

# Navigating Curricular Implementation in a Private Catholic Integrated School: A Critical Realist Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how a Catholic integrated school in northern Philippines implements mandated curricula while balancing policy requirements with its values and vision-mission. Using Margaret Archer's (1996) morphogenetic approach, the study explores how administrators and middle managers navigate pre-existing structural and cultural conditions. A qualitative case study design was employed, utilizing two focus group discussions. Findings indicate that curriculum implementation follows a process of double morphogenesis, where the school interacts with curriculum policies and enforcing structures, such as the Philippine Department of Education and accrediting agencies. While complying with these mandates, the school preserves its Catholic identity by adapting instruction, interpreting curricula through its values, and establishing monitoring and evaluation practices aligned with accrediting bodies. These interactions shape both structural and cultural emergence while staying true to the founder's vision. The study further reveals that structural mechanisms—such as national mandates and institutional affiliations—set conditions for adaptation, yet negotiations arise as the school maintains its religious identity. This is evident in curricular modifications, instructional monitoring, and a distinct teaching charism rooted in lived experiences. Ultimately, the findings suggest that critical realism, through the morphogenetic approach, provides insights into how intended curricula are translated into practice. By understanding these dynamics, curriculum developers and implementers can gain a clearer perspective on what constitutes effective and high-quality curriculum implementation.

**Keywords:** curriculum theory, critical realism, morphogenetic approach, curriculum implementation

## Introduction

Curriculum Implementation is defined as the enactment of a curriculum (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). This includes restructuring and replacing ideas, values, knowledge, skills, and programs instigated by the status quo (Print, 1993; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). These ideas, values, knowledge, and skills must be aligned with society's ideals and aspirations. Curriculum implementation is based on a mandated or prescribed intended curriculum, where what ought to happen—a plan or an intended program of some sort—needs to take place (Ellis, 2004). The intended curriculum is the main basis curricular leaders use in implementing the curriculum (Print, 1994).

However, the mandated intended curriculum has been heavily criticized for being too rigid, as it fails to adapt to the diverse contexts in which it is implemented. This rigidity creates a gap between the intended curriculum—primarily presented documents such as curriculum guides and department memorandums—and the actual experiences of school and classroom instruction, which involve the dynamic interactions, adaptations, and challenges faced by teachers and students (Dasas, 2021; Ng, 2018). Ng (2018) argues that successful curriculum implementation is a cultural change process that requires flexibility. In this context, school structures play a significant role by instilling traditional practices, ensuring teachers attain curricular goals, and allocating appropriate resources (Karakuş, 2021).

Curriculum presage refers to the various influences that curriculum developers face when designing educational programs. However, national curricula have been heavily criticized for lacking a sound theoretical basis at their inception and conception (Priestley, 2011). As a social contract, curricula are meant to reflect the goals and aspirations of the society for which they are developed. Yet, the involvement of multiple actors in the revision process often leads to an overloaded curriculum that lacks proper theoretical foundations (OECD, 2020). Additionally, the fact that intended curricula are not always developed by curricular experts further exacerbates this issue (Print, 2023).

Glatthorn (2018) emphasized the need for curricular leaders to meld theory into schooling practice. Yet, the field of curriculum studies notes that curriculum theory is in its primitive stages, with some theories providing a critical perspective of society and schools (commonly known as reconceptualists) and others offering a guiding practice, such as Ralph Tyler's procedural approach (Glatthorn, 2018). Thus, some curriculum scholars have proposed focusing curricular implementation on social construction (Goodson, 1990) and actual lived experiences (Aoki, 1993, as cited by Kadir, 2022). Priestley (2011) suggested using critical realism to provide a coherent theoretical underpinning to explain such phenomena, specifically Margaret Archer's (1996) Morphogenetic Approach.

Critical realism is a branch of philosophy developed by Roy Bhaskar that posits unobservable structures as the causes of observable events (Bhaskar, 1975). Bhaskar argued that the social world can only be understood by identifying and explaining the underlying structures that generate these events (Easton, 2010). The goal of critical realism is not merely to interpret phenomena or establish generalizable laws but to develop deeper levels of explanation and understanding (Withell, n.d.).

Building on Bhaskar's work, Margaret Archer (1995) proposed the morphogenetic approach, a dialectical model that addresses the relationship between structure and agency. Archer emphasized that *"the ultimate appeal of critical realism lies in its capacity to sustain a coherent conception of structure and agency without collapsing the one into the other"* (Archer, 1995, p. 15). This approach allows for an analysis of how pre-existing curricular policies (structures) influence, yet do not fully determine, the actions of school administrators and teachers (agents) in translating these policies into practice. It also highlights how agents can adapt, reinterpret, or resist these structures based on the school's unique cultural and organizational context (McAnulla, 2002).

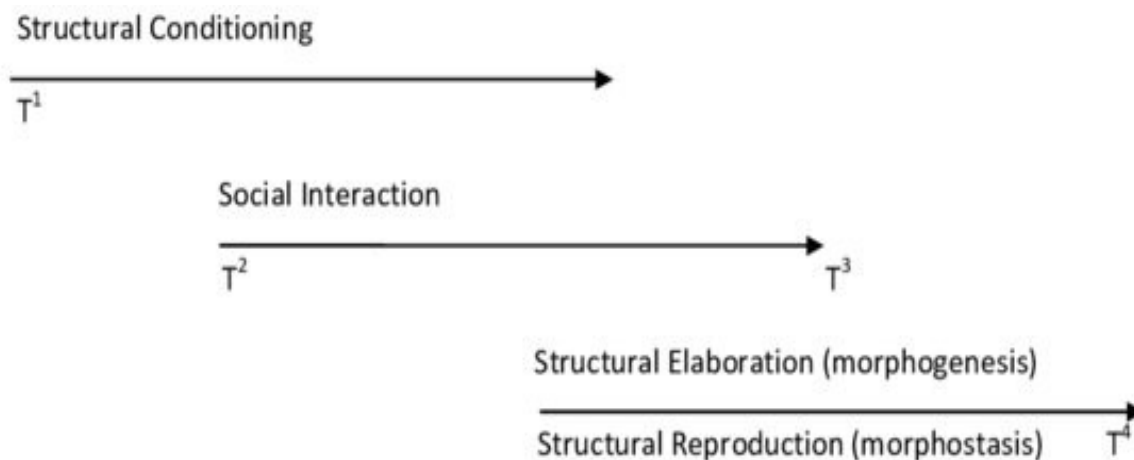
Figure 1 shows Archer's basic morphogenetic/static cycle model over time (Archer, 1995, as cited in Radulescu & Vessey, 2008). In this framework, the timeline is divided into four key points: T1, T2, T3, and T4 that describe how structures and agency interact

over time. T1 (Structural Conditioning) represents the pre-existing structural and cultural conditions that shape the context for action, such as policies, institutional norms, and cultural beliefs. These conditions influence the interests, opportunities, and constraints faced by different groups, setting the stage for how they will act. T2 (Socio-Cultural Interaction) refers to the phase where individuals and groups operate within these pre-existing conditions, making choices and engaging in actions that reflect their interests. During this phase, interactions can lead to conflicts, compromises, or consensual agreements, depending on the degree

of autonomy and power different groups hold. T3 (Structural and Cultural Elaboration or Reproduction) captures the outcomes of these interactions: if the actions challenge the existing conditions successfully, structural and cultural elaboration occurs, leading to changes in the system; if not, structural and cultural reproduction happens, maintaining the status quo. T4 then represents the new set of structural and cultural conditions that emerge from the outcomes at T3, which become the starting point for the next cycle at T1, illustrating the ongoing and dynamic nature of social systems.

**Figure 1**

*The Basic Morphogenetic/static Cycle with its Three Phases (Archer 1995, as cited in Radulescu & Vessey, 2008)*



Archer (1996) later refined these terms to Cultural Conditioning (T1), Socio-Cultural Interaction (T2), and Cultural Elaboration/Cultural Reproduction (T3) to emphasize the significant role of cultural factors in the interplay between structure and agency (McAnulla, 2002). This cyclical process illustrates how structural and cultural conditions are both the medium and outcome of social actions, capturing the dynamic nature of curriculum implementation as schools navigate between prescribed policies and localized adaptations.

Priestley (2011) has emphasized that critical realism can be highly relevant in formulating curriculum theory. He stated that schools, comprising individuals, and social groups, that comprise the school as a whole institution, can be identified as a sub-stratum

of the wider educational system. These components come together and interact, possessing emergent properties of their own. Moreover, individuals exist independently of the knowledge of such structures and thus create causative influences on social events. Priestley (2011) also mentions that critical realism can inform school-based curriculum development in terms of how policymakers construct policy for change and how local education authorities manage the policy change. Goodson (1990) has long advocated studying the social construction of curriculum in terms of interaction or the interactive level. He urged the study of the closer connection between curricular policy and school processes.

Various studies have utilized the morphogenetic approach in education, focusing on policy transfer

(Yang & Chia, 2023), educational technology (Li, 2016), interventions (Abbott et al., 2024), sustainability (Khazem, 2018), and historical failures (Pretorius, 1993). However, none examined how schools interact with prescriptive national curricula, which could inform curriculum theory building. The rationale for using the morphogenetic approach lies in its ability to reveal how underlying structures—such as policies and institutional norms—shape observable events like curriculum implementation (Bhaskar, 1975). As Archer (1995) explains, it provides a “stratified ontology of the social order, endorsing emergence and the causal consequences of the second or third-order interplay between emergent properties and powers” (p. 15).

This means that while we might only observe the visible actions of teachers and administrators, these actions are influenced by deeper, less visible structures and beliefs. The morphogenetic approach aligns with the core principles of critical realism: ontological realism (the belief that real structures exist independently of our knowledge – that of curricular policy and structures that implement such), epistemic relativism (understanding that our knowledge of these structures is fallible and influenced by context), and judgmental rationality (the ability to assess competing explanations to find the most reasonable one) (Archer, 2020). This makes the morphogenetic approach well-suited for examining the complexities of curriculum implementation.

Therefore, the goal of the study was to describe how a private Catholic school implements the prescribed national curriculum following Margaret Archer's (1996) morphogenetic cycle. The choice of a Catholic integrated school provided a unique case due to its position within the Philippine education system, which features a top-down curriculum policy mandated by the Department of Education. As a private Catholic institution, the school possesses a certain degree of autonomy in implementing curricula, while also adhering to quality assurance standards set by accrediting bodies, and a distinct set of school philosophy and values. This context made it particularly suitable for examining the tensions between mandated policies and the school's own values, beliefs, and norms. The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What pre-existing structural and cultural conditions do school administrators and academic middle managers work with?
2. How do school administrators and academic middle managers navigate these pre-existing structural and cultural conditions to implement the curriculum according to their values, beliefs, and norms?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This research employed a case study design, which is particularly useful in critical realism research for uncovering deeper causal mechanisms within specific contexts (Fuchs & Robinson, 2023). While case studies focus on instances, they allow for theoretical generalizations by identifying and explaining the underlying structures and mechanisms that influence observed events. In this study, the case of a private Catholic integrated school provided a detailed context for examining how administrators and middle managers navigate the tensions between mandated curricula and the school's own values, beliefs, and norms. This approach facilitated an iterative process of understanding curriculum implementation beyond the immediate case.

The use of a case study approach through the morphogenetic framework has been detailed by Archer (2020), who argued that researchers can break up the morphogenetic cycle to contribute to the material and fully explain the phenomena. Archer referred to this as Practical Social Theory (PST), emphasizing that the framing of research questions is the most important element. While educational systems, such as that in the Philippine context, may be centralized, the actors within these systems—such as school administrators and middle managers—demonstrate reflexivity in adapting and interpreting curriculum policies. This reflexivity supports Ng's (2018) argument that successful curriculum implementation is a cultural change process requiring flexibility. It also illustrates the core principle of analytical dualism in the morphogenetic approach, which distinguishes between structural constraints and the agency of individuals in shaping curriculum implementation (Archer, 2020).

## **Locale of the Study**

The study was conducted in a Catholic integrated school offering elementary, junior high school, and senior high school education. The locale of the study was chosen as Catholic schools follow a set of practices and cultural beliefs/traditions aligned to the teachings of the Catholic Church through school-mandated activities and practices which in turn promote a unique Catholic identity (Malacao & Del Castillo, 2021). Moreover, the Catholic schooling tradition in the Philippines has long been rooted in its more than 400-year history with the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines accounting for almost 1,300 schools nationwide (Palma, 2012).

The school is in a province north of the Philippine capital and is classified as a rural private sectarian school. However, due to its specific location being at the border of the provincial capital, the school characterizes itself as an urban school. At the time of the writing of the study, the school is in its 7th year of operation. It is run by a congregation of Catholic priests and brothers. The student population is around one thousand two hundred (1,200) with approximately eighty (80) teaching and non-teaching personnel. Moreover, the school's history extends beyond its seven years of existence. The congregation of priests who run the school has been present in the province for more than sixty-five (65) years. The name of the school has been entrenched in the culture of the province and has gained a reputation as an "exclusive school for boys" catering to the rich and upper-middle class of the province. Thus, the re-establishment of the school follows a long history of traditions, cultures, and beliefs in education rooted in the founder's philosophy and the practices of seasoned personnel who have been affiliated with running schools of the said congregation.

As of writing, there are two schools of the same name managed by the same congregation of priests and brothers in the province. It should also be noted that the school is a member of an association of schools on Luzon Island that share the same name and are managed by the same congregation. This association aims to attain common philosophies and educational objectives of its founder and standardize various activities that may complement the majority of the schools (Pacheco & Valera, 2023). The curriculum

implemented in the school adheres to Philippine laws and policies pertinent to educational policies such as the Enhanced Basic Education Act and the Revised Manual for Private Schools in Basic Education (Department of Education, 2010; Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, 2012).

## **Participants of the Study**

A total of two school administrators (A1 and A2) and three subject area heads (S1, S2, and S3) participated in the study. Below is the profile of each participant:

- **A1** is the principal of the school and has been with the institution since it was founded seven years ago. She has been working with the schools of the congregation for more than 30 years.
- **A2** is currently serving as the Assistant Principal for Academic Affairs for over a year. She has been working as an English teacher and Subject Area Head for 10 years within the schools of the congregation.
- **S1** is the current Subject Area Head for Science and has been working with the schools of the congregation for more than 30 years.
- **S2** is the current Subject Area Head for Filipino and has been with the institution for over six years.
- **S3** is the current Subject Area Head for Social Science and has been with the institution for over four years.

The inclusion of these participants was based on their extensive experience in interacting with prescribed curricula, coordinating with national governing authorities on the implementation of the mandated curriculum, and bridging the intended curricula to students through checks and balances with the teachers who implement the curriculum (Goodson, 1990; Priestley, 2011). The study intentionally excluded teachers to concentrate on the decision-making, interpretations, and adaptations made by school administrators and subject area heads, whose roles are essential in translating mandated curricular policies into strategic and actionable practices for effective curriculum implementation. Their role in decision-making and guiding teachers is crucial for

exploring how curriculum policies are interpreted and adapted at higher levels before reaching classroom implementation.

## **Methods and Analysis**

Data were collected from participants through two separate focus group discussions, one for the administrators and another for the subject area heads. Focus group discussions were seen as a viable means of collecting detailed descriptions of how the school leaders interact with the curriculum. These provided a detached approach to how the said groups can co-construct each other's ideas toward building such descriptions. (Fuchs & Robinson, 2023). Moreover, the data gathered from the said groups provide a rich in-depth analysis of structures given their roles as key actors in the implementation of curriculum. Data will provide sufficient analysis of realist methodology that will allow us to expand our understanding of the interdependence of social structures and social interaction which has been explicitly defined in this paper (Crinson, 2007).

A social studies professor with a specialization in Anthropology validated the questions asked during the focus group discussions (FGDs). In the data collection process, some questions were reworded to ensure that participants fully understood the vocabulary. After conducting the two FGDs, the discussions were transcribed and analyzed the data through thematic analysis, which was well-suited for its iterative nature and ability to capture detailed descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of deriving themes involved several steps: (1) FGDs were transcribed and key utterances that referred to structural and cultural conditions were highlighted. (2) The utterances were classified into categories, ensuring that perspectives from both administrators and subject area heads were represented. (3) These categories were reviewed and refined by aligning the meanings of the utterances with the research questions. This systematic approach enabled the identification of themes that effectively illustrated how the curriculum is implemented in the school (Braun & Clarke, 2022, as cited by Fuchs & Robinson, 2023).

## **Statement of Positionality**

It should be noted that the researcher is an employee of the institution where the focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted and works in its senior high school sector. The researcher has been working in the institution for more than two years. To address concerns regarding self-involvement and lack of distance, the researcher provided a reflexive journal entry in the conclusion section of the paper to address these issues (Fuchs & Robinson, 2023; Turner, 2020). Keeping a reflexive journal allows researchers to critique, appraise, and evaluate how their perspective and context shape the research process. This involves reflecting on personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual aspects throughout the process of writing the study (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

## **Ethical Considerations**

To gather data, a letter of consent to conduct the FGDs was sent to the school director. Moreover, at the beginning of each FGD, the participants were asked to state their names and positions in the institution. The consent form included information about the use of the gathered data which was for the sole purpose of writing this research paper. Confidentiality of the identity of the participants and the school was also ensured. Thus, the researcher concealed data that may allow readers to identify this study's locale.

## **Limitation of the Study**

The results of the study are based on data gathered from focus group discussions. Other documentation and processes may provide deeper insights, such as a longitudinal study from T1 (Structural/Cultural conditioning) to T3 (Structural/Cultural Elaboration) and T4 (continuation of the cycle where most critical realist studies using the full Morphogenetic Approach glean on (Archer, 1996). Moreover, it should be emphasized that this study views curricular implementation as a space for social interaction and is not concerned with the fidelity of curricular implementation policy which is the focus for recommendation by curricular scholars mentioned above (Karakuş, 2021; Priestly, 2011).

## RESULTS

### On pre-existing structural and cultural conditions school administrators and academic middle managers work with

The results of focus group discussions revealed three themes as how the management navigate with structural and cultural conditions to implement the prescribed national curriculum.

#### *Theme 1.1: Agencies, organizations, and policies*

The first theme highlights the government and non-government agencies and organizations the school follows, as well as the policies and guidelines it adheres to. Primarily, the school abides to the Philippine Department of Education as the structure that implements a prescribed curriculum. It also abides with accreditation bodies such as the Private Education Assistance Committee (PEAC) the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU), regulating the quality and standards of education of the school.

**S3:** *“First one is ‘yung DepEd (Department of Education) since ‘yun ang pinakacore na sinusunod natin” [“The first one is the DepEd (Department of Education) since this is the core of what we follow”]*

**A1:** *“I think (soon) we will also want to have a check and balance following the standard by submitting to an accrediting body like PAASCU. For now, we have PEAC, so I think we can have a check and balance if we are doing, if we are following our prescribed curriculum and have a high standard.”*

Beyond state-mandated regulatory bodies, the school is also accountable to a school association under the congregation of religious priests, here referred to as (AAA), which ensures the quality and identity of Catholic education within its network.

**A2:** *“Since we operate not as a separate institution, we are operating still in coordination with the Department of Education, of course. And aside from that, we are also under the AAA Organization.”*

In addition, the school interacts with various public bodies such as local government units (LGUs) and other government agencies, which supplement the implementation of curricular activities. Given its identity as a Catholic institution, the school also aligns its policies and curriculum with the teachings and principles of the Catholic Church.

**A1:** *“Being a Catholic institution we are also bound to follow the Catholic Church teachings and principles, because mainly the schools as Catholic institutions, specifically (the school) should abide and follow the Catholic teaching and principles of the Church.”*

**A2:** *“... if we have outside or off-campus activities, aside from DepEd, we ask the assistance of the local government unit or the barangay where the school is situated.”*

This interaction with public bodies presents both alignments and tensions. While the school follows government regulations to ensure compliance with national educational standards, it also negotiates its autonomy to maintain its religious identity. The respondents noted that policy implementation is primarily top-down, citing Republic Act 10533, which mandates the Enhanced K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum, and DepEd’s curricular documents, such as the Minimum Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs).

**A1 and S3:** *“... we follow the Enhanced Basic Curriculum, the DepEd Order 31 of 2012. That is what we are following, and I think the Republic Act 10533 if I’m not mistaken.”*

**A2:** *“So if we are talking about the current curriculum, we are using the MELCS, the Minimum Essential Learning Competencies”*

The school thus operates within a complex structural where political forces dictate curricular guidelines while Catholic educational values shape its overall school cultural practices and approach. By working within these frameworks—complying with government mandates while asserting the school’s mission and vision—the school continuously negotiates its position between public accountability and private interests.

This dynamic reflects how bureaucratic change forces, driven by mandates and policy documents, serve as key drivers for curricular change and implementation (Sergiovanni, 1998, as cited by Rogan & Grayson, 2003). Identifying these structures allows for a better understanding of the range of actions available to the school (McAnulla, 2002). In the Philippine context, where private educational institutions maintain its private identity by negotiating policies which they deem misaligned with the preservation of their Catholic educational mission.

### **Theme 1.2: Roles of Structures**

The second theme shows how the respondents describe the role of the structures that they work with in implementing the curriculum. As curriculum implementers, they must follow policies crafted at the national level, with the Department of Education (DepEd) ensuring compliance through the Minimum Essential Learning Competencies (MELCS) and DepEd Orders.

**A2:** *“So if we talking about the current curriculum, we are using the MELCS, the Minimum Essential Learning Competencies and it is stated in one of the Department Orders. I am not sure kung anong number yon and series states that we have to at least cover all the competencies in the MELCS or Most Essential Learning Competencies and we should not omit any competencies since it is already decongested because of the pandemic. But the school especially in our case since we a private institution, we have the leeway to give an add-on to the current implementation of the curriculum.”* [“So if we talking about the current curriculum, we are using the MELCS, the Minimum Essential Learning Competencies and it is stated in one of the Department Orders. I am not sure which number and series states that we have to at least cover all the competences in the MELCS or Most we have to at least cover all the competencies in the MELCS or Most Essential Learning Competencies and we should not omit any competencies since it is already decongested because of the pandemic. But the school especially in our case since we a private institution, we have the leeway to give an add-on to the current implementation of the curriculum.”]

Beyond enforcing the national curriculum, DepEd also oversees and approves any modifications or additional programs that private institutions integrate. PEAC and PAASCU serve as quality assurance bodies, ensuring that private schools meet high academic standards while maintaining curricular compliance.

**A1:** *“I think (soon) we will also want to have a check and balance following the standard by submitting to an accrediting body like PAASCU. For now, we have PEAC, so I think we can have a check and balance if we are doing, if we are following our prescribed curriculum and have a high standard.”*

Additionally, as a Catholic institution, the school is a member of the AAA Organization, which not only ensures quality implementation but also safeguards the founders’ spiritual charism and the inclusion of character formation in the curriculum.

**A2:** *“...we are also under the (AAA organization). I think another structure that supports the effective implementation of the curriculum is that we maintain quality in terms of curriculum implementation. The curriculum is not only implemented at the level of what is provided by the Department of Education but there are, kung бага, extra, extra, or add-ons to the curriculum (somehow, additional elements or add-ons to the curriculum). As was mentioned, we are a Catholic institution, so because of that, we also value character formation as part of our curriculum implementation” (translated).*

Other government agencies also play a supporting role in curriculum implementation. As mentioned in the previous theme, the school coordinates with local government units (LGUs) for outbound activities and partners with agencies such as the Department of Health (DOH) and the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) for school-related curricular activities. The various roles of these organizations and structures support the literature that curricular implementation operates as a system (Beauchamp, 1975, as cited by Ng, 2018), where personnel, organizations, and procedures work together to produce, implement, evaluate, and modify the curriculum. Crucial to this is how the school, as a Catholic institution, negotiates



with these public bodies to balance its private interests with the public mandates of the state. While the school adheres to DepEd's prescribed policies and the "intended curriculum," it also integrates religious and character formation programs as "add-ons" to align with its Catholic mission. This interaction is evident in its compliance with accreditation standards set by PEAC while simultaneously aligning with DepEd's requirements, enabling a degree of autonomy. However, this dual adherence can also create tensions, particularly when faith-based values necessitate curricular modifications that differ from the secular focus of public mandates.

For instance, the inclusion of Christian Living Education alongside DepEd's mandated subjects exemplifies how the school negotiates curriculum content to reflect both compliance and its religious identity. Such tensions highlight the complexities of maintaining institutional autonomy while fulfilling state educational requirements. Cognizant to Philippine context, private educational institutions uphold their identity by negotiating policies that they deem misaligned with their Catholic educational mission, ensuring that faith-based formation remains central to their curriculum.

### **Theme 1.3: Structural Practices**

This theme explores the practices employed by government organizations and agencies to ensure the proper implementation of the prescribed curriculum.

The Department of Education (DepEd) communicates policies through the dissemination of memorandums and orders:

**A2:** *"...all DepEd orders naman are being communicated and disseminated through the different divisions. Of course, the office of the principal in coordination with the Division Office, will received it, and then the Principal's office will communicate whatever DepEd Orders or memorandums that are coming from the division office that need pertaining the curriculum implementation."* ["...all DepEd orders are communicated and disseminated through the different divisions. Of course, the Office of the Principal, in coordination with the Division Office, receives them, and then the Principal's

Office communicates any DepEd orders or memorandums from the Division Office that pertain to curriculum implementation."]

Beyond policy dissemination, DepEd conducts visits to monitor practices for specific purposes. These visits include standardized testing oversight and verification of curricular implementation documents.

**A1:** *"Usually, (DepEd) visits two to three times in a school year, but with a specific purpose. Like for example, they want to oversee the NAT proceedings, the BECP (Basic Education Continuity Plan) implementation of the school, something like that."*

**S1:** *"Tsine-check din iyan kasi, there was a time na nagpunta ang mga taga-DepEd nun chineck tayo and that was during the pandemic, at hindi lang ang set up ng school ang chineck but all the documents in the principal's office."* ["They also check that because there was a time when DepEd representatives visited and that was during the pandemic. They did not only check the school setup but also all the documents in the principal's office."]

As a means of communication, schools submit circulars and documents to DepEd, reporting how curricula are implemented.

**A2:** *"Whenever we submit documents or documentary requirements of the Department of Education to what the curriculum will be implemented or each school year, I think we include that in the documents for the circular letters or communications that we give to them."*

DepEd also monitors curriculum implementation through standardized testing evaluation practices.

**S1:** *"In connection with the assessment, ang mga bata naman natin naa-assess sila nationally kasi there are National Achievement Tests na binibigay sa kanila. So hindi lang iyong atin, iyong pang AAA assessment ang binibigay sa kanila. Meron din silang assessment coming from the DepEd. Like the National Achievement Test (NAT)."* ["In connection with the assessment, our students are also assessed nationally because there are National Achievement Tests

given to them. So it's not just our own or the AAA assessment that is given to them. They also have assessments coming from DepEd, like the National Achievement Test (NAT)."]

Accrediting bodies such as the Private Education Assistance Committee (PEAC) and the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU) oversee curriculum implementation through quality markers, self-surveys, and evidence compliance. They also conduct school visits, either virtually or in person.

**S1:** *"Say for example, sa mga meetings that PEAC requires, they would ask us for evidence like minutes, ganoon. (Moreover, they visit onsite), face-to-face interview, if we really abide by the policies of the PEAC for accreditation."* ["Say for example, in meetings that PEAC requires, they would ask us for evidence like minutes and so on. Moreover, they visit onsite for face-to-face interviews to see if we really abide by the policies of the PEAC for accreditation."]

PEAC supports curriculum implementation by providing documentation formats for curriculum translation practices, often modeled after DepEd's standards.

**S1:** *"The PEAC, oo the PEAC, tie up with the DepEd that is why some of our documents, in terms of curriculum implementation, we adapt it from the PEAC. That's why the LP (lesson plan) that we are using now is a PEAC design. (Including) the curriculum map, we also follow that of PEAC. However, we also abide by the DepEd. That's why the two are tied up."* ["The PEAC, yes the PEAC, collaborate with the DepEd, which is why some of our documents related to curriculum implementation are adapted from the PEAC. That's why the LP (lesson plan) that we are using now is designed by the PEAC. We also follow the PEAC's curriculum map. However, we still comply with DepEd, which is why the two are tied together."]

PEAC further supports curriculum implementation through professional development initiatives, such as teacher training.

**S2:** *"May planning naman tayo doon like sa simula ng school year... So, andyan na din yung training ng PEAC na may workshop talaga na iprepresent."* ["We have planning for that, like at the start of the school year... So, the PEAC training is also there, which includes a workshop where you are required to present."]

The AAA organization plays a significant role in ensuring a shared understanding of quality curriculum implementation across schools vis-à-vis aligning to its mission as a Catholic school. It facilitates collaboration among teachers and provides opportunities for shared professional learning.

**S1:** *So there are schedules of meetings wherein all teachers from different schools meet. 'Di ba, that is for all AAA educators in the form of an AAA hub. Nagmimmeet tayo to check if we are on the same wavelength in terms of competencies, philosophy, vision-mission natin."* ["So there are schedules of meetings wherein all teachers from different schools meet, right? That is for all AAA educators in the form of an AAA hub. We meet to check if we are on the same wavelength in terms of competencies, philosophy, and our vision-mission."]

AAA also spearheads activities that focus on character formation for both teachers and students.

**S1:** *"Meron silang formation for all AAA educators. Hosted by \*\*\*Press, and even formation for the students, di ba... yung press con, that is also under AAA Publishing."* ["They have formation programs for all AAA educators, hosted by \*\*\*Press, and even formation programs for the students, right? The press con is also under AAA Publishing."]

**S3:** *"(may) mga leadership training pero sa mga students po..."* ["There are leadership training programs, but for the students..."]

AA further reinforces quality control through standardized testing to ensure uniform quality of curriculum implementation across its member schools.

**A2:** *"...through the AAA assessment as mentioned earlier, if the Department of Education has to*

*give achievement tests like the NAT, for AAA, part of its check and balance is the AAA Standardized Education Test.” [“...through the AAA assessment as mentioned earlier, if the Department of Education administers achievement tests like the NAT, for AAA, part of its checks and balances is the AAA Standardized Education Test.”]*

The findings in this theme illustrate how government agencies, accrediting bodies, and educational organizations enforce structural control over curricular implementation. As observed in the responses of focus group discussion (FGD) participants, DepEd, PEAC, PAASCU, and AAA implement various oversight practices, including coordination, monitoring, evidence documentation, and standardized testing. These practices highlight the constant need to ensure quality, emphasizing that structured organizations play a crucial role in maintaining and improving curricular standards.

This supports the literature on Fullan’s (2006) Change Implementation Model, which emphasizes that change should be assessed based on the quality of existing innovations before initiation. Additionally, it aligns with Banathy’s (1991, as cited in Rogan & Grayson, 2003) concept of an administrative level of curricular implementation support, which underscores the need to formalize information regarding resource requirements that facilitate learning and to negotiate the use of those resources. The structured oversight mechanisms in place demonstrate that quality assurance is not incidental but a systematic and deliberate process embedded within the mandates of these organizations.

### **On school administrators and academic middle managers interacting with the pre-existing structural and cultural conditions to implement the curriculum according to their values, beliefs, and norms**

The focus group discussions yielded four key themes regarding how the school engages with these structural and cultural settings to align with its values, beliefs, and norms. Social groups advocating specific values can challenge and/or negotiate imposed structural and cultural norms (Archer, 1996; McAnulla, 2002), thereby ensuring curriculum implementation that reflects the school's core principles.

## **Theme 2.1. Upholding Catholic Values and School Identity**

As a Catholic institution emphasizing spiritual formation, respondents highlighted the centrality of the school’s mission, vision, and philosophy in shaping curriculum delivery.

**A1:** *“The values and Catholic teachings and principles are (also) embedded in the Philosophy (and) vision mission of the institution. We make it a point that they are operational daily concretely expressed through programs, spiritual and values formation programs.”*

The presence of priests and brothers plays a crucial role in translating the school founder’s educational philosophy into practice.

**A1:** *“...through the presence of the religious in our midst, we have the \*\*\* Fathers and Brothers who also carry with them and make it a point that these values that the school is holding on be implemented.”*

Respondents also described a distinctive educational system and style unique to the AAA organization, rooted in the congregation’s philosophy of educating the youth. This is reflected in the values and school culture shared across AAA member schools.

**S3:** *“Siguro po yung unique, kasi \*\*\*school... yung kung ano mang po Vision-Mission ng mga (other) AAA schools before susundin yung sa DepEd kasi parang yon yung originality tulad ng (AAA system of education).” [“Perhaps what makes it unique is that for AAA schools... whatever the vision-mission of the (other) AAA schools are, they will follow that first before following DepEd because that’s what makes us original like the AAA system of education.”]*

**S1:** *“Actually, hindi lang yung AAA style and AAA system, even the core values that we have... those values are very much integrated within our LP (lesson plan)...” [“Actually, it’s not just the AAA style and AAA system, even the core values that we have... those values are very much integrated within our LP (lesson plan)...”]*

## Theme 2.2. Curriculum Implementation Modification

As a private Catholic school, modifications in curricular implementation are evident in specific subjects such as Christian Living Education (CLE) and Science.

**A2:** *“I think one concrete example for this negotiation part with the government specifically the Department of Education, if the current subject offerings that we have, like for example in the DepEd curriculum we only have the GMRC or the ESP, but since we really uphold the character and faith formation of the students we include the Christian Living Education.”*

**S1:** *“Kami, sa Science kasi, if you notice ang start ng teaching of Science ay grade 3. So, 3 hanggang 12 na iyon. Wala tayong Science sa Grades 1 and 2. Pero ang ibang schools may Science ang Grades 1 and 2 nila. So how did we negotiate with the DepEd, how come na-approve sa atin na walang Science ang 1 and 2. Actually, ang content ng Science 1 and 2 is more on health. Health and hygiene, iyon ang content ng Science sa 1 and 2. So iyon ang ginawa natin as a school. Iyong mga lessons sa Science 1 and 2, inintegrate sila sa MAPEH. Kaya ang MAPEH nila, Music, Arts, PE and Health.”* [“For us in Science, if you notice, the teaching of Science starts in Grade 3, so it’s from Grades 3 to 12. We don’t have Science for Grades 1 and 2, but other schools do. So how did we negotiate with DepEd, and how did we get approval for not having Science in Grades 1 and 2? Actually, the content of Science for Grades 1 and 2 is more about health—health and hygiene—that’s the content of Science for those grades. So what we did as a school is we integrated the Science 1 and 2 lessons into MAPEH. That’s why their MAPEH includes Music, Arts, PE, and Health.”]

Spiritual and values formation extends beyond lesson plans and is embedded in school programs and everyday routines and school operations procedure.

**A2:** *“I think it is part of the entire structure of the school both for the students and the teachers that we have, at least it is manifested or integrated in the class schedule in the standard operating procedures in the daily operations of the school wherein we involve both the teachers and the*

*students in the religious formation or the spirituality of the stakeholders of the school.”*

Additionally, a respondent discussed adjustments to learning modalities permitted for private schools, particularly in response to the return to face-to-face classes post-pandemic.

**A2:** *“Although it was stated in the recent memorandum, I think that for this school year 2023-2024, at the beginning, public schools, public and private schools are encouraged to do the full face-to-face to address the beginning gaps in the academic skills of the students. However, there is a provision also that private schools may opt to implement modalities like lighter learning, given that the quality and given number of hours are improved.”*

## Theme 2.3. Curriculum Translation Practices

Curriculum translation involves interpreting government-mandated curricula within the school’s context (L. Dasas, 2020; Johnson, 1969). Respondents emphasized the role of hiring processes and professional development in ensuring proper implementation of the curriculum. This aligns with Dasas (2020) who emphasized the role of teacher profiles as key in curriculum alignment.

**A1:** *“I think it begins with the hiring process. We make sure that they are qualified to teach and that they are aligned with their subjects and areas of specialization, so we can effectively implement the curriculum.”*

**A2:** *“After the hiring, of course, we currently follow yearly professional development for teachers, especially for our faculty who are directly involved in curriculum implementation. At the beginning of the school year, we conduct orientation and induction for teachers, during which a significant part focuses on understanding and developing the curriculum.”*

Teacher beliefs also influence curriculum translation (Dasas, 2020). Respondents emphasized the need to cover all competencies and exercise discretion in adding competencies as needed.

**A2:** *“In the MELCS, or Most Essential Learning Competencies, we should not omit any competencies since it is already decongested because of the pandemic. However, the school, especially in our case since we are a private institution, has the leeway to add on to the current implementation of the curriculum.”*

**S1:** *“...we follow. We follow the arrangement coming from the DepEd. May ano lang tayo, uhh, konting autonomy na magdagdag ng competency na sa palagay natin andon siya pero natanggal... Parang nasobrahan ng tanggal doon sa ibang competencies yung MELCs. So may mga ibinalik na pakaunti-kaunti lang naman.”* [“...we follow. We follow the arrangement coming from the DepEd. We just have, uhh, a bit of autonomy to add competencies that we think should be there but were removed... It seems that some competencies were excessively removed from the MELCs. So, we brought back a few, just little by little.”]

The respondents also believe that some competencies involve higher-order thinking skills already and thus require careful planning and unpacking from the side of the teachers, as guided by their mentors/area heads.

**S3:** *kailangan namin mag-unpack kasi iyong ibang competencies agad na siyang nabibigyan suri, nabibigyan halaga. Agad na po siyang sa parang higher order thinking skills. Wala pa siyang natutukoy. Kasi hindi ka pwedeng mag-affirm na agad na mabibigyan halaga bago mag-definition of terms.”* [“We need to unpack because some competencies already are on the analysis or valuing level. They are immediately geared towards higher-order thinking skills without first identifying them. You cannot immediately affirm their value without going through the definition of terms.”]

A respondent also cited the belief of specific contextualization they had to do to adapt so students could relate to the content being taught. They believe that contextualization plays a role in ensuring content alignment with Catholic values and historical perspectives.

**S3:** *Reformation... against ito sa simbahan pero ikaw na Catholic institution. So kailangan, alam din po ito ng bata, so okay mayroon tayong*

*Spirituality. Ito against siya, pero dapat nai-intindihan niya yung reason na noong ganong panahon, against sila sa mga Catholic.”* [“Reformation... this is against the Roman Catholic Church. However, as a Catholic institution, we need to ensure that students understand this. So, okay, we have Spirituality. It is against it, but they should understand the reasons why, during that time, they were against Catholics.”]

Lastly, values integration is systematically embedded in curriculum mapping and lesson planning as described by one respondent:

**S2:** *...bago yung actual teaching siguro one week before kelangan makita ko na yung learning plan. Kung nakareflect ba yung alignment ng competencies sa core values, sa mission vision. So doon pa lang icheck na. Para on actual teaching, mamonitor din if maapply ba talaga yung Vision, yung Mission, nakaalign ba dito sa school.”* [“...before the actual teaching, maybe a week before, I need to see the learning plan. To check if the alignment of competencies with the core values, mission, and vision is reflected. So even at that stage, it should be checked. This way, during the actual teaching, it can be monitored if the Vision and Mission are really applied and if they align with the schools.”]

#### **Theme 2.4. Instructional Monitoring and Evaluation Practices**

Sound curriculum implementation requires robust instructional monitoring. Private schools mandate specific supervisory processes to maintain quality (DepEd, 2010). One administrator described the structured supervisory program implemented in the school.

**A2:** *“We have a strong supervisory program wherein the school has currently eight (8) subject area heads and I think two (2) coordinators for primary elementary and senior high school. Both keep the monitoring of our teachers, how they implement and what is the implemented in terms of curriculum and instruction.”*

Aside from this, non-teaching personnel were cited to provide holistic student support in the curricular implementation.

**A2:** *“For academic non-teaching, we have the support of the registrar, and we also have the guidance office, which is closely coordinated with the academic department so that other programs apart from the direct or the intended curriculum which are templated through instruction in the classroom, so at least it is being supported with other supports units in the academic for the holistic development of the students.”*

The subject area heads monitor curricular implementation through lesson plan reviews, curriculum mapping alignment, mentoring, and pop-in visits.

**S1:** *“One, we do check the curriculum map if the alignment with the values, with the policies, are present or existing. And then it’s not only in the hard copy that we check, we also do the pop-in visit just to make sure na nasusunod na talaga iyong nasa learning plan nila and how do they integrate the values of the school.”* [“One, we do check the curriculum map if the alignment with the values and the policies is present or existing. And then, it’s not only in the hard copy that we check; we also do pop-in visits just to make sure that what is in their learning plan is really being followed and how they integrate the values of the school.”]

Beyond these curriculum monitoring practices, role modeling is considered essential for teacher development and mentoring.

**A2:** *“I think it is part of the entire structure of the school, both for the students and the teachers, that we have. At least, it is manifested or integrated into the class schedule, the standard operating procedures, and the daily operations of the school, wherein we involve both the teachers and the students in the religious formation or the spirituality of the stakeholders of the school.”*

**S1:** *“Actually, role modeling lang ‘yan. Before you can ask them to adopt the values, you need to show them that you are the one, you are doing it.”* [“Actually, it’s just role modeling. Before you can ask them to adopt the values, you need to show them that you are the one doing it.”]

It is noteworthy to include that this ideal of role-modeling translates beyond the act of showing how it is done. Unique to the school’s identity is establishing rapport between teacher and student. This practice shows strong relationships of defining curriculum as lived experiences (Aoki, 2004 as cited by Kadir, 2022).

**S1:** *“Rapport, it doesn’t mean na komo teacher ka nila dapat mataas or dapat superior ka sa bata. Hindi ganon. When we talk about loving kindness or rapport, kapag sa classroom teacher ka nila at estudyante mo sila. Pero outside the classroom, you are a mother, a sister, a friend. Kasi, that is the only time that you can talk to them in their comfort zone.”* [“Rapport doesn’t mean that just because you’re their teacher, you should be above or superior to the students. It’s not like that. When we talk about loving kindness or rapport, in the classroom, you’re their teacher and they’re your students. But outside the classroom, you are a mother, a sister, a friend. Because that is the only time you can talk to them in their comfort zone.”]

In terms of evaluation, standardized testing by DepEd and AAA organizations ensures curriculum effectiveness. Subject area heads also implement assessment tools like Tables of Specifications (TOS).

**S1:** *“Gumagawa din tayo ng TOS (Table of Specifications) before we make our test. So kung ano lang talaga iyong gusto mong imeasure or i-assess sa mga bata, iyon ang lilitaw. In line with the competencies coming from DepEd.”* [“We also create a TOS (Table of Specifications) before we make our test. So that only what you really want to measure or assess in the students will come out. This is in line with the competencies coming from DepEd.”]

The identified themes align with social order theory, demonstrating how structure, agency, and culture shape curriculum implementation in a private Catholic school (Archer, 2020). Curriculum translation is an interplay of structural mandates, agency, and cultural influences, defining quality implementation. As a Catholic institution, the school negotiates its curricular decisions within the broader framework of state mandates, aligning its private interests with public educational policies.

The negotiations elucidated in the themes manifest as either cultural elaboration or cultural reproduction. Cultural elaboration is evident in how the school maintains its autonomy and Catholic mission through its traditions, such as religious celebrations, faith-based student formation programs, and faculty spiritual development. These practices reinforce the school's identity while allowing it to assert its distinct educational philosophy within the broader curriculum framework. Meanwhile, cultural reproduction is reflected in mandated practices such as the use of curricular guides and pro forma instructional implementation documents, which ensure adherence to state standards. These regulatory mechanisms structure curriculum delivery, reinforcing established norms and expectations in alignment with public educational mandates.

Furthermore, the findings underscore how institutional philosophy and values inform curricular choices, particularly in role modeling and student rapport. These highlight the critical role of curricular leaders in bridging theory and practice to create meaningful educational experiences (Glatthorn, 2018). One key area of negotiation is assessment, where the institution reconciles the national curriculum's emphasis on standardized evaluations with its commitment to Catholic values. While adhering to standardized assessments, the school supplements these measures with formative assessments grounded in ethical reflection, moral development, and service learning. However, tensions arise in balancing compliance with national policies and preserving institutional autonomy, particularly when state-mandated assessments prioritize quantifiable learning outcomes over the school's emphasis on holistic, values-based education. The challenge lies in ensuring that regulatory requirements do not undermine the school's commitment to faith-driven pedagogy and student formation. Ultimately, the school's approach embodies curriculum as lived experiences (Aoki, 2004 as cited by Kadir, 2022), reinforcing its distinct agential capacity in curriculum implementation.

## DISCUSSION

The practice as described above illuminates how the mandated curriculum is interpreted, translated, modified, monitored, and evaluated based on existing structures. Using Archer's (1996, 2020) analytical dualism, this study differentiates between pre-existing

structures (state-mandated policies and accreditation requirements) and the agency of school actors in modifying curricular implementation. This dynamic interaction follows the phases of the morphogenetic cycle, where structural conditions shape practice, socio-cultural interactions negotiate its enactment, and eventual elaboration or reproduction occurs.

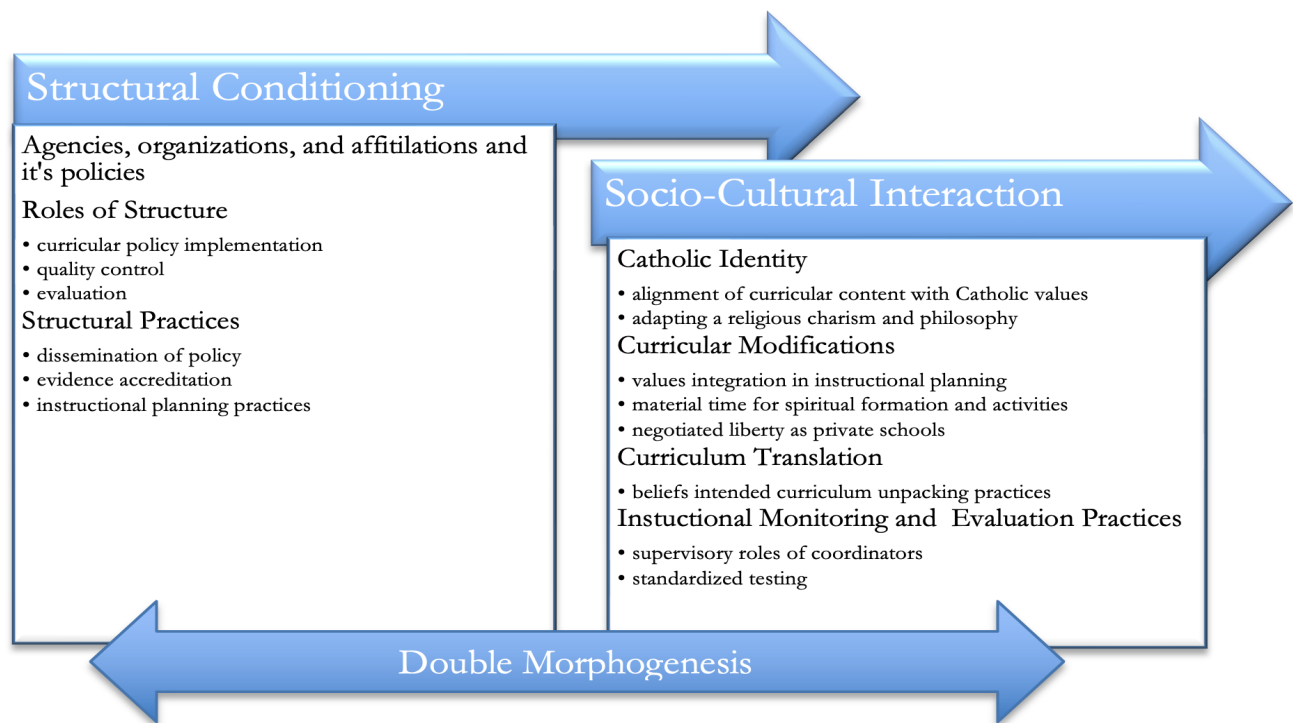
In this case, **structural conditioning** involves mandated requirements such as documentation, standardized lesson planning, and competency-based assessments (L. B. Dasas, 2021). However, **socio-cultural interaction** allows curricular leaders and administrators to negotiate these structures, leading to both reproduction and elaboration of curriculum implementation. Therefore, **structural and cultural emergence** does exist in schools as new roles and practices for professional engagement are defined (Priestly, 2011). A school, being a structure itself, shows organizational provisions and practices. In turn, as the school is an agent of curricular implementation, it renews its organization, roles, positions, and other cultural practices. This is what Margaret Archer termed double morphogenesis (Archer, 2020). To summarize these findings from the focus group discussion, a visual framework representation is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows a visual representation of the curricular implementation morphogenesis of the case study at hand. The two arrows on top represent the first two phases of the morphogenetic cycle as proposed by Archer (1996): **Structural Conditioning** and **Socio-Cultural Interaction**. As defined, **structural conditioning** refers to the context and action that subsequently take place. This case study has shown three basic structural influences of a Philippine Catholic integrated school:

1. **Agencies, organizations, affiliations, and mandates** – including DepEd, PEAC, PAASCU, and the AAA affiliation of the school.
2. **Catholic identity and school charism** – requiring alignment with the teachings and philosophies of the Roman Catholic Church including the schools unique charism.
3. **Curricular policy implementation** – influenced by quality control parameters and evaluation practices.

**Figure 2**

*Morphogenetic Cycle of Curricular Implementation Practices in a Philippine Catholic Integrated School*



The structural influences also elucidate distinct practices, such as **policy dissemination, accreditation through documentation of evidence as markers of quality,** and influences on **instructional planning practices.**

The **socio-cultural interaction** phase involves administrators and subject area heads engaging with these structures. This includes:

1. **Beliefs in instilling Catholic identity**
2. **Specific curricular modifications** such as the inclusion of material time for spiritual and values formation and exercising certain liberties as private schools
3. **Curriculum translation practices** that emphasize Catholic values in instructional planning and practice
4. **Instructional monitoring and evaluation practices**

### **Cultural Reproduction vs. Cultural Elaboration in Curriculum Implementation**

This interplay is evident in how the school both reinforces and modifies curricular practices. Structural

and cultural reproduction occurs through strict adherence to state-imposed accreditation processes, the continued use of pro forma instructional documents, and alignment with standardized assessment frameworks. However, cultural and structural elaboration is also apparent in the school's autonomy in integrating Catholic identity into its instructional approach and assessments, embedding values formation into instructional planning, and emphasizing character-based evaluation alongside standardized testing.

The bottom double-headed arrow in Figure 2 illustrates this **double morphogenesis**, wherein the school, as an agent of curricular implementation, simultaneously upholds and redefines structures and cultural norms in curriculum translation. This back and forth process reflects how Catholic educational institutions manage tensions between national mandates and their religious identity.

This study thus provides evidence of a distinct divide between the curriculum as planned and the lived or the experienced curriculum (Aoki, 2004 as cited by Kadir, 2022). As a result, the national curricular policy tends to create established practices that are superficial, particularly in the rigid adherence to



standardized assessments, mandated lesson planning formats, and documentation of evidence primarily for compliance rather than meaningful pedagogical development. These practices, while intended to ensure quality and accountability, often lead to performative implementation, where educators prioritize bureaucratic fulfillment over substantive learning experiences.

Through the lens of critical realism, this divide can be understood by distinguishing between the **real**, **actual**, and **observed** dimensions of curriculum implementation (Easton, 2010, Withell, n.d.). The real refers to the deeper structural mechanisms—such as national mandates and institutional affiliations—that shape curricular policy. The actual consists of the curriculum as formally prescribed and intended, including its structured assessments and documentation practices. However, what is observed in practice reveals a negotiation between these mandates and the school's institutional identity, where educators develop strategic responses that bridge compliance with faith-driven formation. This interplay of structure and agency underscores the school's role in navigating policy constraints while asserting its own curricular agency to sustain meaningful educational experiences (L. B. Dasas, 2021; Fullan, 2006; Goodson, 1990; Priestley, 2011)".

### **Researcher's Reflection**

While these findings provide insight into how school leaders and middle managers perceive their role in curricular implementation, the author maintained a reflexive journal to critically examine their positionality as an employee of the institution. It is important to highlight that the author, as a student of curriculum studies, subscribes to the perspective that curriculum is both planned and procedural. This perspective asserts that curricular practice must involve the implementation of an intended curriculum, which is subsequently enacted and assessed.

Furthermore, the author acknowledges that their role within the institution is shaped by policy directives from the school principal. As a result, certain conceptions of curriculum interpretation and implementation were observed during the study. One key observation is the prevailing notion that curriculum implementation is

primarily understood as the actual teaching of concepts and skills, rather than the pre-planning phase that occurs between curricular design and classroom instruction. These conceptions stem from the necessity of unpacking competencies and the process of contextualizing instruction during its enactment. Consequently, the seven guide questions used in the focus group discussions (FGDs) were refined and reinterpreted to better distinguish between curriculum planning and actual practice.

Additionally, the author recognizes that in conducting this study, institutional checks and balances were assumed to function effectively in reflecting the structural and social influences within which the school operates. It is worth noting that the school, despite its strong reputation in the province, remains in its early years. Its context is shaped by pre-existing accountability mechanisms—such as accreditation and standardized testing—which are assumed to be effective in maintaining robust monitoring and evaluation practices as prescribed by institutional structures.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study addresses the gap between the intended curriculum, as prescribed by national policies, and the lived curriculum that emerges through school and classroom instruction. While curriculum guides outline what ought to be implemented, the rigidity of mandated curricula often overlooks the diverse contexts in which schools operate. Grounded in critical realism and the morphogenetic approach, this study examines how a Catholic integrated school navigates structural constraints by interpreting, adapting, and negotiating policies within its institutional and cultural realities. As Priestley (2011) suggested, critical realism offers insights into how school-based practices mediate between national mandates and actual implementation, highlighting the dynamic interplay of structure and agency.

Findings reveal that curriculum implementation in the studied school is shaped by external policies yet transformed through institutional norms, values, and philosophies. Schools, as structured organizations, interact with regulatory bodies such as the Department of Education and accrediting agencies, which provide oversight and standardization. However, to maintain

their identity, schools reinterpret these mandates, ensuring that curricular implementation aligns with their core values. This process results in school-specific adaptations that reflect broader systemic issues in curriculum studies—particularly the tension between national standardization and local contextualization.

Moreover, this study underscores the absence of a unified curricular theory in national policies, reinforcing a top-down approach that limits meaningful adaptation. Political pressures also shape curriculum reforms, often compelling schools to modify implementation strategies to maintain institutional coherence. Additionally, while evaluation and monitoring practices are designed to ensure quality, they frequently become performative, emphasizing compliance over substantive learning. These systemic challenges highlight the need for a theoretical framework that bridges policy and practice in curriculum studies.

Despite ongoing discourse in the field, curriculum studies continue to grapple with the absence of a unifying theory that captures both the socio-political dimensions of schooling and the practical realities of implementation. Existing perspectives either critically analyze the broader role of education in society, as seen in reconceptualist approaches, or focus on structured planning models like Tyler's procedural framework. However, neither fully accounts for the complex interplay between policy mandates and institutional agency. This study addresses this gap by applying Archer's (1996) Morphogenetic Approach within a critical realist framework, theorizing how schools mediate top-down curricular policies. By examining how a Catholic integrated school negotiates external policy constraints while maintaining its institutional identity, this research operationalizes towards a more contextually driven practice. In doing so, it contributes to curricular theorizing by demonstrating how structure and agency interact in shaping curriculum implementation, responding to the need for a more coherent, practice-informed theoretical foundation in the field.

Applying Archer's (1996) morphogenetic approach offers a robust framework for understanding how schools engage in adaptation, negotiation, and renewal in response to policy constraints. This perspective moves beyond viewing curriculum as a static policy

document and instead frames it as an evolving practice shaped by institutional and socio-cultural realities.

Future research should further explore curriculum implementation through a critical realist and structure-agency lens. Expanding beyond single-case studies, mixed-methods and longitudinal research can provide deeper insights into how curricula evolve over time. Additionally, training school leaders in curriculum theory and leadership is essential to bridging the gap between policy intentions and meaningful implementation. Addressing these gaps in curriculum theorizing is crucial to ensuring that educational systems reflect both their philosophical foundations and the lived experiences of teachers and students.

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## About the Author

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