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# District offices fostering educational change through instructional leadership practices in Australian Catholic secondary schools

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine how Catholic district offices support school leaders' instructional leadership practices at times of major reform.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper employs the theory of practice architectures as a lens through which to examine local site-based responses to system-wide reforms in two Australian Catholic secondary schools and their district offices. Data collection for these parallel case studies included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, teaching observations, classroom walkthroughs and coaching conversations.

**Findings** – Findings suggest that in the New South Wales case, arrangements of language and specialist discourses associated with a school improvement agenda were reinforced by district office imperatives. These imperatives made possible new kinds of know-how, ways of working and relating to district office, teachers and students when it came to instructional leading. In the Queensland case, the district office facilitated instructional leadership practices that actively sought and valued practitioners' input and professional judgment.

**Research limitations/implications** – The research focussed on two case studies of district offices supporting school leaders' instructional leadership practices at times of major reform. The findings are not generalizable.

**Practical implications** – Practically, the studies suggest that for excellent pedagogical practice to be embedded and sustained over time, district offices need to work with principals to foster communicative spaces that promote explicit dialogue between teachers and leaders' interpretive categories.

**Social implications** – The paper contends that responding to the diversity of secondary school sites requires district office practices that reject a one size fits all formulas. Instead, district offices must foster site-based education development.

**Originality/value** – The paper adopts a practice theory approach to its study of district support for instructional leader' practices. A practice approach rejects a one size fits all approach to educational change. Instead, it focusses on understanding how particular practices come to be in specific sites, and what kinds of conditions make their emergence possible. As such, it leads the authors to consider whether and how different practices such as district practices of educational reforming or principals' instructional leading might be transformed, or conducted otherwise, under other conditions of possibility.

**Keywords** District offices, Secondary schools, Instructional leadership, Practice architectures

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

A major goal of educational systems forming the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been to improve standards of education, in particular, student achievement. This, in turn, has led to an international focus on building principals' instructional leadership capacities, given research suggesting the indirect but crucial role school leadership plays in improving student outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Robinson, 2007). Research over the past three decades has shifted from solely examining the characteristics of effective schools and their leaders to analyzing the role played by middle tier agencies such as district offices in supporting school and leadership effectiveness and student learning (Cobb *et al.*, 2003; Leithwood, 2010).

However, there have been major criticisms of this scholarship. First, Anderson and Young (2018) argue that the research base is too narrow and thus is "too limited to serve as a comprehensive guide" for diverse stakeholders "seeking to support district improvement" (p. 1). Second, Leithwood (2010) contends that research into the role of school districts in enhancing students' achievement has failed to adequately theorize the complexity of change processes involved.

This paper seeks to contribute to this body of scholarship in responding to these criticisms. First, it extends the research base by examining two Australian Catholic district offices engaging in instructional improvement with their schools – an under-represented site of district research (Anderson and Young, 2018). Second, and most importantly, it contributes to theorizing these change processes through employing the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer, 2008). This practice theory shifts attention away from a predominant focus in educational scholarship on the learning of leaders as an individual cognitive activity, often disassociated from schooling sites in which it occurs (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). Instead, it conceptualizes instructional leading and learning as a set of dynamic and fluid practices *in situ*, shaped by and shaping the evolving conditions or arrangements already existing in or brought into schools by agencies such as districts (Wilkinson and Kemmis, 2015). Thus, the paper argues that the theory of practice architectures has the potential to contribute conceptual insights into how district arrangements may enable and/or constrain the emergence of schools' instructional practices. Furthermore, the theory has the potential to shed light on the specificities of diverse district arrangements that orchestrate the emergence of schools' instructional leadership practices.

The study's key research question therefore is:

> *RQ1*. What are the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that enable and/or constrain changing instructional leadership practices in two Australian Catholic secondary schools and their district offices?

Despite a burgeoning body of research in the past few years in North America, there has been little research conducted in this area in Australia. This is surprising since system-wide reform across Australian school sectors has been highly influential in the day-to-day operation of schools in each differently managed and funded jurisdiction. This paper attempts to help fill this gap by providing insights into the particular conditions that bear down on leadership practices in different site-based responses to reform. In order to examine this question, the Australian educational context which shapes the study sites is now sketched.

## Contextual background

A unique feature of Australian education amongst OECD nations is its large non-government education sector, with approximately two-thirds of schools in the government sector, 20 percent in the Catholic sector and the remainder in independent schools (PISA in Focus: 7, 2011). Approximately, one in five Australian children in the study sites in the states of

New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (QLD) attends Catholic schools (Catholic Schools NSW; Archdiocese of Brisbane).

In the Australian constitution, state and territory governments have responsibility for education including the regulation of schools, funding and administration of public education (Harrington, 2011). The Commonwealth Government also provides some funding for government schools, and is the major provider of public funding for non-government schools (Harrington, 2011)[1]. However, responsibility for administration and governance of non-government schools resides within the non-government sectors. In the Catholic education sector, each state has a number of dioceses, headed by a Bishop with overall responsibility for the quality and function of their schools. In government schools, state education ministers bear this responsibility.

In NSW, Australia's most populous state, there are 11 Catholic dioceses responsible for 593 schools with 263,000 students (Catholic Schools NSW). In Queensland, the third most populous state, there are five dioceses with 91,000 students (Archdiocese of Brisbane). Both states have Catholic Education Commissions which have authority and responsibility for educational state-wide policy making delegated to them by Bishops and Congregational leaders (Archdiocese of Brisbane; Catholic Schools NSW).

The majority of Catholic schools in both states are run by a Catholic Education Office (CEO) located in each diocese. These offices (in this paper described as "district offices") are responsible for supporting schools to achieve their educational goals through a range of strategies, including the provision of support for school leaders' learning and development after their initial appointments.

There are clear differences between Australian public and Catholic systems in terms of governance, administration and funding, and the roles that district offices play in these systems, compared to the management of schools in many other OECD countries. However, a major commonality across OECD nations is the increasing role played by middle tier agencies such as district offices in terms of developing principals' instructional leadership in order to enhance students' learning outcomes. The role of districts is further examined in the subsequent literature section but before doing so the theoretical lens which frames this study is mapped.

## Theoretical framework

This study employs the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer, 2008). Like other practice theories (e.g. Nicolini, 2013), this theory holds that social life is conducted in practices (Schatzki, 2002). As a site ontological theory, it views "human coexistence" as "tied to a context […] (or site) […] of which it is inherently a part" (Schatzki, 2005, pp. 465-467). Thus, to understand organizations such as schools, each site in which schooling occurs must be examined in its particularity (Schatzki, 2005).

Practice architectures assert that people in such communities encounter one another not in unmediated ways, but in intersubjective spaces that are "always already arranged in particular ways," shaped by the arrangements or practice architectures that are "already found there" (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). These arrangements prefigure (but do not predetermine) individuals' practices. Thus, in order to bring about changes to practices, such as district leaders fostering principals' instructional practices, one must change the practice architectures or arrangements that hold these practices in place. Otherwise, change will not be enabled and sustainable (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014; Wilkinson and Kemmis, 2015).

This theory holds that practices happen in three dimensions of intersubjective space: semantic space (in the medium of language, in which people encounter one another as interlocutors), physical space-time (in the medium of activity and work, in which people encounter others and the world as embodied persons) and social space (in the medium of solidarity and power, in which people encounter others relationally as social beings). Practices are always composed of sayings, doings and relatings that hang together in the projects or purposes of practices (Kemmis and Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014).

According to this theory, then, educational and administrative practices conducted in sites such as schools/districts/district offices are prefigured (but not predetermined) by the particular cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements found in or brought to those specific sites (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). Together, these three kinds of arrangements form practice architectures that give educational practices their substance (what can be said and done; how people can relate), and constitute conditions of possibility for practices to flourish, while others prove difficult to establish.

Although separated for analytical purposes, these sayings, doings and relatings of instructional leading always hang together in the (sometimes conflicting) projects of the people enacting the practices in different sites such as district offices, schools and classrooms. Figure 1 illustrates the theory diagrammatically.

The theory of practice architectures rejects a one size fits all approach to educational change. Instead, it focusses on understanding how particular practices come to be in specific sites, and the arrangements or practice architectures that make their emergence possible. It allows us to understand whether and how different practices are transformed, such as district practices of educational reforming or principals' instructional leading, and if and when different conditions of possibility are established to support them (Wilkinson and Kemmis, 2015).

In the study reported here, the theory allows us to explore whether and how practices of leading at the district level are, or become, conditions (practice architectures) that make (or do not make) possible transformed practices of instructional leading, professional learning, and teaching; and that in turn support transformed practices of student learning that lead to improvements in students' achievement.

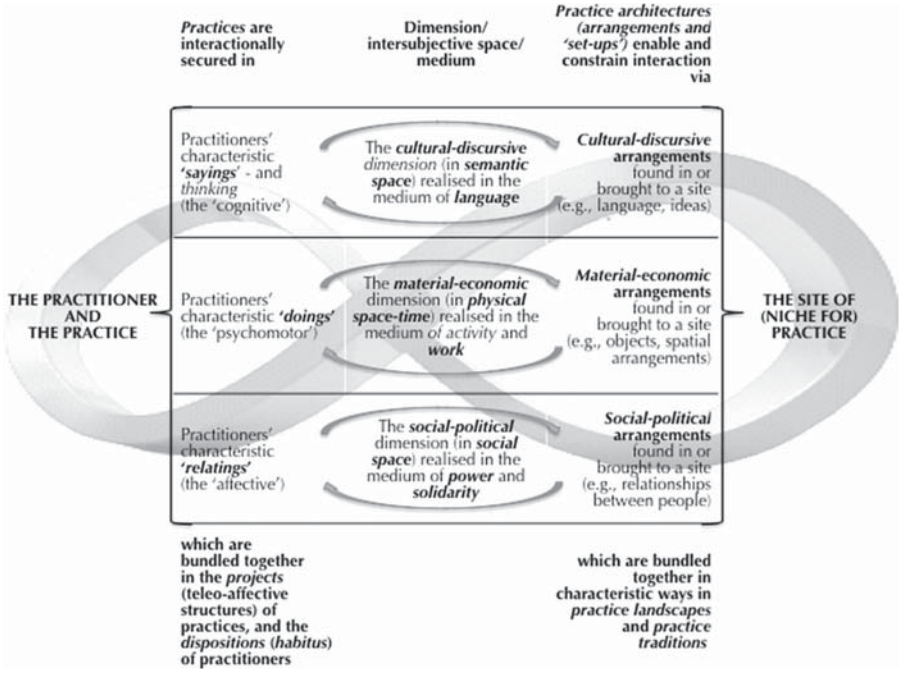

Practices are interactionally secured in
Dimension/ intersubjective space/ medium
Practice architectures (arrangements and 'set-ups') enable and constrain interaction via
Practitioners' characteristic 'sayings' - and thinking (the 'cognitive')
The cultural-discursive dimension (in semantic space) realised in the medium of language
Cultural-discursive arrangements found in or brought to a site (e.g., language, ideas)
THE PRACTITIONER AND THE PRACTICE
Practitioners' characteristic 'doings' (the 'psychomotor')
The material-economic dimension (in physical space-time) realised in the medium of activity and work
Material-economic arrangements found in or brought to a site (e.g., objects, spatial arrangements)
THE SITE OF (NICHE FOR) PRACTICE
Practitioners' characteristic 'relatings' (the 'affective')
The social-political dimension (in social space) realised in the medium of power and solidarity
Social-political arrangements found in or brought to a site (e.g., relationships between people)
which are bundled together in the projects (teleo-affective structures) of practices, and the dispositions (habitus) of practitioners
which are bundled together in characteristic ways in practice landscapes and practice traditions

**Figure 1.**
Theory of practice architectures

**Source:** Kemmis *et al.* (2014)

## Districts fostering instructional leadership

Whether and how instructional leading practices may emerge in specific educational sites, and the role that district offices play in orchestrating the conditions for their emergence is vexed questions. What does current research tell us about the role of districts fostering instructional leadership practices in schools, particularly when it comes to district/instructional practices; and in under-represented sites of research beyond North America?

A recent review of North American district effectiveness research notes widespread agreement about consistent practices undertaken by effective districts (Anderson and Young, 2018). Organized into three domains, these include: "(a) focusing on supporting and leading people who work in schools and districts (b) structuring and managing the organization and its resources, and (c) developing and delivering a high quality education" (p. 2). However, the review concludes that current research on district effectiveness lacks "detailed accounts of […] effective practices across a variety of district contexts" (p. 15). Moreover, it argues that current scholarship is based on a fairly narrow research corpus of district effectiveness (e.g. excluding rural and remote districts), thus limiting its generalizability (Anderson and Young, 2018).

A further criticism of research in this area lies in its lack of "theoretical guidance" and/or advancement of theory (Leithwood, 2010, p. 284). However, Honig's (2012) and Honig and Rainey (2014) employment of sociocultural and cognitive theories to empirically examine the specific practices employed by central office staff working to improve principals' instructional leadership provides a nuanced theoretical response which speaks back to Leithwood's (2010) criticisms. Her studies suggest that the most effective central staff practices for developing principal instructional leadership derived from central staff who understood their role as teachers of principals, rather than as managers or compliance officers (Honig, 2012). A later study of senior central office staff's use of professional learning communities to enhance principals' instructional leadership practices builds on this earlier research (Honig and Rainey, 2014). Crucial findings were that the conditions that engendered central staff engagement with principals included opportunities for professional development and their own "teacherly" orientation to this work (Honig and Rainey, 2014).

Honig (2012) concludes that empirically identifying these practices requires "new approaches to the study of educational leadership" (p. 734). The theory of practice architectures offers another such approach. It differs in a crucial way, however, from sociocultural and cognitive theories employed by Honig such as Lave and Etienne (1991) notions of communities of practice. The latter theory still views the "world of practices through the eyes of individual practitioners who encounter one another in their practices […] [it is a still] […] a world composed of […] aggregates of individuals […] who learn […] from other sovereign individuals" (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014, p. 4). Practice architectures, however, disrupt the sovereignty of individuals that still predominates in much leadership scholarship. Instead, the theory contends that individuals such as principals or central district staff "do not encounter one another in unmediated ways […] via cognitive information processing" (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014, p. 4). Rather, they encounter one another through the media of language, the material world and social relationships, i.e., in intersubjective spaces that are already shaped for people by the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements found in these spaces (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014).

Practice architectures have been employed to empirically examine how and why practices of district and elementary school evolved and changed in two Catholic districts of the Australian states of NSW and Queensland. The qualitative case study conducted over four years (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014) found that fostering school change through district offices required making changes not to individual principals' cognitive information processing but to the arrangements/practice architectures that prefigured their instructional practices. For instance, the study examined how arrangements of language and specialist discourses about instructional leading employed by Australian Catholic district offices when working with school leaders made possible specific sayings of instructional leading in specific elementary school sites. These sayings included shared language such as "evidence-based practice" and "focus on learning." Arrangements of objects and resources provided by district offices to foster instructional leading made possible specific activities and work that could be carried out in relation to instructional leading. Examples included investment in technological infrastructure which assisted schools in making fine-grained analysis of students' test results, and time and funds for travel. These activities constituted some of the doings of instructional leading practices in school sites. Finally, arrangements in the form of webs of relationships of power and solidarity (belonging) in a site provided the substance for, and made possible, the relatings of practice (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). Instances of such arrangements included new relatings emerging between district and school leaders in a shared mission to enhance classroom practices.

In relation to the role of districts in fostering instructional leadership practices beyond North America such as Australia, there have been a number of studies which have examined the crucial role played by principals as instructional leaders in bringing about school reform (e.g. Crowther, 2010; Dinham, 2016). However, research on the specific role of education districts in facilitating such reforms is scarce. An exception is Crowther *et al.*'s (2013) study of school-wide pedagogy fostered by a large urban CEO in NSW. It documents how the CEO's leadership supported a learning culture, a collaborative professional learning environment and inversion of system leaders as servants of schools. It notes the shifting role of the CEO from system compliance to improving students' achievement through facilitating and building school networks that supported collaborative professional learning cultures (Crowther *et al.*, 2013).

Clarke and Wildy's (2011) examination of a public school district in rural Western Australia is one of few that investigated the role of rural districts in enacting instructional leadership change. The authors found that the district office played a crucial role in facilitating principals' professional development by: encouraging the formation of school clusters to "promote learning communities within and between schools"; emphasizing "instructionally focussed professional learning to support principals and teachers"; and using "multiple types of data and training in data analysis" for principals' and teachers' professional development (pp. 26-32). The district practices noted in the preceding studies share commonalities with Leithwood's (2010) documented successful practices, and Anderson and Young's (2018) review of district effectiveness. However, they also foreground why studying diverse sites is crucial in understanding the role district offices play in fostering leaders' instructional practices. These factors include geographical locale (e.g. issues of scale in rural districts); and religion (e.g. district leaders' roles as servant of their faith and faith leaders). The case studies outlined in this paper thus contribute to a scarce corpus of work that theorizes the complexity of district/instructional leadership change, and examines cases beyond North America.

## Design/methodology/approach

The paper draws on parallel qualitative case studies conducted over 18 months from 2014 to 2015, examining local site-based responses to system-wide reforms in two Catholic systemic secondary schools and their district offices in two Australian states. The study extended a previous longitudinal study of system change conducted in elementary schools and district offices in the same districts (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014).

The NSW case was of a low-middle income, mainly monocultural, medium-sized Catholic secondary school, located in a rural diocese. Both the school and diocese were characterized by poor educational attainments as measured by state and national test results. It investigated the impact on educational practices as a result of a key diocesan initiative: a whole-diocesan improvement agenda to enhance student outcomes. The Queensland case was of a low SES, ethnically diverse, medium-sized Catholic secondary school located in an ethnically, geographically, and socioeconomically diverse education diocese with varied levels of educational attainment. The diocese encompassed pockets of wealth and entrenched poverty. It explored the changes to practice architectures in the school resulting from a major district initiative: embedding an explicit learning agenda throughout its schools.

The cases exemplified distinct approaches to leading school change through instructional leadership. The NSW district office took a tightly coupled, system reinforced, top-down and subsequently principal-driven school improvement approach which placed at its center student learning (as measured by student learning surveys and state and national tests results). The Queensland district office took a more loosely coupled approach to leading change, adopting an approach which placed more holistic notions of the development of the whole learner at its core, i.e., students developing academically, socially and spiritually. These outcomes were less easily quantified and measured.

The empirical study employed a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006) with an explicitly ontological focus. Rather than more typical approaches to case study that focus chiefly on individuals or groups and their perspectives on organizations or issues, the cases examined practices as they happen, i.e., district and schools' practices of instructional leading, teaching, professional learning, student learning and reflecting. Cases were purposively selected: two dioceses – one per state – that were known to the researchers as leading major reforms to enhance students' classroom experiences and learning outcomes through an explicit focus on instructional leadership and teacher development. Two secondary schools were selected which district offices had identified as exemplary in leading these reforms.

District office directors and curriculum and teaching and learning leaders who were leading major reforms in both dioceses were initially interviewed to understand the diocesan reforms, particularly in relation to instructional leadership. Three senior personnel responsible for leading curriculum and teaching reform were interviewed in Queensland (all female), and the NSW head of the District Office and curriculum officer responsible for leading school networks were interviewed (male and female, respectively). These personnel identified schools and leaders in both dioceses with a reputation for innovative leadership, and for undertaking key reforms to enhance students' learning.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both schools' executives, and with district office directors and other senior staff. Focus groups were conducted in both schools with middle leadership teams[2] identified by the principal and assistant principal as largely responsible for leading change initiatives. Focus groups were conducted in both schools with four to eight teachers, identified by the executive and middle school leaders as excellent teachers whose pedagogical practices exemplified the best realizations of the change agenda. Five classroom observations were carried out with volunteer teachers. Pre- and post-lesson observation interviews were conducted. Focus groups of four to six students were also held after classroom observations. In the NSW study, classroom walkthroughs and coaching conversations, a regular feature of whole school improvement practices, were observed. After site visits, members of each state-based research team met to critically review evidence and emerging interpretations; initial interpretations informed subsequent data collection.

All interviews, focus groups and observations were recorded and professionally transcribed. Employing inductive reasoning, the researchers subjected data to content analysis, then assigned content to emerging themes. The themes included relevant features that arose from the data, e.g., "walk-throughs," "middle leaders" and others that arose from the theoretical framework, e.g., material-economic arrangements. In the second analytic phase, thematic data from Queensland and NSW were brought to joint analysis meetings held with the whole team, at which thematic data were categorized according to the study's research questions.

Employing deductive reasoning, the data were analyzed using the lens of the theory of practice architectures. This latter approach allowed the research team to ascertain how specific educational practices in the dioceses and schools, i.e., the sayings, doings and relatings associated with instructional leading, were connected to other educational practices, such as district offices' and schools' practices of professional learning, teaching, student learning and reflecting practices, such as coaching conversations.

## Big river district office, New South Wales

The study was conducted in a period of major change for Big River District Office and its schools. Student learning outcomes in the diocese had declined as measured by compulsory National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)[3] tests. Subsequently, the office had initiated broader systemic education initiatives driven by an explicit school improvement agenda, as part of a five-year strategic plan to raise NAPLAN test scores.

In terms of material-economic arrangements, the office saw it as crucial to appoint secondary school principals whose expertise was in instructional leadership (Matthew, Director of Big River District office). Doings emerging from these arrangements included: trialing new professional learning policy frameworks and associated practices (e.g. school-based professional learning involving coaching conversations, inquiry-centered learning, "formative" learning walks, development of teacher professional learning plans, student learning surveys); supporting the development of middle leading practices for identified leading teachers; implementing a "whole-of-system" literacy and numeracy strategy; and installing a new system-wide IT infrastructure; and developing professional practices associated with its use. Led by the office's leadership team (director and two assistant directors), stakeholders including principals, teachers, middle leaders, specialist discipline and sector consultants were involved in related development and implementation of professional learning activities. The recently appointed Principal of Eucalyptus Secondary School, Wayne Rylie, was held up as a key exemplar of this shift to instructional leadership.

In terms of social-political arrangements, previously each secondary school and principal had been more autonomous and independent from systemic and diocesan initiatives, with test results a matter for individual schools. However, a new diocesan governance policy meant secondary schools were directly accountable to the district office. As a result, new cultural-discursive arrangements produced a range of new sayings associated with encouraging a greater sense of "systemness." According to Nellie, Secondary Education Consultant, the emphasis was for schools to "think system, act system." Matthew, District Office Director reiterated, "it's about systemness," with a whole-of-system strategy demanding system-wide responsiveness and responsibility for improvement. Matthew summed it up thus:

> It's about our schools and our learning, and the sharing of NAPLAN and Higher School Certificate [HSC][4] results is an attempt to force responsibility for learning across all schools.

According to Matthew, Wayne's appointment as Principal of Eucalyptus Secondary School was part of the district office's "strategic appointment" approach to school improvement in order to achieve "system thinking." Matthew indicated that Wayne was targeted as a leader "who can think as part of a system rather than as an independent school," with "current changes in our secondary schools occur[ing] due to these changes in principals. We've deliberately appointed systems thinkers in the past five years." Rather than appointing principals on the basis of seniority or length of time served in a school, the office was now seeking principals who, according to Matthew, could "articulate what was core to [their] thinking about learning and leadership." In order to support principals to make this shift, a key change in material-economic arrangements at office level was the creation of two new roles: assistant director, school and system improvement, and a data officer with expertise in school improvement. Matthew explained:

> In terms of systemness, it began with the district office need to have system improvement. Stan Carroll specialized in system improvement and had developed a system improvement tool at [another] diocese […] It gave schools a tool to work locally because they needed to move from a focus where HSC drove the conversation, and nothing about student learning, towards a whole school improvement agenda.

These new district office practice architectures, in turn, enabled the emergence of new sayings, doings and relatings associated with instructional leading practices at Eucalyptus Secondary School.

### Eucalyptus Secondary School: developing practice architectures of "systemness" as part of district office instructional leadership reforms

According to Principal Wayne, Eucalyptus Secondary School was "committed to a whole school improvement agenda related to student learning growth and wellbeing," which involved "pedagogical development using spirals of inquiry for professional learning, [and] newly installed technology systems and platforms." The concept of systemness at the school was bound tightly with the development of whole school improvement plans underscored by, according to Wayne, "evidence-based practices," "individual and collective responsibility" for student and teacher learning, and "inquiry learning."

Echoing Matthew, Wayne stressed that "a relentless focus on learning," was "an imperative for the future of the school" as a strategy to improve student outcomes as measured by improvements in test scores. He took the view that "all students must have the best possible teaching to support their learning in every class, every day," and that "we are all responsible for that." This position aligned with a systemic push stressing the exacting and sustained use of diverse evidence, driven by close analysis and public dissemination of all schools' NAPLAN and HSC results. Colleen, a district office consultant who worked closely with Eucalyptus Secondary School observed that when working with school leaders:

> Our entry point is data […] We expect schools to be able to ask questions of their data […] We expect them to be able to be thinking about what improved practices are needed in teaching that would bring about improved learning outcomes of students.

Colleen noted that the key to an improvement agenda was impact, indicating, "We will have some kind of impact if we have impact with principals."

It is unsurprising then that from his appointment to the principalship, Wayne's message of school improvement echoed the district office's message, and was supported by significant changes to the office's practice architectures. These new practice architectures supported the development of school leaders' instructional practices. They included changes in cultural-discursive arrangements, such as the adoption of a district-wide, whole school and system improvement five-year plan echoed in consultants' and Wayne's sayings such as "systemness" and "core purpose." They included changes in the material-economic arrangements of the district office such as the employment of a full-time data officer who managed the analysis and strategic response of assessment data; the deliberate selection of principals and leading teachers to enact the district office's strategy; and the provision of targeted professional learning for principals about data analysis. These new arrangements, in turn, shaped new conditions for leading, learning and teaching activities or doings in

Eucalyptus Secondary School. These included principal-initiated, student surveys of teaching; classroom walkthroughs by middle leaders and the principal; coaching conversations amongst teaching faculties led by the principal; and the appointment of middle leaders to be champions of the school's improvement strategy.

New arrangements included changes in the social-political arrangements of the district office which were reflected in new relatings between its director and principals. From a focus on system compliance, Matthew now saw his role as primarily about "disturbance" of principals' and schools' deficit learner mind sets. He observed, the "problem with rural districts is that people lower the expectations. The diocese tries to get them out of this – they are sent out for PD." This shift in relatings was echoed in changed relationships between Wayne and staff. As Wayne remarked, it was his job to "ensure that [improvements to student learning] happened," and "if people didn't like it, they could choose to leave."

Other changes in relatings occurred between teachers and students. Previously, pastoral care[5] of students had been managed by one group of middle school leaders, while academic support of students was managed by another group. A new structure initiated by Wayne brought together pastoral care and instruction, headed by new middle leaders whose titles "Academic support and wellbeing leaders" reflected this shift. According to Wayne, this move reinforced the school's commitment to explicitly addressing the learning needs of "every student, in every class, every day." The structure was aimed at supporting student learning, instructional leading and teacher professional learning. As Norm, another Big River consultant noted, the creation of these positions led to instructional leading occurring "at all levels," and was about "getting our circle of influences happening at all levels." According to Kevin, Assistant Director, extending the circle of influences involved positioning "the principal as change agent, from gatekeeper to bridge builder." Kevin also noted it involved "recognizing and training successful and influential teachers in schools" to become middle leaders who would enact the office's school improvement agenda. The changes in district office practice architectures and concomitant changes to the school's arrangements and instructional practices are captured in Figure 2.

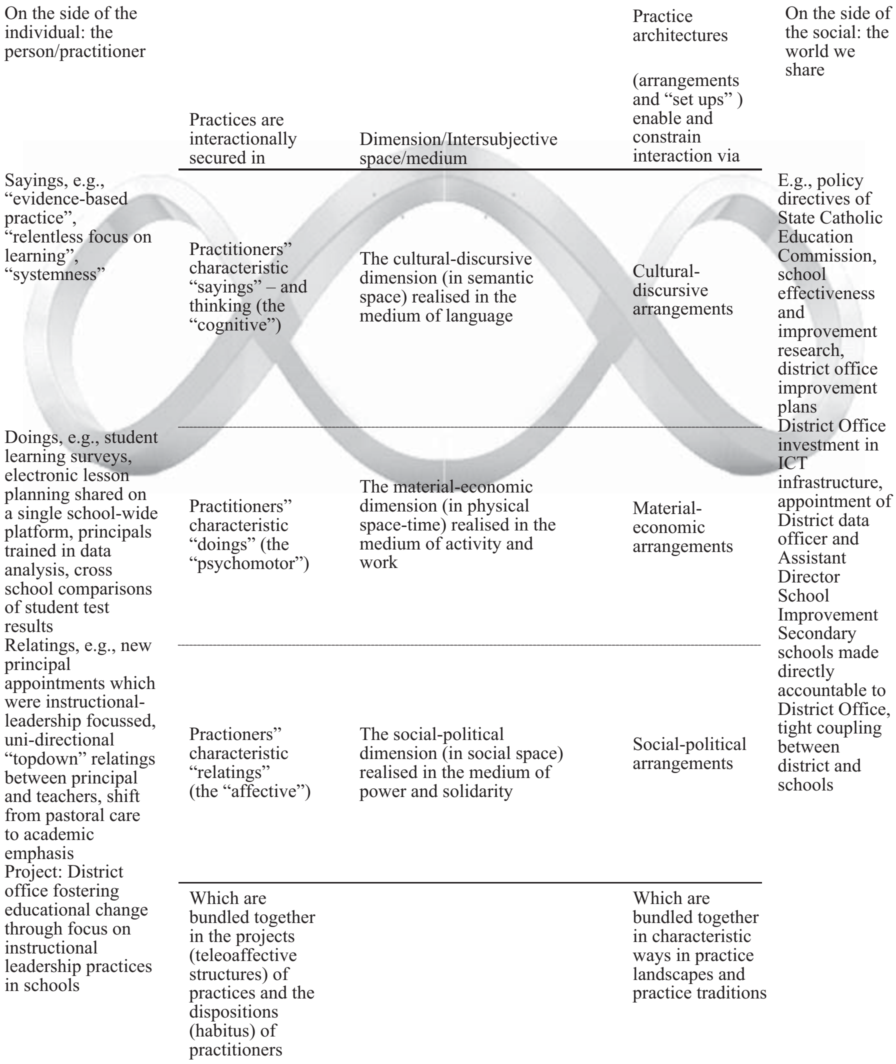
We now turn to a contrasting example of district responses to supporting instructional leadership practices in Queensland.

## Rainforest District Office, Queensland: background

The Queensland study was conducted with Rainforest District Office and Brigalow Secondary School at a period of major change. Queensland NAPLAN results had been lower than other Australian states, and there was increasing pressure from the state government to increase learning outcomes as measured by national tests. In response, Rainforest District Office developed a broad agenda to promote improved student learning outcomes, incorporating a number of strategies including strategic alignment of district office leadership structures with academic learning outcomes, and pedagogical development programs.

In contrast to the tight coupling witnessed between Big River District Office and Eucalyptus Secondary School, the primary way the professional and curriculum development was led was loose and open, based on a broad agenda with trust, support and expectation for local site-based responsiveness. In part, this was necessary because the diocese was geographically broad and diverse. It spanned both inner city locations and rural towns, schools in wealthy communities and others in less affluent areas. Thus, the district office leaders opted to employ more site-based professional learning support (e.g. appointing part time literacy advisors based in schools) rather than regular, large centralized events (e.g. seminars and workshops).

The approach also reflected a different philosophy. As Belinda, District Office Director, commented, the emphasis was on "collective capacity building and leading in schools […] There is good commonality between the system and our schools but less commonality between learning at the classroom level."



| On the side of the individual: the person/practitioner | Practices are interactionally secured in | Dimension/Intersubjective space/medium | Practice architectures<br>(arrangements and "set ups" ) enable and constrain interaction via | On the side of the social: the world we share |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sayings, e.g., "evidence-based practice", "relentless focus on learning", "systemness" | Practitioners" characteristic "sayings" – and thinking (the "cognitive") | The cultural-discursive dimension (in semantic space) realised in the medium of language | Cultural-discursive arrangements | E.g., policy directives of State Catholic Education Commission, school effectiveness and improvement research, district office improvement plans |
| Doings, e.g., student learning surveys, electronic lesson planning shared on a single school-wide platform, principals trained in data analysis, cross school comparisons of student test results | Practitioners" characteristic "doings" (the "psychomotor") | The material-economic dimension (in physical space-time) realised in the medium of activity and work | Material-economic arrangements | District Office investment in ICT infrastructure, appointment of District data officer and Assistant Director School Improvement |
| Relatings, e.g., new principal appointments which were instructional-leadership focussed, uni-directional "topdown" relatings between principal and teachers, shift from pastoral care to academic emphasis | Practioners" characteristic "relatings" (the "affective") | The social-political dimension (in social space) realised in the medium of power and solidarity | Social-political arrangements | Secondary schools made directly accountable to District Office, tight coupling between district and schools |
| Project: District office fostering educational change through focus on instructional leadership practices in schools | Which are bundled together in the projects (teleoaffective structures) of practices and the dispositions (habitus) of practitioners | | Which are bundled together in characteristic ways in practice landscapes and practice traditions | |

**Source:** Modified from Kemmis *et al.* (2014)

**Figure 2.**
Big River District Office and Eucalyptus Secondary School practice architectures

Like Big River, Rainforest Office's initiatives encompassed a range of practices that focussed on strengthening teachers' as well as principals' instructional capacity. For Amanda, Principal Consultant (Learning and Teaching), there was "lack of alignment between learning at classroom level," suggesting the importance of the district office in building this capacity. As Amanda observed, this district capacity building included fostering school-wide practices such as:

> […] working with peers to assist students and teacher learning through learning walks […] providing funding to give teachers time to talk with one another […] observ[ing] one another's classrooms, and nurtur[ing] professional conversations.

The new practice architectures that the district office orchestrated in relation to instructional leading encompassed a range of practices. Amanda noted that the office had focussed on strengthening principal leadership in relation to curriculum development but simultaneously there had been a tendency to "ignore the classroom." Hence, there was a major shift in the cultural-discursive arrangements underpinning their instructional practices, with a new set of sayings emerging that focussed, according to Amanda, "on the learner. How do we help teachers to get to know the students in front of them? Are the kids in my class progressing? What visible evidence is there? What can I do about it?" Supporting these changed sayings were a range of practices aimed at building teacher capacity, such as coaching and mentoring of teachers. These doings, in turn, enabled new social-political arrangements to emerge in terms of changed relatings – between teachers and learners (a focus on learning), and teachers as colleagues (the creation of communicative spaces for teachers to engage in active meaning making around these changes as explored below). Thus, in directly targeting teaching and learning practices, Rainforest District Office aimed to create the conditions and arrangements for instructional leadership to be developed and realized in schools.

### Brigalow Secondary School: developing practice architectures for site-based education development in a period of instructional leadership change

Justin, a new principal, had begun at Brigalow Secondary School at the commencement of the district office's reform agenda. Brigalow had been highly regarded by its district office for its strong social justice philosophy, its emphasis on pastoral care, community outreach and support for marginalized students. However, the school's academic results (particularly in external assessments) had been average at best. In response to Rainforest District Office agendas, and the school's recent performance in external academic assessments, Justin commented:

> So the school drives me crazy because a lot of resourcing goes into outreach […] I ask, where do the boundaries of schooling sit and where is the community? For example, we have a van that goes up to the homeless people every Monday and gives meals to them […] Where does [teaching and learning] sit?

As a new principal, Justin had to balance the school's proud traditions of pastoral care and personal development with a diocesan emphasis on strengthening curriculum and instruction. This delicate balance was forefront in Justin and Deputy Principal Peter's minds, as they sought to develop meaningful and site-responsive actions *vis-à-vis* this strategic reform agenda.

In response to an explicit emphasis upon improving student learning outcomes, Brigalow Secondary School enacted significant change through new material-economic arrangements, i.e., creating middle leadership roles encompassing curriculum development, and classroom instruction. Prior to this restructure, pastoral care roles were seen as of primary importance, with curriculum and instruction given secondary priority. In this manner, both Eucalyptus and Brigalow Secondary School enacted very similar changes. However, in contrast to Eucalyptus Secondary School, where major changes were driven and controlled by the principal, Brigalow's restructure was developed and overseen by the deputy principal, in collaboration with teachers, unions and middle school leaders.

Deputy principal Peter explained:

> [The district office emphasis] changed the focus on curriculum across that year. So when it came time to restructure middle leadership in the school […] curriculum came through really strong, and we've ended up with really substantial curriculum positions.

The school's restructuring of their middle leading positions was a direct and focussed response to the direction of the district office, but it was nuanced to meet localized needs and conditions. Like Big River District, Rainforest District's systemic leaders had clear views about the direction and strategic improvements that were required to ensure students were receiving the best educational opportunities, and to ensure they were provided funding and professional support to support this initiative. Unlike Big River District Office, however, in terms of the social-political arrangements between Rainforest District Office and schools, there was an acceptance that school-based leaders and teachers were best placed to develop their own ways to work through initiatives in their local sites. For example, when asked about central initiatives and support, Director Martha replied, "it's about allowing some time and some flexibility for schools to respond in a way that's going to be able to be best for them to be able to do that."

This flexibility was clear in the school's appointment of middle school curriculum leaders for core subjects: Mathematics, Science, English and Social Science. This decision was a direct response to the district office's focus on student academic learning outcomes. However, leadership roles were organized to retain important pastoral dimensions viewed as crucial to the school's mission. Peter commented:

> We know that issues of relationship are fundamental, so therefore we need students to be with the same teacher for a period of time […] And this is something that we've managed to get some funds from [district office], so they will actually support these teachers to have conversations [about students].

Thus, in terms of social-political arrangements, while having a renewed emphasis on curriculum leadership, the school maintained its support for relational teaching and pastoral care. To this end, senior school leaders such as Peter managed the material-economic conditions (e.g. timetabling) so the middle leaders could undertake curriculum leading, without ignoring the pastoral imperative of instructing practices.

For instance, the school scheduled weekly planning meetings for middle leaders and teachers to meet. These meetings focussed primarily on students' needs – not disciplines – and were structured purposefully to achieve a balance between system (e.g. students' learning outcomes as assessed by NAPLAN) and lifeworld imperatives (e.g. pastoral care issues). The meetings were highly valued by middle leaders and teachers alike, and were seen as affirming administration commitment to pedagogical innovation that connected to more holistic notions of student-centered instruction and learning. As Veronica (Head of Middle Years) observed:

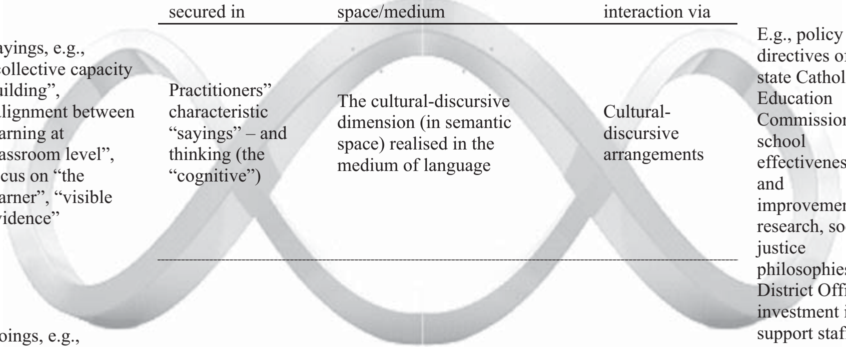
> The [school] senior leaders have seen this time as a priority and have scheduled it and it is structured so pastoral care is there, but connected to curriculum […] Middle leaders lead these discussions and keep them focused on the students' needs.

This student-centered reform was district office-initiated, but was taken up by the school's senior leaders, who supported their middle leaders and teachers to determine how initiatives would unfold. Thus, the district office's concerns for "curriculum teaching that is responsive to students" (Rachel, District Curriculum Leader) were initiated through and with teachers who, in turn, experienced a sense of professional agency. A comment by Simon, a Middle Years Mathematics and Science teacher was typical of teachers' responses, "I like these meetings: they are focussed and scheduled, and I feel I can offer something as a teacher that can really benefit the kids' learning and their well-being." The changes in district office practice architectures and concomitant changes to the school's arrangements and instructional practices are captured in Figure 3.

## Discussion

There are major commonalities and differences between these two case studies of district offices leading educational change through fostering leaders' instructional practices.

Commonalities include the nurturing of new practice architectures of school instruction by both offices in terms of cultural-discursive arrangements. These included a diocesan-wide focus on student achievement that drew heavily on school improvement research literature adapted for the Australian market from England and the USA. In the NSW case in particular, these arrangements enabled new forms of leadership sayings to emerge, such as the importance of a collective responsibility for students' learning that encompassed "our schools […] our learning," rather than viewing classroom practices in isolation.



| On the side of the individual: the person/practitioner | Practices are interactionally secured in | Dimension/Intersubjective space/medium | Practice architectures (arrangements and "set ups") enable and constrain interaction via | On the side of the social: the world we share |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sayings, e.g., "collective capacity building", "alignment between learning at classroom level", focus on "the learner", "visible evidence" | Practitioners" characteristic "sayings" – and thinking (the "cognitive") | The cultural-discursive dimension (in semantic space) realised in the medium of language | Cultural-discursive arrangements | E.g., policy directives of state Catholic Education Commission, school effectiveness and improvement research, social justice philosophies |
| Doings, e.g., appointments of curriculum middle leaders, scheduling of teachers' meetings to discuss teaching and learning practices | Practitioners" characteristic "doings" (the "psychomotor") | The material-economic dimension (in physical space-time) realised in the medium of activity and work | Material-economic arrangements | District Office investment in support staff to work with senior school leaders on curriculum initiatives, office investment in new software to help schools manage student data, and plan teaching development |
| Relatings, e.g., bi-directional relatings between District Office and schools/principal and teachers, balance between pastoral care and academic development | Practioners" characteristic "relatings" (the "affective") | The social-political dimension (in social space) realised in the medium of power and solidarity | Social-political arrangements | Loose coupling between District Office and schools, local site-based education responsiveness |
| Project: District Office fostering educational change through focus on instructional leadership practices in schools | Which are bundled together in the projects (teleoaffective structures) of practices and the dispositions (habitus) of practitioners | | Which are bundled together in characteristic ways in practice landscapes and practice traditions | |

**Source:** Modified from Kemmis *et al.* (2014)

**Figure 3.**
Rainforest District Office and Brigalow Secondary School practice architectures

These new forms of know-how and understanding presaged changes in the material-economic arrangements evident in both dioceses, such as an investment in the NSW's district office and schools' ICT infrastructure that aligned with this collective mission. In turn, this led to new instructional leadership doings emerging, such as the use of evidence for planning and accountability through annual district and principal meetings in which school results were shared and discussed. In the Queensland case, it included the office providing extra funds for the school to appoint middle leaders whose explicit focus was on developing a coherent instructional program in conjunction with the deputy principal and teachers. The new doings or ways of working which emerged included scheduled weekly meetings. These meetings provided the potential for communicative spaces to be nurtured in ways that allowed collective engagement in, and explicit dialogue about instructing practices (Gallagher *et al.*, 2016).

However, there were major contrasts in the two cases' sayings, doings and relatings. For example, the Queensland office afforded schools considerable flexibility to engage in site-based changes and professional learning that suited their specific contexts. The bi-directional or two-way forms of professional learning between teachers, middle leaders and the deputy principal (Stein and Coburn, 2008) that emerged at Brigalow were steered at a distance by Rainforest Office. They suggested social-political arrangements of trust and solidarity between the office, school leadership and teachers – local ownership of change combined with a collaborative approach to instructional practice that encompassed district settings of high standards for students (Gallagher *et al.*, 2016). These were ecological arrangements (Kemmis *et al.*, 2012) of leading practices at all levels, where those in senior leadership positions provide conditions and arrangements for others to lead in their site.

In contrast, in the NSW case, there was a uni-directional approach (Stein and Coburn, 2008), with Big River District Office's appointments of secondary principals who fitted their school improvement agenda and who, at least in the case of Principal Wayne, mimicked these top-down, monologic approaches as he attempted to improve instructional practices amongst teachers. This was despite the potential for collaboration held by communicative spaces such as coaching sessions in which the principal and teachers could engage in dialogue about their knowledge and understandings of instructional practice.

It can be argued that NSW adopted a different approach to Queensland because of their contrasting geographical locales and sites of practice. In NSW, the rural location of its schools combined with the much smaller school numbers and a long history of relationships between office personnel and newly appointed school leaders afforded the diocese the opportunity to create new practice architectures of instructional leading for its handpicked group of principals. It is hard to find fault with their demand that students' poor results needed to be transformed, and principals' and teachers' complacency about those results should be disrupted. There was to be no more business as usual for the district office or schools, and the district office played a key role in nurturing the instructional leadership conditions for reforms to take root and grow.

Our differing cases suggest that different forms of relatings in terms of trust between stakeholders and approaches to change have major implications for the long-term embedding of changed instructional practices. For example, questions need to be asked about how Big River District Office's leaders and principals might move from the low trust, first stage of systemic instructional improvement in which they appear to be located, to a high trust, "participatory environment" in which educators beliefs are shifted beyond "surface changes and procedures" (Gallagher *et al.*, 2016, p. 500). It would require a major shift in the practice architectures of District Office leadership practices, for example, through building "shared responsibility for success" (p. 501) via teacher and student ownership of learning.

The Queensland case provides a glimpse of how and why the creation of communicative spaces through professional learning is crucial, for it models how district office leaders, teachers and principals may engage in genuine dialogue about their potentially very different interpretive categories in relation to instructional practices. These opportunities to engage in shared meaning making that are dialogic, rather than monologic are critical in shifting educators' beliefs and practices (Gallagher *et al.*, 2016).

In addition to the great diversity among the communities served by particular schools, the schools' very different histories, philosophies and practices require offices to adopt diverse approaches to leading for school improvement – approaches that balance these traditions with a social justice imperative for enhancing learning conditions for all students. The importance of district offices honoring the specificity of school sites is both a practical and theoretical point. The studies provide a glimpse into how two contrasting districts deliberately orchestrated conditions to prompt and promote new, enhanced instructional practices – new forms of know-how, activities and relationships – in specific, different, school sites. This orchestration draws attention to the reality that changing practices is not an individual cognitive activity but a "profoundly developmental practice" (Elmore, 2016, p. 531). It is inherently social: we are asking practitioners to "learn, think, and form their identities in different ways […] to be different people" (Elmore, 2016, p. 531). As such, it is invariably a messy process whose real-world consequences cannot be easily apprehended.

## Conclusion

Our paper has revealed that in order for districts to bring about transformations to principals' instructional practices, the arrangements or practice architectures that hold these practices must be examined and changed in their entirety. Attempting to transform principals' instructional practices without changing the (cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political) conditions that hold them in place means that meaningful, sustained changes to practices will not be realized.

To conclude, the theory of practice architectures provides researchers (and practitioners) with a conceptual framework though which to analyze how and why changes to instructional leadership practices may be enabled and/or constrained. It provides a means by which researchers can "zoom in" (Nicolini, 2013) at the molar level of specific district and school sites to examine the distinctive nature of arrangements that hold principals' instructional practices in place. It also provides a means by which researchers and practitioners can "zoom out" (Nicolini, 2013) to conceptualize/reimagine what new practice architectures may need to be enabled to produce transformed ways for district offices, school leaders, educators and students to think, talk, work and relate to one another.

Finally, from a policy perspective, the theory of practice architectures provides a lens into how and why a site-based educational development approach is key for district offices leading instructional change (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). Such a conclusion may sound like a trite cliché in qualitative educational research, i.e., context matters. But this conclusion has its roots in a powerful truth, i.e., an apprehension of the complex lifeworld that educators – be they district officers, principals or teachers – inhabit. As Elmore (2016, p. 533) reminds us, attempts at educational reform need to shift from:

> […] focusing on "universal" prescriptions for organization and practice to the processes required to adjust powerful ideas to diverse contexts […] from universal prescriptions for learning to multiple, diverse, and promising adaptations to diverse populations.

The theory of practice architectures provides a conceptual means by which such adaptations can be apprehended and realized.

### Notes

1. In 1970, an historic decision was made by the Commonwealth Government to provide "general, recurrent per student grants for non-government schools […] to assist the struggling Catholic school sector" (Harrington, 2011, p. 3).

2. Australian Catholic middle leadership teams often comprize subject heads (secondary schools) and year leaders (elementary schools) as well as those responsible for student welfare, curriculum, religious education and professional development.
3. NAPLAN testing is conducted in every Australian school in every sector in Grades 3, 5, 7 and 9.
4. The New South Wales Higher School Certificate is the major examination at the end of secondary school.
5. Pastoral care refers to support for students' physical, social and mental well-being.

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