



**“Preparing to Lead: A Study of Student Leadership in Australian Catholic Schools”**

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School of Education

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Amber Calleja

## **In Abstract**

The following is a study of student leadership development in Catholic high schools. In it the researcher examines student perspectives using the experiences of twenty-one students from three Catholic schools in the regional Bathurst diocese of New South Wales, Australia. The study focused on the leadership development experiences of students who were not student leaders within their school environment and the internal and external factors influencing their development.

Student leadership is an important area of research as the development of students in leadership throughout their schooling has the potential to impact positively on their school and wider community in the present as well as create more competent adult leaders in the future. Catholic schools are a large sector within the Australian schooling landscape therefore a focus on schools within this sector can provide insight into leadership development for a large number of Australian students. Furthermore, Catholic schools are required, under the direction of Catholic educational authorities, to develop their students as leaders using the servant leadership model and example of Jesus. Overall, the following study is significant as student leadership is currently an under-researched area in need of further data and specifically student perspectives.

This study used an interpretivist framework, qualitative design and multiple case study approach. The use of multiple case studies in this study provided rich data through the use of semi-structured interviews, reflexive journaling and document analysis. The examination of these multiple sources has allowed a thorough analysis of the students' experiences of leadership development in these school environments.

A constant comparative method of analysis resulted in four broad coding categories: students' interest in leadership development, students' experiences of leadership development, students' perceptions of leadership, and students' recommendations for improvement in their schools. These categories were further refined into sub-categories to illuminate the nuances of students' perspectives.

The findings of this study indicate that students were exposed to a variety of leadership development opportunities, both singular experiences and extended engagements, whilst in high school. They also had the chance to develop their leadership outside of their high school environment. For the majority of students these leadership development opportunities had been a positive experience and something they expressed a desire to experience more often.

This study also uncovered students' perspectives on leadership. Students in this study expressed clear definitions of leadership, often centring on the qualities attributed to servant leaders. Most were also able to quite easily define their own leadership qualities. The feedback of students in this study also provides insight into student perspectives of leadership structures within their schools. Finally, students offer ideas as to the ways they feel their schools could potentially improve their leadership development offerings.

The analysis provides valuable insight into students' perspectives of their experiences of student leadership development in a Catholic high school context. Such information could prove of value to school leaders and those involved in developing

students in leadership. The data also indicates a need for further research into the experiences of students in leadership development in other settings.

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