

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLICY OF THE CATHOLIC EDUCATION
COMMISSION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA WITH REGARD TO THE
EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES 1982 - 97**

BY

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Education of the University of Western Australia

Graduate School of Education

1999

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study reported in this dissertation was to analyse the policy of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) with regard to the education of students with disabilities during the 1982 – 97 period. Although there has been a large amount of research since the 1960s on the education of children with disabilities, there have been few analyses of education policy in this area. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are even fewer studies relating specifically to an analysis of policy with regard to the education of students with disabilities in Catholic schools.

The study sought to make one contribution to remedying this situation. The research focused on policy development and how it has altered, with the aim of developing an understanding of the reasons underpinning the changes. It was located within the general area of qualitative research. Data gathering took place using two of the major approaches of qualitative researchers, namely document analysis and interviews. The result was an abundance of data that facilitated a comprehensive analysis of CECWA policy with regard to the education of students with disabilities.

The document analysis focused mainly on the CECWA's significant policy documents of 1983, 1988 and 1992, relating to students with disabilities, although other data such as CEO reports, minutes of CECWA meetings, and unpublished correspondence were also used. Semi-structured guiding questions were used during the interviews, which were conducted with a diverse group of people defined as having specific knowledge of the relevant policies, along with those who motivated, developed and implemented policy during the period in question.

The changes in CECWA policy with regard to the education of students with disabilities during the 1982 – 97 period need to be considered within an international context. The disability rights movement, originating in the U.S.A. and the U.K., began to galvanise support in Australian society in the 1970s and transform peoples' attitudes with regard to the rights of minority groups, such as people with disabilities. The United Nations declaration of 1981 as the *Year of the Disabled Person* provided further impetus. The changing attitudes in the wider society impacted on the Catholic Church and its institutions and, as a result, parents of children with disabilities began to have certain expectations, such as their child's inclusion into the full life of the local Catholic parish. As the institution entrusted with the Church's mission in the field of education, Catholic schools were soon made aware of the changing attitudes in Australia with regard to students with disabilities. Local Catholic schools were increasingly expected to facilitate the enrolment and education of all Catholic children, regardless of the nature of any disability.

In W.A., the pressures exerted on Catholic schools were similar to those elsewhere in Australia and the policy of the CECWA with regard to the education of students with disabilities underwent great change. However, during the period 1982 – 97, these changes coincided for the most part with the attitudinal changes taking place in the wider society. In other words, the Catholic Church was not taking the lead in these changes but was, in fact, being carried along by them. This occurred primarily because the worldwide affirmation of the rights of people with disabilities was a movement compatible with Catholic thinking and this movement gradually awakened the Church to its responsibilities

in this area. Nevertheless, as the sixteen-year period progressed, CECWA policy became increasingly legitimated by Catholic theology and associated theory as expressed in official Catholic Church documents. Furthermore, by the end of the overall period, Catholic educational philosophy was becoming a significant force, albeit still a minor one, in influencing policy; forces arising out of the social justice impetus within the broader society remained dominant.

It is recognised that there are limitations to the study contained in this dissertation. The most obvious of these relate to the complex nature and specificity of the study. It needs to be kept in mind that the results do not necessarily apply to all CECWA policy during the period. Similarly, the complex nature of policy formation, involving as it does so many factors and personalities, makes the accurate transferability of this study's findings to other Catholic sectors unlikely.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the findings of the study will have relevance for other settings and contexts. The study provides accurate and comprehensive data relating to implications in three areas, the first two of these being theory development and research. The third, policy development, is particularly valuable because it allows one to reflect on and analyse how beliefs and values have influenced Catholic education and may continue to do so in the future.

Declaration

I certify that this dissertation does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text.

ANTHONY PATRICK CURRY

Acknowledgements

In submitting this dissertation, I acknowledge my gratitude to many people.

To my wife, Shelley and my four children for being so generous with their time and, in doing so, giving me the chance to achieve this worthwhile task.

To my supervisor, Associate Professor Tom O'Donoghue for his knowledge, determination and good humour. Without Tom's guidance and encouragement, this dissertation would never have come to fruition.

To those in the Catholic Education Office who gave me access to historical documents and who granted me some leave to undertake this study, my thanks for the opportunity.

I am also indebted to those who agreed to be interviewed and gave so freely of their time and their knowledge. My wish is that this dissertation, in part, reflects the hard work that has occurred and is still being undertaken by so many people in the Catholic education sector, particularly those working with children with disabilities.

Finally, my sincere thanks are extended to my friends, colleagues and work associates who, by their continued interest in the study, encouraged me to complete this dissertation.

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Notes on Interviews & Coding

During the research required for the study, the data collected involved the entering of relationships between the researcher and a number of people with whose stories and documents he was entrusted. The potential existed to alter these stories; therefore, cognisance was taken of the responsibility towards the care of the participants. Consequently, interviews were conducted with the need for discretion being of paramount importance. The six-digit codes that appear in the text (for example, 170896) are simply the dates on which the interviews occurred. Quotes from interviews were occasionally modified to enhance the language, flow and sense. Because many of the interviewees wished to remain anonymous, they are not listed in the references outlined at the end of this dissertation. However, the researcher has preserved all of the interview transcripts in a personal archive. These transcripts constitute an audit trail which enhances the reliability of the study.

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