MIDDLE SCHOOLING POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

From the 1960s, educational literature has described middle schooling as fundamental reform characterised by structural, organisational, curriculum, pedagogical and assessment changes designed to meet early adolescent needs. Conflict and struggle have also been associated with the development of policy in this domain, as individuals and groups changed their assumptions about students, pedagogy and relationships and challenged resistant, traditional structures and practices that marginalised middle schooling. Recently, therefore, researchers and writers have begun to explore the sociological underpinnings of middle schooling reform. Drawing from the field of ‘policy sociology’, the research reported in this paper explored the complexity of issues associated with the development of middle schooling policy in Western Australia. More specifically, the research analysed the middle schooling policy process in the Western Australian Catholic Education System, during the 1990s and 2000s. The data were collected from the perspectives of professional stakeholders (system leaders, school leaders and teachers) and documentary sources. This paper draws on research findings to examine tensions and struggles with influences, policy text production, practices and effects, outcomes and political strategies used to enhance social justice in relation to middle schooling. Emergent themes offer insights into the dynamics of the middle schooling policy process in a Catholic education system that does not have a formal prescriptive policy statement for middle schooling. The paper concludes by identifying how the study may have applicability wider than the Western Australian context and the Catholic school context it describes and implications for future research.

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Internationally, from the 1960s, middle schooling literature has associated conflict and struggle with the development of policy in this domain. The reasons for the introduction of middle schooling have simultaneously included addressing unmet early adolescent needs and a variety of competing educational, socio-political and economic needs (Blyth & Karnes, 1981; Hargreaves & Tickle, 1980; Wiles & Bondi, 2001). Debates have continued over the nature and degree of structural and organisational changes (National Middle Schooling Association, 2002). Variation and disagreement have characterised curriculum, pedagogical and assessment changes (Beane, 1991; 2004; Bird, 2001; Dowden, 2007). Confusion has surrounded the quality of middle schooling outcomes because of the interaction of influences, processes and outcomes and the use of different criteria for evaluating ‘quality’ schooling (Bandlow, 2001; Cuban, 1998; Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993; Zvoch & Stevens, 2006). Given this complexity and variability, research and literature have repeatedly identified ‘context’ as a significant factor in the development of middle schooling policy. The research reported in this paper focuses on the specific context of the Catholic Education System in Western Australia (hereafter referred to as the Catholic System).
In Western Australia, the late 1990s and early 2000s were characterised by significant education reform. During this time, across all three education sectors of Western Australia (State, Catholic and Independent), a major paradigm shift in education was mandated with the promulgation of the outcomes-based Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998). Its implementation has led to claims of work intensification and the ‘burn out’ of teachers (Lee, 2006). At the same time, the cross-sectoral Ministerial report Planning for Middle Schooling in Western Australia (Jackson, 1999) marked the beginning of what has been described as “the burgeoning and diverse experience of Western Australian teachers who, across the State, are defining education for the middle years” (McNeil, 2001, p. ii). Also during this time, a major review of schooling in the senior years resulted in further work intensification in secondary schools, especially over the issue of outcomes-based education (Berlach & McNaught, 2007).

During this broader educational reform, the Catholic System of Western Australia engaged in several attempts to develop middle schooling policy. An acceleration of middle schooling discourses in that context can be traced to debates surrounding the relocation of Year 7 students from primary to secondary schools (Waugh & Collins, 1998), when Catholic system and school leaders produced the Report on Middle Schooling (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEO), 1997). The report explored the background to middle schooling models and identified implications and issues for introducing middle schooling in Western Australian Catholic schools, but it allowed Catholic schools autonomy to respond to their changing environment according to the needs of their context. In the early 2000s, CEO-initiated middle schooling action research provided professional development for school leaders and teachers from 30 Catholic primary and secondary schools (CEO, 2001; 2003a; 2003b). At the same time, the Catholic Middle Schooling Network was established to support school leaders and teachers to exchange middle schooling understandings. However, by the end of 2003, the action research had concluded and the Middle Schooling Network no longer existed. In 2006, the Director of Catholic Education employed a visiting middle schooling consultant to assist school leaders with ‘transition issues’ (Dullard, 2006). Soon after, not deterred by the new State Education Minister’s proclamation that Year 7s would not be relocated onto secondary campuses in State schools, the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia decided to relocate Year 7 students onto secondary campuses and Catholic schools were required to make suitable provisions (Dullard, 2007a; 2007b; 2007c). Once again, a visiting middle schooling consultant was employed to assist in developing understandings across the Catholic System. Although there has been a decade of interest in middle schooling and establishment of middle schooling in particular schools, at the time of writing this paper, in 2008, a prescriptive middle schooling policy statement of intent for the Catholic System does not exist and middle schooling is not practiced uniformly across the system.

THE AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the study reported here was to analyse the middle schooling policy process within the Catholic Education System of Western Australia, during the 1990s and 2000s. The intention of the research was not to make generalisations about middle schooling policy in the Catholic System but to identify emergent themes from case study sites for others to consider within their own settings.

The policy analysis framework used in the study draws from the field of ‘policy sociology’ (Ball, 1990; 1994; Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992; Ozga, 1987; 2000; Renshaw & Lingard, 2000;
Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997; Vidovich, 2002; 2007). In this field, researchers see
the policy landscape as contested territory in which a complex interplay of interests and goals
determines the shape of practice. Specifically, instead of conceptualising policy as a
statement of prescriptive intent from educational authorities which is uniformly implemented
in schools, in a simple top-down manner, contemporary policy sociologists, tend to
conceptualise policy as a messy, continuous cycle of interactive ‘contexts’ in which there are
multiple actors.

The ‘policy cycle’ analysis framework of this research drew on the work of Ball (1994) and
Vidovich (2002; 2007). Ball identified five policy ‘contexts’: influences, policy text
production, practices and effects, outcomes and political strategies. Because the fourth and
fifth contexts highlight interrelated broader issues of social justice, they were combined for
the current research. Therefore, while consideration was given to all five policy contexts, the
following four research questions were developed in relation to the Catholic System of
Western Australia:

1. What influences have operated and how have they affected the middle
schooling policy process in the Catholic System?
2. How have middle schooling policy texts been produced and promulgated in
the Catholic System?
3. What have been the practices and effects of middle schooling in the Catholic
System?
4. What have been the outcomes of the middle schooling policy process and the
political strategies used to enhance social justice and empower the disadvantaged
in relation to middle schooling in the Catholic System?

Vidovich (2002; 2007) further developed Ball’s (1994) policy cycle framework for empirical
policy studies, including distinguishing macro, meso and micro levels. Vidovich’s model
was adapted for this research wherein the macro level referred to system (CEO) leaders, the
meso level referred to school leaders and the micro level referred to middle schooling
teachers within the Catholic System. This facilitated an analysis of tri-level perspectives on
the five contexts within the complex setting of the Catholic System in Western Australia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With the above understandings, this research became a qualitative study of middle schooling
policy, using a combination of methods. Use was made of case studies, semi-structured
individual interviews and focus groups, which helped to explore interactions and to give
public voice to individuals who are affected by, and can be expected to contribute to middle
schooling policy processes in the Catholic Education System of Western Australia. These
data were enriched with documentary evidence. Combined, these methods assisted in
developing not only an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of middle schooling policy
processes, they also enhanced the study’s trustworthiness.

A combination of sampling strategies was used to optimise data collection. The sites and the
data sources were chosen for maximum variation. Five sites were used in this study, namely,
four Catholic schools and the CEO. Three schools catered for students from Kindergarten to
Year 12, while the fourth school catered for Years 8 to 12. The schools differed in urban and
rural location, size, socio-economic status, history and structures as well as the timing of their
introduction of middle schooling practices. The CEO was chosen as it is the executive arm of
the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia. At the macro level, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with six participants who were system leaders, operating at the CEO. At the meso level, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with seven participants who were school leaders, operating at the four case study schools. At the micro level, 18 middle schooling teachers participated in the research in four focus groups of four or five teachers at each of the four schools.

To ensure confidentiality, school sites were given pseudonyms (‘Beachside College’, ‘City College’, ‘Modest College’ and ‘Prosperous College’) which conveyed key characteristics, and participants were given a code representing their institution, their location on the policy trajectory (macro, meso or micro level) and their interview order. For example, ‘Ma2’ represented the second participant system leader (at the CEO) interviewed at the macro level, ‘Bi1’ represented the first participant school leader (at Beachside College) interviewed at the meso (or intermediate) level, and ‘Mm3’ represented the third participant teacher (at Modest College) to speak during the micro level focus group discussion at the school. This paper, however, moves away from specific findings within specific sites to focus on emergent themes from a comparative analysis across the three levels of the middle schooling policy trajectory within the Catholic System. Nevertheless, quotes from the data are used to illustrate the key points.

EMERGENT THEMES

The themes to emerge from the study are discussed under four subsections, which correspond to the four research questions derived from Ball’s (1994) conceptual framework. The first section illustrates the different policy influences that participants reported were shaping middle schooling in the Catholic System. The second section discusses participants’ perspectives on policy text production. The third section elaborates upon policy practices and effects. The fourth section reports an examination of middle schooling outcomes and political strategies relating to social justice, which participants believed were connected with middle schooling reform.

CONTEXT OF INFLUENCES

Participants at all three levels reported numerous influences shaping middle schooling in the Catholic System in Western Australia. Four significant influences were identified: early middle schooling adopters; the Western Australian Curriculum Framework; the national Quality Teacher Programme (QTP)-sponsored action research; and a Catholic ethos. First, participants across the three levels revealed that early middle schooling adopters who often had made mistakes had influenced the development of middle schooling across the system. One of the participant system leaders reported that perspectives on “lack of academic rigour” resulting from “zany practices” by early middle schooling adopters had resulted in middle schooling “taking a nosedive” (Ma3). This finding adds to the long history of challenging middle schooling for its lack of academic rigour (Chadbourne, 2003; Hargreaves & Tickle, 1980). One participant school leader attributed the significant decline of students in 2000 at one of the schools (school B) to aggressive competitor marketing from a newly built State school where middle schooling was aggressively promoted. As a result, the leadership team at the Catholic school had adjusted the school’s position on middle schooling.

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Second, across the policy trajectory participants reported that the demands of the State-mandated Curriculum Framework and Review of the post-compulsory years (Berlach & McNaught, 2007) had both enabled and constrained middle schooling at different times. On the one hand, according to one participant system leader, the introduction of the Curriculum Framework had been overwhelming: “There was so much of the framework to try and get schools to understand. There are the overarching outcomes, teaching and learning principles, learning area outcomes…the real total scene” (Ma2). On the other hand, one of the participant school leaders reported that the Curriculum Framework was “the real impetus for middle schooling” (Bi2).

Third, the Commonwealth Government-funded Quality Teacher Programme (QTP) action research (CEO, 2003a; 2003b) on aspects of middle schooling was recognised as having enabled middle schooling in Catholic schools. In particular, participants across the three levels gave details of how the research had helped Catholic school leaders and teachers to clarify expectations and avoid confusion and inconsistencies in the upper primary years and lower secondary years of schooling.

Fourth, while no participant had referred to Catholic influences prior to the researcher’s specific questioning about a Catholic ethos, after the query, participants across the policy trajectory gave comprehensive answers, which suggested that Catholic principles and values underpinned middle schooling policy processes in the Catholic System. For example, one of the participant school leaders described the development of the individual in and for the good of the community, in the sense identified by Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) and Grace (2002):

In Catholic schools, you look at the connectedness, this relationship with your kids. It [Catholic ethos] is easy, as it is ingrained in everything we do. It is about a supportive environment. It is the feeling of community. It is fostering the questioning mind, allowing for the spirituality of kids to really blossom. In middle schooling, they are now able to do this. (Mi2)

According to participants, with multiple, interacting and often contradictory influences, such as above identified, the production of middle schooling policy texts in the Catholic System was a struggle.

CONTEXT OF POLICY TEXT PRODUCTION

Although a formal middle schooling policy text had not been produced for Catholic education in Western Australia, informal middle schooling policy texts were evident. Participants at the macro level confirmed that the Report on Middle Schooling (CEO, 1997) was produced to infuse international and national middle schooling trends into the system and promote middle schooling practices across the system. System and school leaders, but not teachers, contributed to this report. Also, to promote middle schooling, a CEO consultant produced brief articles in CEO publications (CEO, 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2003a; 2003b) following middle schooling action research. However, few participants at the macro level, fewer at the meso level and fewer still at the micro level knew of the Catholic report and the articles about middle schooling.

At the macro level, there was an appreciation of the cyclic nature of formal policy text production. Participant system leaders explained that the production of formal system-wide middle schooling policy texts had been delayed because policy production required
contributions from stakeholders, such as school leaders, teachers and parents. One participant system leader explained: *You have to have grassroots working on it, before you move to a policy, because otherwise it’s destined to fail* (Ma2). Another participant system leader had experienced the growing parental demand for middle schooling policy texts: *Parents’ expectations are greater and greater. Where’s your policies on this? Where’s your procedure on this? I find it very frustrating.* (Ma1)

At the meso level, school leaders struggled to produce policy texts designed to promote middle schooling as a legitimate form of schooling to the wider community. One of the participant school leader’s comments about the struggle to produce more formal middle schooling policy texts at the school level was reminiscent of Ball’s (1994) conceptualisation of policy as “both text and action, words and deeds, what is enacted as well as what is intended” (p. 10):

*At first, we didn’t develop a policy statement because in a sense we were doing it step by step. It’s only by going through the process that you actually get to a point where you start to identify what some see as good middle schooling. We’ve gone through the terms ‘middle school’, ‘middle schooling’, ‘educating for the middle years’…all of those sorts of definitions. That reflects the grasping of what we were trying to do with that particular age-cohort of children.* (Mi1)

Another participant school leader identified a further complicating factor in policy text production, by adding, *“if you give a label, then you have to fund it and that hasn’t always been the case across the system”* (Ci2). From his perspective, middle schooling policy decisions were often based on economic considerations and the legitimisation of middle schooling through formal policy texts implied a reallocation of resources, which could be forcefully resisted by those who would be getting fewer resources.

However, participants at the micro level argued that middle schooling teachers needed their work to be legitimised across the Catholic System. There were reports at the micro level of CEO policy texts assisting in this regard, but findings were inconclusive. The contribution of grassroots’ stakeholders to the production of policy texts was deemed critical, as indicated by the following comment:

*If policy was created by the people who were involved, maybe ‘yes’ it would have significance and a bearing on people. If created by people outside who were imposing things then I think it would not work.* (Mm2)

The timing of the promulgation of middle schooling policy text was important, according to the focus group at one of the schools (school M) as reflected in the following comment:

*If policy had been set up before we decided to set up middle schooling at M, it probably would have had some impact because you would have taken things from there and said, ‘This is what the CEO wants us to implement. We need to try to implement this.’ If they were to write something now, then you would probably find that we would disagree with a lot of it because we’ve tried it and it doesn’t work.* (Mm1)
At the micro level, participants commented that by working collaboratively, teams of teachers at three of the four schools (schools C, M and P) began to have a clearer understanding of the implications of middle schooling. This finding was consistent with the notion of ‘collective teacher efficacy’, outlined by Goddard, Hoy and Hoy (2000), where groups of teachers arrive at shared beliefs that they can work together to produce effects, through interactive dynamics of the group members. By collaboratively struggling with challenges, teachers began to write and review middle schooling classroom policy texts, such as skills handbooks and integrated studies booklets, which were used for consistency in teaching between teachers, for the induction of middle schooling teachers and for ongoing professional development. According to participant teachers, informally, some teachers shared these teacher-produced texts with teachers from other schools, including teachers at the remaining case study school (school B). For these reasons, while such texts may fall outside the traditional understanding of prescriptive systemic ‘policy texts’, for participants at the micro and meso levels, these teacher-produced texts had helped to clarify conceptualisations of middle schooling, legitimate middle schooling and refine practice, and so were considered *de facto* policy texts.

Therefore, findings across the policy trajectory suggested that a system-wide policy statement might have addressed contentious issues of legitimacy and accountability associated with the development of middle schooling in the Catholic System. However, policy text production needed to reflect stakeholder involvement. Furthermore, the policy needed to be promulgated and resourced across the system. However, for participants across the three levels, the priority was not policy text production but the enactment of middle schooling, as identified in the next section.

**CONTEXT OF PRACTICES AND EFFECTS**

As there were no formal middle schooling policy texts in the Catholic System, the policy activity was all at the practices level. Different middle schooling practices had evolved in response to changing exigencies, perceived student needs, individuals involved and previous practices used at the four case study schools. This diversity reflects Beare’s (1995) conceptualisation of ‘pluriformity’, a principle he connects with Catholic education. Yet there also emerged from the findings a common, messy, policy process across the four schools. This process echoed the work of writers such as, Cormack (1996), Jackson, Davis, Abeel and Bordonaro (2000) and Smyth, McInerney, and Hattam (2003) who state that middle schooling reform requires changing assumptions about students, curriculum, pedagogy, assessments and relationships and challenging resistant, traditional structures and practices that marginalise middle schooling. In this study, participants spoke of diverse practices, which have been categorised as: ‘re-envisioning schooling’; ‘redefining leadership’; ‘restructuring’; ‘retraining’; and ‘reviewing’.

According to participants across the levels of the policy trajectory, re-envisioning schooling so that it includes a focus on early adolescents was confusing. Multiple purposes for introducing middle schooling had complicated understandings at the different case study schools, as they had in other settings (Blyth & Karnes, 1981; Hargreaves & Tickle, 1980; Wiles & Bondi, 2001). For one participant system leader:

> They [Catholic system and school leaders] can’t ignore middle schooling because it’s so closely tied with that pastoral responsibility that Catholic schools have always been on about. Those kids who were marginalised...
had to do everything that we could to meet their needs. It fitted, really fitted. (Ma5)

Two participant school leaders recalled that middle schooling at their school (schools M) had begun with an embryonic vision of meeting the needs of early adolescents, needing to implement the mandated Curriculum Framework and a community’s desire to amalgamate a primary and secondary school. Another participant school leader envisaged middle schooling as a bridge across the divide between his Catholic secondary school (school P) and its neighbouring, Catholic, primary schools.

Participant school leaders expressed a high degree of confidence in their staff and reported that they were *redefining leadership* to lift the profile of middle schooling and empower others. Leadership role descriptions changed in all four schools and ‘Heads of Middle School’ and middle schooling ‘Team Leaders’ were introduced at three schools. School leaders targeted often-resistant Heads of Department and insisted that the latter engage in middle schooling by teaching, in part, in the middle years.

Participants described different types of *restructuring* of teacher groupings, curriculum and assessment during middle schooling development, however, the effectiveness and efficiency of such practices interacted with the diverse influences and outcomes at the different sites. As had been uncovered in international middle schooling research (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993) findings from this study indicated that different schools used different forms of restructuring. Interdisciplinary teacher ‘teams’ were created in Years 8 and 9 at three of the four case study schools (schools B, C and M) to supplement traditional discipline ‘departments’. According to participants at the meso and micro levels, there were conflicts between teachers in discipline departments and those in middle schooling who were striving to address the interdisciplinary needs of early adolescent students, through realistic and integrated teaching and assessments. Reports of these conflicts echoed Bird’s (2001) description of how the disciplines resist crossing boundaries: "disciplines/disciples fiercely defend their spaces, patrol their boundaries and regard those who either intrude or disrupt with suspicion" (p. 467). One of the case study schools (school P) did not have interdisciplinary teams of teachers. However, participant teachers at the school discussed how information technology (IT) was used to integrate different learning areas as a part of a broader, collaborative objective of integrating multiple factors, such as students’ personal and social development and assessment. The discussion reflected Beane’s (1991; 2004) vision of the ‘integrated curriculum’ and Carrington’s (2006) conceptualisation of early adolescents, schooling and the digital culture. One of the participant teachers explained:

> We are looking at what we’re teaching students, the integration of IT. With the help of one another, particularly in year 8, we are looking at the type of assessments we’re giving them, lots more open-ended tasks so that students at whatever level can achieve. (Pm2)

There were perspectives across all three levels that *retraining* in middle schooling was essential for all system leaders, school leaders and teachers whether or not they had middle schooling responsibilities. One of the participant teachers revealed what had happened at one of the schools (school C) when regular professional development had been neglected:
[Initially] We did a lot of professional development. Of course, as time went on we found that people changed a lot. There were a lot of staff coming and going. PD started to stop. We no longer had integrated programs done. People come and now they see middle schooling as just the little kids: just the junior school, lower school, and that's the concept it's going back into. We've done the cycle. (Cm1)

Other participants reported that regular reviewing was an integral part of a cyclic middle schooling policy process. Findings were consistent with those writers who suggest that within a school setting the process of breaking down differences and evolving teacher understandings and assumptions takes time (Farley & Taylor, 2004; Pendergast, 2006; Sawyer, 2001). One participant teacher whose views were consistent with the rest of the focus group commented:

Like everything else we do, you can’t hesitate to try things. It’s a lot of trial and error goes into everything. Even now, we are still trialling new things. If it doesn’t work we make necessary changes, go back and start again. (Mm1)

Findings suggested that regular reviews of middle schooling outcomes and political strategies used to achieve outcomes that are more equitable were critical for progressing middle schooling policy and practices.

CONTEXT OF OUTCOMES AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES

An analysis of Ball’s (1994) final two contexts of policy outcomes and political strategies highlighted issues of inequalities and political strategies used to enhance social justice. The concepts of unmet early adolescent needs and teacher inequalities were strong themes to emerge. All participant school leaders stated that the aim of both middle schooling and Catholic education was to address the unmet needs of all students. One participant school leader explained how more traditional methods involved elitism: “quite an elitist curriculum based purely on passing exams…quite often just rushed…it wouldn’t matter if the child achieved…one must continue and continue” (Pi1), which was not conducive to learning by all students. Another participant school leader recalled decades of early adolescent neglect:

There’s been a sense for me that it [schooling in the middle years] has been a marking time and standing still in kids’ development. So, if there was any motivation for me in middle schooling it was to do something that was significantly different to what I did…40 years ago. (Mi1)

Participants also identified differences between teachers working predominantly in the middle years and those working in the senior years, which had given rise to conflict, injustices and teacher resistance. Without formal policy texts at the system and school levels, the majority of participant teachers explained that colleagues regularly questioned the legitimacy of signature practices of middle schooling. One participant teacher described the daily struggle of being marginalised as a middle schooling teacher: “I won’t say ridicule, but certainly strong questioning [from the non-middle schooling staff] about where we were coming from, what we were doing and what were the long term results going to be (Mm4). Another participant teacher expressed teachers’ fears succinctly: “We felt we were doing something wrong” (Mm3). In addition, participant teachers were concerned with perspectives of thwarted careers because of their involvement in middle schooling.
Participants at the three levels of the policy trajectory also claimed that political strategies had been used during middle schooling reform to empower the disadvantaged in relation to middle schooling. Participants connected **mutually respectful student-teacher relationships**, as discussed by Keddie and Churchill (2005), with positive outcomes for students. For example, there were claims that enhanced relationships was contributing to improved boys’ education. The focus group at one of the schools (school P) was enthusiastic about the achievements of reluctant boys, who with the use of multimedia amazed their health teachers. Another focus group (school C) reported boys’ enhanced literacy enjoyment and achievement that they attributed to stronger student-teacher relationships and ensuing changed teaching styles.

There were reports of **stronger student voices** being encouraged. Participants identified students, including those with learning difficulties, who have become more confident learners and more aware of their place in the community, as they were regularly asked for feedback and invited to exercise leadership.Echoing Hunter and Park’s (2005) exposition on ‘negotiating curriculum’, were participants’ descriptions of different types of negotiating curriculum, pedagogy and assessments, which participants connected with positive outcomes. One participant school leader spoke of enhanced student outcomes in citizenship and leadership. Another participant noted that all students were developing not just personal and social skills, but also learning how to learn: **Students are much more open. They have different techniques to do their own research, which you and I didn’t hear about until we were at uni or much later. They’re much more collaborative** (Mi1). Therefore, participants at all three levels contradicted suggestions made of middle schooling that it lacks academic rigour. Indeed, they claimed that students were achieving very pleasing results in the middle years and beyond.

Participants at the meso and micro levels had learnt the importance of effective and **regular communication** about middle schooling throughout the school, not just in the middle years. One of the participant school leaders reported that he strove to, "keep the dialogue going [and avoid] schism in the staff. They are the change agents. They are the fossils. You get that culture and you’re in trouble!” (Pi1) To reduce this potential dissonance, participant teachers from all four focus groups endorsed the need for a whole of school approach to developing middle schooling.

Comments from participants at the three levels revealed ‘concertive’ action, openness of the boundaries of leadership and respect for varieties of expertise across many individuals not the few, elements of ‘**distributed leadership**’, as described by Bennett, Wise, Woods and Harvey (2003). According to participants at the macro level, system leaders, while initiating discussion at the system level, had delayed formulating a system-prescriptive statement of intent for middle schooling, preferring to wait for increased ‘grassroots’ activity. School leaders, in turn, while initiating discussion and supporting middle schooling at the school level, allowed teachers a high degree of autonomy in determining how middle schooling was enacted. One participant school leader described his belief in staff:

> I am a great believer. You sow the seed. Take it to the curriculum and pastoral people and everyone can see that there is a real need to be met. And teachers, if they can see that there is a need to be met, a better way of doing things, they go along with it. (Pi1)
In turn, teachers had started to invite and use student feedback to shape middle schooling learning experiences. A comment from one of the participant teachers reflected the enthusiasm of other participant teachers for privileging previously neglected early adolescents:

>You see where the kids are at and go for it! And it doesn’t matter if you encroach on “Oh! This is all Year 9 work!” when you are teaching Year 7s. It is, “What can you do kids?” “Go as far as you can!” “Here’s some extra work if you want”. (Cm5)

Furthermore, participants’ comments suggested that, during the development of middle schooling policy, decisions were not made at a higher level that could be made as well, or better, by a lower one. This finding also indicated that practice was in accordance with long-established Catholic social teachings (Pope John XXIII, 1961; Pope Leo XIII, 1891; Pope Pius XI, 1931) on ‘subsidiarity’.

Teacher regroupings at three of four case study schools to include different forms of interdisciplinary middle schooling teams was also identified as an effective strategy. According to one participant teacher, this strategy helped middle schooling teachers to combat constant criticism: “We were able to laugh about it” (Mm4). Another participant identified the benefits of professional development made possible through middle schooling interdisciplinary teams:

>I couldn’t have asked for a better training ground for my first years of teaching. You learn a lot from different people and you learn a lot about how to deal with different students and your student relationships. You experience different programs, different styles of teaching, different types of teaching, different types of students. You get the whole lot! (Mm1)

Participants in the remaining two focus groups with interdisciplinary teams offered similar perspectives. They also added that interdisciplinary teaming had supported them to develop interdisciplinary learning opportunities. However, findings from the remaining focus group (school P) suggested that an interdisciplinary mindset was sufficient, as interdisciplinary teaming did not exist at this school yet participant teachers felt supported by colleagues from other subject disciplines while developing integrated curriculum opportunities.

**CONCLUSION**

The aim of the study reported in this paper was to analyse the middle schooling policy process within the Catholic Education System of Western Australia, during the 1990s and 2000s. With the absence of a formal middle schooling policy text, the focus was on policy activity that participants across the policy trajectory (system leaders, school leaders and teachers) connected with middle schooling. Four research questions and a policy analysis framework were developed using Ball’s (1994) five policy ‘contexts’ (influences; policy text production; practices and effects; outcomes and political strategies) as developed by Vidovich (2002; 2007) for empirical policy research. This paper has drawn on research findings across the policy trajectory from macro, meso and micro levels to examine emergent themes.
Participants identified four significant influences shaping middle schooling policy in the Catholic System: early middle schooling adopters, the State-mandated Curriculum Framework and changes in senior school; middle schooling action research; and a Catholic ethos. Although formal policy text production was not a priority at any level of the policy trajectory, across the trajectory participants acknowledged the value of stakeholders contributing to the production of policy texts. They also stressed the importance of policy texts being promulgated and resourced across the system. Informal policy texts had been produced but were not well disseminated at any of the three levels (macro, meso and micro). In the absence of formal policy texts, the focus was on an analysis of practices, as reported by participants. It was revealed that different practices enabled middle schooling at the different case study schools. However, commonalities were identified across the schools consisting of activities that were categorised as: ‘re-envisioning Catholic schooling’, ‘redefining leadership’, ‘restructuring’, ‘retraining’ and ‘reviewing’. Finally, an analysis of policy outcomes and political strategies identified student and teacher inequalities and strategies such as, mutually respectful student-teacher relationships, stronger student voices, regular communication, distributed leadership and teacher regroupings. Participants claimed that these strategies were connected to the improvement of middle schooling student outcomes in areas such as literacy, learning skills, confidence, citizenship and leadership.

The research reported in this paper may have applicability wider than the Western Australian context and the Catholic school context it describes. First, the research contributes to the underdeveloped literature on middle schooling in a Catholic context, as its focus was specifically the Western Australian Catholic Education System and it draws links between Catholic teachings and middle schooling practices. Comparative studies are suggested in middle schooling policy processes in international Catholic contexts. Second, the research contributes to what has been described as a neglected area of curriculum policy research, namely non-government schools (Vidovich & O’Donoghue, 2003). Context continues to be identified as a significant variable in the development of middle schooling policy (Nagel, 2006) and with the growth of the non-government sector in many countries (such as Australia where this study was located) more research is required to develop understandings of middle schooling policy and practice in these more independent contexts. Third, the research data shows that teachers were producing policy texts themselves at a micro level through their activities of direct experimentation. Participant teachers claimed to have evidence of real improvement of outcomes for particular groups of students resulting from these activities, despite the messiness of early adoption and the diversity of approaches in the different schools. They were also asking for policy text development at the macro level to support, clarify and validate this work. Furthermore, there was evidence from the interview data that without this system level policy development and resourcing, there was the danger that this useful, on-the-ground work would wither. This significant finding warrants further research and is consistent with concepts of policy as contested territory.

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