

Christian Schools Australia: Using school mission statements as a source of data for understanding their purpose.

Stephen Brinton

Abstract:

Many member schools of Christian Schools Australia (CSA) are more than thirty years old yet no research has been done to ascertain if they are achieving their aim of developing in students a biblical worldview that dynamically informs life's experiences. This study will consider the history, distinctive nature and praxis of six member schools of CSA. An inductive research design involving the collection of data by way of document study, interviews and surveys is proposed for PhD research.

This paper considers the mission statements of these schools as part of the document study for the research. First, the value of mission statements as a source of data for understanding a school's purpose and values is considered. Then the approach to coding, analysis and interpretation and specific techniques and sequence of coding and analysis is given. The final section considers the initial findings of the analysis which reveals that five of the six schools still have as their primary intent their aim of developing in students a biblical worldview that dynamically informs life's experiences.

Introduction

The area of study being considered for research is the independent (non-systemic) Christian school movement in Australia. The research will have particular reference to member schools of Christian Schools Australia (CSA), which is both a national association of Christian schools and the organization that serves those schools. Member schools of CSA are shaped by a Christian worldview founded on a fundamentalist view of the Bible and its metanarrative. Belief in God and issues of faith are integral to the education and learning experience of students. CSA member schools then aim “for students to know what they believe and why; that their character is formed on the basis of sound beliefs and values... [and] graduates reflect the hope and purposeful service characteristic of those who follow Jesus”¹.

The literature reveals that no studies have been done on whether CSA schools are achieving their outcomes. Many CSA schools are now more than 30 years old. It is appropriate then to consider whether these schools are achieving their aim of developing in students a biblical worldview that dynamically informs life’s experiences. The research will consider the history, distinctive nature and praxis of CSA schools. An inductive research design involving the collection of data by way of document study, interviews and surveys is proposed.

This research is important. It has grown out of the author’s experience as a Christian school educator; initially as an Education Officer with the association, then as a principal and staff leader with various schools over many years. Many key people in the CSA association are known by the author. It is acknowledged that the author needs to show reflexivity and be aware of the ways that prior assumptions, experience and the research process shape the collection of data (Creswell, 2002, p. 494).

Questions for Consideration

In the study the following research questions are being considered and will be answered by means of a document study and interviews:

- How does the history of CSA schools demonstrate their distinctive nature?
- Have schools’ praxis changed over time?

As part of the document study, school mission and vision statements have been analysed as a source of empirical data and to answer the question: What do the mission statements of CSA schools reveal about these schools?

The Importance of School Mission Statements

For over a decade, the relevance of schools’ mission statements has been considered by Stemler and Bebell (1999, 2011 and 2013). Prior to the World Wide Web mission statements were often simply part of the documentation of a school - written, filed and forgotten. Now, schools not only require a mission statement for registration, they are included in the content of schools’ websites. According to Stemler and Bebell (2013, p. 11) school mission statements are often the product of the school community and are known by the school community and serve to represent the core philosophy and working ethos of a school. They maintain that a school’s mission statement “provides an accessible and meaningful window” into the purpose of a school and a “straightforward and accessible indicator of the school’s values”.

¹ Christian Schools Australia <http://archive.csa.edu.au/component/content/article/56-about-csa/132-about-christian-schooling>

Symes and Gulson (2005) in an article entitled “Crucifying education: The rise and rise of new Christian schooling in Australia” also recognise the importance of school websites for conveying the purpose of schools and say that websites, “have become an inescapable part of Australia's educational landscape”. They are critical of the new Christian school sector and writing under a sub-heading “Deifying the web: Christian schools in cyberspace” they see in Christian school websites evidence of their extremism. They write (2005, p. 22):

These sites provide textual platforms that enable information about schools to be accessed expeditiously, and to be styled in such a way as to 'crystallise' their ethos. Schools are now using their websites much as they used prospectuses in the past, as marketing devices, as a way to promote schools to prospective parents.

Stemler, Bebell & Sonnabend (2011, pp. 301, 391), identifies four reasons for using school mission statements as a source of data for understanding the purpose of schools: they represent an important summary of a school's core values; they are publically available as they are generally placed on a school's website; they are able to be coded; they are an indicator of the school's cultural values. The value of school mission statements as a source of data is endorsed by Schafft, K. and Biddle, C. (2013, p. 57), when they say:

Mission statements for educational institutions reflect the mediation of a broad range of influences into one vision of purpose. They therefore represent a valuable source of data for understanding the ways in which educational leadership articulates the purpose of schooling.

Following the precedent by Stemler et al. (2011, p. 417), the terms *purpose*, *mission* and *vision* have been treated as synonymous for this research (as they have by some schools), even though they have distinct connotations in the literature. The web-based mission statements of a purposeful sampling of six CSA schools were systematically coded and analysed to gain an understanding of the purpose of Christian schooling as defined by the schools themselves. The criteria for the selection of the schools were:

- They commenced within six years of the start of Christian Community High School (CCHS) the school which gave its name originally to the association of schools,
- Historically they were part of Christian Community Schools Ltd, now Christian Schools Australia Ltd., and
- Founding staff (or equivalent) are still associated with the schools.

Fifteen schools commenced within six years of CCHS and were part of Christian Community Schools Ltd. From these, six were selected because they met the third criteria and had staff or retired staff still associated with the school from its foundation.

The ethics of identifying the schools was considered. In order to uphold privacy, each school has been assigned a unique pseudonym. The pseudonym corresponds to the name of an early Australian Prime Minister as modelled by Stemler et al. (2011, p. 404). The six schools are:

1. Barton Christian School – 1976
2. Deakin Christian School – 1979
3. Watson Christian School – 1980
4. Reid Christian School – 1980
5. Fisher Christian School – 1981
6. Cook Christian School – 1982

School websites are designed to communicate with students, parents and the community. Although websites are in the public domain, the content of public school websites is subject to State and Federal criteria and is the intellectual property of the relevant State Department of Education². For private schools content control would generally be through the principal and schools would own the intellectual property. Issues of copyright and fair-dealing means any quotations need to be referenced. If quotes could lead to the school being identified summaries and non-specific statements will be used.

Approach to Coding, Analysis and Interpretation

Stemler et al. (2011) used Content Analysis as the methodology for their study of school mission statements. The approach to analysis in this study reflects Saldana's (2009, p. 47) "pragmatic eclecticism". He outlines various perspectives on coding decisions and promotes the value of remaining "open" in the data collection and review. For the novice researcher he suggests a generic approach to data analysis whilst remaining open to change and outlines a "First Cycle" coding method that includes: Attribute Coding, Holistic Coding, Descriptive Coding and Initial Coding followed by Focused Coding. In discussing the Initial Coding method, Saldana (2009, p. 81) explains that this method is a First Cycle open ended approach to coding and states that, "Initial Coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data". This method follows, in the main, the basic systematic process of analysing data outlined by Creswell (2009, p. 186). Creswell has the researcher read the data, create topics for the data and then organise the topics into categories which are then analysed.

Specific techniques and sequence of coding and analysis

I. Preparing Data for Analysis

The initial task in considering the sub-question: What do the mission statements of CSA schools reveal about these schools? was to collect the data for analysis. Bazeley (2013, p. 51) notes that "obtaining data of any sort is not a neutral activity" as in collecting data decisions are made consciously and sub-consciously that shape the collection as to the most useful, suitable and pertinent data for the question. In this research, the decision was made to exclude reference to the core values of schools which were often included along with mission statements. Collecting the mission statements entailed the researcher copying the mission statements from the selected schools' websites. These were then organized for analysis and cut and pasted into a Word document for preliminary reading and "immersion" (Cohen, 2007, p. 471) and to "get a sense of the whole" (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). Attribute Coding of each school was included at this point.

II. Pre-Analysis of Data

School Mission Statements and Vision Goal statements are, by their very nature, an "important summation or distillation of an organization's core goals" (Stemler et al., 2011, p. 390). A pre-analysis of the Mission Statements and Vision Statements reveal they share a number of common characteristics: they are theme specific; they are often grouped or "coded" under sub-headings; and, there is a similarity of content. The latter was confirmed by doing a "find" for specific words as expected from the literature and experience. Often the same words were repeated e.g. "Christian", "biblical" and "equip" and these were highlighted and a count conducted. For referencing purposes, the Mission Statement and the Vision Goals for each school were numbered; they were then formatted and copied and pasted into a tabulated document for Initial

² For example: *Online Communication Services Website Standards*. Retrieved from: <http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/SiteWebStandards.pdf> and *Terms and Conditions of Approval to Conduct Research*. Retrieved from: http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/research/terms_conditions.pdf

Coding (Saldana 2009, p. 81). The headings for each column being: Text, Preliminary Code, Final Code and Analytical Memo as illustrated in the table extract below.

Text	Preliminary Codes	Final Code	Analytical Memo
Attribute coding: Barton Christian School, Sydney, NSW Coeducational K-12 school, Established: 1976			
MISSION GOALS & VISION STATEMENT			
1. Our vision is to foster a Christ-centred learning community where all students receive an education which enables them to know the Lord Jesus Christ, grow in Him and serve Him to their full potential.	CHRIST-CENTRED COMMUNITY GROW IN CHRIST	CHRIST-CENTRED EDUCATION	The word "Christian" appears 2 times and "biblical" appears 2 times. Mission goals are already grouped therefore to some extent already themed. Only this school includes the name and title "Lord Jesus Christ".
Centrality of Christ:			
2. Our school recognises the source of all hope to be in the Lord Jesus Christ. Biblica principles are the foundation of our curriculum, faith and practice.	CAUSE OF HOPE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION	GENUINE FAITH COMMUNITY	
Learning Community:			
3. Our staff will be growing Christians and Godly role models who strive to be excellent practitioners	CHRISTIAN STAFF GODLY PRACTITIONERS	SKILLED GODLY STAFF	
4. Our school community will be characterised by quality relationships that reflect Christ's loving servant leadership			
5. Our school will serve the Christian community by working in partnership with parents and church to provide an environment conducive to learning	RELATIONSHIPS	SELF-DENYING	

III. Coding

Given the conciseness of statements, emergent coding was done on each complete mission/vision statement. Saldana (2011, p. 84) states, "Detailed coding is not always necessary so sentence-by-sentence or even paragraph-by-paragraph coding is permissible depending on your research and analytic work ethic". Steps in coding were:

1. Read through each school's mission statement in the "text" column.
2. Determine the emergent code from the text and place code in the column entitled "preliminary code".
3. Make analytical memos of matters to follow up or items of interest.
4. Continue this process until satisfied with the preliminary codes
5. Review the preliminary codes and group these under new code names in the column "Final

Codes". Given the text was grouped in the original mission statements, it was not necessary to move the mission statements to group meaningfully under new final codes.

- Review and repeat this process until satisfied with the final codes.

IV. Analysis and Preliminary Findings

Before analysing, a further step was taken to categorise the codes. After completing the coding, there were 25 "final codes", so following Creswell (2009, p. 186) these "final codes" were reduced further by grouping them into six new emerging categories which were then refined with reference to the themes listed by Stemler et al. (2011, p. 396). The following, is part of the "working document" showing the new categories and the mission statements - identified alpha-numerically by the initials of the pseudonymous name and a sequential number - listed below the category. This allowed some initial analysis of the data. The six categories that emerged have in fact become the summary of the mission statements of the selected schools and show that the selected schools seek to be distinctively Christian and that belief about God and issues of faith are central to the education and learning experience of students (see Table 1).

Categories	Christ-centred, child-focussed education	Partnering in learning	Integrate into the Spiritual Community	Integrate into the Community	Serving the local and global community	Cognitive Development
Alpha-numeric coded statements	BCS 1 DCS 1,7,8,9,10,13 WCS 1 FCS 1,2 CCS 1	BCS 3,4,5 DCS 14,18 FCS 8,9 WCS 3,6	BCS 2,6,7,11 DCS 2,3,4,5,6, WCS 2,4,8 FCS 4,5,6,7 CCS 5,6,7	BCS 4,13 DCS 15,16,17,19,20,21 WCS 5 FCS 10, CCS 8	BCS 12 DCS 12 RCS 4,5,6 FCS 11 CCS 4	BCS 8,10 DCS 11 WCS 7 RCS 1,2,3 FCS 3 CCS 2,3,9,10

Table 1

Further analysis can be made by considering the data in a pie graph of the percentage of each mission goal assigned to each category as shown in Table 2. The number of mission/vision statements is 68 (N = 68). The following gives a brief write-up of the top three categories.

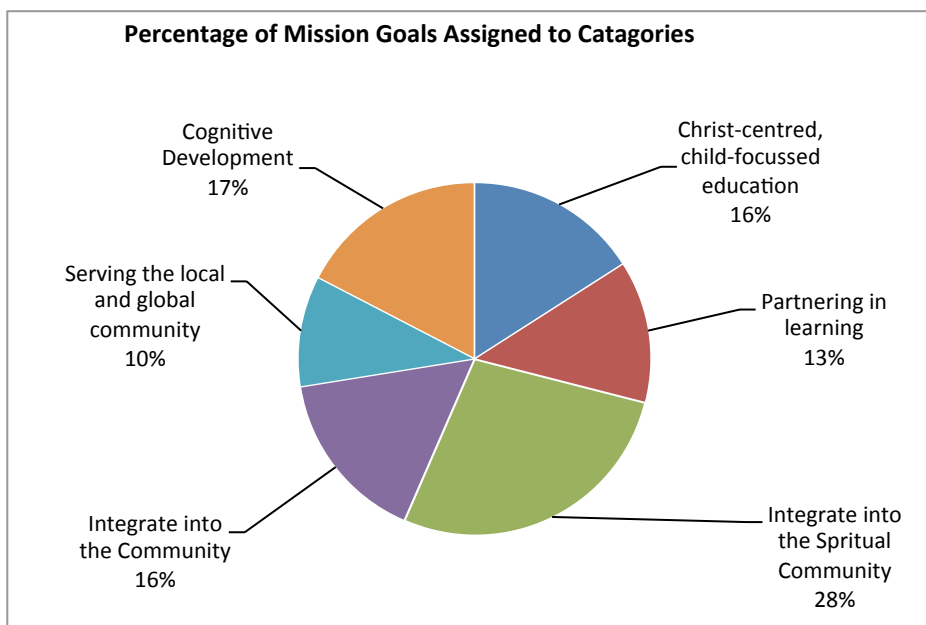


Table 2

The analysis reveals that 28% of the mission statements determined by schools pertain to students being integrated into the spiritual community. This indicates that schools value and prioritise students experiencing their own faith-formed relationship with God and assimilating a biblical Christian worldview that dynamically informs their choices. The second major category is Cognitive Development consisting of 17% of the mission statements. This reveals that schools see it as important that they follow State curricula and attain at an excellent standard. Schools want students to be equipped for life by achieving well academically. Many of the schools show that they prioritise Christ-centred, child-focussed education as indicated by the fact 16% of the mission statements pertain to this category and equally important have a desire to see students contribute to the community and be good citizens generally.

This analysis confirms that Christian schools are seeking to be distinctive and offer an education that is shaped by a biblical worldview and equips graduands academically for life and service. This conforms to the literature. Dowson (2014, p. 43), sees the purpose of Christian education as “preparing students to live godly lives in God’s world” and Fisher (2012, p. 36), so that students “are prepared with a Christian world-view, reflecting attitudes and knowledge affected by a Christ-centered approach ... being educated for life and eternity”. Etherington (2008, p. 114) believes it is so that a student might come to a saving knowledge of Jesus and develop physically, emotionally spiritually and cognitively to serve others now and in the hereafter.

The priority of schools is revealed in their mission/vision statements as shown in Table 3. This table shows the number of mission statements per category for each school. Significantly the only category prioritised by all the selected schools is that of Cognitive Development. All schools promote an education that equips

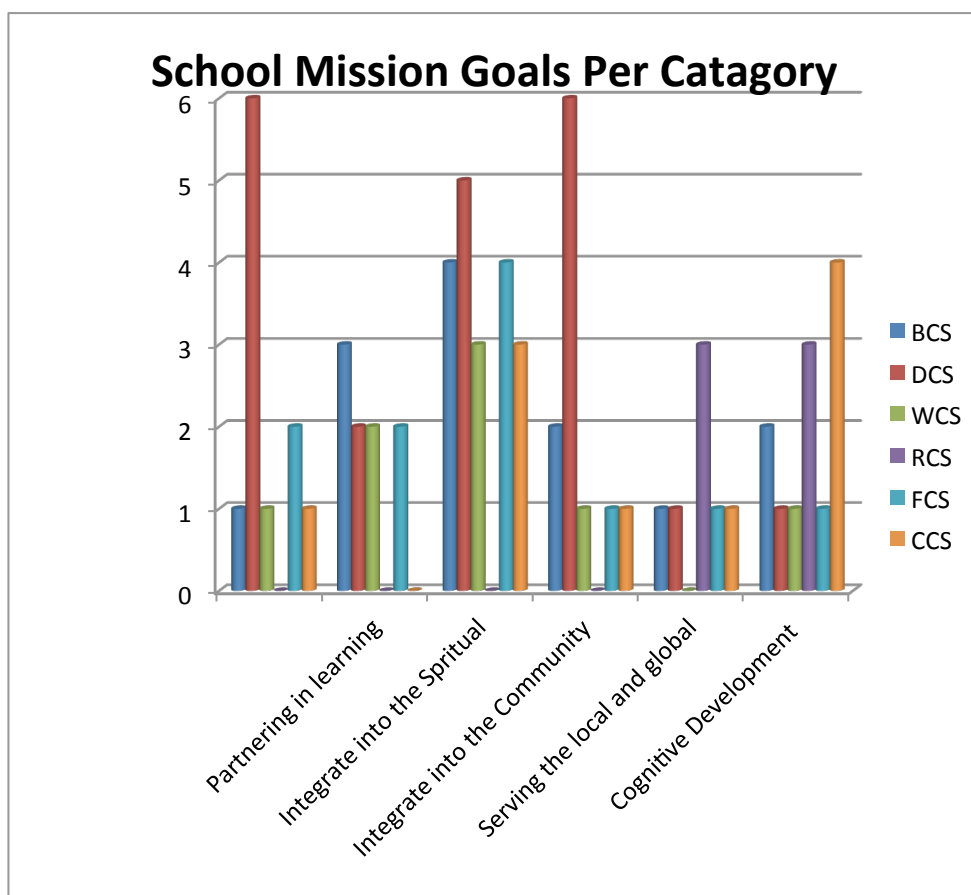


Table 3

students for life that is an achieving education based on Board of Studies Curricula. This rightly shows that the purpose of schools is an education which prepares students for their vocation in life “equipping them with wisdom to live well” (Maple, 2014, p.25). The table also shows that five schools value and promote as important an education that is Christ-centred and child-focussed (BCS, DCS, WCS, FCS AND CCS). This reflects a major emphasis in the literature (Friskin, 2011; Blomberg, 1996; Fowler, 1996; Wilhoit, 1991) and is a primary reason why Christian families select Christian schooling - families want their children to have an education that supports their Christian values. As Kienel (1983, p. 2), states: “True Christian schools are presenting Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and the Bible as the infallible point of reference for living”. These same schools also want students to be integrated into the Spiritual Community - this category relates to faith formation and students being disciplined into a Christian world and life view. Again this conforms to the literature on Christian education. Twelves (2001) in considering the characteristics of successful Christian schools identified the transformation of students to be the primary purpose of such schools.

Four of these same schools (BCS, DCS, FCS AND WCS) have a goal of partnering with families in learning. This is in-keeping with the literature which states that parents have responsibility for the education of their children (Fennema, 2006, p. 10; Lambert and White, 1996, p.50). In five schools (BCS, DCS, RWS, FCS AND CCS) the desire is that students will integrate into the community and use their capacities to serve locally and globally.

For one school, Reid CS, the analysis of the data reveals its primary purpose for schooling is that students achieve academically based on the Board of Studies curricula and are prepared to be part of the community. It has very little in its mission statement reflecting a distinctive Christian focus. This begs the question then how effective is the school as a Christian school? Does this mean its purpose is more akin to a private school as compared to a Christian school? Do the mission statements by themselves reliably indicate the purpose of a school?

Further questions arise from the analysis. The literature on Christian schooling is shaped by biblical concepts and language. Only one school, Cook CS, used the name and title “Lord Jesus Christ”. Does the language used in a Mission Statement indicate how distinctive a school will be as a Christian school? This same school created an acrostic for its mission statement. Does this mean the mission statements were contrived or a true reflection of the school’s purpose?

It is evident that mission statements, given their availability on school websites and their brevity, are a useful source of data for empirically examining the purpose of schools. Analysis through Content Analysis with emergent coding strategies has revealed, in the main, that Christian schools still have as their intent to be effective in fulfilling their aim of developing in students a biblical worldview that dynamically informs life’s experiences. The nature of this research though has meant only one data collection method has been used and multiple sources are required for validity and reliability and to neutralize any bias inherent in a particular data source (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002, p.33). The next step in this research will be interviews with relevant principals and other stakeholders and this will triangulate findings.

Stemler et al. (2011, p. 402) followed up their initial study into schools’ mission statements with a second study where a sample of school principals were interviewed to ascertain if the statements reflected practice or drove practice. In the same way, further research needs to be done to ascertain whether these select CSA schools are in fact fulfilling their mission - whether the mission statements reflect school practice or determine practice.

V. Reflection

Understanding Qualitative Research and data analysis has been a “steep learning curve” for this researcher. The blank canvas that was “Qualitative Research” has slowly been filled through the lectures, readings, text books and journal readings. The picture that is emerging is complex, somewhat confusing but becoming meaningful – among the strong dominant colours of reds, browns and blacks are lighter hues and glimpses of gold and silver. The meaning and understanding that is being gained will enable data analysis to be used as an effective, worthwhile and indispensable tool.

Of necessity is the need to build in time and systems. Research analysis is not something that can be “done on the run”. Coding and analysis is skill based. Proficiency will develop in the process of doing. Decisions therefore have been made and steps taken so that this can be prioritised. More time will allow a greater focus on setting up systems to manage the research, obtain and work with the data and be creative, coherent and sophisticated in thinking rather than superficial and elementary.

Conclusion

This analysis of Mission Statements is positioned as part of the document study researching the impact and effectiveness of CSA schools contribute to answering the questions:

- How does the history of CSA schools demonstrate their distinctive nature?
- Have schools’ praxis changed over time?

The data analysis of schools’ mission statements reveal that in the main their intent is to develop in students a biblical worldview that dynamically informs life’s experiences. Whether the mission statements reflect school practice or determine practice cannot be ascertained; more work needs to be done.

References

- Anfara, V., Brown, K., & Mangione, T. (2002). Qualitative analysis on stage: making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher*, 31(7), 28-38. Retrieved from: <http://0-edr.sagepub.com.library.newcastle.edu.au/content/31/7/28.full.pdf+html>
- Bazeley, P (2013). *Qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.
- Blomberg, D. (1996). Knowing and learning in biblical perspective. In *Reclaiming the future: Australian perspectives on Christian education*. Edited by Lambert, I and Mitchell, S. Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education*. (6th ed.). New York, Taylor & Francis e-Library. Retrieved from: <http://knowledgeportal.pakteachers.org/sites/knowledgeportal.pakteachers.org/files/resources/RESEARCH%20METHOD%20COHEN%20ok.pdf>
- Creswell, J. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dowson, M. (2014). A biblical philosophy of education. In *Teaching Well*. Edited by Goodlet, K. and Collier, J. Canberra: Barton Books.
- Etherington, M. (2008). Is Christian Schooling Really at Loggerheads with the Ideas of Diversity and Tolerance? A Rejoinder. In *Education Research and Perspectives*, 35(2), 112-137. Retrieved from: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=edu_article
- Fennema, J. (2006). Transforming Education: Parents. In *Engaging the Culture: Christians at Work in Education*. Edited by Edlin, R and Ireland, J. Adelaide: National Institute for Christian Education.
- Fowler, S. (1996). Grounding Christian Education in Scripture. In *Reclaiming the Future: Australian Perspectives on Christian Education*. Edited by Lambert, I and Mitchell, S. Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity.
- Fisher, J. (2012). Leading the development of new models of schooling: Community-based Christian schools in Australia. In *Religious Education Journal of Australia*, 28(2), 36-42. Retrieved from: <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=706533246373438;res=IELHSS>
- Friskin, R. (2011). *It Only Takes A Spark: The Story of Christian Community Schooling*. Macquarie Park, Sydney: Morling Press.
- Kienel, P. (1983). *The Philosophy of Christian School Education*. 4th ed. Whittier. California: Association of Christian Schools International.
- Lambert, I & White, A. (1996). Parents and Teachers as Partners in Education. In *Reclaiming the Future: Australian Perspectives on Christian Education*. Edited by Lambert, I and Mitchell, S. Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity.
- Maple, G. (2014). Teaching and learning. In *Teaching Well*. Edited by Goodlet, K. and Collier, J. Canberra: Barton Books.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: Sage. Retrieved from: http://stevescollection.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/8/6/13866629/saldana_2009_the-coding-manual-for-qualitative-researchers.pdf

- Schafft, K., & Biddle, C. (2013). Place and purpose in public education: School district mission statements and educational (dis)embeddedness. In *American Journal of Education*, 120(1), 55-76. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.newcastle.edu.au/stable/pdf/10.1086/673173.pdf?acceptTC=true>
- Stemler, S., & Bebell, D. (1999). *An empirical approach to understanding and analyzing the mission statements of selected educational institutions*. Retrieved from: <http://www.purposeofschool.com/files/2011/09/NEERO99.pdf>
- Stemler, S., & Bebell, D. (2013). *The school mission statement: Values, goals, and identities in American education*. New York: Routledge.
- Stemler, S., Bebell, D., & Sonnabend, A. (2011). Using school mission statements for reflection and research. In *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 47(2). DOI: 10.1177/0013161X10387590
- Symes, C., & Gulson, K. (2005). "Crucifying education: the rise and rise of new Christian schooling in Australia. In *Social Alternatives*, 24(4), 19-24. Retrieved from: http://discoverthought.com/Religion/References_files/SYMES%2005.pdf
- Twelves, J. (2001). Some Characteristics of Successful Christian Schooling. In *Australia Journal of Education & Christian Belief*, 5(1), 61-74. Retrieved from: <http://jimtwelves.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/successful-christian-schooling-in-australia.pdf>
- Wilhoit, J. (1991). *Christian Education and the search for meaning*. (2nd ed.). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.