

'Local Area Education Planning' - Policy Planning and Practice.

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Abstract

This paper presents the beginning of an analysis of the Education Department of Western Australia's *Local Area Education Planning (LAEP) Framework*, which has involved school amalgamations, closures and sometimes the emergence of middle schools. Policy making is an intrinsically political activity; a way by which governments prescribe social change. At the micro level of policy implementation it is likely to be sharply contested as agents (administrators, teachers, parents and students) struggle to understand and influence the changes in progress. This paper is an analysis of what individuals and groups have 'done' with a top-down macro-level policy. The challenge is to reveal the messiness and the complexities of policy in practice, with a particular emphasis on the perspectives of students involved in educational change.

The research involved in-depth case studies of two schools undergoing considerable educational change as the result of *LAEP Framework*. Data collection methods for this study involved focus group and semi-structured interviews with a number of student cohorts, document analysis, staff interviews and field notes. The initial findings point to significant tensions between the macro level policy makers and the local agents involved in the policy implementation.

Introduction

Educational change, in Western Australia as elsewhere, has taken the form of major school restructuring and school reculturing, often with a commitment for improving the educational success of all students. Historically many of the changes introduced in schools have been a result of top-down policy initiatives and have sought to address specific issues of academic failure, school dropouts, student alienation, and the need to equip students to be contributors in an increasingly complex society. To this end in the late 1990's the Western Australian Government released its Plan for Government School Education to set the direction for the government education system over the next three years and into the twenty-first century .

This Plan represented a policy ensemble which included the Making the Difference Policy , the Curriculum Framework , and the Local Area Education Planning Framework , aimed at restructuring and reculturing education framed in the rhetoric of improving outcomes for all students. The complete *Making the Difference Policy* was released in 1998 and schools were encouraged to develop strategies which would address further issues pertaining to students at educational risk . The *Curriculum Framework* represents a major educational change to outcomes-based education, the purpose of which is to improve the learning and achievement of all students . The aim of the *Local Area Education Planning Framework* (hereafter referred to as the *LAEP Framework*) is to modify or reorganize planning of the delivery of education by changing the focus of planning from an individual school to a group of schools in order to better manage the delivery of curriculum and resources . This paper presents initial findings and analysis of understandings and perceptions of the students at one case study school, concerning the *LAEP Framework* implementation and subsequent educational changes.

Context of Influence.

Policies are never released in a vacuum. There are a number of influences which will impact on how the policy is written, how it is received and how it is acted upon . The *LAEP Framework* shows global influences, such as the demand for middle schooling, as well as concerns with economic demands for governments to demonstrate greater value for money in expenditure of funds. It is also necessary to give the *LAEP Framework* its historical context , and to understand how both past and contemporary changes have influenced the *LAEP Framework*. I will deal with each of these contexts before moving on to a discussion of the *LAEP Framework* implementation and my initial findings from one case school.

Global Context.

In the last twenty years educational change has largely been centred around the competing discourses of student alienation and economic rationalism . Many nations around the world are concerned about the growing number of students who are currently in danger of failing school and are not making a successful transition to working life. Locally, nationally and internationally as many as 20 per cent of students continue to be alienated from their education and their future life prospects suffer as a result ; ; . They are under the threat of long term unemployment, long term welfare dependency and social marginalisation into adulthood ; ; . These concerns have led to major restructuring efforts in educational systems in many countries. Change efforts have focused largely on "improvement plans that set out to increase accountability and raise student achievement scores" , p. 174.

In the U.S.A., after the release of the report *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a document which raised serious questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of the American education

system, a raft of different reforms were introduced, which have focused on the increasing centralization of authority, especially in regards to the delivery of the curriculum. The reason for the changes has been the perceived failure of the schools and the mismanagement of education funding by schools . This failure of schools has been a grave concern in the light of the growing globalisation of the world economy. American educators and economists believe they need to have a highly educated workforce in order to compete with other world economies. A higher educated and more skilful work force is seen to lead to greater economic development and contribute to a more advanced and competitive society .

Changes in England have included the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS), an aspect of the Education Reform Act 1988, which has seen schools become responsible for their own budgets and education resourcing whilst the National Curriculum has ensured a centralized control over learning has increased. The result has been the breaking of the authority of the Local Education Authorities, some school closures and a strong focus by schools on monetary concerns and high academic achievements (Ball, , .

Economic Discourse

The global shift in education policy discourse to an 'economic rationalist' discourse occurred during the eighties. In this paradigm education's function is to serve the economy . The OECD has played a particularly influential role in establishing the credibility of the notion of economic rationalism and education's function as the place for vocational training in order to increase a nations economic advancement . The notion of education's subordination to the economy has increasingly gained acceptance here in Australia .

In a society where economic considerations are determined the most important , there is a growing need for education to meet the vocational demands faced by adolescents. Education, particularly secondary education, is often seen as the crossroads of adolescents lives, a 'gateway' to economic advantage . However, in Australia there are more than 25 per cent of students who fail to complete school . Many students leave school without an adequate knowledge or skills base . And although the knowledge and skills required for the preparation of a work life should be taught at school, schools are increasingly required to aim vocational education at two specific yet divergent goals: the need to prepare for currently existing jobs, and the capacity for students to adapt to jobs not yet imagined . However, the first priority needs to be given to improving the quality of schooling in order to more effectively combat student educational alienation so that they may make a contribution to society .

Student Alienation.

Students alienation is a term used to describe students who are at risk of not completing school for a variety of reasons, including failure, language barriers, disabilities and other ; ; ; . Alienation, is a negative aspect of young people's lives, described as a particularly disturbing relation between the student and their school is often associated with behaviours such as violence, school failure, absenteeism, truancy, and school drop out ; ; ; ; .

Within the school context, Mau examined the multidimensional concept of alienation, and focused on Seeman's , four constructs of powerlessness, social estrangement, meaninglessness and normlessness. Though the constructs of alienation are described as being distinct and separate, the boundaries are not fixed. A student may exhibit normlessness and powerlessness, yet still feel they belong to the school and are part of their peer group, that is, not suffer from social estrangement. Perhaps it is best to describe alienation as a process), or contextually relevant rather than a personality trait or a state of being . It may be said that whilst all students experience potentially alienating contexts, there

appears to be a threshold below which the student is no longer able to tolerate what is happening to them, and they exhibit the behaviours commonly associated with alienation. Alienation can be influenced by a variety of factors, including factors from the home, school and from within the student themselves. What is alienating will also depend on the context and the circumstances, as it is not a static phenomena. Some see schools as having the potential to ameliorate external factors, thereby reducing alienation and simultaneously increase students achievements. This forms a strong supporting theme in the *LAEP Framework*.

Middle Schooling.

Middle Schooling, or the creation of schools within schools was first explored in the USA in the 1960's to deal with the growing concern of student alienation. It has gained considerable popularity as a restructuring tool during the 90's in order to address the continuing issue of student alienation and those identified as educationally at risk. The use of middle schools, often a group of students clustered around a core of two to four teachers, can provide a more personalized school environment addressing many of the issues associated with student alienation. The *Middle Year of Schooling Project* explored the nature of student alienation in the middle years and recommended the empowerment of teachers to transform the middle years and to meet the learning needs of students during these years. In WA, the Education Department has not sought the implementation of a uniform systemic change to introduce middle schools. However the Department released a statement in 1997 saying, it would support schools which wished to introduce Middle Schools as part of their organizational change.

Local context (Western Australia)

In Western Australia the release of the *LAEP Framework* uses the rhetoric of the social justice and a quality education for all students whilst encouraging districts to be more accountable and use flexible resourcing structures. The aim for each district has been to streamline the delivery of educational services, for the improvement of student access to curriculum and quality facilities. Yet at the same time resources were to be used effectively, options considered were to "maximise the use of facilities and any spare facilities should be sold and funds used to provide area and State improvements".

Staff, parents, secondary students and the wider community were to be consulted on plans for their area – the *LAEP Framework* was to be a "customer driven process", notes overhead 5). Options given for consideration (through consultation and by each district) included school amalgamations, school closures, and the creation of senior colleges and middle schools.

Historical Context.

Historically, the Western Australian Department of Education has at all times been concerned with meeting the needs of those not able or not willing to complete school, those now termed 'at educational risk'. The notion of access for all students was an underlying principle of the Board of Education back in the mid 1800's. This was supported by the community of the time:

"We have no right to discriminate as to the parties to whom education should be imparted. We ought to have no class education, but all should receive the benefit of a liberal course of instruction" (Commercial News and Shipping Gazette, 1855, quoted in .

Throughout the twentieth century the Education Department continued to be concerned with provision of a quality education for all students. The Department's reports, Dettman , Priest , and Beazley , to name just three, are littered with recommendations regarding students, learning, social justice and students whose educational needs were not being met by the Department's education provisions in its mainstream system. Yet up to three per cent of students, under the school leaving age of fifteen, miss at least one day a week, some leave without completing year ten . The *LAEP Framework* continues the principle of social justice and the concern with students at 'educational risk'.

The Case Study

My research to date has been to look at the implementation of the *LAEP Framework* in two EDWA districts, focusing in depth on one school undergoing substantial educational change as a result of the *LAEP Framework* implementation. The *LAEP Framework* was released in September 1997, with options to be presented to the minister within 6 weeks, full implementation was to have occurred within four years. The district, in which my case study school is situated, was given the further instruction at the time that there was no room for 'soft option'; (District Secondary School Planning Draft Discussion Document: Draft without prejudice, 3rd November 1997), because of the number of small secondary schools, some would have to close. It became a question of which schools, all schools having strong community links. The district was further divided into smaller clusters of schools, to facilitate the *LAEP Framework* implementations.

Eventually two options, from the cluster in which the case study school was situated, were presented to the Director General. The Director General was to make his recommendations, and submit this to the Minister for Education. The preferred option was a split school over two campuses, one a junior high school, comprising years seven to nine, picking up grade seven students from local primary schools, and on the other campus a senior high school including years ten, eleven and twelve. The Minister announced in 1998 that the second option would happen, an amalgamated school on one campus, the other campus would be sold. The new school would incorporate a middle school, years eight and nine, and a senior school, years ten to twelve, and it would be fully implemented by the beginning of the year 2000.

Student Voices in Educational Research.

Restructuring schools should be more than just a physical reorganization, especially if schools are to have success with all their students. It also has to be accompanied by changes in how we as educators think about our students . There needs to be an "increasing use of students as researchers on classroom practice to play a very strong part in both the reconceptualization of teaching and the diffusion of practice" (Miles ; p. 63). But "research that focuses on student voice is relatively recent and scarce" (Nieto ; p. 396). In the nineties there have been only a small number of studies which have sought to include the students' voice on issues including teaching and learning, learning conditions, and school reform ; . These few studies emphasize the importance of taking cognisance of the voice of students in gaining greater insight into how students feel and think about teaching and learning. A central concern of the current research is to gain an in-depth understanding of how students experience their role in educational change, the result of a top-down policy initiative, and to present these perceptions using their "voices".

Research Questions.

The research questions which are guiding this study are:

- What are students' perceptions of educational change as it is happening to them in a WA secondary school?
- Do students feel that the changes have made any had any difference and influences on their school life?
- In whose interests do students perceive changes to the school were made?
- To what extent do students believe they have influenced the process of educational change in the school?

Methodology of the Research.

The in-depth understandings sought in the research call for a qualitative case study method. The case study method was chosen because of its flexibility and because it allows for information to be collected from many sources ; ; . Focus group interviews with students has been the predominant form of data collection and will be conducted over two years, with interview sessions held at several points of time along the change timeline. Data collection and analysis happen simultaneously in a qualitative case study. It is an interactive process. The findings of the first round of interviews from one case and initial analysis are presented in this paper.

All students in years ten and eleven, as well as those twelves who were part of the implementation committees, were invited to participate in the research on a voluntary basis. These year groups were chosen because they were most impacted by the substantial changes which took place during the course of the *LAEP Framework* implementation. There could be a perceived limitation in using volunteers in that not all sections of the school's student population may be represented. However, it was important for the purposes of this study that students felt comfortable in participating and felt that they could be as candid as possible during the interview (see also .

The makeup of the groups was selected based on their year cohort and the absentee data collected from the previous year. Absenteeism is an indication of students feelings of alienation from their schooling . According to the *Western Australia child health survey*, those absent for more than 10% of their schooling can be considered at "educational risk" . The year cohorts were therefore split into three groups. The first group comprised of those students who were absent less than 20 days. The second group comprised of those who were absent between 20 and 60 days and could be considered at some "educational risk" . The third group was made up of those students who were absent for more then 60 days. The reason for the distinct groupings is to explore potential differences in how these different groups of students perceive school change . Triangulation of data from focus group interview, with information gathered from school staff interviews, such as teachers and school administrators, as well as through analysis of school documents such as the absentee data, suspension and exclusion data, and other documents related to the policy implementation process ; ; , will enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings.

Responses from the focus groups interviews showed that students had given the events of the past two years a great deal of attention. The responses were thoughtful and insightful. Students often showed an awareness of hidden or covert agendas. The groups were split along gender lines. This was not intentional. Often students who volunteered and responded to the written invitation to participate, failed to show up at the arranged interview time. Some subsequently declined, others were interviewed later. But in all but one area there appeared no gender differences in the responses. The findings, for the purposes of this paper, are organised in relation to the research questions.

- ***What are students' perceptions of educational change as it is happening to them in a WA secondary school?***

Students were divided in their responses depending on which school they had enrolled in. Students, from the school which closed, were initially very negative in response to the proposed changes. Their reasons were twofold, they were angry about the intended closure of their school. They described the rallies in which they had participated and the reaction to the ministerial announcement by their parents and neighbours. They also expressed concern about the "fighting", describing the "bad blood" which had existed between the two schools in their histories. None of the current students had ever seen the fighting but they had "heard about it". Several students remembered feeling "scared" about the move and sadness at "loosing all my friends" who were going to other schools. One boy, from the school which closed, expressed anger at the "bribery" which "he" (signifying the then Minister for Education) had used to try and get students to move schools ahead of the closure timetable. Students from the second school were not so concerned, some said they had, "felt sorry for the kids (from the school which closed)", they felt "sad". One student laughed and said, "It felt good that a school was closing down."

None of the negative feelings continued and now, sometime on from the initial changes, students felt much more positive. "It ended up alright though" said one student, another commented, "My views have changed, I'm happy now, it's a lot better, this school has a good environment, we're not identified as a separate group anymore."

Students were also very preceptive about the introduction of the Middle School. Students were asked to describe the changes as they moved from year eight, to year nine (when Middle School was introduced), to year ten, and give their reactions to these changes. It was in response to this question that a gender difference became apparent.

The move to Middle School in year nine, with a 'home room' and their own lockers in their room, was seen as a positive change by all students. The boys, however, preferred the current year, moving from class to class. Staying in the same classroom all day "makes you feel restless", "you feel a bit confined", "you get tired of sitting in one class, you just wanted to get up and move around". The girls on the other hand enjoyed staying in the same room, "you didn't have to move", "we got close to the people in our own class" and "you had more learning time to finish off work because you didn't change class".

All groups commented on the teaching and learning that took place during their time in year nine, enjoying the closeness that they developed with their core teachers. "You didn't have to move", "we got close to the people in our own class" and "you had more learning time to finish off work because you didn't change class". Only one student felt they were going to do better in year ten. This student was the only one to have a positive expectation of the move into year ten. Others felt uncertain. Quite a few students expressed concerns about the work, "they expect more from you, they expect you to get your work done", "the teachers have got more stricter in year ten, there's more work in class and more homework."

Students also felt they lacked an identity in the school. Year ten was now formally part of the senior school. However, none of the groups felt that they were part of the senior school, "we're half-half really", "you're like caught in the middle, sometimes you're treated like one (middle schooler), sometimes the other (senior schooler)". "I feel in the middle, like the middle brother, a bit like, what's that girls name? (pause) Jan! We're Jans" (laughs).

- ***Do students feel that the changes have made any had any difference and influences on their school life?***

On the whole the students did not think that the new school structure had influenced them or had made any difference to their life at school, only one student felt that she did less work now, moving from her old school to the new school. One group of year twelve's felt that the biggest change happened for them in the transition from year ten to year eleven. One group felt that their sense of belonging was as a result being in the school for a number of years. As one student from this group said, "It's teachers who change how you work. It's the affect of the teachers on how you work and affects whether you learn". And another student commented that it was "maturity makes me behave, not changes to the school".

- ***In whose interests do students perceive changes to the school were made?***

There were some interesting responses here which showed students were aware of the more covert economic reasons as well as the more overt educational reasons for the changes. A number of students said they had discussed this question with their parents and peers. Students from the school, which closed, showed a greater awareness of the issues and reason for amalgamation, but all the students showed they had given it some thought. Not one student actually remembers being told why or in whose interest the changes were being made, by someone in authority. Though some thought that there parents had been told. One or two discovered the closure\amalgamation from older siblings, some from peers and one student thought they, "might have heard it at an assembly, but I can't remember".

Students perceived that the school closure/amalgamation served two purposes, one student summed it up this way, "generate more profit and make this school bigger and better". Other comments showing their understanding of some of the underlying economic tensions, "small schools cost too much, two lots of funding, resources, that sort of thing, double teachers too", "our school had to close down because they were selling the land for housing", "for money, to more to buy equipment, from the sale of the land", and one student angrily exclaimed, "He (the then Minister of Education) just wanted to make money!"

But students were also able to express the educational purposes. "The school was small", "To get more kids instead of two small schools", "Numbers were down at the other school so they were going to make this a larger school and I heard they were going to offer more classes here", "They promised us stuff, like new classes, an increase in choices and flexibility", and "You get more subjects now with more kids".

- ***To what extent do students believe they have influenced the process of educational change in the school?***

The policy was released in September 1997 and a public meeting of parents was held in November 1997. Community, parent and secondary student consultation was an important precept of the *LAEP Framework*. Students were invited to participate in the committees. "My mum came and asked me, they said they wanted a student involved. We didn't say much at the meetings though, didn't feel comfortable, didn't want to interrupt".

But most students felt they had no influence on the *LAEP Framework* implementation. "We were never asked for our opinion about the amalgamation", "We had protests, went on a strike and everything, it was on the news, but it was pointless", "The decision had already been made", "They'd already decided, for a long time they had the amalgamation idea", "I think that if we'd said no, they wouldn't have listened because the decisions were already made".

Students felt their only influence was "In the little minor details, like the uniforms", "Only on the surface work, the name", "We were asked to vote for the name", "We were asked to do a

survey of students to see what kids wanted, especially about the uniform and about choosing the logo and stuff" (student committee member).

Conclusion.

This paper presents only an initial analysis of student perceptions and understandings of the *LAEP Framework* implementation, at one case study school. The findings and analysis are tentative. A precept of the *LAEP Framework* was to create a space for students voices as part of the consultation process. Secondary school students were identified, by the policy, as one of its customers, to be consulted as part of the 'customer-driven process' of implementation. Yet, the findings of this paper show that the process of implementation doesn't fit the rhetoric. This paper has explored how these student perceived the changes made as a result of the *LAEP Framework* and their perceived levels of influence. Whilst their initial responses were more negative, some time on from the implementation students say they are think more positively about the implementation changes. However, they attribute this not to the changes, which they only see as partly having been made in their interests, but to their continuing presence in the school and their own growing maturity. Students felt that their influence on the policy implementation was limited and superficial, and they felt they were unable to impact decisions made at higher levels.

The policy, the *LAEP Framework* is framed in the rhetoric of improving the outcomes of students at educational risk, students alienated from their education. The introduction of Middle Schooling as part of the *LAEP Framework* implementation at this school is aimed at helping students enjoy a greater sense of belonging. The findings of this study seem to suggest that this has indeed been the case, although perhaps more successfully for girls than for boys. Other studies in the USA (see) support these findings. However, a concern raised in these findings, is the problems of 'middling' or 'creating Jans' with the year tens. It may be necessary to reassess the role of the tens in school where Middle Schooling is implemented, if the problem of student alienation is not simply to be moved from one year to the next.

Finally, schools are community spaces and closure is going to be difficult and evoke strong emotional responses. To implement the *LAEP Framework* was going to be a messy process. These findings showed students awareness of the tensions between economic rationale for the policy implementation, even though these were not overt, and the educational justifications.

The voices of students are seldom heard in educational research or, for that matter, in the policy process. Yet, the findings of this paper showed that students are perceptive, thoughtful and insightful. It is perhaps time that we as researchers and educators change how we think about our students and take time to listen to them.

References