Policy 'partnerships'? Power dynamics in curriculum reform

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In curriculum policy, discourses of 'policy partnerships' and 'communities of practice' have become increasingly prevalent and were reflected in Western Australian curriculum policy processes from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s – a period of significant, highly contested change. This paper presents the findings of an empirical study into the impact of curriculum reform on the changing dynamics within and between the government and non-government education sectors, drawing on critical theory and post-structuralist approaches to policy analysis within a broader framework of policy network theory. This approach is used to highlight power issues at all levels of the policy trajectory. This research found that despite policy discourses of collaborative and consultative processes to create a 'shared' curriculum, the government and non-government education sectors remain largely distinct due to significant power differentials, as well as structural and cultural differences. The analysis reveals three closely connected emergent themes – limited collaboration, regulated consultation and enhanced state control of curriculum policy agendas. It is argued here that although discourses of 'policy partnerships' and 'community of practice' are increasingly evidenced in contemporary curriculum policy, they do not take sufficient account of embedded hierarchical power relationships. Further, such discourses can be used as legitimisation strategies to promulgate policy changes which enhance the steerage capacity of the state. Deeply entrenched power differentials operate simultaneously to distort policy partnerships and communities of practice, by both including and excluding particular sets of policy actors.

Keywords: policy partnerships; power; collaboration; consultation; curriculum reform

Introduction

This paper provides an analysis of key emergent themes from an empirical study into curriculum policy in Western Australia. The research findings presented here form part of a larger study into changing dynamics within and between government and non-government education sectors from the mid-1990s to late 2008. The Western Australian education system has been undergoing outcomes-based curriculum reform since the mid-1990s. This highly contested change was widely recognised as the most 'pure' form of outcomes-based education in any Australian State. In 1998, the outcomes-based Curriculum Framework[1] was released and the State Government mandated that all schools, both non-government and government, must demonstrate compliance by 2004, although policy contestation continued into the late 2000s.

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[1]Curriculum Council, *Curriculum Framework* (Perth: Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998).

It is argued here that although discourses of 'policy partnerships' and 'communities of practice' are increasingly evident in contemporary curriculum policy, they do not take sufficient account of embedded hierarchical power relationships. Such discourses may be used as legitimisation strategies to promote policy changes that serve to increase the steerage capacity of the state. These deeply entrenched power differentials operate simultaneously to distort these policy partnerships and communities of practice and by both including and excluding particular sets of policy actors. This research revealed that the dynamics of power between local-level interest groups was crucial to curriculum policy processes in Western Australian, but it is also important to analyse how the state continues to maintain a powerful position. The research revealed that despite policy discourses of bringing the government and non-government sectors together through a 'shared' curriculum, there was significant strategising within these education sectors about how to remain distinct. Further, more significant power differentials within and between education sectors were caused by structural and cultural differences. This paper provides an analysis of three closely connected meta-level emergent themes from the research – limited collaboration, regulated consultation and state control of policy agendas.

Contextual and conceptual background

The initial time frame for the research represented the period from policy inception (1995) to the deadline for policy enactment for Kindergarten to Year 10 (2004), although curriculum policy contestation continued to the late 2000s. In Western Australia in 1995, the 'Ministerial Committee to Review Curriculum Development' was established to examine existing curriculum development processes. Following this review, the Curriculum Council was established by an act of State Parliament in 1997 to oversee the development and enactment of the Curriculum Framework, which was released in 1998. A stated aim of the Curriculum Framework policy was to unify the education sectors through a shared curriculum. This policy represented the first time that curriculum was mandated for non-government schools; therefore the dynamics within and between the education sectors were in an accelerated state of transformation in the period of study.

In Australia, the number of students attending non-government schools (over 33% and growing rapidly) is relatively high by world standards, particularly compared to other OECD nations such as New Zealand, the USA, England and Wales.[2] From 1996, the Liberal-National Coalition Commonwealth Government increased funding for non-government schools, providing more financial support to non-government schools than to government schools or the tertiary education sector.[3] This placed schools within the government sector in more direct 'market competition' with non-government schools.[4]

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[2]P. Meadmore, '"Free, Compulsory and Secular"? The Re-invention of Australian Public Education', *Journal of Education Policy* 16, no. 2 (2001): 113–25.

[3]S. Crump and R. Slee, 'Robbing the Public to Pay Private? Two Cases of Refinancing Education Infrastructure in Australia', *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 2 (2005): 243.

[4]S. Bradley, M. Draca, and C. Green, 'School Performance in Australia: Is There a Role for Quasi-markets?', *The Australian Economic Review* 37, no. 3 (2005): 271–86.

Concepts of collaboration, consultation and policy partnerships have become key features of public policy discourses, including education.[5] Collaboration is presented as a focus on the needs of grassroots interest groups and communities, as opposed to the emphasis on expertise that underpins traditional 'top-down' bureaucratic approaches.[6] Consultation has different meanings in different contexts.[7] In this study, the definition by Harrison and Mort is employed, and refers to 'a local attempt to seek the views of a broad constituency of persons (whether or not current service users) about some potentially important policy decision'.[8]

Much of the literature on policy partnerships draws on the Copenhagen Centre's definition: 'People and organisations from some combination of public, business and civil constituencies who engage in voluntary, mutually beneficial, innovative relationships to address common societal aims through combining their resources and competencies'.[9] There is a strong focus on horizontal relationships, particularly an emphasis on local interest groups and stakeholders.[10] A 'policy network' agency is often created, which is responsible for the achievement of specific outcomes and subject to various forms of accountability mechanisms. Such network agencies are often regulated by the state, through contracts that stipulate the roles and responsibilities of the interest groups and individuals.[11]

Arguably collaboration, consultation and policy partnerships are key elements of a broader, more powerful neoliberal discourse that underpins the new modes of subtle regulation of education that have reformed relationships between policy actors, including politicians, education leaders, teachers and 'customers' – including business/industry, parents and students.[12]

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[5]M. Griffiths, 'Collaboration and Partnership in Question: Knowledge, Politics and Practice', *Journal of Education Policy* 15, no. 4 (2000): 383; S. Robertson and R. Dale, 'Local States of Emergency: The Contradictions of Neo-liberal Governance in Education in New Zealand', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23, no. 3 (2002): 463–82; J. Frankham, 'Network Utopias and Alternative Entanglements for Educational Research and Practice', *Journal of Education Policy* 21, no. 6 (2006): 661–77.

[6]A. Cardini, 'An Analysis of the Rhetoric and Practice of Educational Partnerships in the UK: An Arena of Complexities, Tensions and Power', *Journal of Education Policy* 21, no. 4 (2006): 393–415.

[7]R. Simmons and J. Birchall, 'A Joined-up Approach to User Participation in Public Services: Strengthening the "Participation Chain"', *Social Policy and Administration* 39, no. 3 (2005): 260–83; J. Leadbetter, 'Investigating and Conceptualising the Notion of Consultation to Facilitate Multi-agency Work', *Educational Psychology in Practice* 22, no. 1 (2006): 19–31.

[8]S. Harrison and M. Mort, 'Which Champions, Which People? Public and User Involvement in Health Care as a Technology of Legitimisation', *Social Policy and Administration* 32, no. 1 (1998): 60.

[9]The Copenhagen Centre, *New Partnerships for Social Responsibility*, 1999, www.Copenhagen centre.org/main (accessed November 21, 2007).

[10]Cardini, 'Analysis of Rhetoric'.

[11]T. Seddon, S. Billett, and A. Clemans, 'Politics of Social Partnerships: A Framework for Theorising', *Journal of Education Policy* 19, no. 2 (2004): 123–42; T. Seddon, S. Billett, and A. Clemans, 'Navigating Social Partnerships: Central Agencies–Local Networks', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 26, no. 5 (2005): 567–84.

[12]Griffiths, 'Collaboration and Partnership, 383–95; C. Bagley, C. Ackerley, and J. Rattray, 'Social Exclusion, Sure Start and Organisational Social Capital: Evaluating Inter-Disciplinary Multi-agency Working in an Education and Health Work Programme', *Journal of Education Policy* 19, no. 5 (2004): 595–607; Seddon, Billett, and Clemans, 'Navigating Social Partnerships', 567–84; Cardini, 'Analysis of Rhetoric'.

Methodological frameworks

The research reported in this paper draws on both critical theory and post-structuralist approaches to policy analysis within a broader framework of policy network theory. In this research, policy network theory is used to bring the macro focus of critical theory and the micro focus of post-structuralism together in order to highlight power issues at all levels of the policy trajectory. Critical theory and post-structuralism together create a type of hybrid approach. In educational policy research, definitions of policy have been the subject of much debate; understandings of policy differ according to theoretical perspectives.[13] Recent research has seen a shift away from the state-centred modernist perspectives on policy, which tend to focus on the hegemonic role of the state.[14] A more post-structural approach was forged by the 'policy cycle' model of Bowe, Ball and Gold, which rejected notions of separate phases of policy formulation and implementation.[15] Their original policy cycle recognised three policy contexts: the context of influence; the context of text production; and context of practice/effects. Subsequently, Ball extended the 'policy cycle' to include two more contexts: the context of outcomes and the context of political strategy,[16] which are more concerned with 'bigger picture' issues of power and social justice.[17]

Consistent with Ball's conceptual tools, this study draws on critical theory and post-structuralist approaches to policy analysis, both of which explore different types of power relationships in, and around, policy processes. Critical theory approaches focus on hegemonic power structures with the aim of exposing relationships of domination. Post-structuralist approaches to policy analysis focus on the individual agency of policy actors and the multiple interpretations and creativity of responses to policy enactment.[18] This study draws on both of these complementary approaches and uses policy network theory to examine the relationship between all contexts of the policy cycle and all levels of the policy trajectory, from macro to micro, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the dynamics of curriculum policy changes in the context of Western Australian education. Analysis of the discourses of policy actors at different levels was used to help expose power relationships embedded in the policy processes. Here, 'discourses' refers to prevalent and powerful policy rhetoric.[19]

This study analysed the policy processes surrounding the development and enactment of the Curriculum Framework in Western Australia from macro to meso to micro levels by drawing on a wide range of documentary sources and semi-structured interviews. For the purposes of this particular study, 'macro' refers to the sites of policy production by the policy elite in peak organisations in Western Australian

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[13]L. Vidovich, 'Removing Policy from its Pedestal: Some Theoretical Framings and Practical Possibilities', *Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (2007): 285–98.

[14]R. Dale, *The State and Education Policy* (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1989); B. Troyna, 'Critical Social Research and Education Policy', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 42, no. 1 (1994): 70–84.

[15]R. Bowe, S. Ball, and A. Gold, *Reforming Education and Changing Schools* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[16]S. Ball, *Education Reform: A Critical and Post-structural Approach* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1994).

[17]Vidovich, 'Removing Policy'.

[18]M. Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (St. Leonard's, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1998).

[19]M. Apple, *Power, Meaning and Identity: Essays in Critical Educational Studies* (New York: P. Lang, 1999).

education: the State Government; the Curriculum Council; the Education Department[20]; the Catholic Education Office; and the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australian. At the macro level, the main source of data collection was documentary sources. Two macro-level participants who represented the 'policy elite' were also interviewed. The term 'meso' refers to mid-level bureaucrats and policy actors who operated within the interest groups, such as the Curriculum Council, the Education Department, the Catholic Education Office and the Association of Independent Schools. These participants were in senior-level positions within a number of organisations but were not the 'policy elite'. Altogether, 15 meso-level participants were interviewed for this study. Finally, the term 'micro' refers to the school, teacher and classroom level. There were four 'micro-level' case study schools: two from the government sector (referred to here by the pseudonyms Public School and State School) and two from the non-government sector (referred to here by the pseudonyms Independent School and Catholic School). A total of 56 participants across the policy trajectory was interviewed. The focus on dynamic interactions and the concern for power relationships was best served using a qualitative approach. The bulk of the data was collected in 2004, the year of the deadline for Curriculum Framework policy enactment although ongoing curriculum policy contestation was examined. Therefore, the research was very timely as it analysed the changes in Western Australian education as they were occurring.

Policy partnerships? Meta-level themes

This study into curriculum policy processes surrounding the Western Australian Curriculum Framework in the period from 1995 found that there was a marked focus in official policy rhetoric on policy partnerships achieved through both collaboration between interest groups and consultation by the policy elite with grassroots policy actors in schools. However, while the Curriculum Framework was presented as an opportunity for collaboration between education interest groups (particularly government and non-government sectors) and an open consultative forum for educational debate in which grassroots teachers could be involved, there was ample evidence to indicate that the policy processes and outcomes were heavily controlled by the state. This suggests a significant tension between, on the one hand, discourses of collaboration and consultation, and on the other hand, enhanced centralised control.

The first two sections below focus on an analysis of purported collaboration and consultation in the curriculum policy processes. The third section focuses on continued, and enhanced, state control of the curriculum policy agenda. Discourses of collaboration and consultation may both be viewed as a tool of legitimation employed by the policy elite to present the policy reform as an 'organic' development initiated at the grassroots level. The state is therefore able to retain control over policy processes, while deflecting any potential blame for negative outcomes to those at lower levels of the policy trajectory. Discourses of 'policy partnerships' and 'communities of practice', underpinned by purported collaboration and consultation,

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[20]From 1988 to 1994 the name 'Ministry of Education' was used to refer to the organisation of the government education sector. From 1994 to 2001, this organisation was designated 'Education Department of Western Australia'. In 2001, the name was changed to 'Department of Education'. In February 2003, the State Government consolidated several departments into the 'Department of Education and Training'. For the purposes of this paper, the title 'Education Department' will be used.

serve to obscure the dominant position of the state in policy processes. Thus, the focus on horizontal relationships between interest groups in policy processes is arguably an attempt to mask vertical power dynamics. Throughout these sections, the themes are illustrated using direct quotes from the data with the source of the quotes identified only by the participant's organisation to protect anonymity.

Collaboration?

Discourses focusing on collaboration within 'policy partnerships' and 'communities of practice' to achieve a consensus on a 'shared' curriculum across government and non-government sectors downplay the potential for relationships to be undermined by embedded hierarchical power relationships. As identified earlier, 'collaboration' refers to the focus on the participation of grassroots interest groups and communities in policy processes. In the study reported in this paper key emergent themes included a lack of trust between interest groups; conflict over roles; the dominance of particular actors over policy processes; and cultural differences as well as power differentials between interest groups, particularly the government and non-government education sectors.

This research suggested a lack of consensus about what constituted 'collaboration' and 'shared' curriculum in relation to the Curriculum Framework policy processes in Western Australian. Official policy rhetoric and Curriculum Council participants suggested that the formal composition of the Council created actual, authentic collaboration. Thus at the macro level (meso and micro levels discussed later), formal composition structures were presented as evidence of an inclusive, 'collaborative project' between interest groups. Underpinning this was the notion that the Curriculum Framework represented a 'statement of consensus'. By contrast, meso- and micro-level participants highlighted the complexities of power dynamics in purportedly collaborative relationships, exemplified in the following quote: 'Even though it [the Curriculum Framework] gave a sense of all sectors being equal it was a bit like *Animal Farm* – some are more equal than others'.[21] Thus, the official policy rhetoric of the Curriculum Framework as a collaborative project did not acknowledge the complex dynamics of power between the various interest groups.

Collaborative relationships may be undermined by rivalry and lack of trust between interest groups, particularly in regard to roles in policy processes. In this study, the prevailing view expressed by meso- and micro-level participants was that collaboration between the different interest groups (particularly the government and non-government education sectors) did not occur because of their different agendas and philosophies. There was ample evidence to suggest that the government sector was particularly resistant to collaboration because it meant relinquishing its dominance over curriculum policy processes. As one meso-level government sector participant stated: 'When the Council first came into being, it was a shift for us because we had to be one player among three players to work together to develop a shared curriculum'.

As Tett and others have argued, interest groups may conflict over their role in the policy network, particularly over loss of independence and autonomy, and the implications of shared 'glory' in any potential successes.[22] Often, proponents of

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[21]Former Curriculum Council Member.
[22]L. Tett, J. Crowther, and P. O'Hara, 'Collaborative Partnerships in Community Education', *Journal of Education Policy* 18, no. 1 (2003): 37–51.

communities of practice do not take sufficient account of existing relationships between interest groups, which may negatively affect collaboration.[23] In this study, this was exemplified by one participant, who stated: 'It's a minefield of politics between all of them [the education sectors]'.[24]

The majority of meso- and micro-level participants argued that the influence of particular individual policy actors was a key factor in the cultural dominance of the government sector over Curriculum Framework policy processes. Thus while discourses of collaboration highlight horizontal power dynamics, they tend to ignore vertical power structures that serve to disempower particular policy actors and between interest groups. Knowledge and power are inextricably linked and familiarity with policy rhetoric and terminology may potentially act as a mechanism for inclusion/exclusion through the creation of powerful 'expert insider groups'.[25] Those with the least knowledge of the policy rhetoric and terminology are those most disempowered during policy processes.

Further, individuals who represented the 'policy elite' were able to yield significant power over policy processes because of their positions within key organisations and their prior expertise with outcomes-based education (this was confirmed through documentary data analysis). While individual agency plays an important role in all levels of the policy cycle, actors in senior positions within policy organisations are far more powerful than micro-level actors. As Whitty argues, much educational research exaggerates 'the extent to which local agency can challenge structural inequalities'.[26]

Collaborative policy partnerships are also potentially undermined by cultural barriers.[27] The research revealed significant power and status differentials between government and non-government education sectors. Most meso- and micro-level participants suggested that there were 'inherent' differences between the education sectors that were not significantly changed, despite policy rhetoric of unity through a shared curriculum. Said discussed notions of the 'other' in terms of constructions of (racial) identity.[28] As Rizvi and Lingard have argued, conceptualisations of the 'other' are related to issues of power, control, information and representation and it is therefore a useful concept in other fields of study.[29] In relation to professional identity, notions of the 'other' emerged as a striking theme in this research. Non-government-sector teacher participants, in particular, clearly identified themselves as 'other' from government school teachers by suggesting that they worked harder, that their professional roles were distinctly different, and that their students were inherently more

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[23]L. Milbourne, S. Macrae, and M. Maguire, 'Collaborative Solutions or New Policy Problems: Exploring Multi-agency Partnerships in Education and Health Work', *Journal of Education Policy* 18, no. 1 (2003): 19–35; Bagley, Ackerley, and Rattray, 'Social Exclusion', 595–607; Seddon, Billett, and Clemans, 'Navigating Social Partnerships', 567–84.

[24]Professional Development Provider.

[25]M. Evans, 'Understanding Dialectics in Policy Network Analysis', *Political Studies* 49, no. 3 (2001): 542–50; E. Borg, 'Discourse Community', *English Language Teaching Journal* 57, no. 4 (2003): 398–400.

[26]G. Whitty, *Making Sense of Education Policy: Studies in the Sociology and Politics of Education* (London: Paul Chapman, 2002), 13.

[27]Milbourne, Macrae, and Maguire, 'Collaborative Solutions', 19–35; Bagley, Ackerley, and Rattray, 'Social Exclusion', 595–607.

[28]E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

[29]F. Rizvi and B. Lingard, 'Edward Said and the Cultural Politics of Education', *Discourse* 27, no. 3 (2006): 293–308.

intelligent. These sentiments are encapsulated in the following quotes: 'In the [government] school that I was at before here, the car park would be empty at 3.15 pm … [Government schools are] a lesser place to work in as a teacher'[30] and 'parents don't realise that a child here that's in the bottom band [at this school] may actually still be in the top half of the State because our standards here are fairly high'.[31] There was ample evidence to suggest that schools within the non-government sector *wanted* to remain distinct, encapsulated in the quote: 'We are an academic school, unashamedly so'[32] and as such, they were resistant to collaboration with the government sector, which consistently performs less well in published league tables.

This study found that despite policy discourses of collaboration to achieve a shared curriculum, there was significant strategising within government and non-government education sectors about how to remain distinct. Further, there were marked power differentials within and between the interest groups, particularly the education sectors, that operated simultaneously to distort potential 'policy partnerships' and 'communities of practice' and served to both include and exclude particular policy actors. Thus, while the Curriculum Framework was presented as a statement of consensus arrived at through collaboration across different interest groups, policy processes were characterised by significant vertical power differentials.

Consultation?

Consultation has been a key feature of public policy discourses in recent years.[33] As identified earlier, the term 'consultation' has various meanings depending on perspectives and contexts. In this study, the definition by Harrison and Mort is employed, and refers to 'a local attempt to seek the views of a broad constituency of persons (whether or not current service users) about some potentially important policy decision'.[34] Consultation may be seen as a tool for legitimising public policy by emphasising broad local-level participation in the policy process.[35] While consultation may potentially involve more grassroots interest groups in policy processes, it also enables the state to claim credit for the policies at the same time as 'shifting the blame' for any potential negative outcomes.[36]

In this study into the Curriculum Framework policy processes, the extent of consultation processes was highly contested by participants at different levels of the policy trajectory. Official policy rhetoric from the macro level stated that the policy processes had been broadly consultative. At the meso level, participants from the Curriculum Council and education-sector organisations claimed that the policy

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[30]Independent School Manager.

[31]Catholic School Teacher.

[32]Independent School Manager.

[33]A. James and A. James, 'Tightening the Net: Children, Community, and Control', *British Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 2 (2001): 211–28; D. Cook, 'Consultation, for a Change? Engaging Users and Communities in the Policy Process', *Social Policy and Administration* 36, no. 5 (2002): 516–31; Simmons and Birchall, 'Joined-up Approach', 260–83; Leadbetter, 'Investigating and Conceptualising', 19–31.

[34]Harrison and Mort, 'Which Champions, Which People?', 60.

[35]Ibid.; E. Klijn and J. Koppenjan, 'Politicians and Interactive Decision Making: Institutional Spoilsports or Playmakers', *Public Administration* 78, no. 2 (2000): 365–87; Simmons and Birchall, 'Joined-up Approach', 260–83.

[36]Cardini, 'Analysis of Rhetoric', 393–415.

processes had been highly consultative and that there were numerous opportunities to participate, as reflected in the following quotes: 'Initially it was a highly, highly consultative process'[37] and 'They consulted everyone that would have been impacted. It was a really, really comprehensive consultation system'.[38]

Most meso-level participants suggested there was a widespread sense amongst teachers that consultation had been inadequate. The following quotes reflect typical participant views: 'Some teachers in schools would say that they had never heard of it [the Curriculum Framework] and didn't get involved'[39]; 'The negative silent majority is a bit of a concern sometimes … I think they do feel that their voice wasn't always heard'[40]; and 'Teachers tend to be quite cynical about whether they were actually being listened to'.[41] Participants at all case study schools (micro level) were overwhelmingly critical of consultation processes and comments by several participants indicate they were unaware of opportunities to be involved, exemplified in the following quote: 'The preface to it [the Curriculum Framework] was non-existent – so all we knew was the government was telling us we have to do this'.[42] Interestingly, there was a 'shifting' of blame from Curriculum Council staff to the education-sector organisations in relation to lack of teacher involvement in the policy process, encapsulated in the following quote: 'If they [teachers] didn't feel like they were part of it, then it was probably a result of the sectors not feeding back to that range of teachers'.[43]

Participants outside the Council and education-sector organisations were highly critical of what was perceived to be 'regulated' consultation, arguing the consultation sessions were tightly controlled to avoid any public expression of negativity or dissent. The following quote provides an example of participant views: 'Where there's a consultative forum, it is the person or organisation in charge of bringing people together that generally has their own agenda, and you [the audience] follow their agenda … the cynic in me would say it [consultation] was tokenistic'.[44] These claims were confirmed by several participants who had been involved, and who maintained they had been given strict instructions to present the policy changes favourably and it consequently became a public relations exercise rather than genuine consultation: 'We had to be very active in giving a positive slant … They [the Curriculum Council] had a public relations consultant and there was constant publicity that 'we're consulting the community and the teachers' … it was really a public relations exercise'.[45] Thus, this study revealed that the rhetoric of consultation was invoked to legitimise the policy changes by suggesting they had the broad support of the Western Australian education community, particularly teachers.

The way in which the policy elite respond to policy feedback can point to underlying power dynamics.[46] In this study, lack of knowledge and expertise of policy

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[37]Non-Government-sector Participant.

[38]Government-sector Participant.

[39]Curriculum Council Member.

[40]Tertiary Educator.

[41]Professional Development Provider.

[42]State School Senior School Teacher.

[43]Curriculum Council Member.

[44]Tertiary Educator.

[45]Former Curriculum Council Member.

[46]Klijn and Koppenjan, 'Politicians and Decision Making', 365–87; Simmons and Birchall, 'Joined-up Approach', 260–83.

discourses was fundamental to exclusion from policy processes during all phases of the policy cycle. An important point related to consultation – and the Council's response to consultation – is that the Curriculum Framework policy text was widely acknowledged[47] to be overwhelming, confusing, vague and not user-friendly. This reveals an inherent flaw in the consultation process; teachers were asked to provide feedback on a policy that the majority did not understand. Several teacher participants claimed that widespread negative feedback from teachers was largely ignored for political reasons:

> It's their [policy elite] jobs so they're not going to say 'well we made a bad decision' – and it's unlike people in the higher places [to say] 'we don't think this is a good idea, perhaps we'll stop it now'. Many, many teachers were unhappy about it but they just pushed ahead. You had plenty of opportunity to say [what you thought] but nothing has happened.[48]

Further, comments made by a Curriculum Council staff participant indicated that feedback which did not reflect an in-depth understanding of the Curriculum Framework was not taken into account: 'If you didn't have an understanding of that paradigm shift, then your responses to the consultation could have been confused'.[49] Response to consultation was therefore an important tool in the Council's control over policy processes.

   Consultation processes are widely recognised as problematic, primarily because of problems with participation.[50] Participation in consultation processes is linked to issues of power, inclusion and exclusion.[51] A key emergent issue from the study was that micro-level participants were structurally and culturally excluded from Curriculum Framework policy processes. Policy discourses frequently stated that Council members who were bureaucrats from the education-sector peak organisation represented teachers' views. However, this does not take into account that the agendas and interests of bureaucrats and teachers are often quite different. Overwhelmingly, micro-level participants complained they could only provide feedback on the minutiae of the policy, because key policy decisions had already been made 'further up' the trajectory. The following quotes encapsulate typical participant views: 'There's this quasi-consultation – the executive decision has already been made so they fit the programme around it to make it look like there's been consultation'[52], 'I am not aware of any significant discussions or debates with educators, particularly teachers in the field, whatsoever'[53] and 'It's been imposed on the teaching profession. I don't think we as teachers saw the need for this but they [the Curriculum Council] had already made up their minds'.[54]

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[47]P. Deschamp, *Feedback on the Draft Curriculum Framework: A Summary of the Opinions of Teachers, School Administrators, and Other Educators, Parents and Interested People* (Perth: Precision Information, 1998).

[48]Catholic School Teacher.

[49]Curriculum Council Staff.

[50]Cook, 'Consultation, for a Change?', 516–31; Simmons and Birchall, 'Joined-up Approach', 260–83.

[51]James and James, 'Tightening the Net', 211–28.

[52]Public School Teacher.

[53]State School Manager.

[54]Catholic School Manager.

As several commentators have maintained, there is a strong link between involvement in policy processes and existing relationships of power, as those who are regularly consulted tend to be leaders in the field exhibiting good relationships with policy-makers, who operate as 'recruitment agents'.[55] Most meso- and micro-level participants in this study argued that any teacher who was consulted was 'screened' by the Council to ensure their support for the policy, as the following quotes illustrate: 'They [teachers] are handpicked, they've already been screened for political correctness'[56] and 'The people selected to be involved in the various committees that produced this were selected because they had a particular point of view'.[57] The careful and purposive selection of those who are to be consulted significantly undermines the rhetoric of consultation.

This study revealed that the state, through the Curriculum Council, exerted significant control over Curriculum Framework policy processes subtly regulating consultation. The emergent theme of Curriculum Council power and how it maintained control over the agenda, manifested in several ways: through its avoidance of negativity and dissent; through its selection of individuals to take part in the consultation processes; and through ignoring negative feedback. Almost half the meso-level participants were highly suspicious of the consultation processes, claiming that they had been tokenistic and insincere. Further, lack of knowledge and expertise, as well as purposive selection of individuals to participate in consultation groups, served to exclude certain policy actors, particularly teachers, from policy processes. Arguably, the policy rhetoric of broad consultation served to obscure the dominance of the state over policy processes. Consultation may therefore both be viewed as a tool of legitimation which enables the state to retain control over policy processes, while deflecting potential blame for any negative outcomes to those at lower levels of the policy trajectory.

State control of policy agendas

An inherent tension exists between discourses of 'policy partnerships' and 'communities of practice' that highlight collaboration and consultation, on the one hand, and the mechanisms by which the state may continue to exert centralised control over both the processes and outcomes of policy, on the other.[58] The state is able to control policy agendas through selectively empowering different groups of policy actors.

There were tensions created by purported collaboration and consultation juxtaposed against centralised control by the Curriculum Council, which manifested throughout the context of policy text production. Macro, meso and micro data

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[55]H. Brady, K. Schlozman, and S. Verba, 'Prospecting for Participants: Rational Expectations and Recruitment of Political Activists', *The American Political Science Review* 93, no. 1 (1999): 153–66; G. Jordan and W. Maloney, 'How Bumble-bees Fly: Accounting for Public Interest Participation', *Political Studies* 44, no. 3 (1996): 668–85; Cook, 'Consultation, for a Change?', 516–31; Simmons and Birchall, 'Joined-up Approach', 260–83.

[56]Public School Teacher.

[57]Catholic School Manager.

[58]Bagley, Ackerley, and Rattray, 'Social Exclusion', 595–607; J. Evans, F. Castle, D. Cooper, R. Glatter, and P. Woods, 'Collaboration: The Big New Idea for School Improvement?', *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 2 (2005): 223–35; T. Seddon, S. Billett, and A. Clemans, A. 'Social Partnerships: Practices, Paradoxes and Prospects of Local Learning Networks', *The Australian Educational Researcher* 32, no. 1 (2005): 25–48; Seddon, Billett, and Clemans, 'Politics of Social Partnerships', 123–42; Seddon, Billett, and Clemans, 'Navigating Social Partnerships', 567–84.

indicated different levels of perception of state control over education policy. As previously highlighted, Curriculum Council discourses emphasised collaboration and consultation, which were used to legitimise the Curriculum Framework policy by presenting it as an 'organic' (bottom-up) development. At the meso level, participants offered contradictory views over whether the Curriculum Framework reflected state control or collaboration/consultation. Micro-level participants in schools overwhelmingly argued that the policy process was heavily controlled by the state and that teachers were disengaged from the policy processes.

State control was highly complex and encompassed not only overt exercise of power over the processes and outcomes of the policy, but also more subtle means of control such as through powerful individual policy actors, through selection of committee members and the rewriting of the policy text. Macro- and some meso-level participants stated that while writers were appointed for each Learning Area, the Council secretariat rewrote large sections of the policy text for 'consistency': 'people were contracted to write, but my recollection is that the actual document itself was written by Council staff'.[59] Further, a participant who had been a contract writer claimed there was a clear expectation to follow Council directions rather than the recommendation of the Reference Group, thereby ensuring the Council's agenda was followed:

> There was a definite decision that all the Learning Areas should look the same, so even what the group signed off on ended up being changed … It was always made very clear to me that you listen to your Reference Group, but at the end of the day if the Council says 'this is what is going to happen' then that is what happens because that is who your contract is with.[60]

Thus, the use of discourses of local empowerment embedded in notions of 'policy partnerships' and 'communities of practice' becomes a tool of legitimation for the state, because of the purported wide local-level support for, and participation in, the policy processes.[61] However, despite the policy rhetoric, the state continues to exert significant control over the policy processes through both overt and covert mechanisms.

Conclusion

There is an inherent tension between discourses of 'policy partnerships' and 'communities of practice' that highlight collaboration and consultation, and the mechanisms by which the state may continue to exert centralised control over both the processes and outcomes of policy. This study revealed there was significant strategising within government and non-government education sectors about how to remain distinct, despite policy rhetoric of collaboration in the 'shared curriculum'. Significant vertical power differentials within and between the various interest groups served to distort this purported 'community of practice' through the inclusion and exclusion of particular policy actors. Further, the policy rhetoric of broad consultation in Curriculum Framework policy processes served to obscure the dominance of the state over policy

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[59]Government-sector Participant.

[60]Non-Government-sector Participant.

[61]Griffiths, 'Collaboration and Partnership', 383–95; W. Maloney, G. Smith, and G. Stoker, 'Social Capital and Urban Governance: Adding a More Contextualised 'Top-down' Perspective', *Political Studies* 48, no. 4 (2000): 802–20; Robertson and Dale, 'Local States of Emergency', 463–82.

processes. Discourses of consultation enabled the state to retain control over policy processes, while deflecting potential blame for any negative outcomes to lower levels of the policy trajectory. Thus, the state is able to control policy agendas through the selective empowerment and disempowerment of particular groups of policy actors.

Both collaboration and consultation might be seen as legitimation strategies which, in effect, operate as regulatory mechanisms. Discourses of collaboration and consultation may be viewed as neoliberal strategies of governance that seek to devolve responsibility and accountability to the 'end user' whilst enabling the state to 'steer at a distance' through the specification of outcomes and subtle forms of regulation.[62] It is argued here that presentations of communities of practice as 'groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise'[63] do not take into account that diversity within communities is often closely connected to differential power relationships. There are deeply entrenched hierarchical power relations that operate simultaneously to affect these communities of practice and to include and exclude particular policy actors, ultimately serving to undermine collaborative policy partnerships.

While examination of the dynamics of power between local-level interest groups is crucial to policy analysis, it is also important to consider how the state can continue to exert control, not only over the policy process as a whole, but also over dynamics between the interest groups. This research revealed considerable tension resulting from the power and influence of the government sector because of stronger representation on the Curriculum Council and through the influence of key Education Department personnel who had roles in both the Education Department and the Curriculum Council and prior experience of attempted curriculum reform at the national level. This was complicated by further tensions resulting from the unequal levels of autonomy given to schools in the government and non-government education sectors and also between Catholic and independent schools within the non-government sector. Given the complexity of power dynamics between interest groups at the local level, a concept of a policy network is a useful tool for critical analysis of policy processes. However, closer attention needs to be paid to the power dynamics within and between interest groups in the local sphere, and the relationship of these dynamics to broader considerations of state constraint and local agency.

Policy processes are characterised by (often hierarchical) dynamics of power between the state and policy actors at the local level. During the 1990s, critical policy analysis was often concerned with issues of the balance between state control and local agency.[64] With the ascendance of neoliberal styles of governance, different

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[62]Evans et al., 'Collaboration', 223–35; Seddon, Billett, and Clemans, 'Politics of Social Partnerships', 123–42; Seddon, Billett, and Clemans, 'Navigating Social Partnerships', 567–84; Cardini, 'Analysis of Rhetoric', 393–415; A. Fataar, 'Policy Networks in Recalibrated Political Terrain: The Case of School Curriculum Policy and Politics in South Africa', *Journal of Education Policy* 21, no. 6 (2006): 641–59.

[63]E. Wenger and W. Snyder, 'Communities of Practice: The Organisational Frontier', *Harvard Business Review* 78, no. 1 (2000): 139.

[64]Ball, *Education Reform*; S. Ball, 'Some Reflection on Policy Theory: A Brief Response to Hatcher and Troyna', *Journal of Educational Policy* 9, no. 2 (1994): 171–82; S. Ball, 'Big Policies/Small World: An Introduction to International Perspectives in Education Policy', *Comparative Education* 34, no. 2 (1998), 119–30; Bowe, Ball, and Gold, *Reforming Education*; Dale, *State and Education Policy*; R. Hatcher and B. Troyna, 'The 'Policy' Cycle: A Ball by Ball Account', *Journal of Education Policy* 9, no. 2 (1994): 155–70; Troyna, 'Critical Social Research', 70–84.

forms of policy making have emerged, centred around notions of policy partnerships and communities of practice.[65] Local-level actors are often widely diverse and wield significantly different degrees of power. This complex interplay of local-level dynamics influences the policy process as a whole; consequently, greater attention needs to be paid to local-level dynamics. Policy network theory has become increasingly popular to 'break down linear approaches to policy'.[66] In this, critical policy analysis must move beyond a discussion of state constraint and local agency to incorporate analysis of the changing dynamics within and between groups of policy actors and interest groups that are played out in global–local networks.

Robertson and Dale firmly locate collaborative partnerships within neoliberal frameworks of governance.[67] They argue that while such policies represent a devolution of responsibility towards the local site, the state controls the process through accountability and restricts individual and local agency. Further, discourses of partnerships are invoked to legitimate policy directions:

> The new scale for action is at the level of the local; self, organisation, community, where the state has put into place the governance mechanisms that ensure its capacity to strategically control this new territory. The state's capacity to rule ideologically – particularly from a distance – is dependent on its ability to generate legitimacy for its political project.[68]

According to Gewirtz et al., 'spin' is becoming increasingly prevalent in policy-making: 'the processes and products of purposively managing information in order to present institutions, individuals, policies, practices and/or ideas in a favourable light and thereby mobilise support for them'.[69] Griffiths similarly claims that collaboration discourses give local interest groups and individuals 'a sense of ownership and involvement',[70] when in fact the agenda is tightly controlled by the state. Similarly, underpinning discourses of consultation are arguably neoliberal modes of governance related to tightening social control by emphasising performance and accountability for the outcomes, at the same time as decentralising the minutiae of public policy. While consultation discourses are presented in positive terms through an emphasis on the importance of civil society, they in fact represent a tightening of social control by outlining 'explicit educational objectives while concealing some more implicit ones of regulation and surveillance'.[71]

Policy partnerships, including networks, collaboration and consultation processes, may be viewed as complex 'sites of struggle' that have the potential to be positive by empowering individuals to make decisions at the local level. It is vital to acknowledge the importance of both structure and agency; while policy actors do not 'merely reflect in any deterministic manner the impact of the structural context on their behaviour', policy processes should also not 'be understood as contextually over-determined by

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[65]S. Stoer and A. Magalhaes, 'Education, Knowledge and the Network Society', *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 2, no. 3 (2004): 319–35.

[66]Vidovich, 'Removing Policy', 14.

[67]Robertson and Dale, 'Local States of Emergency', 463–82.

[68]Ibid., 469.

[69]S. Gewirtz, M. Dickson, and S. Power, 'Unravelling a 'Spun' Policy: A Case Study of the Constitutive Role of 'Spin' in the Education Policy Process', *Journal of Education Policy* 19, no. 3 (2004): 321.

[70]Griffiths, 'Collaboration and Partnership', 385.

[71]James and James, 'Tightening the Net', 215.

structure'.[72] Individual policy actors and policy networks have 'fluid identities': 'they constantly develop their subjectivity in light of the ever evolving structural context in which their political activity is located'.[73] As Seddon et al. claim, the impact of neoliberalism is dependent on local factors such as traditions and culture, and the extent to which agencies and individuals align themselves with neoliberal ideologies.[74] Notions of policy partnerships, with a particular emphasis on collaboration and consultation, were key features of the discourses surrounding the Curriculum Framework in Western Australian, the focus of this study, with significant implications for policy processes in general.

This paper argues for closer attention to be paid to the power dynamics within and between groups of policy actors in the local sphere of the policy trajectory. Further, it relates local-level dynamics to broader considerations of state constraint and local agency by incorporating an analysis of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that operate within a policy network. The theoretical tools for policy analysis need to be broadened to encompass an examination of the policy process as a whole, including global, national and local dimensions. Critical theory and post-structuralism together create a type of hybrid approach that is a particularly useful tool for accommodating this broader scope and depth by bringing together the macro and micro foci. Some commentators argue that critical theory and post-structuralist approaches are antithetical because of their conflicting ideologies and methodologies.[75] These include claims that within the contemporary context of globalisation, the micro-level focus of post-structuralist analysis does not provide the necessary means to pursue issues of social change and justice.[76] However, a key focus of post-structuralism is the concern for deconstruction in order to examine implicit underlying assumptions, which provides a tool of critique.[77] Thus, there is value in bringing together critical theory and post-structuralist approaches in order to gain a more 'complete' understanding of policy processes.[78]

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[72]Fataar, 'Policy Networks', 643.

[73]Ibid., 644.

[74]Seddon, Billett, and Clemans, 'Politics of Social Partnerships', 123–42.

[75]G. Gillian, 'Foucault's Philosophy', in *The Final Foucault*, ed. J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988), 34; D. Hill, 'State Theory and the Neo-liberal Reconstruction of Schooling and Teacher Education: A Structuralist Neo-Marxist Critique of Postmodernist, Quasi-postmodernist, and Culturalist Neo-Marxist Theory', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 22, no. 1 (2001): 135–55.

[76]M. Apple, 'Creating Difference, Neo-liberalism, Neo-conservatism and the Politics of Education Reform', *Educational Policy* 18, no. 1 (2004): 12–44; Hill, 'State Theory', 135–55.

[77]I. Stronach and M. MacLure, *Educational Research Undone: The Postmodern Embrace* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1997); G. Biesta and G. Stams, 'Critical Thinking and the Question of Critique: Some Lessons from Deconstruction', *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 20, no. 1 (2001): 57–74; E. Atkinson, 'The Responsible Anarchist: Postmodernism and Social Change', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23, no. 1 (2002): 73–87; M. Peters and W. Humes, 'Editorial: The Reception of Post-structuralism in Educational Research and Policy', *Journal of Education Policy* 18, no. 2 (2003): 109–13.

[78]R. Klijn, 'Analysing and Managing Policy Processes in Complex Networks: A Theoretical Examination of the Concept Policy Network and its Problems', *Administration and Society* 28, no. 1 (1996): 90–119; D. Marsh and M. Smith, 'There Is More than One Way to Do Political Science: On Different Ways to Study Policy Networks', *Political Studies* 49, no. 3 (2001): 528–41; Evans, 'Understanding Dialectics', 542–50; M. Jephcote and B. Davies, 'Recontextualising Discourse: An Exploration of the Workings of the Meso Level', *Journal of Education Policy* 19, no. 5 (2004): 547–64.

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