for future policy makers in education:

1. The research sought to fulfil the primary recommendation of Long's (1996a) work that more detailed research was required of Australian Christian schooling.

*There has been very little research or other material published on the fastest growing system of non-government schooling in Australia since the 1960s. What research that has been done has been largely done by post-graduates and that has been rarely taken up by the established scholars* (Long, 1996a: 12).

*It is hard to credit that so little research has been published on such a significant development of schooling in Australia, a movement of schools that is larger than the department of education in the Northern Territory or the ACT. At its current growth rate of 8.5 per cent per annum this system of schools will be larger than the Tasmanian government system by 1997* (Long, 1996a: 19).

2. The study aimed to establish the degree of success of the school. A range of school performance and opinion data generated from Sandford Christian College have been compared with publicly available benchmark data from Victorian government schools (Office of Review, 1997: 14).

*A benchmark is the point of comparison for a school. A benchmark enables the school to compare its own performance to the performance of other groups of schools and to establish its own relative standard of performance level* (Office of Review, 1997: 6).

3. One of the objectives was to understand the essence of the success of the school. A range of qualitative data has been used, including individual and group interviews. This study has provided rewarding insights into the factors associated with the success of the College. Tensions and problems have also been highlighted and the College's responses to them have been explored in Chapter 6.

*Success has been defined as the extent to which the schools' stated aims and objectives had been achieved in the several phases of the schools' history (Chen, 1972: 3).*

4. It was anticipated that the research would assist future policy makers in understanding the impact of Christian schooling on a specific section of society (Peshkin, 1986: 13).

*The most meaningful impact of schooling is best measured when students have left school and settled into their activities (work, marriage, post school friendships, child rearing etc.) which will characterise their life as adults, but Bethany Baptist Academy is too new to support such measurement... Since the school had only graduated three classes of seniors at the time of this study, I thought it untimely to do a full-scale study of the impact of Christian Schooling on its graduates (Peshkin, 1986: 13, 167).*

## **1.4 Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 depicts graphically the areas of study and the relationships between them (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 18). This framework is both descriptive and causal in nature, designed to provide a rationale for the research design, which is presented in Chapter 3.

The framework is divided into three parts. There is a central axis that runs from bottom left to top right across the whole framework. Below this and to the right there is a clockwise revolving circle, which in addition to articulating with the central axis in the centre of the framework, focuses upwards to the same objective as the axis. Finally, above and to the left of the central axis is a further clockwise revolving circle, which also articulates with the central axis in the centre of the framework. It also has a focus upward and to the right, on the same objective as the axis.

The central axis itself comprises two elements. The central shaft of the arrow depicts the passage of time from the school's foundation in the bottom left, to the time of the study in 2000 at the top right. The arrowhead represents the past student survey (4) with its retrospective perspective, reflecting on past performance in order to improve the future. In the centre of the shaft, there is a rectangle that depicts the School Development Review (2) derived from the Accountability Framework employed in government schools in Victoria.

This review depicted a snapshot of the history of Sandford Christian College. It was an opportunity for the school to take stock and compare its performance with that of the government schools' benchmarks. This was the central feature of the research design. What follows is a more detailed consideration of the parts of the model.

The two circles either side of this central axis represent two balanced supports. The bottom right circle (1) depicts the initial stage of the study design process. This begins with the formulation of the research objectives, followed by the design for the data collection. A mixed methods approach was employed. That is, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to collect the data and, finally, they were analysed with the application of Department of Education software. The study design established the framework for the conduct of the School Development Review. The majority of the data presented in the review were derived from quantitative methods and are presented in Chapter 4.

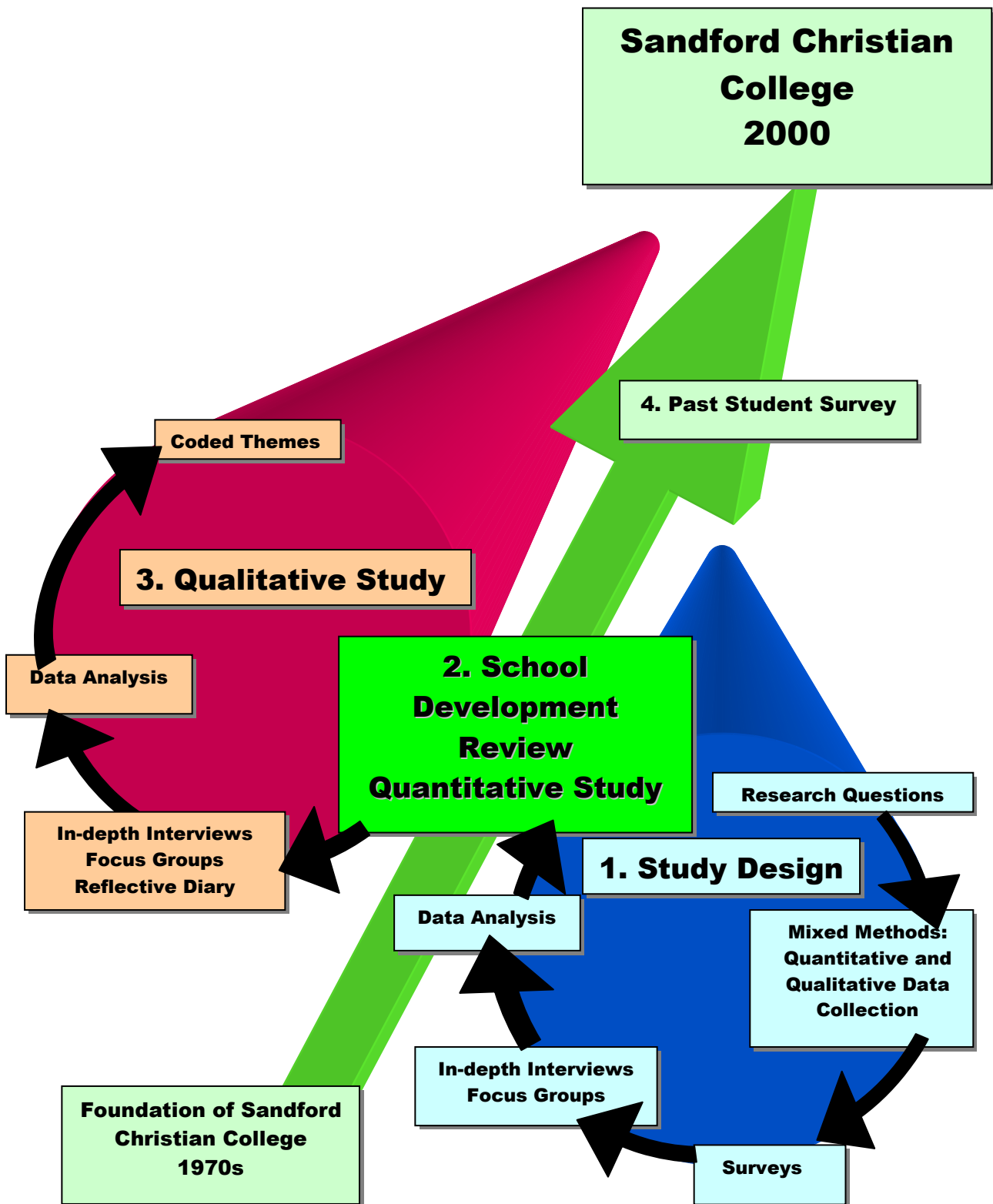


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

The top left circle (3) represents the qualitative study stage that was conducted subsequent to the first two elements in the conceptual framework. Here, the outcomes from the in-depth interviews and focus groups were subjected to a deeper analysis aimed at the identification of the essence of the community of Sandford Christian College. The data in this stage were largely qualitative and are reported in Chapter 5.

Both circles of study (1 and 3) focus towards the top right of the conceptual framework, illustrating their part in the final outcome of the study design, namely Chapter 6, the Discussion, which develops a synthesis between the quantitatively and qualitatively derived research findings. Chapter 6 also attempts to address the three research objectives in the context of the literature already presented in Chapter 2.

The Past Student Survey (4) completes the conceptual framework. The survey provided a consideration of change in the College since its foundation and an examination of the outcomes of the College's education in the adult lives of past students. This survey identified two phases in the College's history, namely the Early Years 1978-1990 and the Recent Years 1992-1999. The results of this survey are reported in the second part of Chapter 4 following the School Development Review.

Finally, Chapters 4 and 5 represent the bridge between the theory and current practice of Chapters 2 and 3 and the findings of this research in Chapter 6. The School Development Review and the Past Student Survey results are presented in Chapter 4 and the findings of the qualitative in-depth interviews and focus groups are presented in Chapter 5.