Article

System Reform: The Ever-Elusive Quest—An Australian Study of How System Middle Leaders' Role Enactment Influences the Attainment of Policy Coherence

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Abstract: Within an educational context, the current aim of policy translation is to achieve policy coherence by strategically and structurally aligning components, enabling whole system reform. While acknowledging the importance of this coherence conceptualisation, the current literature perspective primarily emphasises message conveyance, and lacks a dimension that identifies policy coherence as the result of how individuals, including middle leaders, interpret and translate policy into actions, both individually and collectively. System middle leaders occupy a unique position within organisational structures, as they bridge the gap between executive system leaders and school- based leaders. To investigate how policy is interpreted and translated within their roles and the impact this has on attaining policy coherence, this study employed an interpretivist approach to exploratory case study methodology, grounded in a review of authoritative literature. The aim was twofold; first, to enhance understanding of policy coherence development at the system middle level by exploring the role enactment of system middle leaders within a large Australian government education system; and second, to examine the interconnectedness and impact of leaders' role enactment on policy coherence for system reform. Findings suggest that achieving policy coherence is hindered by a lack of role clarity among system leaders, in relation to policy implementation, stemming from the inconsistent interpretation and translation of policy into system strategy documentation and a deficiency in formal policy interpretation and role induction practices. As a result, individual system leaders often turn to informal policy interpretations and interactions with peers to clarify roles, leading to role tensions, accountability ambiguity and partial policy implementation. As a result, this study concludes that the integration of role theory, policy implementation theory and organisational alignment theory offers an interpretivist insight into the development of policy coherence for system reform, illuminating a theoretical pathway and practical recommendations for systems to attain policy coherence.

Keywords: system leaders; policy coherence; role clarity; policy interpretation; policy translation; system reform

1. Introduction

For over 30 years, education systems across the globe have experienced the implementation of system reform policies aimed at improving student outcomes [1,2]. Implementing these policies effectively requires coherent processes that enable system leaders to tailor the strategies to their contexts [3,4] by managing the tensions between empowering key stakeholders and mandating actions at a system level [5,6]. Achieving policy coherence is therefore an important consideration in education reform.

The complexity of education policy implementation has been well documented [3] with education systems becoming increasingly cognisant of the need to clarify how policy can be implemented as a deliberate and dynamic process of change [3,7]. Within this

context, education systems continue to wrestle with achieving sustained system-wide improvements [7], as successful reform efforts are frequently confined to isolated cases of school improvement.

Different perspectives on policy coherence [7–10] have emphasised the need to develop organisational approaches through various forms of organisational alignment [1], with the predominant messages highlighting that strategic and structural aspects of alignment are the key indicators of policy coherence. The literature also indicates that an education system's inability to achieve system wide improvements stems from the reform policy's emphasis. Reform policies often target school-based change agents [11] rather than the systemic intervention models espoused by Fullan [8].

While there are theoretical frameworks [3,5] for achieving policy coherence, there is no consistent understanding of the factors that contribute to policy coherence as it is translated and interpreted through the system. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to illuminate the factors that impact the implementation of policy through system organisational layers. This was achieved through an exploration of system middle leaders' enacted roles with a focus on how policy is interpreted and translated between the system middle level and school system level.

2. Literature

The purpose of this section is to map the complex landscape of curriculum policy implementation in which the curriculum reform strategy was being implemented during the research. While there are historical Australian curriculum reform policy studies focused on policy design [12] and school implementation [13], it was important to understand the different intersecting aspects of contemporary curriculum reform, policy and organisational context, policy implementation and role enactment, to reflect upon the way in which policy was interpreted and translated through system middle leaders' roles. To undertake this task, international and national research literature across the following key topics was considered:

- Education system reform: policy context
- Policy coherence
- Policy implementation
- Policy interpretation and translation
- System middle leadership roles
- Concepts of role

Following the review of the literature, it became evident that there was an absence of research about system middle governance structures and roles. The literature review in this aspect therefore drew from parallel international research positioned within the system middle layer (referred to as the district system) in the USA. This section concludes with a summary of the literature and a visual mapping of key concepts to illuminate the gaps and relevance of this study within the context of existing research.

2.1. Education System Reform: Policy Context

The Australian Constitution provides state and territory governments with the authority for school education. With the increased global focus on education systems, the Australian federal government has increased its influence over these jurisdictions [14] through the implementation of multiple national education reform agendas (reflected in national policy). These reforms were also reflected in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* and its education goals for young Australians that espoused the notions that (1) Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and (2) all young Australians become successful lifelong learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed members of the community [15]. In 2008, there was a focus on preparing students for a global world and the provision of excellence, which saw the development of the national curriculum reform and National Assessment Plan—Literacy and Numeracy

(NAPLAN). These reform actions directly reflected the Australian government's response to the increasing pressure of global education rankings [16].

The implementation of the Australian Curriculum varied between the eight Australian state and territory jurisdictions, as they moved to develop differentiated policy settlements with the Australian government [15] and maintain influence over the national reform agenda. In response to this, one Australian state and their Department of Education (DoE) spent three years (2009–2011) developing streamlined curriculum policy documents and associated guidelines and resources, including the P–12 Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework [17]. This policy suite continues to provide school leaders and teachers with guidelines for teaching and learning within Queensland schools, with a focus on teacher pedagogy and assessment.

Studies on the implementation of the Australian Curriculum as the key strategy in the national curriculum reform in Australian schools has largely focused on teacher perceptions and school implementation approaches, with no research conducted on policy implementation through the system layers or how multifaceted policy implementation is influenced by the multiple actors across a system.

2.2. Policy Coherence

The concept of policy coherence in education emerged in the early 21st century when systems began to explore why certain policies were failing to achieve their intended outcomes [18]. At this time, the identified lack of policy implementation coordination was a key driver in shifting policy development practices to focus on policy alignment, where multiple policies, tied together by strong visioning, were targeted in the same direction [19]. Within policy implementation research, the concept of coherence, where policy-relevant knowledge required a translation process in order to be understood across multiple contexts, was positioned as a policy solution [20]. Coherence was found to be directly influenced by a system's ability to utilise shared leadership [10,21] to communicate transparent expectations and provide relevant professional learning focused on pedagogical issues and teaching practices [21]. Policy coherence was also viewed as the collective alignment of multiple factors within a system [10,22].

Central to this notion of coherence was an understanding that education policy implementation was underpinned by learning processes that enabled policy actors to translate policy into contextualised responses to meet school needs [23]. Organisational theories [24] have been utilised within the literature to illuminate how the processes of co-construction, interpretation and sense-making have assisted policy actors to translate policy into action at the individual school level [25]. While this research is imperative to understanding how individuals make sense of school improvement strategies, the incorporation of these notions and the impact they have on policy interpretation and translation for system reform is yet to be understood.

Highlighted within the policy implementation literature is the impact that varied policy interpretations have had on resulting teacher practice, which according to Coburn et al. [22] contributed to "piecemeal and superficial changes in instructional practice" (p. 245). These findings support the notion that processes that place a focus on policy coherence through the alignment of policy responses would support the achievement of policy goals [18]. It is important to note that the literature supporting the notion of policy alignment and coherence acknowledges the associated complexities and challenges connected to large scale implementations [7]. The literature posits that coherence needs to be considered through various perspectives, including vertically (across different levels of a system), horizontally (within any one level of a system) and within the context of other policy reforms [26,27]. However, the limited coherence in policy implementation is constrained to aligning governance and communication structures to orientate and coordinate translation processes for achieving policy priorities, with the literature underscoring the imperative to explore the interactions between role enactment and coherent policy implementation [27,28].

2.3. Policy Implementation

The definition of policy is widely contested within the literature, with definitions ranging from the articulation of future goals and actions to a "purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concerns" [29].

The attainment of coherent policy implementation has also been explored by many researchers from various perspectives [30]. While definitions of policy implementation vary, they all concede that implementation describes the gap between policy intent and policy outcomes [29]. The literature [21,31] highlights that policy implementation is directly influenced by the environment, culture and values of the individuals and the variability in which policies are interpreted and implemented by policy actors [18]. Furthermore, this supports Viennet and Pont's [3] research that indicates policy implementation processes "can result in failure if not well targeted" [3] (p. 6). Therefore, policy implementation processes need to reflect and respond to their broader context [3].

In light of this literature, the definition of policy implementation as "a purposeful and multi-directional change process aiming to put a specific policy into practice" [3] (p. 7) has been adopted in this research study. Viennet and Pont's OECD study synthesised policy implementation frameworks to illuminate the key determinants of education policy implementation as outlined in Figure 1. This framework was produced by Viennet and Pont in 2017, summarising the key characteristics that are theoretically visible with a coherent policy implementation strategy.
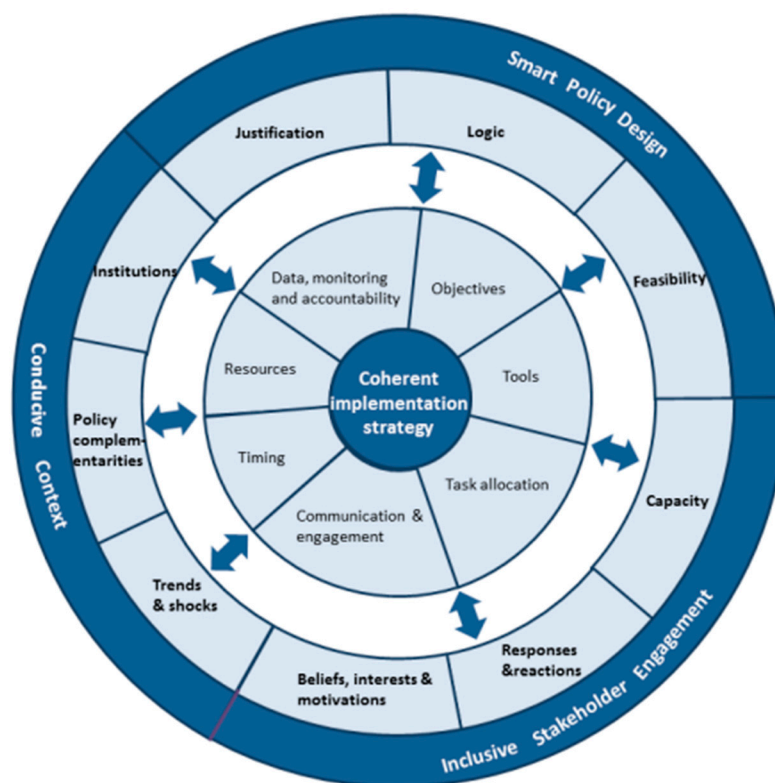

Figure 1. Education Policy Implementation: A visual framework. Note: from Education policy implementation: A literature review and proposed framework (p. 7), by R. Viennet & B. Pont, 2017, OECD. Copyright 2017 by OECD [3].

In policy implementation, individuals within education systems shape practices collectively. Policy actors both receive and drive policy outcomes [26,32], emphasising the role of human interactions in achieving policy goals. Therefore, policy actors are implementers who make meaning, explain policy and make decisions on how it looks in practice [16,21,26,32]. While the research articulates factors that impact on the effective

implementation of policy, the impact of policy interpretation and translation practices on the attainment of policy coherence remains unclear.

2.4. Policy Interpretation and Translation

Systems implementing policy are responsible for influencing or changing current practice. As such, education systems' structures and practices are continually being shaped by the actions of individuals and their interactions with others [19]. Central to this notion is that within any system, actors work individually and collectively to shape and operationalise policy, resulting in policy actors being "both receivers and agents of policy" ([31], p. 625).

Michel's [20] examination of effective policy implementation highlighted the importance of considering the role of policy actors and the impact of human interactions on the attainment of policy goals. Within the policy implementation literature, it is acknowledged that policy meaning is important, but "understanding those meanings …requires deliberate efforts of interpretation … to ask not only what a policy means, but also how a policy means" [20] (p. 111). Therefore, policy actors are implementers who make meaning, explain the policy and make decisions on how it looks in practice [20,31].

Hooge [29] identified closely with Michel [20] where the concept of policy translation, defined within this research study as interpreting policy for the purpose of creating new policy forms (e.g., developing regional or district professional learning, or developing school improvement plans) involved the use of connecting devices across systems to directly impact on daily practice. The translation of consistent policy messages is complex; however, through the use of connection devices that develop a common understanding of policy implementation work, the attainment of coherence is increased [3]. The conclusion drawn by Hooge [29] was that policy alignment had been achieved through the implementation of governance structures and policy instruments as communication tools that supported consistent policy understandings.

Cognitive consensus research [33] that built on the notion of in-school system alignment, identified the importance of developing collective understandings of, and commitment to, an organisation's constructs as a means of implementing school improvement strategies. Collaboratively developed cognitive connections led to the emergence of organisational cognisance. The literature argues that it is through the use of explanatory frameworks that individual and collective meta-cognitive processes are made explicit, allowing for a deeper understanding of how individuals engage with, and are connected to, the improvement journey. This cognitive alignment aspect (referred to in this study as organisational cognisance) added value to how system alignment within schools could be achieved beyond observable behaviours and communicated perceptions. This perspective on system policy implementation raises the question of how system policy actors make sense collectively of policy messages.

Mohammed and Ringseis's [33] research explored how shared cognition is achieved within a group decision-making context. The research identified that when effective teams achieve cognitive consensus, they develop shared assumptions regarding interpretations of issues and how they are operationalised. This outcome was found to positively impact on how decisions were implemented. Liang [34] also explored the notion of collective intelligence, where interacting minds develop collective thoughts, which he refers to as "Orgmind" [34] (p. 53). While this research is imperative to understanding how individuals make sense of school improvement strategies, the incorporation of these notions and the impact they have on policy interpretation and translation within the system middle layer is yet to be understood.

Hooge [29] also raised the notion that the variance of meaning attached to policy would have no impact on daily practice if policy instruments were used as intended. However, as Viennet and Pont [3] state, policy is implemented within complex education systems that require policy actors at various levels of the system to engage and interact with policy to develop localised responses. The research identifies elements influencing

successful policy implementation; however, it does not explain how policy interpretation and translation practices affect the attainment of policy coherence. To explore how policy actors are positioned to support policy implementation, the following sections unpack the concepts of system middle leadership and role theory connected to organisational improvement.

2.5. System Middle Leadership

System responses to achieving policy coherence have also resulted in an exploration of various organisational levels and the roles within each level [27]. Within the international and national literature, system middle leader roles, situated within district and regional structures, were historically established to provide administrative support to schools through regulations [26,27]. With the introduction of standards-based reform legislation, the role of system middle leaders began to change. Regions and districts were tasked with implementing academic standards tied to standardised assessments for all students and holding schools accountable for student achievement [4]. With this change of focus, from school reform to system reform, the responsibility of improving student achievement formally extended beyond the schools to the districts [8]. System leaders (executive and middle) began to be positioned as institutional actors in system reform, assuming the roles of providing instructional leadership, reorientating the organisation, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus. Research into system leaders' (executive and middle) roles in establishing policy coherence [27] highlights that there was a lack of consensus regarding the importance of establishing policy coherence [35]. Achieving organisation goals requires aligning roles with reform policies and recognising the influence of power dynamics and individual perceptions [35]. Consequently, the connection between policy coherence research and the involvement of system middle leaders in policy implementation poses a challenge to systems. Managing the diverse needs of schools is a complex task; however, as highlighted in the research, when system middle leaders enact their leadership responsibilities effectively, growth in student achievement is evidenced. Effective system middle leadership in the USA (referred to as district leadership) identified six key responsibilities and actions for system reform, which included co-constructing district goals and aligning the provision of support to achieve these goals [27]. This notion has been supported by executive system leadership research [26] that identified that successful regional leaders must be able to respond uniquely to each school context. So, while system leadership research [35] agrees that executive system leadership has the potential to have a positive impact on the implementation of system reform strategies, there is little research on the role and impact of the subsequent layer of system middle leadership or its relationship to building policy coherence.

With a global focus on education reform, Fullan's [4] research identified that schools could not sustain improvement without external support. It was identified that without the use of knowledgeable others [24], the ability to reflect and incorporate emerging evidence-based practices is limited and growth plateaus. This notion is supported by Fullan's [4] organisational coherence work. His study found that system reform requires clarity and alignment, which is created within the three levels of an organisation—system, regional or district, and school—through the use of deliberate structures that promote moving policy into clear actions and practices.

Honig's [26] explorations of the complexity of policy implementation highlighted the need to consider how policies are implemented and their success measured as a part of the design process. Honig's [26] findings outlined that policy implementation may be successful in some contexts and not in others, thus highlighting the need to investigate the conditions that support successful implementation. Furthermore, these studies identified that regional participation in collaborative educational policy implementation is an important contributing factor, while Lezotte's [36] study found that the school, rather than the system's middle level, should be the focus of system reform.

Bloxham [35] also affirmed that system executive leaders play a critical role in a system's approach to reform policy implementation. However, to achieve policy outcomes, relevant professional development and infrastructure needed to be provided [7]. This provision of resources supports the facilitation of professional dialogue that promotes shared understandings for improvement [27].

Furthermore, McLaughlin and Talbert's [37] study identified that policy implementation is enhanced when the middle system level (districts) function as learning organisations. The modelling of collaborative behaviours and the provision of relevant professional development enables all stakeholders (district and school) to work together to achieve a common goal. What is interesting about McLaughlin and Talbert's research is that the characteristics of coherence at a district and regional level were identified; however, the concept of how coherence is achieved was limited to the interactions between the system middle leaders and principals and the system middle leaders and individual schools. It appears that there is a dimension within the concept that needs further development and focus. The reason for this is that it is unclear how policy coherence is influenced by how system middle leaders individually interpret and translate policy before and during their interactions with principals and school personnel. While this research considers policy actors, message conveyance and system role, it lacks a dimension of considering how role enactment contributes to the attainment of system-wide policy coherence.

2.6. Concepts of Role Theory

Role theory, which explores how various roles are reflected and enacted in organisational improvement, provides a valuable lens for exploring policy implementation and the attainment of policy coherence. Role theory developed from deeper inquiries into how various roles were reflected in organisational improvement. Traditionally defined as a particular set of agreed norms that are organised around a function [38], organisational role theory has been used to explore how systems distribute roles to achieve established goals.

When role descriptions are formalised, it is often assumed that role consensus (an agreed set of role behavioural expectations) is achieved and reflected in action. In practice, as Walker and Shore [38] have established, an individual's norms, beliefs and attitudes influence how they understand their roles, and these can either strengthen or weaken role consensus. Therefore, effective role enactment assumes that members share similar interpretations of role expectations and behaviours. If there is too much diversity (limited role consensus), then role conflict occurs [38]. Rai's [39] research explored factors to reduce potential conflict and found that, when formalised roles are paired with organisational commitment, role conflict is minimised. While this research addressed the gap in how organisations can maximise role consensus, the research was limited to describing the impact of the organisational environment rather than the factors that influence role enactment.

The review of the literature revealed that, whilst there is an acknowledgement of the critical role that system leaders play in system reform, the current understanding of how system middle leaders' enacted roles reflect the interpretation and translation of policy into practice is limited. The literature illuminated the following gaps which were also mapped within (Figure 2):

- The concept of policy coherence has predominantly been explored at the international, national and state government level, where the strategic and structural alignment between policy stakeholder groups or policies themselves has been highlighted. There has been limited focus on the exploration of the factors impacting on the attainment of system reform policy coherence within an individual system.
- In conjunction with concepts of coherence within the system reform literature, the alignment of strategic and structural elements of organisations is evidenced. There is

insufficient recent research conducted from a policy coherence perspective on the cognitive aspect of system policy implementation.

- The policy implementation literature continues to acknowledge the role of policy actors in interpreting and translating policy; however, there is insufficient research exploring system middle leaders' roles in the attainment of policy coherence.
- Role enactment theory highlights that individual role enactment can either strengthen or weaken organisational role consensus; however, how role enactment impacts on policy coherence is unknown.
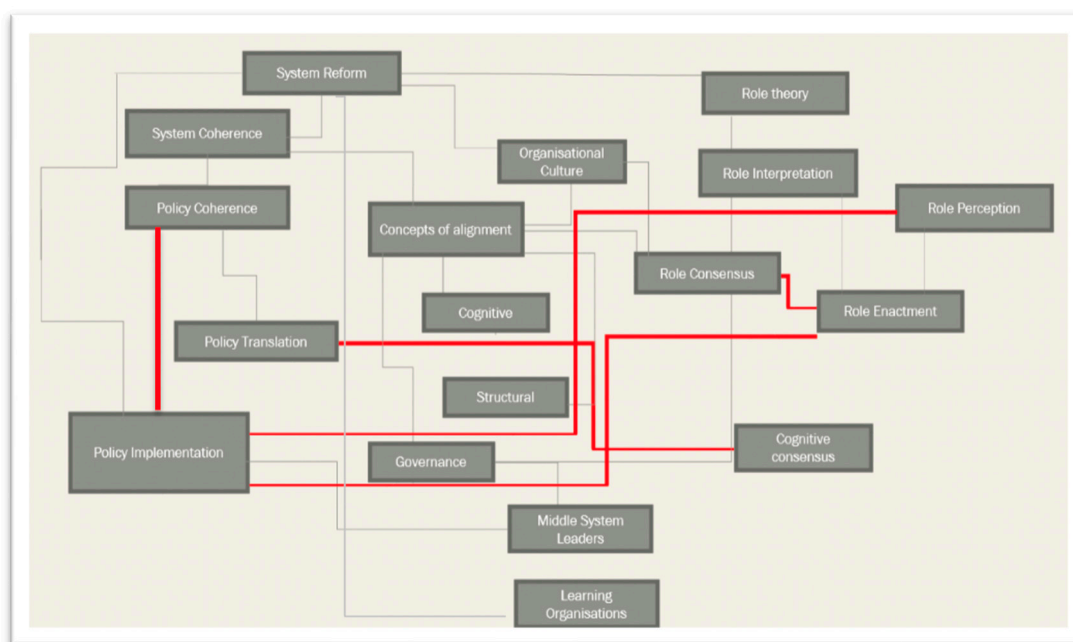

Figure 2. Connections and gaps identified within the literature. Note: dark grey boxes refer to existing theoretical concepts; light grey lines identify the existing theoretical connections evidenced within the literature; bold red lines indicate theoretical connection gaps within the literature.

Based on the above review, this research explores how policy is implemented through an organisation's middle layer. Through the exploration of system middle leaders' role enactment, the study aims to illuminate how policy is interpreted and translated. Based on the overall aim and purpose of the study, the following research question arises: what factors emerge as significant policy implementation concerns influencing how system middle leaders interpret and translate policy as they enact their roles?

This is answered with the following sub-questions in mind:

1. How do system middle leaders perceive their role in interpreting and translating policy within a system?
2. What implications for policy coherence emerge from these findings?

3. The Research Context

The research was situated within a large government-funded state education system, organised into seven geographical regions, each lead by Regional Directors (RD) and Assistant Regional Directors (ARDs) (referred to as system executive leaders within this study) as outlined in Figure 3. An aspect of the Department of Education's (DoE) improvement strategy was the development and implementation of policies, guidelines and resources. These policies and guidelines were designed to "provide step by step processes, presenting ways to deal with mandatory and legal obligations, and explainations of staff duties and responsibilities" [40] (para. 1). A key aspect of supporting these schools was the provision of targeted resources to regions, to "maintain alignment, tailor support and

scale up success" [41] (p. 2). System middle leaders (assigned the title of regional project officers) were one group of support personnel allocated directly to regions to support schools.
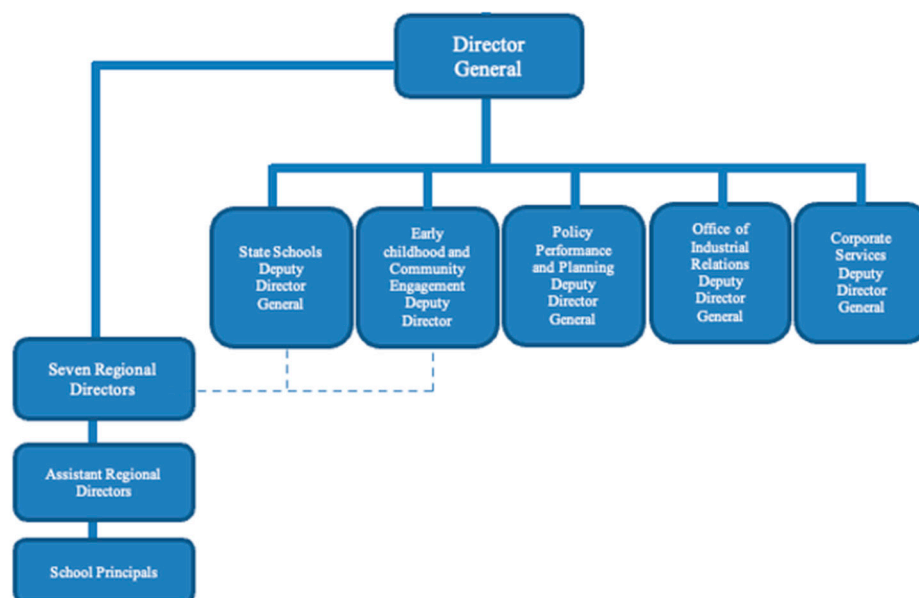

Figure 3. Department of Education organisational structure. Note: adapted from [42] (p. 1). Copyright 2021.

Delivering the priorities and strategic objectives of the DoE was central to the role of regional system executive leaders and regional system middle leaders, particularly in relation to improving student learning outcomes in Queensland as echoed within the Regional Operating Framework [41] that states: "Regions are the critical link between central office, where state-wide policy and system performance measures are set, and the delivery of high-quality services by schools and other frontline providers" [41] (p. 3).

Regions therefore focused on "working in partnership with schools … to plan for and deliver innovative services that meet the needs of students, children and families … and improve learning and training outcomes" [41]. In alignment with the implementation of policy reform strategies, regions "provide[d] principals and schools with additional support and professional guidance," and "support[ed] capacity building in an increasingly autonomous environment" [41] (p. 5).

During the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, the P–12 Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Framework action policy [17] was developed to outline the requirements for Queensland state schools in implementing the required Australian Curriculum and remaining Queensland Curriculum for Prep–Year 12 students [17]. The role of system middle leaders (regional education officers) was created to support schools in implementing the Australian Curriculum and, at a state level, aligning school improvement strategies to this action policy.

As the P-12 CARF [17] policy suite and the group of system middle leaders (regional education officers) assigned to policy support had established places within the DoE, they were deemed suitable as the context and case for the study.

4. Ethics, Materials and Methods

The research questions were explored using an exploratory case study methodology, enabling the identification of emerging patterns and the synthesis of key concepts across diverse participants within a single case [43]. Ethical clearance for the proposed study was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland (approval no. H18REA009P1).

4.1. Research Methodology

      This study has embraced a well-structured design plan, aimed at addressing specific inquiry questions. This ensured the purposeful collection and analysis of data through the use of Yin's [43] case study design, as outlined in Figure 4. This plan outlines an operational procedure utilised to collect and analyse the data, together with an explanation of the relationship between these procedures. Figure 4 represents the three phases of the exploratory case study research design: definition and planning; preparation, collection and analysis; and conclusions).
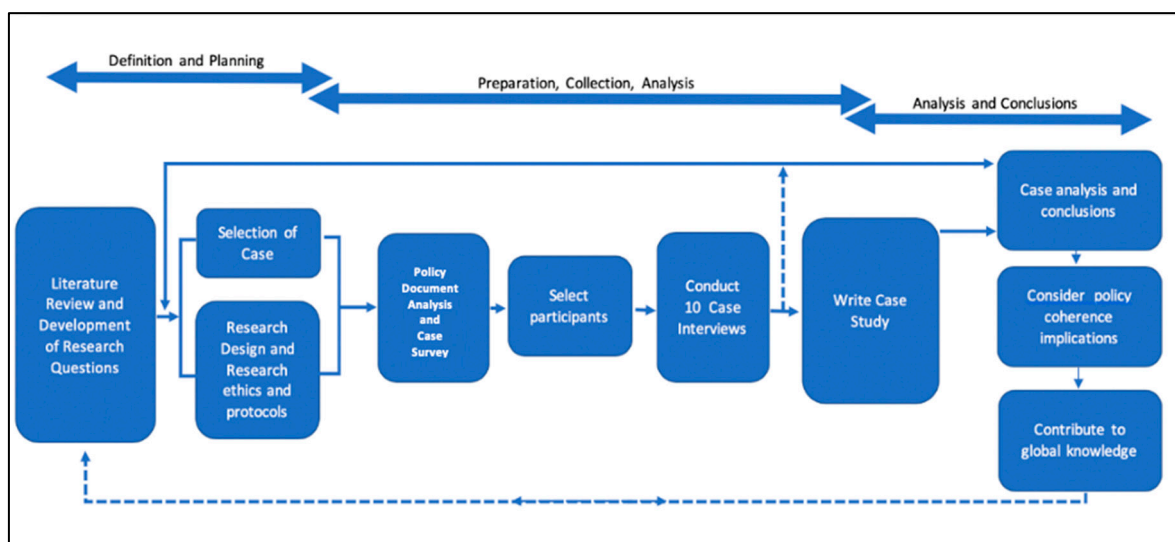

Figure 4. Case study research design. Note*:* adapted from applications of case study research [43].

      Using a single organisation for the purpose of this research has been supported by a range of researchers [43]. Consistent with this idea, the research study was conducted within a sizable government-funded state education system.

      To capture the required data for the study, participant qualitative surveys were utilised, which incorporated open-ended questions (Table 1). The ability to identify policy enactment as a key role descriptor was a necessary characteristic to ensure the sample population could contribute to the focus of the study. This was drawn from the open-ended section where participants had an opportunity to provide answers in their own words, enabling the researcher to collect diverse responses and illuminate initial factors that influenced policy translation through role enactment, such as the identification of role responsibilities.

Table 1. System middle leaders role enactment survey.

	Question
1	What is the purpose of your role?
2	When you began your role, what induction/support processes or professional earning were offered or provided?
3	From your perspective, how did this support you in performing your role?
4	Approximately what percentage of your time do you spend working in the following: Your office Facilitating professional learning Collaborating with school leadership teams Collaborating with teachers in classrooms Other

5	How does the system support what you do in your role?
6	How do you know you are effective in your role?
7	What would support you in performing your role more effectively?

4.2. Participant Selection

Gaining access into a field for research is an initial research activity and it can affect the planning, design and implementation of the research. Within the research design, research approval was sought from the DoE, enabling a clear channel of communication and support for the implementation of the research methodology.

As the research involved system middle leaders from multiple regions, the researcher utilised the Department's state's curriculum regional education officers' email distribution list which enabled direct access to all potential participants.

The sample target population was drawn from members of the state's system middle leaders' team with approximately 56 members. Drawing from this target population, data for analysis were obtained from 22 completed surveys which equated to a 41% response rate.

4.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis incorporated processes where the relationship between one or more factors (i.e., policy documentation, policy perceptions and enactment descriptions) required organising the data for examination and comparison that in turn leads to a description and potential understanding of the case.

Inductive analysis method was utilised to examine the data and categorise the identified patterns within the data as they unfolded [44]. Subsequent deductive analysis utilising Viennet and Pont's [3] and Limani's [45] conceptual frameworks through the use of coding descriptions was utilised as a method for examining emerging themes and the connection these had to the attainment of policy coherence. This form of data reduction provided a mode for mapping frequent or infrequent mentions of factors that may be different in importance to each research phase and for each participant.

4.4. Conceptual Framework

Utilising a conceptual framework enabled a thorough examination of the implications of the research findings from a policy coherence standpoint. The framework drew upon the principles contained within Viennet and Pont's [3] theoretical policy implementation framework (policy design, stakeholders, implementation, and context) and Limani's [45] organisational alignment theory. Viennet and Pont's [3] framework delineates a systems approach to policy implementation and is comprised of six policy design determinants that underpin, influence and shape organisations' policy implementation processes. The framework acknowledged the need to consider the contextual factors and multi-directional nature of policy implementation to gain insights into the embedded structures, policy stakeholders (also referred to as actors within Viennet and Pont's [3] research) and points of influence across a system. Organisational alignment theory, as depicted by Limani et al., [45] can be separated into formal and non-formal functioning units. Organisational structure, strategy and policies fall into the formal side of organisational functioning. This formal aspect of alignment establishes the goals, objectives, processes, and employee tasks within an organisation and is characterised by aligned policies, procedures, roles, associated tasks and measures.

These frameworks were utilised to examine the data implications for attaining policy coherence across the two research phases. Three main criteria relevant to coherent policy attainment were identified (policy design, policy implementation and alignment of policy design elements) along with seven specific sub-criteria drawn from Viennet and Pont's [3] policy implementation framework: communication and engagement; timing; tools; task allocation; objectives; data, monitoring, and accountability; and resources (including

human resources). In addition to these criteria, the alignment between participants' role enactment descriptions and the intent of their role (as a support resource for the implementation of the P-12 CARF [17] curriculum policy) was examined using Limani's organisational alignment theoretical framework [45].

5. Results

In this section, the study's qualitative findings are presented. The sample was drawn from approximately 56 system middle leaders (regional project officers). Data for analysis were obtained from 22 completed surveys, representing a 41% response rate. First, we outline the inductive analysis of data, which allowed for the emergence of themes directly from the data. These resulting themes were identified in response to each of the following research questions:

- How do system middle leaders perceive their role in interpreting and translating policy within a system?
- How do system middle leaders enact their roles?
- What factors support or inhibit their role enactment in relation to policy implementation?

5.1. How Do System Middle Leaders Percieve Their Role in Interpreting and Translating Policy within a System?

When participants described the purpose of their role, the following five key role characteristic themes emerged: leadership; support; capability building of self and others; strategy implementation; student improvement.

5.1.1. Leadership

The role of system middle leaders was strongly associated with the notion of leadership, with most participants identifying this as one of the reasons they applied for the position. Participants saw the opportunity to be employed within these roles being associated with either leading others or a career pathway into leadership through the development of their own leadership capability. These notions were reflected within statements such as "I wanted to further develop my leadership skills" (Participant 11); this role was a "chance to work at a higher level" (Participant 7) and "I was attracted to the opportunity to influence at a leadership level" (Participant 16).

5.1.2. Support

The provision of support to regional and school leadership teams and teachers was perceived as a key characteristic of the role. When exploring the purpose of support, two main categories emerged: supporting the implementation of the Australian Curriculum and the enactment of school improvement agendas.

Supporting "school leadership teams to implement the Australian Curriculum according to State Schooling requirements" (Participant 19) by "working with teachers and leaders" (Participant 26), through the provision of "professional learning" (Participant 27) was viewed consistently by participants as a critical aspect to their roles and reflected the DoE P-12 CARF policy [43] in action document objectives.

"Support[ing] school leaders to enact their improvement agendas" (Participant 41) and "manage change" (Participant 23) was also stated by participants. With a focus on "whole school processes, teacher knowledge and skills in curriculum provision" (Participant 41), participants identified that they "support[ed] cluster work" (Participant 22) that directly aligned to "implement[ing] state school initiatives" (Participant 8) and the "achieve[ment] of regional improvement goals" (Participant 35).

5.1.3. Capability Building of Self and Others

In addition to the provision of professional learning, participants identified that their role was to "develop the capacity of leadership teams [school clusters, school leaders] and teachers" (Participant 4) in achieving school and regional improvement agenda goals. Participants indicated that they worked directly with leaders as they "provide[d] leadership support in managing change" (Participant 23) and "built the capabilities of people who also [had] a great opportunity to influence" (Participant 10) others. System middle leaders identified that they "improv[ed] school leadership teams capability to implement the Australian curriculum according to the state schooling requirements" (Participant 13) and "assist[ed] school leadership teams to deliver high quality education programs. These were designed to meet individual needs in an inclusive context, considering student wellbeing, attendance, academic achievement, and successful transitions" (Participant 6).

5.1.4. Strategy Implementation

Participants identified that system middle leader roles supported departmental initiatives and regional priorities through various ways of working and with a focus on targeted strategies.

Working closely with school leadership teams was the most common way of achieving this. Participants identified that they "liaise[d] with ARDs to support cluster work" (Participant 22) and worked first within school clusters followed by "working closely with schools [identified through] priority school reviews" (Participant 21).

As participants worked with schools and school clusters, they "deconstruct[ed] key documents" and "synthesize[d] information into accessible and realistic ways based on in-school experience" (Participant 7). This was often shared through the delivery or "designing, producing, and developing [of] professional learning for adults in an educational context" (Participant 6).

Three key state and regional strategies were identified as the foci of system middle leaders' roles. The most frequent role responsibility was to "implement and align [school processes] to the Australian Curriculum" (Participant 17). Participants identified that they "buil[t] capacity and retain[ed] quality teachers through building knowledge [of the] Australian Curriculum, pedagogy and the APSTs" (Participant 14).

5.1.5. Student Improvement

Participants closely aligned the purpose of their roles to having either a direct or an indirect impact on student learning as the role provided them, as Participant 3 stated, with "the best platform to make a difference for multiple students." Similarly, Participant 6 indicated that the role provided them with an opportunity to have a greater "impact … than working within [just one] school."

About half of the participants made broad indirect statements about the impact of their roles on students, such as their role being to "improve student outcomes at schools" (Participant 13) or to go in with the "motivation to improve outcomes for students" (Participant 15). Three participants highlighted that their roles were directly responsible for measurable student impacts such as "increasing upper two bands" (Participant 2) in NAPLAN data, "re-engaging disengaged youth" (Participant 2) and "having a measured positive impact on student achievement" (Participant 7). These measures aligned to those articulated in the DoE P-12 CARF [17], which references increased literacy and numeracy outcomes.

5.2. How Do System Middle Leaders Enact Their Roles?

The analysis of system middle leaders' perceptions regarding their role enactment in relation to interpreting and implementing policy unveils four key themes. These themes encapsulate the nuanced approaches and responsibilities central to their engagement with policy: role induction practices, policy interpretation practices, policy translation and role accountabilities intertwined with policy measures.

5.2.1. Induction Practices

Participants shared insights into their induction and ongoing support, stating that the central office's key role was to provide regions with specific information, such as "policies and procedures, knowledge-based articles" (Participant 20) and "policy directives" (Participant 12). However, they noted that "documentation from central office [was] quite brief with [limited] descriptions" (Participant 8), and "there seem[ed] to be a mismatch between central expectations and regional realities" (Participant 8), resulting in role tensions and confusion.

Participants identified that their induction was insufficient, with "very little direction for day-to-day operations [and no clarity] of my role nor how my role fits in with other related teams" (Participant 5). This led to confusion about their role expectations, with one participant stating, "it was very confusing as to exactly what my role would entail. There were conflicting statements at times and at others I felt like my manager was expecting me to 'guess my role'" (Participant 8).

Participants engaged in collaborative practices, such as team meetings and mentoring, which helped them understand their role expectations. However, one participant suggested that "a more consolidated approach (3–5year plan)" and "closer working ties with [various regional] curriculum teams" would support "a team approach to goal achievement … as there is a lot of overlap in roles" (Participant 6).

Participants also suggested that implementing a collaborative approach with involvement from those in higher positions would be important for all parts of the regional team to understand their roles. They noted that "regional leadership [does not] understand the role or its importance" (Participant 9) and that "more collaboration with ARD's" (Participant 23) would provide a clear direction for regional education officers.

5.2.2. Policy Interpretation

The role of system middle leaders involves understanding policy messages. Two main categories emerged regarding factors contributing to how they made sense of policy messages: interpretation practices and policy documentation.

Participants' perspectives on policy interpretation practices revolved around conversational processes. Some described collaborative conversations within team meetings, where new thinking was developed through dialogue. Participant 9 exemplified this, stating, "Every time we come together … we are asking questions of each other which keeps clarifying what [the policy] means and what [the policy] should mean".

Despite valuing these practices, some participants noted irregularities in understanding policy, leading to individualised regional approaches. Some participants felt policy interpretation was an individual responsibility, requiring building knowledge and connecting with others for learning. Participant 4 emphasised this, stating, "You need to be willing to spend time building your knowledge base … but also be on top of research."
Additionally, Participant 35 highlighted the importance of interregional collaborations, stating she "stumbled across the P-12 Assessment and Curriculum Framework and learnt … while [she] connected with others."

Participants outlined that as the DoE's policy strategies were translated into multiple targeted regional strategies, clarity of the intended outcomes was reduced. Participant 4 noted a lack of clarity due to the simultaneous implementation of numerous policy documents, leading to the perception of conflicting messages and a lack of awareness in schools, as expressed by Participant 14.

Policy language was also identified as a factor contributing to varying interpretations. Participant 35 highlighted that "some policies are very wordy," while Participant 33 pointed out that the broad and carefully worded nature of policies led to interpretation discrepancies. This vagueness necessitated individuals to "make up [their] own idea as to what that would look like," according to Participant 10.

5.2.3. Policy Translation

Participants noted that as policy was translated into various forms, it was influenced by factors such as diverse role perceptions, career experience, team cohesion, and contextual policy interpretations.

Regarding role perceptions, participants discussed how their interactions with system leaders and school personnel reflected diverse role expectations. They acknowledged hierarchical task delegation, with system leaders dictating regional tasks. However, some felt uncomfortable about their lack of voice in the process. One participant described this dynamic, stating, "there [was] a hierarchy that they need[ed] to adhere to" (Participant 35). They further noted that "decision-making" occurred within the region as the system leaders "would tell [them] what they would be doing or how that [would] fit within the current agenda" (Participant 33). Additionally, another participant highlighted the significance of individual managers in providing flexibility, stating, "managers 'made it very clear that we had abilities to run our role as we needed to run our roles'" (Participant 1).

School personnel, including principals and leaders, were seen as responsible for contextualising policy within their schools, impacting how policy was translated into action and supported school autonomy. Participants recognised the pivotal role of school leaders, with one stating, "principals [were often] the gatekeepers" (Participant 3), highlighting the importance of building trust with school leaders to effectively support schools.

Career experience played a crucial role, with participants leveraging their teaching and leadership backgrounds to contextualise policy responses and build credibility. However, the absence of leadership experience was seen as a barrier to working effectively with regional senior leaders and school leadership teams; "leadership experience provided credibility" (Participant 3).

Team cohesion was deemed essential for effective support, although participants noted challenges with overlapping role responsibilities and personal dynamics within teams. Despite this, participants acknowledged the value of collaboration and the need for greater clarity around their role enactment. As Participant 10 stated, "greater clarity within documentation and … clarity around role enactment [as] working in a team would have a greater impact than one person working in isolation".

Participants emphasised the importance of utilising policy to support schools, requiring a deep understanding of policy documentation and its connection to school practices. They highlighted the need to tailor support to each school's context and to bridge the gap between policy language and classroom practice to effectively assist teachers in understanding and implementing policy.

5.2.4. Role Accountabilities

The DoE system positioned its policy focus on the provision of high-quality teaching (using the Australian Curriculum) for student improvement (Queensland Government, 2020a). Consequently, the participants consistently articulated that their roles were to support schools in implementing contextualised school improvement strategies. However, as participants described their role, it became evident that they struggled with articulating how the impact or effectiveness of their role was measured. The ambiguity surrounding accountability, they noted, was impacted by their role position within schools and their understanding of impact measures.

Participants also connected the lack of impact measures to knowing whether they were successful in their role. This resulted in the participants listing various qualitative measures, including "the stories behind my role" (Participant 9), "verbal feedback" (Participant 8) and "people asking to book me" (Participant 4), as well as quantitative measures including "school [data] trends" (Participant 3) and increases in students achieving in the "upper two bands" (Participant 35) of National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) to attempt to articulate how they would measure their impact.

This accountability ambiguity seemed to result in the participants articulating a desire for a clear focus on how to measure their impact and how to know they are successful

within their role. Role clarity was communicated as a critical factor for five participants in understanding who owned the results of school improvement strategies and, therefore, what data could be attributed to their role impact.

Another critical factor was that their role was positioned as a "support for schools" (Participant 9), where there was no accountability aligned to the support offered because the uptake was dependent upon whether a school chose to implement the suggested support strategies or not. The participants also articulated that "sometimes the person that you [are asked] to support doesn't want to be supported. And sometimes it does feel like you're pushing ... a story that they don't want to hear" (Participant 10). This notion of delegated support and its negative impact on support uptake were also echoed by Participant 3, who compared delegated and volunteered school engagement in regional support strategies.

Many participants agreed that there was a lack of impact measures directly aligned to their roles and that "the system contributes a lot of money and effort into [supporting schools] even though we don't get a lot of change" (Participant 8). However, pockets of perceived sustainable school improvement were also identified by two participants who had been in the role for more than 5 years and had tracked school improvement in locations they supported. When describing how the absence of their role would impact on schools, the system middle leaders seemed to agree that their role was integral in assisting schools to find clarity within policy messages, even though this was unable to be directly measured.

5.3. What Factors Support or Inhibit Their Role Enactment in Relation to Policy Implementation?

The themes that emerged from the inductive analysis were then considered within the context of the study's conceptual framework. Utilising the study's conceptual framework, a summary of system middle leaders' role purpose and enactment perceptions and the alignment to the existing policy coherence concepts was mapped (Appendix A) to reveal the study's findings (Figure 5). The theoretical dimensions and concepts that emerged within and across the research findings illuminated the impact of policy implementation and role enactment practices on policy coherence. The understandings that emerged shed light on the relationship between policy role enactment and the following two aspects of organisational alignment (for policy coherence): strategic and structural [45]. In addition, the findings unequivocally demonstrated that role enactment significantly influences organisational cognitive alignment, establishing this as a critical theoretical alignment aspect of policy coherence.

The resulting findings were then considered in relation to the research questions and were utilised to identify factors that informed an explanation of what was occurring. One way of representing these findings and the subsequent explanation was through the development of a visual explanatory framework (Figure 5). This framework identified the connections between the findings and four theoretical policy concepts: policy coherence, policy design, policy interpretation and policy translation. Through the exploration of the theoretical concepts of policy coherence (objective and crafting alignment) and policy enactment, the factors that impacted on system middle leaders' role enactment and the attainment of policy coherence (structural and strategic) with the need for cognitive alignment were illuminated. The explanatory framework visually summarises these aspects to reflect how system middle leaders' role enactment and their interpretation and translation of policy influences the attainment of policy coherence.
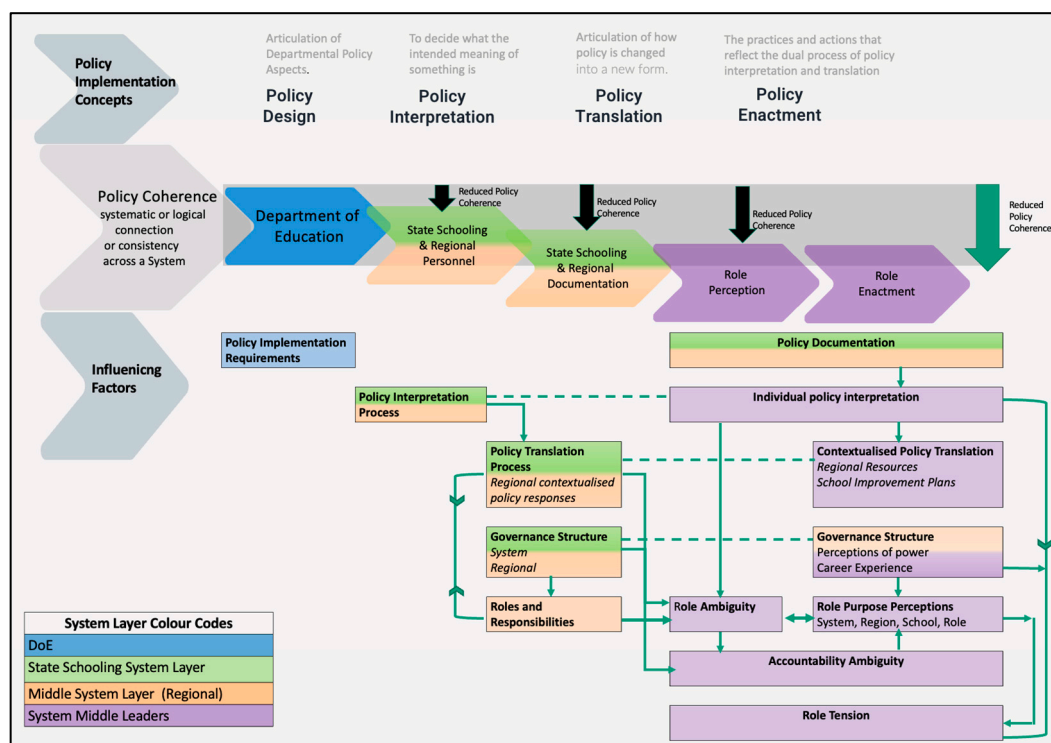
Figure 5. An explanatory framework based on research findings.

Figure 5 depicts the theoretical concept of policy coherence by a large grey arrow that begins on the left of the framework and moves through and across the subsequent policy implementation processes. As the study's findings were identified, they were placed under the policy coherence section. Using the lens of organisational alignment [45], policy coherence is achieved when policy is aligned. Where factors were not aligned across the research phases, the attainment of policy coherence was negatively impacted.

The initial factors that influenced policy enactment were identified as influencing factors positioned below the policy enactment concept. The effect of these factors on the coherence between the policy translation and policy enactment concepts was characterised by the position of each coloured arrow (positioned in alignment or partial alignment with the preceding arrow) with the reduction of policy coherence depicted by black arrows. The emerging relationships between influencing factors are depicted by green arrows. The identified factors with the framework are as follows:

- **Policy Implementation Requirements**. As policy was translated into contextual responses, the articulation of detailed functions and responsibilities diminished. The strategic alignment of policy in action documentation (for example, P-12 CARF [43]) to policy implementation requirements (for example, regional role descriptions and role perceptions) was misaligned and therefore negatively influenced.

- **Policy Interpretation Practices.** Policy interpretation practices through conversational structures were underpinned by the idea that interpretation was predominantly implicit and individual. The absence of practices fostering shared cognition hindered the development of collective policy understandings. Consequently, policy interpretations were shaped by individual perceptions of ideal policy, as well as personal experiences, practices and beliefs.

  Participants' descriptions supported the idea that shared policy understandings were crucial. They identified that the use of broad and vague language in policy documents contributed to varying interpretations of policy. As the participants described the impact policy language had on regional and school-based departmental employees' interpretations, they also posited that policy documents were able to be accessed

and interpreted independently by school staff, resulting in a variety of policy interpretations at the school system layer.

When considering how policy coherence is achieved, a critical aspect identified by Hoing [26] is that policy translations are based on shared policy interpretations and understandings. Within this study, this has been attributed to the notion of collective cognition alignment of policy messages. It is evident within this study that the lack of formal policy interpretation practices that ensure there are shared understandings of policy messages has resulted in a lack of collective cognitive alignment.

- **Policy Translation Practices**. Although formal policy translation practices were not explicitly described within participants' descriptions of their enacted role, policy documents (e.g., P-12 CARF [17]) identified that the system had policy templates for school improvement plans and the inquiry model, and these were utilised by regions and schools in the development of contextualised policy responses, guidelines, resources and school improvement plans. The regional or school strategies that were inputted into the translation tools were influenced by policy interpretation practices. As the DoE's policy strategies were translated into multiple targeted regional strategies, the perception of the amount of change and subsequent documentation being implemented at once was overwhelming for system middle leaders and schools.

  The findings identified that this resulted in a lack of clarity and consistency around policy messages, as the plethora of policy documents were often required to be accessed and interpreted simultaneously. These notions suggested that role enactment practices negatively influenced the strategic and collective cognitive alignment of policy.

- **Governance Structure.** Within the system governance structure, regions were identified as "play[ing] a critical role in supporting the performance of state schools" [41] (p. 7), and "ensur[ing[consistency and alignment with departmental priorities" [41] (p. 6). The omission of system middle leader teams within the system governance model seemed to inhibit the transparency of clear system roles associated with policy implementation. This in turn influenced the perception of the system middle leaders' role within policy implementation and the subsequent structural alignment of policy implementation practices.

- **Roles and Responsibilities**. As policy was translated into regional strategies, the partial alignment of school support to policy reflected regions' autonomy and flexibility in determining how they would deliver services to their schools and therefore resulted in inconsistent reference to policy documents across the regions. The lack of system middle leaders' reference to specific roles and responsibilities within documentation resulted in system middle leaders developing their own individual role responsibilities. The participants utilised their interpretation of policy documents (P-12 CARF [17]), their own career experience and how they were tasked by regional system leaders to create their own role responsibilities. As a result, there was a variety of regional education role perceptions that included a leadership role, a support role, responsibility for building the capability of others, responsibility for implementing system and state strategies and responsibility for improving student outcomes.

  While the implementation of strategies aligned with broad policy objectives, that is, to implement and align school processes to the Australian Curriculum, system middle leaders did not articulate specific role responsibilities or describe their role as a policy resource. This resulted in the partial misalignment of system middle leaders' policy role purpose and policy objectives.

- **Purpose Perceptions Role.** The understanding of how policy was translated into action and the connection to role purpose as reflected in role responsibilities was influenced by the diversity of role perceptions. In the absence of system middle leaders' role responsibilities, individuals shaped their role through a variety of interactions at the system, regional and school system layers. As a result of this, they predominantly perceived their role to be a leadership role that was responsible for supporting

schools to implement school improvement strategies and build teaching and learning capability. System middle leaders were unable to clearly articulate how this was achieved or how they knew they were successful in enacting this role perception.

The participants acknowledged that within the system structure there was a hierarchical relationship between formal roles (RD, ARD and school principals) which was reflected within the system governance structure. This structure influenced how role tasks were assigned and received by regional and school personnel. At times, this resulted in misalignment between system middle leaders' role purpose perception and the strategic focus of the regional system leaders (ARDs) or other system leaders (regional peers, school principals and leadership teams). This in turn caused role tension for system middle leaders and influenced the structural and strategic alignment of policy.

- **Role Ambiguity.** Role ambiguity was commonly experienced by system middle leaders when they had uncertainty about which tasks and responsibilities were part of their role. System middle leaders consistently expressed the need to clarify their role purpose and associated responsibilities and ways of working. In the absence of clearly articulated policy implementation roles and responsibilities, system middle leaders' roles were continuously shaped by their own interpretation of policy texts and the depth and breadth of human interactions that occurred between system leaders, peers and school personnel. Furthermore, the system middle leaders noted that there were often diverse role perspectives that caused role tension and required system middle leaders to draw on their career experience to be flexible in how they mitigated these diverse role perspectives to enact their role. Ongoing role ambiguity resulted in role tension and influenced the structural and strategic alignment of policy as it was implemented.

- **Accountability Ambiguity.** Role accountability was closely linked to role responsibilities. As system middle leaders attempted to identify the aspects of their role, they were unable to articulate formal consistent role accountabilities or success criteria. System middle leaders articulated that the absence of role measures led to their inability to identify how to measure the direct impact of their work. They articulated that being able to measure their impact would provide them with clarity of expectations and a clear line of sight that in turn would support them to reflect upon and improve their role enactment.

- **Role Tension**. Role tension [39] was experienced by system middle leaders when they were faced by diverse role perspectives and differing role expectations. These experiences occurred within human interactions (system executive leaders, peers and school personnel) and were often reflective of power perceptions between the various roles. Role tension resulted in system middle leaders enacting role tasks that were in direct conflict with their individual role perceptions or additional role tasks assigned by other system personnel. Therefore, role tensions influenced the structural and strategic alignment of policy implementation.

The theoretical dimensions and theoretical concepts that emerged within and across the research phases illuminated the impact of policy role enactment on policy coherence (underpinned by policy implementation and organisational alignment theory).

6. Research Implications for Theory: Explanatory Frameworks

Currently, the research on coherence and research on the role of system middle leaders (sometimes referred to as regional or district leaders) are seen as separate entities. Considering the findings, the explanatory framework was conceptualised to reflect the interdependent policy implementation and role enactment factors that influenced the attainment of policy coherence as an aspect of system reform.

It became evident from the findings that system middle leaders' role in interpreting and translating policy appeared to directly impact the achievement of policy coherence through policy enactment (interpretation and translation). As their role was originally

positioned in the literature as either inconsequential or positive institutional actors in system reform [46], this finding adds a valuable perspective to the impact that system middle leaders' roles have on attaining coherent policy implementation.

In addition, the findings identified that in the absence of formal sense-making processes and collective cognition, a variety of individual policy interpretations were being utilised to translate policy into new forms [26]. Considering this, the attainment of achieving system-wide policy coherence was negatively impacted through partial policy implementation influenced by diverse policy interpretations and policy support advice. This finding positions the need to understand how coherent policy messaging through policy interpretation and translation practices was attained. This research study posits that this is achieved when systems utilise formal practices that support the development of collective cognitive cognisance (Figure 6).
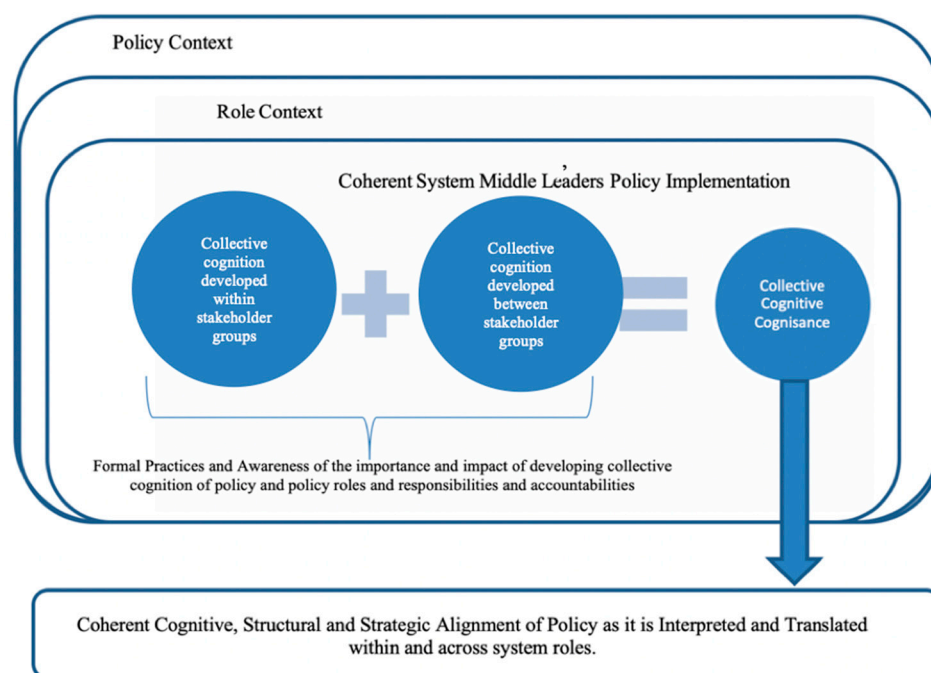

Figure 6. Collective cognitive cognizance.

Collective cognitive cognisance from a system's perspective is an awareness of the role that collective cognition plays in attaining policy coherence. Through the intentional development of collective policy understandings and the interpretation and translation of these understandings through the enactment of formal policy roles, policy coherence is promoted.

Collective cognitive cognisance is therefore defined within this study as a system's awareness of the need to utilise its governance structures consciously and strategically to make sense of policy messages and how policy is translated. This collective sense-making ensures there is a common understanding from which policy is interpreted and translated through enacted policy roles. This in turn promotes coherent policy implementation as suggested by Coburn et al. [22], who outlined that having a variety of policy understandings and interpretations contributes to the development of misaligned policy strategies.

Over the past decades, the role of system middle leaders (situated within regions and districts) in educational reform theory has highlighted that when regions (districts) take a system approach to aligning their strategic focus and vision for student achievement through a comprehensive strategy, they positively impact student outcomes within individual schools [8].

This study's findings, therefore, build on these notions to consider policy implementation roles within the middle (regional or district) system layer. Until now, this focus has been limited to studies on roles associated with senior leadership and principal supervision [46] as well as small-scale studies of how individual district personnel have supported district-wide strategy implementation within schools [27].

The interdependent relationship between these three alignment aspects (strategic, structural and cognitive), policy role factors and coherent policy implementation is depicted in Figure 7. Furthermore, Figure 7 utilises the emergence of the notion of collective cognitive cognisance to illuminate the interdependent relationship between traditional organisational alignment aspects (strategic and structural) and the need to include a cognitive alignment aspect as policy is interpreted and translated. This depiction adds further clarity to how the inclusion of cognitive alignment with policy coherence theory promotes coherent policy implementation as policy is interpreted and translated through enacted policy roles.
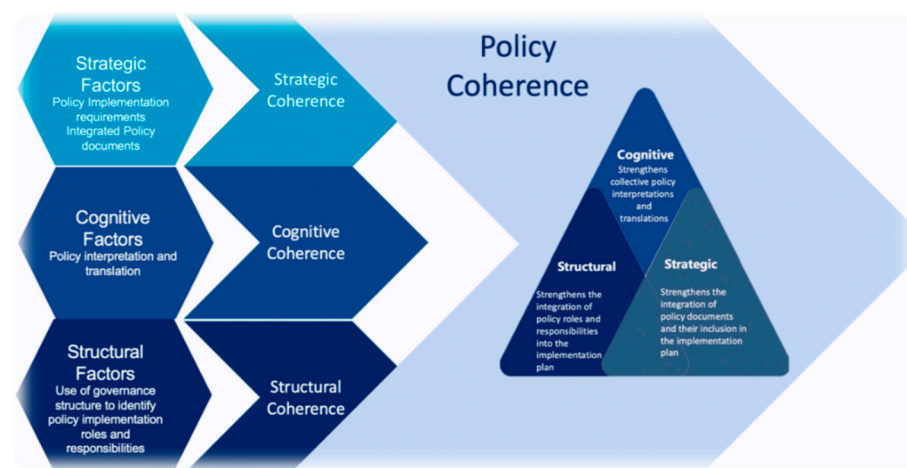

Figure 7. A case for strategic, structural and cognitive alignment within coherent policy implementation theory.

Figure 7 begins on the left by identifying which organisational alignment aspect (strategic, cognitive or structural), policy implementation, role and role enactment factors contribute to. As each factor and alignment aspect is interdependent, the attainment of policy coherence cannot be achieved without considering all coherence aspects together, as depicted by the overlapping triangles in the figure.

The notion of cognitive alignment was previously silent within the system reform literature that emphasised the importance of utilising structural and strategic alignment [47] as a precursor to transparent policy implementation processes. While policy translation was positioned as a characteristic of policy coherence [48], the literature on how policy translation occurred was limited to cognitive and sociocultural processes positioned at the individual school level [25]. In the systems' literature, they were couched within organisational learning culture concepts.

The study's findings, therefore, broaden the literature on coherent policy implementation through the identification of the need to include processes that explicitly support the development of cognitive alignment. The inclusion of this aspect supports the coherent crafting of policy messages, as policy is interpreted and translated through enacted policy roles.

Utilising the overarching findings, the framework that emerged from the study (see Figure 8) highlights role theory as a valuable theoretical framework that identifies how policy implementation (that is shaped by policy and social interactions with various actors) is interpreted and translated. Role theory, together with policy implementation and organisational alignment frameworks, provides a useful tool through which to analyse

and improve policy coherence theory. These findings led to the emergence of the term policy role enactment, which extends on the notions of policy actors within policy implementation to explicitly consider how role factors influence implementation. This term is positioned as being of the greatest importance or prominence within the policy role enactment framework (indicated by a yellow circle within Figure 8).
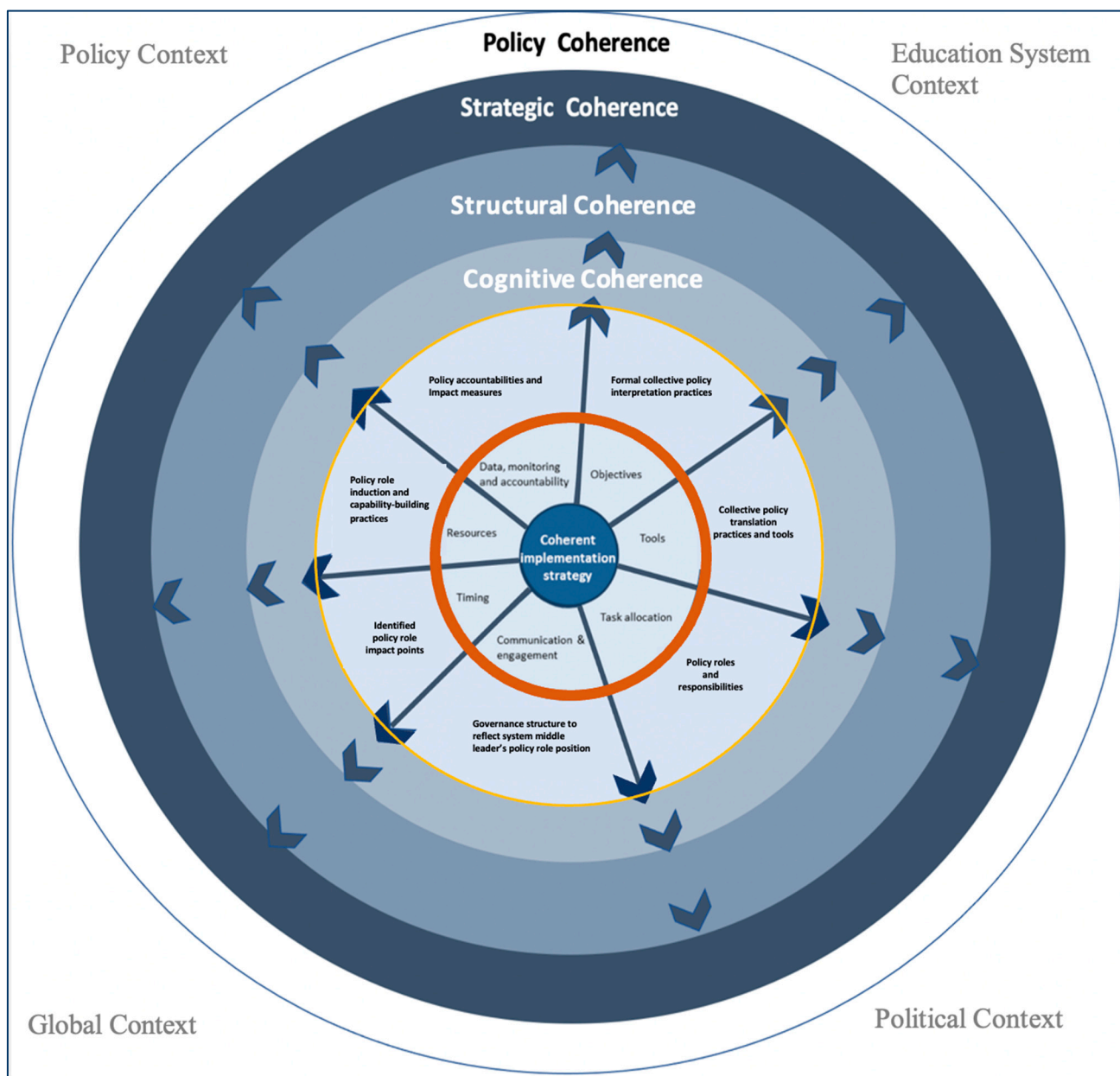

Figure 8. A framework for achieving system policy coherence. Note: the framework connects this research study's policy role enactment factors (the outer four circles) to existing coherent policy implementation criteria (the inner circle). Centrally positioned elements are from Viennet and Pont [3] (p. 7). Copyright 2017 by OECD.

The framework for achieving system policy coherence acknowledges that policy development and implementation is influenced by the context in which it is situated. When considering coherent policy implementation, the model also utilises Viennet and Pont's [3] (the inner circle shaded in light orange) criteria that identify the influence of policy design and implementation on the attainment of policy coherence. The third circle (outlined by yellow borders) captures the findings and recommendations of this study to

explicitly connect the concept of policy role enactment to the concept of coherent policy implementation. The key criteria were as follows:

- Governance structures to reflect system middle leaders' policy role positions;
- Policy role induction and system middle leaders' capability-building practices;
- Integrated policy roles and responsibilities;
- Collective policy translation practices and tools;
- Collective integrated policy interpretation practices;
- Role accountabilities and impact measures;
- Identified role policy impact points.

Together the two concepts of coherent policy design and implementation, and policy role enactment and their identified criteria, build upon existing notions of Limani's organisational alignment [45] to identify the factors that influence the level of (vertical and horizontal), cognitive (new alignment aspect), structural, and strategic alignment collectively achieved within each system middle policy role group (e.g., system middle leaders) responsible for interpreting and translating policy.

7. Research Implications for Practice

As the main purpose of this study was to determine what emerges as significant factors influencing how system middle leaders interpret and translate policy to enact their role. The analysis of the data and subsequent research findings were synthesised within the Explanatory Framework that informed the identification of factors and their implications for system middle leaders' policy role enactment. The policy design, implementation and role enactment factors that influenced the attainment of policy coherence were:

- policy implementation requirements.
- policy interpretation practices.
- policy translation practices.
- governance structure.
- roles and responsibilities.
- role purpose perceptions.
- role ambiguity; and
- accountability ambiguity.

This study's findings provided significant insights into how policy is utilised to develop contextualised policy responses and the study subsequently illuminated the importance of basing the translation of policy messages on consistent policy understandings. These findings contrasted with Hoing's [26] research, which aimed to explore the role of regions (districts) when implementing regional (district)-wide strategy responses and positioned the importance of developing contextualised ongoing policy responses with schools. Key system leadership (situated within districts) role characteristics associated with effective school support were identified; these included flexible approaches to meet individual school needs and supporting, not dictating, policy responses. Hoing's [26] research, however, failed to consider how system leadership (district) personnel utilised policy and the impact this had on achieving system-wide policy coherence.

This study, therefore, adds these additional contributions to Hoing's [26] coherent policy messaging and crafting notions.

8. Research Limitations

This study identifies a possible research limitation. The study is limited to one education system which, whilst large, has specific contextual and cultural aspects that would not necessarily be replicated in other systems. Whilst generalisability is not a concern for this research approach, the significance for the size of this system, as well as aspects of the findings, may indicate possible application of the generated framework to other contexts. It could also provide a platform for future research.

The limitations identified in this study were focused on the case being limited to one educational system and that the data, while aimed at being reflective of the broad composition of regional education officers, were reliant on interviews and the sample size. It is acknowledged that further research into policy implementation, as explored in this study, would contribute to an essential and growing body of research on the role enactment of system middle leaders and their impact on system reform.

9. Further Research

The following range of opportunities for further research address the research limitations as well as capturing opportunities identified during the data analysis and findings chapters. Firstly, the policy role enactment framework could be utilised as a tool to develop understandings of policy role enactment through the various roles of system middle leaders. The findings could be utilised to explore the consistency of system middle leaders' role perceptions and enacted practice.

In addition, as the focus of the study was to investigate how policy was interpreted and translated through regional education officers' enacted roles within the Queensland Department of Education. Research could be conducted to explore policy role enactment within additional system leaders' roles and within similarly placed leaders in public education systems of other states and territories within education systems to determine the consistency of policy role enactment practices and their impact on policy coherence. Another approach could be to conduct further research on the enacted role of regional education officers through observing their role in action.

Finally, further research could be conducted regarding the use of collective cognitive cognisance practices and their impact on policy coherence interpretation and translation practices. The focus on coherent policy messaging would extend upon this study's research findings and provide deeper insights into how systems create policy coherence awareness.

10. Conclusions

This study concludes that the integration of role theory, policy implementation theory and organisation alignment theories provides an interpretivist insight into the development of policy coherence through system middle leaders' policy role enactment. Through understanding the interdependent relationships between the bodies of research, role factors that influence policy coherence were illuminated. The use of the resulting policy role enactment framework would contribute to validation of the framework, which in turn could be utilised within other education systems within Australia and internationally and is an identified area for research in other contexts and roles.

The study also offered insights into the importance of including cognitive alignment as a critical aspect of organisational policy coherence theory. This theoretical implication illuminates that achieving structural and strategic alignment through policy role enactment is dependent upon the development of collective cognitive alignment. This study's theoretical contribution positions the importance of sense-making interactions between system leaders, their regional teams and schools to consider cognitive alignment as an organisational construct underpinning the attainment of policy coherence.

Finally, the research sheds light on the concept of organisational cognisance and cognitive alignment through the identification that system-wide cognitive coherence requires an awareness of developing collective understandings of policy and policy roles, responsibilities and accountabilities within and across a system. The research posits that this is achieved when systems strategically utilise their governance structure and formal practices to support the development of collective cognitive cognisance.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical clearance for the proposed study was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland (approval no. H18REA009P1).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The collated de-identified data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

Appendix A

Summary and formal organisational alignment (Limani, [45]) of Viennet and Pont's [3] policy implementation analysis criterioa within and across research phases.

Criterion	Policy Documents		Survey Role Perceptions	Survey Descriptions of Role Enactment		Research outcomes.
	Policy Design Documents	Curriculum Policy Documents	Identified Role Enactment Factors			Factors impacting on policy interpretation and translation.
			Green indicates alignment to policy aspects. Orange indicates partial alignment to policy aspects. Red indicates no alignment to policy actions through omission or new information. (Crossed out factors indicate that the next phase evidenced the factor)			
Objectives *(An) identified result/s or aim/s that underpin/s policy documentation*	Policies should provide a point of truth and be published in one place.		Role of policy is to provide clear directives to regions.		Policy guidelines and resources available from multiple online platforms including statewide and regional	Multiple policy guidelines access points create confusion with participants indicating school personnel are not consistently aware of policy resources.
	Align with other policy instruments.	Supported Government directives through aspects identified below.	No policy specificity identified.	Policy use was utilised when developing contextual school improvement responses.	No formal practices to check for individuals' understanding of policy messages.	System middle leaders rely on own interpretation, impacting on policy coherence. Schools utilise their own interpretations or seek clarity from regional system middle leaders.
	Support strategic objectives.	Delivery of a world-class education system supported by responsive services.	There is a perceived mismatch between policy expectations and regional realties		Policy instruments were informally unpacked through conversational practices—no explicit link to policy objectives or desired results related to role.	Strategic objectives are positioned within documentation although wording and focus may change, impacting on coherence.
	Clearly define roles and responsibilities.	Responsive services included the following: Working together to provide quality learning experiences for all students and to maximize student learning.	Role was positioned to improve leadership, teaching capability and student outcomes.	Participants agreed that their role was to support the implementation of the state's strategic direction.	No specific role descriptions aligned to regional strategic direction or system middle leadership role. Role descriptions drawn from broad school-based role responsibilities, including Head of Curriculum and Head of Department.	Lack of articulated regional role responsibilities aligned to policy objectives, regional policy measures and agreed system practices. Lack of Induction process into System Leadership ways of working, role responsibilities and accountabilities
Communication and Engagement *Consultation and stakeholder engagement to gather support and understanding of policy language.*	Policies development should consider key, appropriate and relevant stakeholder consultation	Partnerships with stakeholders, industry, universities and communities to accomplish the following: Inform and develop government policy. Provide advice and analysis. Represent and service the community.	Regional team members engage with school leadership teams, principals, regional teams and at times central office. No reference to stakeholders informing policy identified.	No direct interactions or processes with policy personnel identified. Lack of perceived voice in contributing to the development of regional strategies, implementation plans or informing policy		Stakeholder engagement through policy development. No clear stakeholder involvement documented that utilises implementation feedback or objectives as reflection measures.

Criterion	Policy Documents		Survey Role Perceptions	Survey Descriptions of Role Enactment		Research outcomes. Factors impacting on policy interpretation and translation.
	Policy Design Documents	Curriculum Policy Documents	Identified Role Enactment Factors			
Communication of goals, objectives and processes required for policy	Policy should consider relevant stakeholder communication.

No reference to communication of goals, objectives and processes required for policy | No reference to how policy was explicitly communicated to stakeholders. | Regional communications identified. The focus of these communiques was on contextualised regional approaches aligned to operational plans.

No reference to State Schooling communication beyond policy documentation that state policy objectives e.g., State Schooling Strategy, P-12 CARF | | Policy messages were translated into regional strategies.
The number of supporting documents created confusion and resulted in a variety of policy interpretations.
Policy language and the broad nature of policy documentation contributed to misaligned interpretations and resulting actions.
Change in school leadership impacted on consistency of policy interpretation. | No formal policy communication plan

Policy support documents accessible through multiple online platforms by all DoE stakeholders—contributes to partial policy alignment.

Regional communications focus on contextualised regional approaches aligned to policy objectives with language that may or may not align to overarching policy objectives. |
| Implementation Strategy

Articulated plans explaining how to enact policy while the policy can identify the theoretical implementation underpinnings. May provide a vision and be open and flexible to accommodate changes. | Identified policy implementation cycle. | Embedded within policy instruments: | Regional leadership members or central office determined role activities—perceived as the process for implementing policy.

Limited clarity of how to implement strategies on a day-by-day basis | | | |
| | Policies should articulate their functions, responsibilities, and purpose | Develop shared understandings of the Australian Curriculum. | | | Some participants described the use of the Australian Curriculum and their role in clarifying teaching expectations. One participant explicitly described building capability.
No formal processes to confirm policy interpretations are aligned to policy intent. | Multiple policy interpretation points that rely on individual policy interpretations that may or may not align to policy intent. |
| | | Use evidence through inquiry improvement cycles. | | | The inquiry model was identified as a resource; however, the use of the inquiry model was not discussed. | Knowledge of inquiry models evidenced. Application of inquiry models as a role enactment tool was not discussed. |
| | | To collaborate to work, learn and improve together. | Collaborative practices were positioned within each region. | Lack of perceived voice in contributing to the development of regional strategies, implementation plans or informing policy.
Career experience enhanced ability to collaborate with regional and school leaders | Interactions with system leaders could either support role enactment or hinder role enactment.
Interactions with school leaders could support role enactment or hinder role enactment.
Regional Team cohesion hindered role enactment | Role clarity impacts on role enactment. |
| | | Build teaching and learning capability. | Building teacher and leadership capability to implement the Australian Curriculum | Role was identified broadly as a school support | Building leadership and teacher capability was positioned; however, role descriptions predominately positioned role as facilitators, clarifiers of policy and strategy rather than building capability. | Understanding of capacity building was predominately limited to provision of knowledge and providing policy clarification. |
| | Policies should manage operational issues and risks. | | | | | |

Criterion	Policy Documents		Survey Role Perceptions	Survey Descriptions of Role Enactment		Research outcomes. Factors impacting on policy interpretation and translation.
	Policy Design Documents	Curriculum Policy Documents	Identified Role Enactment Factors			
Data monitoring and accountability *Sharing of knowledge via an instrument that informs decision making and contributes to discussions and transparency of decision making.*	Policy monitoring should examine policy content to ensure accuracy, relevance, clarity and reliability. No reference to measuring or monitoring policy implementation. No mention of using policy outcomes to review or refine policy	Continuous improvement was positioned within policy descriptions.	No reference to continuous improvement Changes in school process were identified as a school measure with no reference to continuous improvement.	No reference to continuous improvement or accountabilities.	No reference to continuous improvement. Identification that the same work continues to be implemented after 5 years of working within the role, indicating limited impact.	-Reliance on point in time school-based data as outcome measures. -Absence of role impact measures linked to capacity building. -Identified need to develop shared understandings of what aspects of policy implementation regional education officer's role supports and how impact could be measured.
Data monitoring and accountability continued *Sharing of knowledge via an instrument that informs decision making and contributes to discussions and transparency of decision making.*		Student achievement, attendance and engagement data were identified as the key measure. Student achievement, attendance and engagement data were identified as the key measure. Continued	Student achievement data were identified as a key measure. Number of schools supported indicated as a measure. Informal feedback indicated as a role measure. Participants identified that they were unsure how to measure impact, resulting in role tension.		Role position descriptions identified tensions in who owns the data and are student measures relevant to the regional role? Project schools and showcase awards identified as indicating impact.	-Lack of measurable role responsibilities. -Lack of knowledge and application on what is the point of impact for regional education officers' role. -Absence of formal role measures resulted in informal and varied measures being used
		No targets were identified.	No targets were identified	No targets were identified.	No clear targets.	Accountability ambiguity; Lack of role targets
		Annual School Review was implicitly positioned as a tool to monitor curriculum implementation.	No reference to the use of school reviews processes as a measure or monitoring tool.		Clear links between school reviews and regional education officer's role No link to school reviews as a monitoring tool.	Regional education officers were tasked with supporting schools for their school reviews; however, the outcome of reviews was not considered to be a role measure.
Resources *Inputs necessary for policy implementation.* *Funding financial and human resources*		Resources are targeted to be responsive and provide support.	Regional Role described as the following: Implement regional or state strategies to improve student improvement including the Australian Curriculum.		Implementation of regional strategies positioned with limited specificity beyond literacy, numeracy or STEM.	Role positioned a school support role; however, did not directly align this to a policy implementation support role.
supporting guidelines and online documents	Policy implementation should be supported by aligned policy instruments including procedures, guidelines and <mark>supporting information</mark>	Use evidence to inform practice; e. g., Annual School Reviews, Inquiry Model P-12CARF identified online and documented resources to support curriculum implementation at a school level.	No specific mention of policy resources		Use of the Australian Curriculum and P-12 CARF when supporting schools and principals. Use of school reviews, state inquiry model identified	Policy documents used inconsistently
Capacity building		Resources are targeted to build capability.	Role purpose described as: Leadership role Support role. Capacity-building role	Role described as a support role. Building leadership and teaching capability		No explicit definition or ways of working associated with building capacity identified to achieve policy outcomes.
Task Allocation	Policy procedures should	Department task identified to support schools and departmental staff.	-Assistant Regional Directors were identified as leaders within the region.	Regional Directors, Assistant Regional	-ARDs and Managers delegated tasks.	Role ambiguity results in role tension.

Criterion	Policy Documents		Survey Role Perceptions	Survey Descriptions of Role Enactment		Research outcomes.
	Policy Design Documents	Curriculum Policy Documents	Identified Role Enactment Factors			Factors impacting on policy interpretation and translation.
	outline the processes and responsibilities required to support policy implementation	Assistant Regional Director's task was identified. Regional Services Team tasks identified. No specificity regarding who the teams were or how many members were in each team. Support to schools specified.	-Regional team purpose was broadly understood as a support role. -Task specificity was lacking with little direction provided for day-to-day operations. Role tensions between some central office role tasks and regional role tasks.	Directors and Team Managers identified as leaders.	-Some regions allowed direct contact with schools. Task specificity was lacking from leadership but developed with school personnel. This either supported or partially supported policy actions. Role tensions between team members due to overlapping role responsibilities	Misaligned task allocated. Varied understandings of role purpose No articulated specific role responsibilities.
		School tasks were to implement improvement cycles using the: school improvement model			Regional education officer to support schools in their school reviews. Schools access different regions' support if not offered by their own region.	
		School Improvement Hierarchy Standards of Practice.	Lack of agreed role enactment processes within regions and across regions for similar roles.			School reviews used a support focus; however, specificity in what support looked like was limited. No use of standards of practice.
Timing	Policies should reflect current, reliable and trusted information	Five-year policy timeframe (2020–2024) Schools are to implement the Australian Curriculum Version 8 by the end of 2020. Continuous improvement cycles One region only identified 2020 timeframe for Australian Curriculum implementation No link to ongoing improving trends. Point in time measures only identified.	No reference to timeframes.	No reference to timeframes.	No reference to timeframes	No policy implementation timelines identified
Tools	Policies should identify mandatory requirements and be easy to access through DoE's procedure register.	Requirements outlined within P-12 CARF. Mandatory language not evidenced. Documents can be accessed on policy register and through an open internet search.	No mention of P-12 CARF or policy tools. No mandated requirements mentioned beyond completing mandated annual training modules.		Links made to the use of: P-12 CARF School Reviews Inquiry Model	Policy mandates embedded within descriptions.

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