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## **Education Leaders or Followers: The Administration of Catholic School Systems and Recent Federal Government Education Policy**

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*This paper reports the findings of a study of the role of three Catholic school system's administrative centres, the Catholic Education Offices (CEOs) in relation to the Federal Government's literacy and vocational education policies for schools. Within their respective State education contexts, the CEOs interpreted, mediated, and overwrote the two Federal Government education policies. Further, the CEOs structured the policy enactment process in the schools themselves. The findings of the study suggest that policy researchers and public policy designers should give attention to the influence of school administrative centres on policy implementation. Catholic school system administrators have a complex role in the present policy and economic environment -- one that will demand vigilance and political skill if they desire to provide leadership to Catholic schools.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

From the mid 1980s in Australia, there have been developments in both a national approach to vocational education and training (VET) and a national school curriculum framework with defined standards. Although State Governments have responsibility for schools and for the regulation of vocational education and training, the Federal Government "has a strong national interest in educational outcomes" (Kemp, 1997a). This interest began in a substantial way in the 1960s with the funding of school science blocks and later expanded to incorporate direct funding for education programs (Marshall, 1996). While initially program funding was directed largely towards capacity building and equity objectives (Marshall, 1996), this changed as the Federal Government's promotion of national education policy

(see Dawkins, 1991; Watt, 1998) took a more interventionist form. In recent times this "intervention" is evident in policies such as those on literacy/numeracy and VET in schools.

The history of Catholic schools in Australia has been one of contested state and Church relations over matters of ideology (Barcan, 1965) and funding (Shirley, 1996). In the 1960s, due to the decrease in the number of religious men and women available to staff the schools (Praetz, 1982) and the increasing costs of education (Barcan, 1965; Selby Smith, 1971), the need for government financial support became critical. The Catholic Church became involved in the political lobbying of governments. By the middle of the 1960s all governments, State and Federal, offered considerable financial support to the non-government school sector (Barcan, 1980).

With this new funding, came administrative demands (Canavan, 1990). These combined with the need to lobby governments to obtain support (Harman, 1975), and in some cases to manage the resource demands of new curriculum (Bourke, 1974) resulted in the consolidation of Catholic administrative structures dealing with education. By the middle 1990s, Catholic schools, most of these as part of diocesan systems, were educating about one in five Australian school students (MCEETYA, 1995, p. 5). State aid provided almost 75% of their funding with more than 50% coming from the Federal Government (NCEC, 1997, p. 51). Consequently, today Catholic school systems are dependent on the "favour" of State and Federal Governments for their financial viability, and on State Governments for the right to conduct schools.

This paper reports the findings of a study of the role of three of these Catholic school system's administrative centres, the Catholic Education Offices (CEOs) in relation to two Federal Government education policies. By way of context, the following section presents insights from the scholarly literature into the relationship between public education policy and Catholic schools, the role of central school administrations in the implementation of public policy, and the interaction of policy with the implementing organisations.

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICY AND CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

In the 1990s the Federal Government's education policy and programs defined particular goals and outcomes for schools, but gave little detail about the method of implementation of the policy itself (Dudley & Vidovich, 1995; Dwyer, 1995). Among recent Federal Government's policies, the Literacy (DEETYA, 1998) and the VET in schools (DEETYA, 1996) policies are ideal examples of new education policy. They include expectations of specific schooling outcomes as part of their funding accountability requirements, while leaving the detail of implementation to schools and State education authorities. In the absence of legal authority, the Federal Government uses funding to exert moral, and some suggest, financial pressure on schools. Consequently, the relationship between the Federal Government and schools is framed in terms of accountability. By this means the Government applies and monitors its policy mandates (Adams & Kirst, 1999).

Strike (1997) says that this type of policy demands high standards of student performance, program "coherence" and less education bureaucratisation. He claims that this new approach, based on models of schools as efficient organisations rather than good communities, assumes education is about outcomes rather than process. As an alternate position, he argues that education policy developed from the perspective of schools as education communities recognises that schools have complex goals, and serve multiple purposes (Hodgkinson, 1991) and require a range of measures of accountability.

The latter view of schools is more consistent with that of the Catholic Church which considers that "the central goal of education is the education of the whole person" (NCEC,

1998, p.3) through the development of community (Griffiths & McLaughlin, 2000, p. 36). Researchers of Catholic education characterise its qualities in terms of a distinctive mission and value system. Coleman and Hopper (1987) claim that the strengths of Catholic schools are due in part to their place within an extended "functional community" centred on parishes, the sharing of a value system and the network of other social ties within that community which result in "social capital" for the child. Grace (1995, p. 162) found that the predominant view of Catholic head-teachers regarding the special mission of Catholic schools contained three interrelated features: Gospel values, the teachings of Christ and the nurture of community. Whether this mission can be balanced with that of the school as efficient organisation in competition in the "market place" (Dudley & Vidovich, 1995; Marginson, 1999) is a question open to debate (Grace, 1995).

Within the Australian Catholic Church there has been a recurring discussion about the "purpose" and "identity" of Catholic schools (see Barcan, 1965; Griffiths & McLaughlin, 2000), and the determination to maintain "autonomy" and a Catholic identity (Praetz, 1982) for Catholic education. This debate continues (see Treston, 1997; Webb, 1991) as Catholic schools become more dependent on government funding and governments seek to be more directive in relation to the outcomes of schooling.

Considerations of the role of CEOs in the education process are integral to the debate on "identity" and "difference" since the majority of Catholic schools are part of diocesan school systems. Doyle (1989, p. 49) defines the CEO's role as "to effect subsidiarity, to create decentralisation and to protect autonomies". In support of this view Beare (1995, p.7) claims that the principles guiding the operation of Catholic schooling are subsidiarity, pluriformity, and complementarity. These three principles rely on decisions being made at the local level wherever possible, decisions meeting local needs and diversity, and that the parts of the system work together to form an "alliance forged for the common good". Some writers challenge this picture of the functioning of Catholic school systems. Furtado (1997) presents subsidiarity as a principle that creates tensions and limits the ability of CEOs to effect any control over schools. Griffiths and McLaughlin (2000, p. 36) suggest that a number of CEOs have been accused of adopting bureaucratic models of governance while incorporating models of management based on efficiency rather than community. This debate and the surrounding tension are symptomatic of the unease of Catholic educators in this new policy environment.

Public education policies impact on the implementing organisation in a number of ways. They establish cultural norms that the state considers desirable for education, develop mechanisms of accountability for student and teacher performance (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997, p. 2), and achieve material effects and gain support for those effects (Ball, 1998, p.124). Whether the explicit objectives of policy relate to a shift in or maintenance of values, one consequence of the implementation of policy is that it has an impact on organisational values and culture. Structural or material change will alter the power relationships of groups and individuals within an organisation and so affect their level of influence within that organisation (Scott & Cohen, 1995). Further, programs designed to cause change reward or penalise certain behaviours. By so doing they symbolise what is now "important" within the organisation. Thus, whatever the primary target of a public policy, whether it is structure, resource distribution or organisational culture and values, the impact will not be limited to a particular target. For ideological organisations a key consideration in the implementation of public policy will be its influence on organisational values and culture.

The intervention of the Federal Government through its outcomes driven public policy may well mark a watershed in Catholic schooling in Australia. In order to appreciate the influence of this type of policy on Catholic education, it is important to understand the role of the

administrative centre in the implementation of such policy and what happens to policy itself in the process of its implementation.

### **Public Education Policy and the Role of the Central Education Administration**

The literature supports the power of central administrators of school systems to influence policy implementation in schools. The role of these administrators can be characterised as largely one of management, as they deal with practical and substantive decisions or as one of leadership, where practical and substantive decisions are integrated with values decisions including those made on ethical and moral grounds (Hodgkinson, 1991). Two different pictures of the role are evident in the descriptions of district offices in the United States and those of Local Government Authorities (LEA) in Britain. The descriptions of the role of district offices are framed as management processes in some of the scholarly literature. For instance, the district office provides valuable assistance in implementing government policy by (a) modify programs to meet the school situation (McLaughlin, 1991a), (b) providing a combination of pressure and support in the "loosely structured multi-layered world of schools and education policy" (McLaughlin, 1991b, p. 88) and, (c) supporting extensive and intensive ongoing training during policy implementation (Odden, 1991). Woods and Wenham (1995) present one LEA in a leadership role in relation to a government discussion paper. They describe the role as one of "mediation". The LEA took quick action to moderate the schools' unease, a clear professional lead, and situated the debate around the discussion paper in the professional arena. This action gave the document credibility. Barber presents a similar view of the LEAs in the late 1990s when he argues that they are providing the community leadership "so essential to transforming attitudes and promoting successful education" (1998 p. 760).

In the Australian context, Rizvi and Kemmis (1987) in their evaluation of the Federal Government's Participation and Equity Programs (1984 -1986) in Victoria, contend that the central support unit was established to meet certain management imperatives. They found little acknowledgment of the democratic and participatory rhetoric of the programs. In opposition to the program rhetoric, schools' behaviour towards this unit often demonstrated centralist values and dependency. Despite this, the unit carried out some important functions, among which the authors list the following: (a) research into the major issues, (b) the establishment of networks of schools, and (c) the circulation of information about good practices through sponsoring system-wide debate (p. 174). In this evaluation the authors suggests that the State perceived the role of the support unit to be one of the policy management and that schools had little appreciation of the shift in culture that underpinned the policy itself. Clearly, the central administration gave little leadership in terms of a cultural shift in the implementation of these programs. These studies provide support for the view that the central school administration carries out an important role in the implementation of public policy. This role may be framed as one of the management of policy support or as one of leadership where decisions related to policy implementation are integrated with decisions on organisational values and culture.

### **Public Policy within the Implementing Organisation**

Descriptions of interaction between "the policy" and the implementing organisation vary. Hatcher and Troya (1994, p. 155) present the implementation process as involving a "degree of slippage and 're-creation' in the transition from the declared purposes to enactment", while Rein presents implementation as an "accommodation to institutional realities" (1983, p. 155). In other literature the implementation site is regarded as more actively involved in shaping the policy. Dwyer (1995, p. 98) claims that there are clear examples in Australian practice in relation to vocational education policy which show that the "shaping of policy is 'localised' and not solely with those at the centre". This "shaping" of policy at the local site can form

part of the process of justifying policies (Apple, 1997, p. 168), a process whereby the policies themselves are "legitimised". Scott (1995) defines legitimacy as "a condition reflecting cultural alignment, normative support and consonance with relevant rules or laws" (p. 45). Within organisations efforts to ensure that public policy "fits", may demand local "reshaping" of the policy. Such "shaping" reflects a politically pragmatic approach to policy implementation, one in which the policy is "overwritten". Scott uses the term "overwriting" to describe a process that results in a "bricolage", a layering of internal policy on top of the public policy creating a new policy structure defined and shaped by all the layers (1996, p. 133). These different views of policy implementation reflect different positions along a continuum in relation to local control over the policy process.

Undoubtedly, the central administration can take a key part in legitimising policy, "overwriting" it with a professional discourse, building the capacity of schools to respond to the policy and "accommodating" the policy to the "reality" of schools. The study described in the following section examines this role in three Catholic Education Offices.

## THE STUDY

During the study, conducted in late 1998 and early 1999, key informants from three Catholic diocesan school systems explained how their systems responded to the two policies -- VET and Literacy. Those responsible for the policy area in each CEO took part in semi-structured interviews about their respective systems' responses to the current policies. These informants also provided copies of the documents that they considered important to their school systems' responses. In order to highlight differences and similarities (Maxwell, 1998; Merriam, 1988), school systems were chosen from different Australian States and dioceses of dissimilar size, and geographic and demographic distributions. Contextual analysis (Maxwell, 1998) and categorisation of the data (see Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rudestan & Newton, 1992) from each of these school systems provided the material for a cross-case analysis, which in turn formed the basis for the description of the CEOs' responses to the policies. In keeping with standard ethical procedures, the schools systems are referred to using pseudonyms to mask their identity.

### The Literacy and VET Policies

The study was designed to examine how CEOs respond to public education policies that seek to influence student outcomes. The two policies, Literacy and VET offered some insight into this question as they differed with respect to target groups, policy players, and levels of complexity. At the time the research was being conducted, the literacy policy was largely affecting primary schools, and its application was confined to schools. In contrast, the VET policy targeted students in the last two years of secondary school and its implementation was contingent on a range of external organisations and other policies connected with national training and employment. Examining the response to these very different policies offered the potential to capture "the core experiences and central shared aspects" of the policy responses rather than experiences relevant to only one policy type (Patton, 1990, p. 172).

In the context of this study the term literacy policy refers to all or any element of the National Literacy Numeracy Plan (DEETYA, 1998) and the associated funded Literacy Program. The latter has two strands -- one delivers funds to schools to foster literacy and numeracy, and the other funds national literacy and numeracy strategies and projects. This program subsumes previous programs for English as a Second Language (ESL), as well as the National Equity Programs (NEPS) that targeted disadvantaged students. The new program continues to target these two groups. The VET policy refers to New Apprenticeships

(DEETYA, 1996), the associated industrial policies and the principles underpinning them, as well as the funded VET programs.

### **Policy and Catholic School Systems**

There is often confusion about the relationship and policy roles of the State Catholic Education Commissions (CECs) and the individual Catholic school systems. While the CECs represent the views of Catholic education in the States, their role in developing policy for individual diocesan school systems depends largely on their relationship with the Bishop of the Diocese and the size of the State. State CECs are responsible for both the distribution of Federal Government program funding and reporting the outcomes of programs to the Commonwealth. In the three cases examined in this study, two of the CEOs serviced the State Commission and both these CECs made policy for schools; the third used its Diocesan Schools Board as its policy body. For simplicity in this paper I will refer to the "policy body" rather than elaborate on the different relationships.

The policy history in relation to VET and literacy was different. Schools had a long history with literacy education. VET was a new area for schools, and one that was constantly changing. As a result when the two policies were introduced, they entered organisations with different levels of available resourcing and expertise in the two areas. In all CEOs the person responsible for literacy, who had responsibility for a small team of people, was at a higher level in the organisation compared to the level of the single individual managing VET. Not only was the policy environment different for the two policies, but each school system was distinctive in its character and the choices it made in response to elements of the policies.

#### The Medurban Diocesan School System

In the Medurban Diocese, the largest of the three school systems with about 40 000 students, the organisational structures supporting the decision-making process, the CEO's increasing curriculum "leadership", and the centralist approach to policy were all important factors in the Literacy and VET response. Since literacy support was a priority for which considerable planning had already occurred, the result was a well resourced, centralised and organised approach to the literacy policy. Although the Medurban Diocese's policy body had previously identified VET for some system support, there was no structured approach but rather a process of monitoring, informing and establishing a broad philosophical position in relation to VET.

The Medurban Diocese is located in State with assumptions of school involvement in curriculum development within a broadly defined curriculum framework. The expectation that teachers will develop classroom curriculum is particularly true for the primary schools. The State's education culture and regulations freed the CEO to choose from a range of responses to the Federal Government policies. At the same time, these State factors also influenced the assumptions of schools and the system in relation to their respective roles in the policy process. As a consequence, the CEO could provide educational leadership with fewer restrictions than exist in some other Australian States, but the schools expected a role in the decision making. In VET, the State institutions limited the possible approaches more than was the case with literacy.

Cultural alignment between the policy and the school system were important to the CEO administrators. The key informants argued that for both policies, the system chose to go beyond the Federal Government's objectives to use the policy to support more extensive change in order to meet student needs. The CEO used a range of strategies to align the Federal Government's policies to the system's processes, language, and priorities. The system described these policy processes as based on "subsidiarity", collaborative

leadership, and dialogue. In a State where there was a cooperative relationship between all the different school systems, the Medurban Diocese valued its autonomy and professional contribution to education. It used the language of "education" and not "economics". It also placed a high priority on coherence between its values and beliefs as it pursued a more centralised and systemic response to these externally imposed policies.

### The Binary Diocesan School System

The Binary diocesan school system, with about 24 000 students, experienced vulnerability in relation to Federal Government actions due to its location in a small State with a high level of dependency on the Federal Government. The CEO and school leaders monitored closely the Federal Government's policy directions, those of the local government school system and the expectations of parents. It represented itself as an autonomous system with particular educational priorities largely associated with its primary schools.

In the area of literacy the Binary Diocese was developing a planned, integrated approach, which was endorsed at the highest policy level, marking this a "core issue" for education. This approach was framed in a pedagogical discourse and identified as a strategy to address "disadvantage" and was therefore a responsibility of the Special Needs Team. The system was developing a new definition of "disadvantage" for use in the distribution of literacy funding. As a consequence of NEPS, systemic planning in relation to literacy education had already occurred and support structures already existed. There was coherence between the language of the Diocesan Special Needs and Literacy Numeracy Plans, the system documentation concerning literacy, and the literacy manager's discussion. The rhetoric was one of education and equity.

The VET policy became part of an ambivalent relationship between the CEO and its secondary schools -- one where the CEO's role was principally with respect to the governance of schools rather than curriculum leadership. There was no apparent organisational structure within the CEO to manage VET other than as a funding or legal matter. The result was that this policy area was kept largely at the margins of schools and the system. The CEO adviser did negotiate some important changes with and on behalf of schools, but these changes gained little systemic recognition.

### The Provincial Diocesan School System

The Provincial diocesan school system, the smallest of these three school systems, had about 16 000 students. This small education system functioned in a large highly centralised State education environment. Many of the State's education programs and processes were accepted practice even when these were not mandated for non-government schools. The schools in the Provincial diocese subscribed to external testing for literacy, and the teachers were preoccupied with State registration requirements. Despite the State influences, the system displayed a level of "independence" in its interpretation of the two Federal Government policies.

The CEO created staff positions and adjusted others in response to the Literacy and VET policies. In schools there were established literacy and VET programs due to earlier Federal Government policies and/or State programs. These programs were adapted to meet the new policy requirements. There was no statement of educational philosophy, nor any formal education policy process within the Diocese. However, the CEO was in the process of developing representative committees in the areas of literacy and VET.

Decisions that had previously been left to individual schools were becoming centralised as the system responded to the Literacy and VET policies. Although there was evidence that

this was primarily a response to State practices, the Federal policies reinforced this direction. Policy responses were largely instigated by the two people responsible for these areas at the CEO, in the case of literacy to "comply" with the Federal Government requirements and in the case of VET to "rationalise" and "systematise" processes of management. Both the literacy manager and the VET adviser established policy processes to effect decisions and actions that reflected their own philosophies. The lack of a both policy structure and hierarchical curriculum processes at the CEO combined with the history of school-based education decisions, resulted in both advisers becoming key policy players. In this role, they were constrained by their lack of "authority" in relation to schools, the State restrictive curriculum regulations, and the expectations of schools and their communities.

### **Description of the Policy Process**

There were three helpful representations of the policy process in the literature that assisted in determining a description of what occurred in the Catholic school systems in this study. These were Woods and Wenham's (1995) concept of "mediation", Scott's (1996) notion of "overwriting" the policy, and Bowe, Ball and Gold's (1992) conceptualisation of the policy process in terms of the contexts of influence, text production, and practice.

Building on these conceptions, this paper uses the terms "interpretation", "mediation", "overwriting", and "enactment" to represent the policy process in Catholic school systems. These were found to be the most robust description of the policy process revealed by the data. While the general conceptualisation of Woods and Wenham's (1995) "mediation" and Scott's (1996) "overwriting" are retained, the meaning here is not limited to that of these authors. Together these four operations result in outcomes, some of which are related to those the policy is designed to effect, and some are process outcomes. The operations are not linear, but overlapping and interdependent. In this study, the policy process included "interpretation", "overwriting", "mediation", and "enactment" as well as the initial acceptance of government program funding and its associated accountability. For simplicity, all these processes collectively are referred to as the "policy transaction", that is, the process is one where the negotiation between Government as the policy developer and the Catholic school system as the policy actor is carried through to a settlement (The Macquarie Dictionary, 1985). "Enactment" -- the specific actions in schools with a direct relationship to the stated policy goals, outcomes or targets, such as testing students, and establishing VET courses -- is not the focus of this study.

### **The Policy Transaction in Catholic School Systems**

The acceptance of program funding and the associated accountabilities marks the beginning of the policy relationship between the Federal Government and Catholic school systems. Clearly then, it is at this level that the policy transaction begins. During the discussion with the informants there was no evidence that the CEOs gave any consideration to rejecting the Federal Government program funding. However, this observation may be a factor of the distance of the informants from CEO-CEC debates and the fact that no information was gathered from the CEC in relation to policy decisions. Further, there was no expressed unwillingness to meet the specific policy accountabilities associated with the funding even though there were common concerns with the long-term financial implications of both policies.

#### Policy Interpretation

"Interpretation" is the process of appraising and dissecting the public policy to clarify its importance, its underpinning values, motivations, assumptions as well as the policy requirements. A number of factors associated with the policy itself, the organisational

structures and culture and the perceptions of individual policy players influenced the interpretation of the policy. At times the interpretation was similar across the school systems and at times it varied. In the latter case, the result was different approaches to the translation of the policy and its enactment.

The clarity of the policy influenced the way it was interpreted in the CEOs. Since the components of the literacy policy were clearly defined, the literacy informants identified common essential policy elements. In this list they all included the national Goals and Sub-goal for literacy and numeracy. In contrast, for the VET policy where the components were less clear, the interpretation varied between the school systems. The Provincial Diocese focused on the specific issues related to New Apprenticeships current in the State at the time. The informants from the other two school systems presented the VET policy in a broader implementation context, but even here they varied. One focussed on a systemic approach to VET; the other explored the issues for the schools.

Government motivation and interest were also interpreted in different ways. All three literacy informants identified the Federal Government's interest in "student performance on outcomes", but attributed motivations as different as school accountability and a desire for students to be "as literate as possible". All the VET informants agreed the VET policy was designed to reduce the unemployment statistics, increase retention in schools, and effect some "school reform", but two of them considered that the Government had a "hidden" motive in relation to VET, that of fundamental and wide-ranging change in schools.

The importance of the policy and its components reflected the way the policy roles and supportive structures had developed at the particular CEO. Issues related to the management of the funding dominated the Provincial Diocese informant's comments. In the Medurban Diocese, education philosophy was the focus of much of the discussion. The informant in the Binary Diocese emphasised policy accountability, the concept of "disadvantage" and the management of funding within that context. Underpinning all these discussions was the recognition of the need to comply with the assessment of students' literacy achievements against benchmarks. There was no similar measure against which VET policy compliance could be ascertained. In all but one of the school systems, VET was initially assessed as a matter for financial management and accountability rather than a substantive education issue. Despite this, the individual VET advisers considered it to be an important policy.

The Catholic school systems had common positions in relation to the policies. While they recognised the limitations of the policies, all informants gave the policies an in-principle endorsement, though this was not formalised at the system level in relation to the VET policy to the degree found in Literacy. Despite this endorsement all systems were concerned about: (a) the use of student performance, measured in outcomes, as the basis for the distribution of funding, (b) the costs of the full implementation of benchmarking, and (c) the level of resourcing, including staffing and time, required by the VET policy.

### Overwriting

"Overwriting" attaches new values, discourse and local motivations to the policy. This overwriting, while consistent with the structures and cultures of each school system, was most evident in relation to the literacy policy, though even here the degree of overwriting varied across the school systems. The CEOs used the literacy policy to gain support for their "own" literacy initiatives while at the same time providing a "sharper focus" for literacy education. They used their control over funding distribution as an opportunity to advance particular beliefs about literacy education. Further, the Binary and Medurban Dioceses sought to "legitimise" the literacy policy and to ensure the cohesion of the elements of "policy

in action" with the system's educational philosophy and priorities. The Provincial Diocese showed less concern for issues of educational philosophy and more concern for maintaining prior funding distribution priorities that the informant argued forcefully were the "real" intent of the new arrangements despite different advice from the CEC.

"Overwriting" the VET policy was largely a personal matter for each of the advisers. The policy had little formal decision-making structure associated with it in any of the school systems. Further, due to its shifting and complex nature, few high ranking CEO administrators appeared to have a detailed understanding of the policy so the CEOs relied heavily on the interpretation of the individual advisers. In two cases, the advisers portrayed this policy as offering greater "equity" for students and used this to encourage school principals to establish VET courses in their schools.

Different discourses surrounded the policies. The strong discourse of planning and coherence associated with the literacy policy itself became part of the discourse in the school systems. In contrast, the discourse which implied the failure of schools and that purporting a utilitarian ideology was not included in the system's policy discourse, nor was there reporting of parents accepting these types of representation. The one exception to this was in the Provincial Diocese where the VET informant gave a utilitarian presentation of the VET policy while identifying this as his personal philosophy on education.

### Mediation

"Mediation" implies decisions about who holds responsibility for which components of the policy, the adaptation or development of system procedures to carry out the policy requirements, and the political processes the CEO engages to gain schools acceptance of the "overwritten" policy. Mediation was highly dependent on the interpretation of the policy, a process that was in turn dependent on established processes and structures where these existed.

All school systems allocated responsibility for the literacy policy within well-established processes and roles, or adapted those associated with prior funded programs. In the two school systems with no obvious location for the VET policy, initially it was subsumed within the responsibilities of other established roles. Later on the Provincial Diocese created a new staff position using the VET program funding.

In most instances, where previous approaches met the new Federal Government policy requirements these were simply adapted to the new requirements, but where these did not exist, new programs or roles were designed. In relation to the choice of literacy assessment instrument for the benchmarking of students' achievements, high-level policy processes, with their associated advisory committees and school consultations, occurred in both the Medurban and Binary Dioceses. Notwithstanding this, the location of decisions related to the other components of the policy varied across the dioceses. In some cases these decisions were centralised and in others they were left largely to schools with the advice and support of the CEO. Since schools already had in place procedures that could be used for benchmarking purposes, the Provincial Diocese treated the literacy policy decisions as matters of "management" and policy compliance. They continued their support for ESL and literacy programs in disadvantaged schools. One exception to the adaptation of existing processes was in the Binary Diocese. Here they developed a new system for the distribution of the literacy funding based on their particular interpretation of the new funding guidelines for which they sought schools' endorsement.

All the CEOs used the literacy policy to defuse school controversies related to policy decisions. At times they made considerable efforts to negotiate on decisions that the schools

opposed or were ambivalent towards. By arguing that the policy required a specific type of response, the advisers used the literacy policy to achieve their individual or system objectives. This was particularly evident in relation to funding distribution, which was a contentious issue in number of instances. In VET, the advisers used the demands of the policy within the State context to lever its acceptance in schools. This was done largely by persuasion as none of the advisers had any authority in schools.

### Influences on the Policy Transaction

The influences impacting on the Catholic school systems' responses to Federal Government education policy were: (a) the associated funding accountability mechanisms; (b) State factors such as size, institutions, regulations and educational philosophy; (c) the individual policy characteristics, (d) the school system's relationship with the State CEC; and (e) internal system factors. The Catholic school systems were aware of the need to account directly to the Federal Government for policy funding which they did as a separate sector within the State. All three State Governments regulated senior schooling more than primary or junior secondary schooling, thus limiting the "freedom" of choice in response to the VET policy more than the literacy policy. Further, the nature of the different curriculum in the States meant that the historical approach to literacy and VET in each diocese was embedded within a different cultural and structural framework. The CEO's capacity to interpret, mediate, and overwrite the policy depended on the established structures, processes and culture in relation to the policy area; the culture and structure of decision-making; individuals and groups with interest and expertise in the policy area and; the nature of the policy itself.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is indeed an irony that most of the literature presents the implementation process associated with public education policy with little acknowledgment of the "gatekeeping" role of a school system's central administration. This is particularly so when this body is held accountable for the outcomes of the policy and accountability is such a strong focus in recent public policy. Woods and Wenham (1995) use the term "gatekeeping" in relation to head-teachers who they argue decide what comes into the school, when, and how, in addition to what gets taken into consideration, that is "they mediate and interpret policy instructions" (p. 130). In this role the "gatekeeper" has a bi-focal perspective, seeking to maintain what is important to the organisation and assessing the external environment for threats and new pressures that will destabilise it (p. 131). The CEO carries out a similar "gatekeeping" role for their school systems and in so doing it is a powerful player in policy implementation. The way the CEO details the response to the practical issues of the policy has the potential to support the maintenance or transformation of organisational values or to allow new values to infuse with the policy.

In this study, the CEO as "gatekeeper" mediated and overwrote the policies either systematically through formal processes, or through the individual/s responsible for the policy. The degree to which system administrators simply allowed the policy to be adapted to "institutional reality" (Rein, 1983) or chose to actively overwrite and mediate varied. Despite this there were some common approaches across the dioceses. Both policies were presented to schools as "education" policies with the overtones of the economic and the "market place" removed. Policy detail was shared with schools to gain support for a particular interpretation or a particular system priority, but much of the detail was "filtered" out. When the school system used more structured formal processes, it carefully aligned its explicit values and educational beliefs with its representation of the policy. Whenever the policy was used to reinforce policy directions already established in these school systems, they took efforts to ensure coherence with established priorities, processes, and discourses

underpinned by particular beliefs. In a similar way, Fuhrman, Clune, and Elmore (1991, p. 218) found that education districts in the United States used Federal Government policy as an opportunity to meet their own needs as they attempted to shape the policy. Through these processes the structural, cultural and political traits of the "organisation" interact with "public policy" when it enters the school system, but this is not a one-way process.

Previous policy decisions often result in the institutionalisation of particular curriculum approaches, ways of thinking, and what becomes valued in the school system. They also facilitate the development of particular types of resources thus building the capacity necessary to implement the new policy (McDonnell & Elmore, 1991). In this study curriculum approaches in relation to literacy were most strongly institutionalised where the previous public policy and the priorities of the school system had coincided. The former NEPS and ESL policies which encompassed issues of literacy then drove the development of particular expertise and this expertise became the lens through which new approaches were viewed, so penetrating the very "categories of structure, action and thought" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, 13). Thus the prior policies effectively changed beliefs by practice (McLaughlin, 1991a, p. 149) ensuring that the established approach to literacy development in these school systems become a key component of the "new" response to literacy. There were also cognitive sunk costs (Powell, 1991) since people were already committed to certain ways of "thinking" about and working with the general policy area (Ginsberg, 1995). School systems had already established priorities, ways of "thinking and doing" in literacy education and had built up their resources. These features then became the framework for interpreting the new policy. Under these conditions, the policy transaction is likely to be an adaptive process and thus further stabilise the established organisational structures associated with the policy area (Ogawa, Crowson & Goldring, 1999). This was the situation in the Medurban and Binary Dioceses and to a lesser extent in the Provincial Diocese in relation to the literacy policy. None of these factors exist for a new policy, such as VET. Consequently, there is limited capacity to interpret the "value" of the new policy or to mediate the policy in the school system. McLaughlin (1991b) contends that "capacity" and "valuing" are important determinants of the outcomes of a policy. This study supports this view as it demonstrates the influence of educational leadership and public policy on the institutionalisation of practice and beliefs about practice.

While the role of leadership is often associated with those in positions of authority, individuals responsible for "new" policy areas may take a key role in the policy process. When small Catholic education systems addressed a "new" and complex policy where there is little established structural support, the individual who held the responsibility became a powerful actor in the interpretation, overwriting and mediation of the policy, due to the individual's expert knowledge (Leithwood & Duke, 1999). Where there was a strong organisational culture, that is, one with tightly structured beliefs, values and norms (Grimmett & Crehan, 1992), as in the Medurban Diocese, the individual was supported by system processes and explicit expressions of values. In organisations with less strong cultures, policy interpretation can be highly dependent on the personal experience, and the values and motivations of the individual holding the responsibility, as was evident in VET in both the Provincial and Binary Dioceses. Greenfield argues that individuals, as the building blocks of organisations, "change ideas into behaviour and possibilities into consequences" (1993, p. 55). An individual in the central administration, even with little formal authority, working with a new policy area has the potential to effect such changes. This is particularly true for "ambiguous" policies, a category into which the VET policy falls. Matland (1995) maintains that it is difficult for superiors to monitor this type of policy and that there is unlikely to be a uniform understanding of the policy. Under these conditions, the individual responsible has opportunities to be highly influential in the interpretation of policy.

The policy itself can gain "legitimacy" with schools through external and internal factors that are influenced by the central administration. Groups of schools acting together provide external "legitimacy" for a change response, hence the value of the role of the central administration in bringing together networks of schools and circulating information about good practice (Rizvi & Kemmis, 1987). The central administration's overwriting of the policy gives the policy internal "legitimacy" (Scott, 1995, p. 45), ensuring that the policy is a better "fit" with the organisational values and processes. This process of legitimisation and mediation of the literacy policy was demonstrated in the various literacy responses, but it had not occurred to the same degree for VET where there was no embedding of the area in system structures. The more embedded an education policy in the management procedures of a school system, the greater is its perceived legitimacy for schools.

This study suggests that in complex policy areas, in highly changeable political policy environments, the resources schools have to understand and respond are insufficient to produce consistent change. Schools need assistance to interpret and locate the policy within a comfortable "belief" and management structure. Superficial compliance in schools may be brought about, but structural or cultural change is highly unlikely. Schools are social institutions, which are part of a stable sector with a high degree of homogeneity (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). To effect substantial change requires support and pressure (McLaughlin, 1991b) from the administrative centre.

## **CONCLUSION**

Structures, and ways of thinking and doing become institutionalised as a result of policy implementation, influencing organisational values in subtle yet powerful ways. For educational leaders, monitoring and reflecting on the impact of external policy on the familiar but foundational aspects of schools is an important part of their roles. A fuller understanding of both the relationship of school systems with public policy and the influences on that relationship from the policy network needs to be developed. This will enable educational leaders to be in a better position to interpret these processes. For Catholic education, maintaining its unique mission in Australian education is the only way Catholic schools can justify their existence. Understanding the influence of public education policy on school systems' practice and beliefs is crucial to ensuring that the response to public policy is coherent with organisational values.

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