Aspirations for equity and excellence: A policy trajectory exploration of school improvement, informed by global policy reform, in one very remote Australian school

Thesis submitted by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

This thesis was written on Kaurna Country. I acknowledge that the lands, waters, and sky where I reside are Kaurna Country and acknowledge the Kaurna people as the custodians of this region. I seek to tread lightly on Kaurna land, and that of the First Nations people associated with this research, recognising the cultural authority of the Antakirinja, Matu, Yankunytjatjara, Arabunna, Adnyamathanha, Dieri and Wirangu peoples. I respect First Nations people's ongoing relationship with Country. Sovereignty for these Countries was never ceded. This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

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Undertaking this research and subsequent thesis creation have given rise to a journey of immense learning. In my transition from practitioner to researcher, I have been challenged to navigate insider/outsider positioning, be reflexive and ethical, and to put aside my own views to allow the data to tell an important story about which I am very passionate. I hold enormous gratitude to those who nurtured and shaped my journey.

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STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

Nature of assistance	Contribution	Names, title, affiliations of co-contributors
Intellectual support	Supervisors (Thesis writing and data analysis)	Dr Kerrie Mackey-Smith – Primary supervisor, James Cook University
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DECLARATIONS

Declaration

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

Karen Cornelius, 12 April 2024

Human Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the *Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2018).

This study was initially granted ethics permission by the *Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee,* on 20th July 2018, with an expiry date of 31st October 2022. The research was designated: *Project 7996.* This approval included an acknowledgement from the Education Department, that I was an employee and approved researcher at the case study school.

In July 2021, I transferred to James Cook University (JCU). This decision was taken to provide continuity of doctoral supervision through Dr Kerrie Mackey-Smith who took up a new academic position at JCU. The prior ethics approval was acknowledged by JCU and their Human Ethics Approval Number was *Project H8778.*

No participant concerns were submitted to either ethics committee. Final reports were submitted to both ethical research committees before the expiry date in 2022.

Statement of the use of Generative AI

Generative AI technology was not used in the preparation of any part of this thesis.

ABSTRACT

The impacts of conservative, neoliberal policy on Australian education aspirations for equity and excellence are a focal interest across this study. Globally, neoliberal market-dominated ideals and human capital theory underpin contemporary social policy, including education. These global education policy discourses are unproblematically adopted by education systems as they pursue improvement and *world class* education. Simultaneously, national agreements outlining Australian education aspirations have had equity and excellence at the forefront. The *Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Declaration of Goals for Education* (Council of Australian Governments, 2019) is the fourth national agreement espousing these values and is the nation's current, principal education policy document.

The study's primary objectives are positioned at the intersection of neoliberal influences and ambitions for equity and excellence. Here, the Australian state central to this study embraced school improvement policy solutions informed by global discourses and announced its intentions to become 'world class'. Their ambition was accompanied by the *Toward 2028: Department for Education Strategic Plan* (2019b) and supporting documentation.

This study is undertaken by a school principal with an interest in how policy impacted the workings of her very remote school. This context provided a unique platform for a complex, and ultimately, deeply human study of world class policy aspirations as a determining formation. To understand how the policy framed the requirement to improve, a critical policy trajectory approach was adopted to better understand the state education system's world class education aspirations and their enactment. Three contextual frames guided the policy trajectory research: the *context of influence*, the *context of policy text production* and the *context of practice* (Ball, 1993; Bowe et al., 1992).

The study begins with the *context of influence,* elucidating the neoliberal capitalism and global education policy trajectories that shaped Australia's education policy. Prominent are discourses of 'crisis' and 'falling standards' which buttress improvement aspirations.

Secondly, critical discourse analysis was applied in the *context of policy text production*. Bacchi's (2009, 2012) theoretical lens, *What's the problem represented to be?* approach, was employed*.* This approach applies critical scrutiny to postulated 'solutions' and

problematises taken for granted assumptions in policy texts. The study interrogated the state education department's (2019b) *Toward 2028: Department for Education Strategic Plan* to understand this policy text as a determining formation of teachers' work. Reflexive thematic analysis identified topics and themes that shaped the study.

How the study state's ambitions for world class education were enacted is the focal point for the third context, the *context of practice*. A case study was undertaken in a very remote school. This provided a unique setting for consideration of effects of the education department's policy position. Case study methodologies, borrowed from ethnographic methods, and reflexive thematic analysis represented lived experiences and tensions between policy and enactment. The perspectives and felt difficulties of the educators who volunteered to participate were represented as faithfully as possible.

Acknowledging and building on extensive policy sociology scholarship, this study contributes to the field by deeply attending to a unique context. It took a close lens to policy and enactment, foregrounding the experiences of educators in a remote school more explicitly than is often undertaken in studies with such an interest.

The study found that equity gaps intensified as the department pursued world class education ambitions. The department developed metro-centric initiatives and implemented 'simple' solutions and standardised measures. The key strategies: improvement planning, measurement of improvement, and standardisation of teachers' practice, actively silenced structural and contextual barriers and fell demonstrably short of reducing equity gaps in the remote school context.

Consequently, the study advocates for contextualised improvement work in remote and disadvantaged settings. Such work must be rooted in a deep understanding of the constraining forces of localised social structures. It reminds policy writers to be mindful of policy effects in schools that support remote and vulnerable communities. The study also sheds light on the implications of teaching being constituted and remade in the neoliberal 'common-sense' view and highlights the consequences for teachers' work and the intensification of equity gaps. Overall, the research makes clear the risks of policy logics that decontextualise, standardise, and treat all students the same.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND TERMS

Acronym	In full	Additional information (where relevant)
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics	
AC	Australian Curriculum	The national curriculum, developed by ACARA
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority	Responsible for developing the Australian Curriculum and NAPLAN
ACER	Australian Council of Education Research	
AERO	Australian Education Research Organisation	Funded by the federal government to identify research informed 'best practice'
AEU	Australian Education Union	Teacher's union organisational body
BI	Business Intelligence	Digital data management systems that enable easy user access
BST	Basic skills test	The statewide literacy and numeracy assessments introduced in 1995 for Year 3 and 5 students
CA	Conversation analysis	Method applied in case study analysis
CDA	Critical discourse analysis	Methodology applied
COAG	Council of Australian Governments	National political decision-making body, made up of the Prime Minister and Premiers of all states
CPS	Critical policy sociology	Methodology applied
DE		The public education department in the Australian state being researched. DE has been used throughout to support reader identification of this government agency.
DSAS	Desert Sunshine Area School	De-identified name for the case school, a preschool to year 12 education facility in Desert Sunshine
Elder		Respected First Nation knowledge holder, often also a community leader
ED	Education director	DE directors with responsibility for geographical groupings of the leaders of schools and preschools

GERM	Global education reform movement	
HITS	High impact teaching strategies	Teaching strategies identified as having high impact in classrooms
ILSA	International large-scale assessments	
IRSD	Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage	Australian Bureau of Statistics indicator of a community's socioeconomic disadvantage
IMF	International Monetary Fund	
JCU	James Cook University	
LET	Local executive team	The staff working in the regional office with the education director
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy	A series of basic literacy and numeracy skills tests administered to Australian students in year 3, 5, 7 and 9
NIT	Non-instruction time	Teachers' planning and preparation time within school hours
NSRA	National School Reform Agreements	Intergovernmental funding agreements – outlining commitments from states for federal funding
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	
PAT	Progressive Achievement Testing	Tests developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Reading and Mathematics) PATR- Reading Comprehension PATM - Mathematics
PIP	Priority Improvement Plan	Improvement plan based on expectations imposed on one-year turn around schools having annual external reviews
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment	Operated by the OECD
PSC	Phonics screening check	Statewide screening of Year 1 (six-year-old) students' phonics progression
PST	Preservice teachers	Undertaking their university training to become teachers

RTA	Reflexive thematic analysis	Data analysis process used in this study
SEA	Standard of educational achievement	DE's minimum expectations of student outcomes
SES	Socioeconomic status	
SIP	School improvement plan	
States	Australian states and territories	Australia has a federal government and six states and two territories with governance responsibilities (including education). This thesis refers to 'states' rather than the extended label for ease of reading.
WPRB	*What's the problem represented to be?*	Bacchi's approach to critical policy analysis
WTO	World Trade Organisation	

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, Australian education has been framed by policy ambitions for equity and excellence. The current *Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Declaration of Goals for Education* (Council of Australian Governments, 2019) envisions equity and excellence as having positive educational, social, and economic outcomes. My study is an exploration of equity and excellence impacts on a very remote school stemming from an Australian state education department's (2019b) ambition to shift up the global ranking scale 'from good to great', by becoming 'world class' by 2028.

A policy trajectory approach was undertaken to structure this investigation. Three contextual frames guide the policy trajectory research: the *context of influence*, the *context of policy text production* and the *context of practice* (Ball, 1993; Bowe et al., 1992). Firstly, the global narratives that influence Australia's frame of reference, the *context of influence,* identifies neoliberal capitalism and global education policy impacts. Prominent in this context are conceptions of 'crisis' and 'falling standards' which underpin and support ambitions for equity and excellence. Secondly, critical discourse analysis is employed in the *context of policy text production*, applying Bacchi's (2009, 2012) *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPRB) approach*.* Here, the study interrogates the state education department's (2019b) *Toward 2028: Department for Education Strategic Plan* (henceforth referred to as: DE's Strategic Plan)*,* to understand this as a determining formation of teachers' work. Thirdly, the *context of practice*, situates a case study in a very remote school and explores enactment and implications of 'world class aspirations' for equity and excellence. The remote and isolated case study location provides a unique setting for consideration of the effects of the education department's policy position.

This chapter leads the reader into my thesis. It introduces the researcher and situates my positionality as an educator. It then explicates the research question as intertwined with a policy 'problem'. Subsequently, this chapter explains the significance of this study and why the story demanded a voice, and finally introduces the thesis structure.

1.1.   PERSONAL CONNECTION TO THE STUDY

I chose to study the state education department's (DE) recent improvement ambitions because it launched and began to enact world class aspirations while I was principal of Desert Sunshine Area School (school alias, DSAS). With the school's senior leaders, I had lived experience of the changes in this very remote school and our insights supported an exploration of enacting mandates

thought to enable world class ambitions. My initial research intention had been to undertake ethnographic research about remote school leadership and teacher autonomy. DE's 'improvement' direction prompted a project refocus and honed my research topic.

My varied career experiences shaped a long-standing, professional drive toward democratic, agentive, and socially just pedagogy and leadership (Freire, 1994; Giroux, 2010). The transformative capacity of education was what motivated me to complete my teaching career as the principal of a remote school. I wanted to make a difference and offer service. What happened during my three-year DSAS tenure, and in the three years that followed, mattered to me and was 'an important story to be told, a story that lies deep within the soul' (Conteh et al. 2005, p. ix). Fundamentally, reflecting on my experiences and the literature I have canvassed across my career and during this period of study, I am of the view that public education is losing its association with service to the common good of a democratic society (Thomson, 2020). As Biesta (2009, 2015b) also laments, education has been devalued by neoliberal modes of governance, and here I aim to illustrate that the processes devaluing education are ironically intertwined with current school improvement agendas.

Recognising that a researcher's orientations are influenced by their 'socio-historical locations and becomings' (Blaikie, 2010, p. 53) and the importance of foregrounding one's positionality (Phillips et al., 2024), I will recount a little of my history as context for the study. The impetus to understand learning and help others to love learning has been a lifelong driving force. My determination to 'be a teacher' started early. As a young child, I attempted to organise the children in my street playground to come inside and sit in front of my blackboard to 'play school'. I was the first in my family to complete a tertiary degree and started my teaching career with intense enthusiasm and whole-heartedly committed to ongoing learning.

My career has provided extraordinary opportunities and has served to hone my professional care, my desire for all to be successful learners, and my equity values. My roles in education have ranged across Australian metropolitan sites, Thailand, and most recently a very remote school. I have fulfilled education roles as a teacher, school leader (deputy principal and principal), district director, central office superintendent, tutor for unemployed youth, and literacy coach.

Stepping back to reflect on my career, I recognise that one formative experience occurred more than twenty years ago, when I led a metropolitan school. I was introduced to the idea that students as young as Year 3 (8-year-olds) may decide that school was not for them. The work of

Smyth et al. (2000), recounted in their *Listen to me I am leaving* report, resonated. I was principal of a school with over 680 preschool and primary students (three to thirteen years-of-age) when I first read the report. Our school improvement plan at the time included a focus on increasing learner engagement. We made the connection between what we described as 'disengaged' and the report described as 'left' - present in body but not in mind. As a team, we aimed to strike a deliberate balance. Identifying that many students who were 'leaving' could not read, staff employed explicit literacy instruction to close reading gaps. This was alongside whole school innovative project-based learning, enterprise activities, and perhaps most importantly, genuine opportunities for student agency and voice in learning and school operations.[1]

This work with staff was underpinned by shared values. Collaboratively, we worked to resist deficit thinking, understanding that labels, punishment, and placing limits on options made the disengaged 'the problem'. We utilised students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Zipin, 2009) to find ways to connect them with the school and learning. One measure of our success was the reduction in 'time-out' as a 'consequence' of classroom and yard misbehaviour. In 2002, 280 time-outs were recorded in the department's data base. The following year, this had dropped to 96. In 2004, the school abandoned the time-out room, instead connecting students through a range of restorative practices to re-engage them with their education (School data). In 2005, the Federal Minister for Education came to the school, to publicly present me with a national award for quality school leadership. The award recognised the innovative work we had done as a staff to turn around the school culture, increase student engagement, and potentially influence students' life trajectories.

Fast forward twenty years of ongoing leadership experience to my latest post as principal at DSAS. DE launched its policies purporting world class aspirations in the second year of my tenure. It became clear that the principles underpinning my leadership were at odds with neoliberal-informed political reform (Harvey, 2005; Holloway, 2021b). This became my 'why'; the driving force that supported the dedication of four years of research to the problem at the centre of my study.

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[1] The My Significant Change Story written as part of reporting the middle school improvement journey to DE is available in Appendix 1 if more background about these leadership priorities would be helpful to the reader.

1.2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

School improvement is the fundamental topic of my research. Improving schools to better educate young people has always been core business. Consequently, my study does not challenge the validity of the intention to improve schools, rather it adopts a critically reflexive stance and problematises identified problems, assumptions, and claims that are associated with an Australian state's improvement policy and its enactment.

Addressing equity concerns is one role of education policy. Equity gaps are prominent in national education policy positions and central to Australian education policy actors' decision making. This positioning is not new. For decades researchers have affirmed that equity or social justice cannot be seen 'as an add-on … it is fundamental to what good education is about' (Connell, 1993, p. 15). While global measures and rankings are contested, they do intimate that the equity situation in Australia is worrying (Cobbold, 2021; Diem & Brooks, 2022; Savage et al., 2013). Evidence to support this concern comes from many quarters. Some examples include Australia's education system being ranked as the fourth most segregated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018). This ranking is an assessment of the disparity in educational attainment between disadvantaged students in comparison to those from advantaged backgrounds. Additionally, Australia's most disadvantaged students are widely reported as three years behind the most advantaged (Baker, 2019; OECD, 2018) and underperforming students fall a year further behind each time they undertake national literacy and numeracy assessments (Goss & Sonnermann, 2016).

Nationally, remote school students are overrepresented when considering the impacts of disadvantage. Their socioeconomic status is compounded by their location. A student's or school's postal code is widely recognised as a significant predictor of the quality of education students receive (Francis et al., 2017). The intersection of isolation and socioeconomic factors made DSAS a uniquely appropriate site for this study. Locating the case study in a very remote school, provided an opportunity to explore the outcomes and implications for potentially vulnerable students as a result of changing policy. Given that greater equity is recognised as providing economic and social cohesion benefits, 'how we treat the most vulnerable students shows who we are as a society' (OECD, 2018, p. 4). Of interest to my study was how a school serving vulnerable students was impacted by DE's policy agenda.

Australia's national education policy pairs ambitions for excellence with their equity goals. For the Australian state under examination here, excellence is a term synonymous with aspirations for world class education. Globally, neoliberal and capitalist discourses are woven into excellence aspirations, resulting in widespread reliance on measuring education and monitoring standardised outcomes as a conduit to excellence (Hardy & Lewis, 2018). Increasingly, global benchmarked standards and transferable reform packages or 'best practices' are considered a panacea to falling standards regardless of context (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016a).

Understanding how the policy's determining structures impacted on equity and excellence, the lived experiences of those working in the case school, and the conditions and effects for all involved with the school framed my research. Why this was important follows.

1.3.   AN IMPORTANT STORY TO BE TOLD

Midway through my principalship at DSAS, the department accelerated its adoption of neo-conservative determining formations to propel its schools further into the 'age of measurement' (Biesta, 2012; Smyth, Hattam et al., 2000) with standardised measures, pressure to conform, mandates for standardised approaches, and heightened accountability. I found myself curiously positioned for first-hand experiences of what Gonzalez and Firestone (2013) might describe as an educational tug-of-war between personal understandings and DE's new improvement initiatives.

I learned an enormous amount as a principal of DSAS and during my PhD studies. My closely held democratic and agentive principles and justice orientation were sharpened and fortified. I have been empowered by new knowledge. On leaving DSAS, I repeatedly heard myself thinking, 'I wish I knew then what I know now'. As a result of the labour on my thesis, it is my hope that this knowledge will be accessible to educators in the field. This thesis and the peer reviewed journal articles, both published and planned, might provide steppingstones for others facing similar educational tugs-of-war.

Educators need alternative narratives to confront the global and economic rationalist agendas, power structures, policy disjunctures, and conservative practices currently impacting education. The capillary nature of power enables dominant discourses to create 'consistent, subtle and continuous messages' which 'shape ideas about what children and teachers should think, say and do' (Gunn, 2019, p. 13). A deeper understanding of hegemonic structures and dominant discourses makes resistance and rethinking more possible.

The policy trajectory research underpinning this study intentionally disrupts destructive and unhelpful narratives by problematising DE's approach to improvement and exploring policy enactment through a case study. DE's improvement policy is an example of how a government is attempting to serve the 'national interest' through approaches that '… might satisfy "some of the people most of the time", thereby reducing potential resistance …' (Vidovich, 2003, p. 72). Embedded in the state's policy narratives are dominant global discourses which are failing to address growing equity gaps (Cobbold, 2021; Diem & Brooks, 2022; Savage et al., 2013). These narratives are illuminated through discourse analysis that problematises (Bacchi, 2009; Ozga, 2019; Webb, 2014) the policy assemblages' underpinnings. The case study brings the genuineness of a real site to understanding the forces at play and their impacts. It brings to life the lived experience of those working and learning in a very remote school in these times. Particularisation (Stake, 1995) strengthens appreciation that education is not shaped by policy logics, but by context. This thesis narrative holds great importance for all schools, and for education in remote communities. The process of highlighting and unsettling these discourses will support teachers to challenge practices unsuited to their contexts.

Twenty-five years ago, I began a school year in a different challenging school with an activity designed to remind teachers of their motivation for their chosen career. The insights gained were extensive, but foremost was the appreciation that teachers thrive when they have a voice, maintain hope, and enact the transformative agendas they bring into teaching. It is apparent that the ethical and moral project most teachers entered their careers expecting to employ has since been lost (Ball, 2016). Accordingly, this study will present a case for change, to reconsider what counts in education, resist instrumentalist views, and assert the important work teachers do and how they should be treated for them to be effective professionals.

To close this section, my prior employment as a director in state office, a district director, and principal of five schools in the Australian state under study, position me for access to those who hold power inside DE. I plan to share this research with the Chief Executive and others, holding optimism for a positive hearing.

1.4.   THESIS STRUCTURE

This study's exploration of how school improvement policy, informed by global education policy discourses, was enacted in a remote school is structured around 11 chapters:

Chapter One is an introductory overview of my personal connection to the research, its significance, and the thesis argument. This final section of Chapter One offers a narrative explanation of each subsequent chapter and how they are positioned against the three policy trajectory research contexts.

The *context of influence* is the focus of the first half of Chapter Two. Here, the Literature Review summarises the study's conceptual framework and delineates the pertinent literature that underpins policy text production. It provides background and an overview of existing literature to support the exploration of how neoliberal capitalism and global education reform shaped the study state's improvement policy aspirations. International and Australian education policy aspirations for *equity* and *excellence* are also explicated. The second half of the Literature Review elaborates contemporary research of interest to the *context of practice* including: improvement aspirations, measurement of improvement, standardised responses, accountability and performativity, teacher professionalism, and remote education.

Chapter Three introduces the study's methodology and research methods, underpinned by policy sociology and ethnographic methods. The study occurred in two parts: a critical discourse analysis, and a case study. The first part was a critical discourse analysis approach, Bacchi's (1999, 2009) WPRB, holds problem questioning or problematising, rather than problem solving, as a central tenet. DE's Strategic Plan was problematised as a policy text to interrogate its formation and intentions. The second part was an explanatory case study that presented 'data bearing on cause-effect-relationships - explaining how events happened' (Yin, 2003, p. 5). Within the very remote case study school, *the context of practice* enactment of DE policy was explored using ethnographic methods. The chapter details the choices and research practices adopted to undertake the discourse analysis and case study, including insider/outsider considerations, reflexivity, and adherence to national ethical research standards.

The critical discourse analysis (CDA), central to the *context of policy text production*, is detailed in Chapter Four. Bacchi's (2009, 2012) WPRB approach was applied to DE's Strategic Plan (2019b). WPRB supported examination of the plan and accompanying documentation as a discursive determining formation, problematising the construction of the 'falling standards crisis' which acts

as a motivation for the department's new improvement strategy. How this policy position came about, for whom, and carrying what assumptions (Blackmore & Lauder, 2005) is central to the policy trajectory research. This chapter includes the researcher's peer reviewed article, published in the International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies, and titled: *The race for 'world class' education: Improvement or folly?* (Cornelius, 2023).

Chapter Five introduces the case school and its community, the *context of practice*. This chapter provides 'a bedrock of thick description' of the community, its culture, and the school (McInerney, 2004, p. 29). Understanding the very remote school context supports readers' perception of the study site where DE's improvement policy intentions were enacted.

Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine present the case study data exploring the implications and consequences of enacting DE's Strategic Plan. Here, the study recounts happenings in three time periods. I was the DSAS principal for the first period, from 2017 to the plan launch in September 2018, and the second, which was after the launch and through 2019. The third time frame was 2020-2022 when the enactment of the new policy gathered momentum under a new principal's leadership. I interviewed DSAS school leaders during the third time frame to understand their perspectives on enacting *world class* aspirations. The case study data chapters are detailed next.

Chapter Six provides an introduction to the case study data, focusing on 'improvement' and 'success'. It includes my peer reviewed journal article, co-authored with Dr Kerrie Mackey-Smith, *Improving educational outcomes: Why don't remote schools in Australia measure up?* (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022). This article drew on the 2020 interview data collected for this study. The journal article's inclusion reflected the significance of these interviews in developing my thinking about the phenomenon under examination, namely school improvement. It introduced two of the major case study topics: the use of mandated improvement planning templates and targets, and DE's use of standardised testing or 'true measures' to track improvement at school and system levels.

The following three chapters were informed by the additional data collection and drilled deeper into the study topics including the improvement imperative, how improvement was measured, and how teaching and learning was standardised to facilitate success. Chapter Seven clarifies the improvement work already occurring at systems and school levels, prior to the department's new policy directives, and explored the implications of a mandated improvement planning format, stipulated improvement targets, 'focused and deep' attention on literacy and numeracy,

accountability measures, and tensions for the leaders interviewed. The implications of measuring improvement with standardised trusted and true assessments are probed in Chapter Eight. How a 'regime of testing' (Thompson, 2014, p. 62) led to an imperative to 'fix the data', despite doubts about data reliability is also introduced. Chapter Nine explores the implications of measuring narrow improvement plans and goals. DE was caught up in political pressure for quick results and responded by relying more heavily on external experts, endorsing prescribed curriculum and commercial products, and creating decontextualised lesson plans for teacher use. Across all three chapters, some impacts recurred: accountability and compliance practices, loss of teacher autonomy and professionalism, and concerns for increasing student equity gaps.

The policy trajectory research findings are summarised in Chapter Ten. This penultimate chapter identifies links between the analysis of DE's policy intentions and the case study findings in relation to enactment. It considers falling standards discourses, accountability, reliance on measurement and its fallibility, improvement planning, the literacy and numeracy focus, impacts on teachers, contextual blindness, and equity concerns.

The thesis concludes in Chapter Eleven with a summary of key insights and findings related to policy aspirations for equity and excellence, reflections on the study's contribution, and suggestions for future research.

1.5.   CONCLUSION

This chapter introduced my doctoral study, providing an overview of my personal connection to the topic, an explanation of the research problem, and the significance of the study. The final section detailed the thesis structure.

I introduced my socio-historical locations and becomings and recounted school improvement initiatives undertaken earlier in my career to illustrate my positionality coming into this study. I explained how my final DE experience, as the principal of a very remote school, sharpened my research focus. Here I was confronted by the challenges educators face with structures, systems, policies, politics, and expectations and their enactment in a unique and challenging context.

In locating the importance of this study, I responded to Ball's (2012a) analysis of neoliberal policy narratives, and his conclusion that more work is required to trace the effects of local policy regimes arising from the pervasive expansion of neoliberal thought. I explained how I adopted

Ball's (1993) advice and employed policy trajectory research to better understand how this state school improvement policy was developed and enacted.

Hattam et al. (2018) identified an urgent need for educational research that contests neoliberal-informed reform. This study undertook to add to this body of work. I demonstrate that DE's ambitions embraced global education policy. The research explores the lived experience of enacting a state education department's *world class* ambitions in an isolated, complex, and unique remote school. It provides original insights into the diverse ways neoliberal-informed educational accountability discourses and practices were taken up and responded to in this context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This Literature Review will outline the conceptual framework drawn on for this study. The framework has two main functions, as a review of the literature drawn from pertinent fields and as a map of how knowledge, refined and defined, underpins this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Wolcott, 2002). The study uses a critical policy sociology approach to explore an Australian state's education improvement aspirations and the tensions that arise between policy and enactment in a remote school setting.

I intend to build on the extensive work of scholars who have examined the impacts of global neoliberal capitalism and human capital paradigms on education policy, and in particular, policy related to school improvement and its enactment. Consequently, this Literature Review canvases extant literature relevant across the policy trajectory contexts:

It begins with the study's philosophical underpinnings. Policy and its enactment are expressions of structure and lived agency, hence power and structure/agency are central phenomena in this study.

The review next establishes the broader context, the *context of influence*, in two parts. Firstly, global education reform under neoliberal capitalism, economic rationalism, and globalisation. Secondly, Australia's education ambitions for equity and excellence, establishing the context for policy and aspirations for enactment as the background to this study.

Finally, the Literature Review addresses the *context of practice* and interrogates contemporary research related to the impacts of neoliberal capitalism and global education policy reform on improvement policy and its enactment via teachers' work. It surveys literature related to study's themes: school improvement, the role of measurement, standardised responses, accountability, performativity, teacher professionalism, and remote education.

2.1.   PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

While the epistemological assumptions underpinning this study are elaborated in the Methodology chapter, there are central phenomena worthy of explanation here. Extensive engagement with theorists has broadened my understanding of key foundational concepts and fortified my data analysis. This section outlines my understanding and position when employing the term 'power'. Power is a contested concept. Often the contestations centre on whether the

power lies with the agents or actors or with society's determining structures such as governance and law. Given the centrality of Bacchi's (2009) critical discourse analysis approach to this study, I draw predominantly – but not solely – on her theoretical underpinning in Foucault (Bacchi, 2010).

According to Foucault (2001), the most effective way to understand power within social structures is to analyse how people's social identities are tied to their role as subjects of power, and how they do or do not resist it. Foucault envisioned power as hegemonic, unequally present in every person and institution, and obscure and invisible. He held that power is not just the repressive, top-down force situated with institutions or states, but also a productive force, instrumental in who we are, what we can do, and how we see the world (Danaher et al., 2000; Foucault, 1980). Power draws on knowledge and relationships, influencing people's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Foucault (1979, 1991, 2001) advocated a reverse engineered study of power. He was attuned to studying power's impacts on the ruled, more so than examining the intentions of those in authority (Foucault, 1979, 2001). Foucault (1988a) was interested in the normalised, hegemonic effects of power in the social world. He attended to how normalised power surveils and influences people's self-control, making them want to comply with societal expectations and make themselves useful (Foucault, 1988a). Of interest to this study is the concept of power being made up of a multiplicity of force relations, and that studying the hegemonic impacts of power on the ruled, through their relationships and dynamics will reveal its techniques (Foucault, 1991).

Foucault indicated that much can be read into subjects' resistance to the hidden coercions of power. Danaher, Webb, and Schirato (2000) interpreted this to mean that 'power never achieves what it sets out to do, or claims to do' (p. 77) as power produces resistance to itself. This resistance is fundamental to power dynamics, with relations of power requiring that subjects are free to unsettle the 'common sense' that sustains power and forces choices. Resistors cannot simply denounce violence or criticise an institution; casting blame should be replaced by questioning 'the form of rationality at stake' (Foucault, 1988a, p. 84). Resisting power speaks to human agency within structures – a central concern for this study.

This interplay between structure and agency is a fundamental concept in sociology, underscoring how social structures and individual actions interact to shape human behaviour and society. In general terms, structure refers to enduring, patterned arrangements and institutions in society, such as economic systems, politics, and cultural norms. Agency implies individuals' capacity to

make choices, exercise free will, and act with intention (Scott, 2014). Two widely recognised foundational structure and agency theorists, are Durkheim and Weber. Durkheim believed social structures exerted pronounced influence on individuals, shaping their behaviour (Scott, 2014). Weber (1947) explored the role of bureaucracy and rationalisation to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their actions in social structures.

Seen as a contemporary leader in this debate, Archer (1995) describes the problem of structure and agency as a central dilemma in social theory. She goes on to say that structure and agency are part of everyday life such that humans feel 'free and enchained, capable of shaping our own future and yet confronted by towering, seemingly impersonal, constraints' (p. 65). The ongoing debate about what lens should be used to understand the nature of human action asks whether our actions are shaped more by individual agency or by the constraining forces of social structure. Many argue that structures, overshadow human agency. This study adopts a less deterministic stance, that individuals are both constrained by and capable of changing social structures through their actions (Archer, 2000). The case study explores this constraint and capacity.

2.2. CONTEXT OF INFLUENCE - PERVASIVE DISCOURSES AND CONSERVATIVE TIMES

This section is the first of two which establish and explicate the *context of influence*. Here the review explores scholarship related to the ensemble of structures central to this study: neoliberalism, economic rationalism, and global education policy. It also considers how such concepts frame and structure education in increasingly conservative times.

2.2.1. Neoliberalism and economic rationalism

Neoliberalism and economic rationalism are key interrelated dynamics underpinning most areas of contemporary social policy, including education. Both are underpinned by market-dominated ideals and human capital theory which have pervasively impacted reality for much of the world's population over the last fifty years, with wide ranging political and economic implications (Ayers & Saad-Filho, 2015; Plehwe et al., 2007). Under these hegemonic influences, education is impacted by the expectation that it produce the human capital necessary for a globally competitive economy (Holloway, 2020).

Economic rationalism is underpinned by 'doctrines that economies, markets and money deliver … better outcomes than states, bureaucracies and the law and are the only reliable means of setting

value on anything' (Pusey, 2018, p. 12). Inside the drive for economically rational decisions, economists hold lead roles in developing value-added models. Significant trust is now placed in economists' analytic predictive tools, and they are expected to make sense of complex issues and simplify them. In this process they rely on statistical tools that disregard uncontrollable factors and context in the social practices they investigate (Amrein-Beardsley & Holloway, 2019). Setting value, simplification of complex issues, and discounting of context can be problematic when applied to human endeavours, such as improving education outcomes.

Neoliberalism is a contested term, despite its longevity and pervasiveness. The 'neoliberal imaginary' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 37) is a dominant ideology shaping our world today (Adhikary, 2014; Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005). Mudge (2008) characterises neoliberalism as a 'single, fundamental principle' (p. 706), based on the supremacy of market competition and motivated by the capitalist class's political will, especially that of financial institutions. Barnes, Humphrys and Pusey (2018) write that neoliberalism has variously been described as 'a mode of regulation, a political or class-based project, an ideological doctrine, a state form or mode of governmentality, a form of everyday practice, or an historical epoch' (p. 5). Recognising the great diversity in characterisation, Connell and Dado (2014) describe neoliberalism as a 'broad historical shift in ideology and practice rather than a single doctrine' (p. 118). So pervasive is the neoliberal agenda, it is not uncommon to hear that 'the world is neoliberal' (Phelan, 2014, p. 2). On the other hand, Rowlands and Rawolle (2013) contend that neoliberalism is not a theory of everything because 'its complex and multifaceted nature makes it difficult to define and describe' (p. 260).

Researchers critically evaluate the numerous impacts of hegemonic neoliberal discourses (Frost, 2016). Economic logic has subsumed social, human, and ecological rationales in favour of 'the market' (Phelan, 2014, p. 3) and authoritarian governance has emerged (Ayers & Saad-Filho, 2015). Apple (2005) describes the impacts of market-oriented, authoritarian governance on schooling as 'destructive rapaciousness produced by economically rational decisions' including funding cuts, loss of decision making, and 'conservative modernisation' (p. 11). Loss of local decision-making and increasingly conservative improvement practices are significant to this study.

The destructive effects of neoliberal and economic rationalist agendas on configurations of capitalism, democracy and the social structures of modernity are widely canvassed in the literature (Brown, 2019; Humphrys, 2018, 2019). Influenced by Marxist and anti-colonialist thinkers, renowned educator Freire (1970, 1994, 2005, 2015) wrote extensively about the impact

of market laws and their detrimental effect on democratic practices. Brown (2015) identifies deleterious consequences of neoliberal and capitalist discourses that evacuate democratic principles. In her book, *In the ruins of neoliberalism*, Brown (2019) presents a compelling dissection of the long-term impacts of decades of neoliberal inspired economic policy. She describes the conjoining of neoliberal and capitalist discourses with a rising 'combination of libertarianism, moralism, authoritarianism, nationalism, hatred of the state, Christian conservatism, and racism' and exposes how 'neoliberal intensification of inequality … [is] a tinderbox' (p. 6). Gorur, Sellar and Steiner-Khamsi (2019) echo this perspective, seeing reforms underpinned by neoliberal capitalism as having failed 'to improve educational outcomes … instead present[ing] governments with a whole new set of problems, including rising inequities' (p. 3).

Given the complexity and range of perspectives and potential descriptors of neoliberalism, and its conflation with economic rationalism, for the purposes of this study one term will generally be used to encompass these concepts. Based on an appreciation that the current challenges in schools are shaped by globalised neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism (Harvey, 2005; Brown, 2019) this thesis will generally use the term 'neoliberal capitalism', while recognising the range of possible alternatives (Reid, 2020). Neoliberal capitalism is not alone in structuring current educational governance. The globalisation of educational authority is also important to this study.

2.2.2. Globalisation impacts

This study engages with policy discourses in the nation state of Australia. These policy discourses, sitting between '*the global* and *the federal system* [and] are complex, non-linear, multi-directional and ever changing' (Beech et al., 2023, p. 3 emphasis in original). This section clarifies 'the global' and explores global governance and the policies and practices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as a significant global education entity.

In broad terms, globalisation opens doors to international exchange, 'whether commercial, cultural, or demographic' (Schleicher & Zoido, 2016, p. 374). Since the late 1900s, globalisation was embraced for its potential to create possibilities and break down boundaries, characterised by calls 'to overcome "methodological nationalism" and explore new, dynamic methodologies' (Gorur et al., 2019, p. 1). Globalisation is responsible for bonding nation states into 'an interlocking body' such that competition for human capital shifts from the domestic to international domain (MacKenzie & Chiang, 2023, p. 1). It is also seen as historically significant for its mobility of capital,

but it continues to produce … 'irregularities in the tectonics of political and social life' (Appadurai, 2006, p. 170).

Of interest to this study are the tectonics of global accountability discourses. They underscore constant comparison and competition in the governance of education (Beech et al., 2023; Engel et al., 2019) and a common assumption that education will achieve excellence if treated like a marketplace (Sahlberg, 2023). Such change orthodoxy spawned the global education reform movement (GERM) and promised positive outcomes and economic advantages (Fulge et al., 2016; Verger et al., 2019). It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss GERM's history, enactment, and academic critique; rather the review moves to explore the role of the global authorities in enacting accountability through evidence-based policy and large-scale assessments.

Historically, international bodies such as the World Bank, UNESCO, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the OECD became influential global authorities because education was seen as a crucial factor in ensuring economic productivity and competitiveness (Ball, 2021b; Lewis & Lingard, 2023). For the 38 member countries, the OECD delivered long sought-after order in education (Grek, 2012), signifying 'collective wisdom, power, resources, and expertise centrally located in an international space' (Engel et al., 2019, p. 128). Through 'thickening global governance' (Robertson, 2016, p. 275), the OECD predominated in framing and steering global education policy (Lewis & Lingard, 2023; Sellar & Lingard, 2013).

The OECD's enhanced policy roles were spearheaded by their international large-scale assessments and digital data infrastructures (Beech et al., 2023) connecting global policy spaces through a focus on 'what works' and evidence-based approaches (Gurr et al., 2022; Hattie, 2019). Their policy ecosystems were built on the premise that education policy should be decontextualised and 'solely based on evidence and learning from others' (Grek, 2012, p. 244).

The OECD advanced international large-scale assessments (ILSA), such as their reading, mathematics, and science testing through the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA). Originally ILSA functioned as 'thermometers' to measure learning at a national level (Lockheed & Wagemaker, 2013, p. 296) but later as global measurement tools (Lewis & Lingard, 2023; Meyer, 2014). The measurements became synonymous with accountability expectations and ILSA were used more like 'whips' (Lockheed & Wagemaker, 2013, p. 296). This synergy increased their influence, honing the OECD's global reach and focus. Rather than measure what and how a nation teaches its students, ILSA assess skills the OECD deems vital for young people's

future productivity (Gorur et al., 2019; Lingard, Martino, et al., 2016). The attention on future productivity, rather than broader educational outcomes, distorted, narrowed, and homogenised educational practices (Meyer, 2014). While narrow measures were easy to compare and rank, extensive expert critique discouraged reliance on single tests 'as a measure to gauge quality or make other broad pronouncements about the characteristics of large systems' (Meyer, 2014, p. 2).

Critiques of the OECD's work challenge its claims of neutrality, preparation of league tables, advice provision, shifting of public ideas about the well-being of education systems, and redirecting policy priorities (Engel et al., 2019; Meyer & Benavot, 2013). Three examples of applicable critique follow. In the first, the OECD's claims that ILSA are politically, culturally, and ideologically neutral are refuted, given global differences in social, cultural, and colonial backgrounds (Caro et al., 2016; Dobrescu et al., 2021). Decontextualised policy, assessment, and teaching practices feature in this current study. In the second example, Meyer (2014) asserts that a decontextualised and 'neutral' global space does not hold governments accountable; rather that it ascribes responsibility to schools for raising student performance on standardised tests. This notion of 'responsibilisation' of schools and educators is elaborated later in this literature review. The third example further contests the imputed neutrality of PISA, claiming it 'can create momentum around an issue that was not previously significant' (Engel et al., 2019, p. 128) and creates dependence on OECD evidence. In summary, critiques of the OECD's global developments suggest failure to improve the 'quality, equity, and efficiency of education although that has been its basic promise' (Sahlberg, 2023, p. 1). Notwithstanding rigorous critique, ILSA have become the basis for international comparison providing politically useful evidence (Hardy & Lewis, 2018).

The discourses of neoliberalism and global education policy provide the backdrop for structural changes in Australian education. This study seeks to understand local-global discourses within the *context of influence*, providing a framework for understanding how teaching is constituted and remade in the neoliberal 'common-sense' view.

2.3.   CONTEXT OF INFLUENCE - AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION

This second *context of influence* exploration moves to locate the discursive agendas of neoliberal capitalism and globalisation, in Australian education. Ensuing is a brief history of Australian federal government ambitions for increased influence over the states' policies and practices, policy implications, and the role of funding. Subsequent sections address Australian educational aspirations for equity and excellence.

Neoliberal capitalism and global education policy have long been attached to improvement aspirations in Australian education (Adhikary, 2014). Successive federal governments have espoused the view that human capital development is crucial to an internationally competitive economy, advocating for a significant role in developing education policy rather than being a 'bit player' (Reid, 2020, p. 26) supporting state projects. Then Federal Minister for Education, John Dawkins (1988), released a pivotal policy statement, *Strengthening Australia's Schools*, which made it 'clear that education was a major tool of microeconomic reform' (Reid, 2020, p. 27). The relationship between education and human capital development was cemented through instrumentalist education policy approaches that increased corporate managerialism, such that education became 'awash with key performance indicators, vision and mission statements, strategic plans, and intrusive accountability' (Reid, 2020, p. 27).

While state governments have responsibility for schooling, major policy agendas and reforms are navigated at the national level through 'complex intergovernmental channels that are strongly influenced by the federal government' (Savage, 2016, p. 841). A significant tool in this centralising of power, the intergovernmental National School Reform Agreements (NSRA) (Council of Australian Governments, 2018) tied federal education funding to action commitments from state governments. These commitments were linked to standards-based reforms in areas such as curriculum, teaching standards, assessment, and reporting. These reforms were justified as necessary to increase Australia's competitiveness and as a solution for 'putative policy problems of overlap and duplication across states and territories, and inequalities in provision and performance' (Savage, 2016, p. 840).

Global pressure exerted through international organisations such as the OECD was pivotal in shaping Australian policy changes (Beech, 2011) and standardising responses to areas such as curriculum, assessment, and teaching standards (Reid, 2020). The new approaches emphasised evidence-based policy making, reliance on science, and made claims of increased efficiency and accountability (Fulge et al., 2016). Based on these principles, justification of Australian federal education structures, such as the national curriculum and national standardised literacy and numeracy testing (Savage, 2016; Thompson et al., 2016), were framed as a response to global social and economic factors (Beech et al., 2023), including claims they would bring about curriculum justice for all students through equity and excellence (Lingard, 2010; Savage, 2016).

2.3.1. Ambitions for equity

Equity is a key value of contemporary societies' education systems (Levin, 2003; Ziegler et al., 2021). However, the gap between ambitions and what is achieved in practice raises significant global concern (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). At this point, the review undertakes to explore the gap between equity ambitions and reality in Australia. It will summarise equity definitions, consider equity in policy and Australia's progress toward equitable schooling, and explore structural inequity.

Protracted debate about defining educational equity has involved various interpretations (Lingard et al., 2014) including a 'number of overlapping and inter-related principles such as fairness, inclusion, social justice, and non-discrimination' (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021, p. 4). UNESCO (2017, p. 7) defines equity as 'ensuring that there is a concern with fairness, such that the education of all learners is seen as being of equal importance'. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggest that equity should be viewed more broadly, moving beyond providing access to consider historical, social, and economic conditions that shape the capacity to benefit. Alternatively, inequity is usually understood as disparities based on gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and a variety of other indicators (Francis et al., 2017; Ziegler et al., 2021). On the global stage, the OECD has a clear position on equity. It links equity and quality, identifying the primary outcome of world class schooling systems as the delivery of 'high-quality education across the entire school system so that every student benefits from excellent teaching' (OECD, 2018, p. 4). This requires education systems to ensure that students of different backgrounds achieve comparable academic outcomes and analogous 'levels of social and emotional well-being in areas such as life satisfaction, self-confidence, and social integration' (OECD, 2018, p. 13).

Equity has held a central position in Australian education goals from the 1980s to the current *Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Declaration of Goals for Education* (Council of Australian Governments, 2019). Under this policy formation, Australian education policy writers have envisaged that equity aligns with positive social and economic outcomes. Equity ambitions include providing access to inclusive, high-quality education for all, removing barriers, and ensuring all students are supported to achieve their full academic potential (Council of Australian Governments, 2019). With the *Mparntwe* statement, Australia's aspirations switched from the long-held *equity and excellence* to *excellence and equity*, signalling a higher value placed on educational excellence over equity (Mockler, 2014; Thomson, 2021). This is despite it being clear that equity gaps are increasing

(OECD, 2018; Sahlberg, 2023; Thomson, 2021) and that Australia has not achieved either high quality or high equity education (Kenway, 2013).

Achieving equity in and through education has been elusive despite concerted policy efforts (Kyriakides et al., 2019; Sellar & Lingard, 2013), and inequity has remained a vexatious policy problem worldwide (Chmielewski, 2019; Savage et al., 2013). Education is seen as an important vehicle for fostering equity in society (MacKenzie & Chiang, 2023; Savage et al., 2013). Greater equity has economic and social cohesion benefits. According to the OECD (2018) 'how we treat the most vulnerable students shows who we are as a society' (p. 4). Therefore, the OECD (2018) holds the position that differences in students' learning outcomes should be 'unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which students have no control' (p. 13). Despite these global intentions, socioeconomic background is the strongest predictor of educational attainment (Francis et al., 2017) and OECD reporting on PISA results consistently ties socioeconomic disadvantage to gaps in outcomes. For example, in their reporting on Australia's 2022 PISA results, socioeconomically disadvantaged students were 'six times more likely than advantaged students to score below Level 2 in mathematics' (De Bortoli et al., 2023, p. 234). Achievement of the OECD determined proficiency standards also varied according to locality. Across all domains, '24% of students in major city schools were poor performers, compared to 34% of students in regional areas and, disturbingly, almost half (48%) of students in remote areas' (De Bortoli et al., 2023, p. 77).

Having established that equity is a primary goal of education and that Australian equity gaps are significant, this review turns to an examination of structural barriers to equity, providing three examples. First it considers free-market approaches to inequity, secondly, concentration of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools, and thirdly, the impact of locality.

Neoliberal policy logic structures education as individual value accrual (Gerrard, 2015) within discourses of free markets and competition (Lingard, Martino, et al., 2016; Sahlberg, 2023). Such discourses underpin the enduring notion that meritocracy will provide all students with equal opportunities to pursue their talents and aspirations and enable equally talented students to have equal opportunities to succeed in education and life, no matter their home background (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). Given clear evidence that Australian equity gaps are increasing, Reay (2017) identifies meritocracy as a myth with clear winners rewarded for their privileged class background, writing that meritocracy is 'the educational equivalent of the emperor with no clothes' (p. 123). In

other words, meritocratic approaches ignore social hierarchies and structural barriers such that 'equality of opportunity means equal chances to become unequal and is therefore a recipe for continuing inequality' (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021, p. 5).

The second structural example is the clustering of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools (Bonnor et al., 2021). The proportion of Australian disadvantaged students attending disadvantaged schools was the fifth highest on OECD rankings in 2018 (Sahlberg, 2022). This situation is attributed to the influence of neoliberal capitalism on policies 'that have treated education as a marketplace where parental choice determines [schooling] supply and demand' (Sahlberg, 2022, p. 7). Extensive data sources point to outcome differences related to where students are educated (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Gore et al., 2022). Two examples of test outcome differences are offered. Firstly, for Australian students in advantaged and disadvantaged schools, outcome variations on the 2021 Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), saw students in affluent schools at the high benchmark (562 points) on average and students in more disadvantaged schools achieving the intermediate benchmark (508) points (Hillman et al., 2023). A second illustration is the OECD's (2018) PISA analysis that shows, by age 15, disadvantaged Australian students educated in advantaged schools are educationally 2.5 years ahead of their peers in disadvantaged schools. Bonnor and Shepherd (2016) found '[p]rivilege and wealth offer an initial head-start and greater opportunities through school than are available to others' (p. 7). This head-start is evidenced in the examples offered.

Another example of structural inequity is detailed in Roberts's (2023) research into factors impacting rural students' educational outcomes. He found that when factoring out socioeconomic status, rural and remote students' achievement is below that of urban peers. His research demonstrates that a dearth of experienced teachers and appointment of teachers without relevant curriculum area expertise impacts significantly on all non-metropolitan students' learning outcomes, regardless of socioeconomic status. Another recent study into access to mathematics and science subjects in Queensland schools reports that over 40% of senior mathematics subjects are taught by unqualified teachers in rural and remote areas (Chinofunga et al., 2021). Extensive research locates staffing policies, teacher access, and teacher mobility as structural inequities for rural and remote students (Dean et al., 2023; Gore et al., 2022). These structural inequities are further compounded by lower socioeconomic status, and enrolment in disadvantaged schools.

In summary, the OECD (2012) contends that inequity and school failure costs are high for students and society and that equitable outcomes are essential for economic prosperity and social cohesion. Regrettably, deep engagement with the required systemic changes is outside the purview of this review but suffice to say, addressing the myriad of structural inequities will require systemic intervention. Eacott (2023) reveals that 'default individualism' underpins the extent of expectation that individual schools and teachers can 'fix schools' (p. 304). He mounts a case for system-wide approaches to inequity because they are the product of systemic design rather than the actions of individual schools. Significant to this study, contemporary scholars posit that context, and other factors external to schools' influence, are of fundamental importance in addressing inequities (Braun et al., 2011; Heffernan, 2018b; Keddie, 2014).

Having reviewed literature related to equity, this review moves to consider 'excellence' and the naissance of the study state's world class aspirations.

2.3.2. World class aspirations

While education is expected to be a conduit for more equitable and inclusive societies, it is also presumed to be responsible for the excellence of educational outcomes (Savage et al., 2013).

Increasingly, excellence in education reform is linked to improved educational outcomes in a quest for world class education (Morris, 2012; Schleicher, 2018). Over time, the term 'world class' has been used in conjunction with learners, curriculum, education, schools, and systems. Some examples follow. Jerald (2008) described a world class education as one that positions learners 'to compete and innovate in the 21st century' (p. 1). Similarly, Zhao (2012) attributed world class education with responsibility for producing leaners able to think like entrepreneurs and be resourceful, flexible, creative, and globally oriented. World class education is often seen as a key output of the International Baccalaureate curriculum (Hill, 2012). Influential in education reform research, Barber and Sebba (1999) initially researched world class systems and identified seven consistent characteristics, including extensive school autonomy that enables schools to respond to their context and use their resources as required, and systems' ability to innovate, manage change, and hold a clear commitment to equity.

As large-scale international testing (ILSA) gathered momentum, there has been a marked shift towards attributing world class status through the lens of international comparisons (Stewart, 2012), often based on achievement of PISA results (Loureiro & Cruz, 2020; OECD, 2016; Schleicher, 2018). At this juncture, the review explains how assessment culture, and its use of international

comparative data (Addey et al., 2017), impacts the desire for excellence. It also considers the falling standards discourses that underscore improvement ambitions.

The quest for excellence is underpinned by measurement. The 'assessment culture', also known as managerial or test-based accountability systems, dominates the quest for excellence globally (Verger & Parcerisa, 2018). Biesta (2012) calls this culture the *age of measurement*. Built on international and intranational competition and accountability regimes (Grek et al., 2021; Lingard et al., 2017) it holds ambitions to improve and monitor learning outcomes (Schleicher & Zoido, 2016; Verger & Parcerisa, 2018). Pivotal to the assessment culture is ILSA's ability to 'generate internationally comparable evidence for policy and shape how education is understood and valued' (Addey et al., 2017, p. 435). PISA is credited as the lever for the OECD's centrality in international education policy (Meyer, 2014) and underpins the assessment culture's reliance on comparable data in the search for excellence.

A test-based accountability driven assessment culture has come to prominence in Australian education policy (Ozga, 2013). Analogous to global precursors, Australia's assessment focus is on a few quantitative performance indicators in literacy, numeracy and sometimes science (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016). Measurement and assessment, as determining structures, and their impacts on teachers' agency and work are the focus of subsequent subsections of this review.

The assessment culture reinforces 'falling standards' discourses across Australia. The apparent decline in Australian education standards is ascribed to global and local testing outcomes which translate 'life in schools and communities into a series of abstract representations in graphs, grids, league tables, and indices' (Lingard et al., 2014, p. 711). In recent research, the validity of claims that standards are falling in Australia have been contested. Georgiou and Larsen (2023) reported through the University of Wollongong's media centre, that while their new research acknowledges declines in PISA results, it finds little evidence of decreases in any other international or NAPLAN assessment. Despite findings like these, the reported decline in student achievement from 2000 to 2020 bolsters falling standards discourses (Skourdoumbis et al., 2023).

Despite the acknowledged limitations in PISA data, the following figures in the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) (2019) graphics provide an overview of the decline painted by PISA results. Waning PISA outcomes are clearly illustrated in Figure: 2.3-1 where Australia's results in the three assessment areas are shown from 2000 to 2018:

Figure 2.3-1: Australian achievement in PISA since 2000, measured from the first cycle in which a subject was the major focus domain (ACER, 2019)
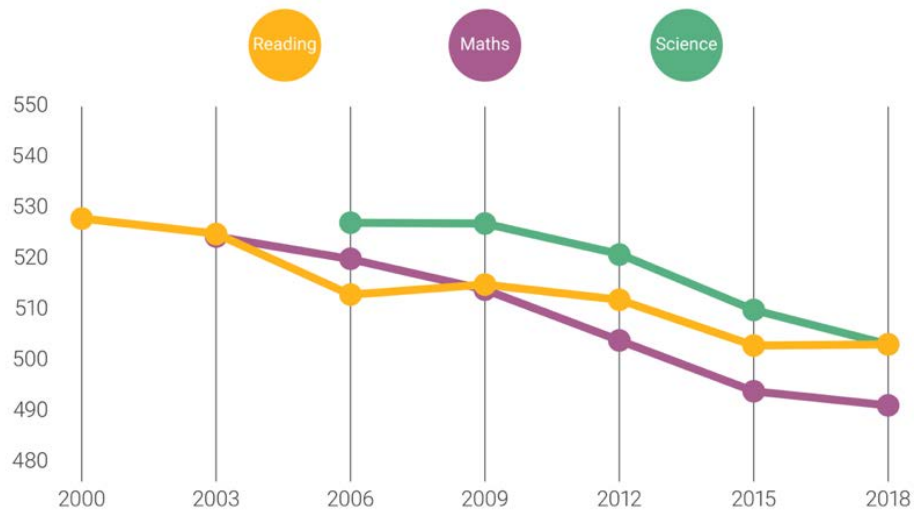
In Figure 2.3-2, the percentage of Australian students achieving PISA's National Proficient Standard is shown, relative to the highest and OECD average (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2019).

Figure 2.3-2: Percentage of students achieving PISA's National Proficient Standard (ACER, 2019)
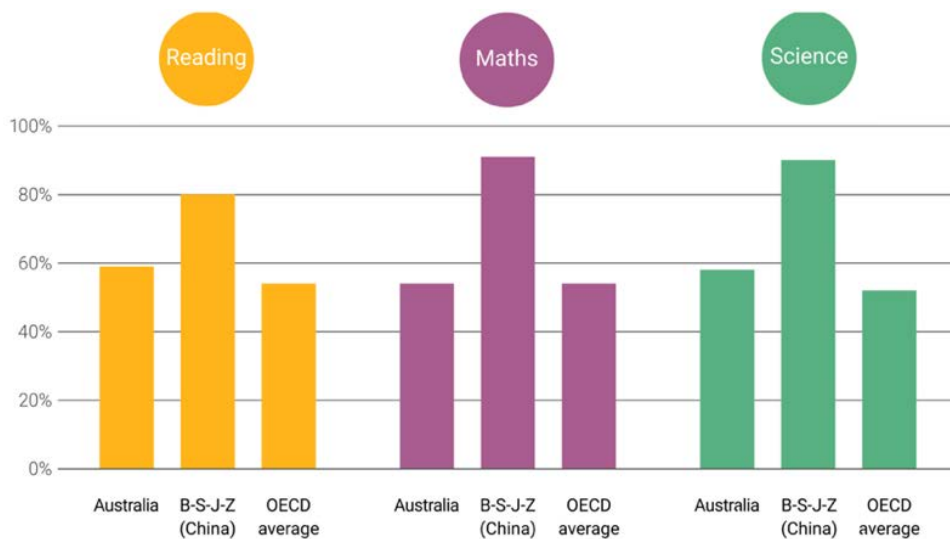
That PISA results point to less than 60% of Australian 15 years olds being proficient readers and mathematically competent is one evidence set used to support Australia's purported falling standards crisis. The equivalent graphs including the 2022 PISA results are due for release in May 2024. ACER's *PISA 2022. Reporting Australia's results. Volume I: Student performance and equity in education* (De Bortoli et al., 2023, p. 78) reports that the trend continues. For example, the mean mathematical literacy performance and differences from PISA 2018 to 2022, by geographic

location, showed a two-point decline for students in major cities, thirteen-point decline for regional students, and a twenty-two-point decline for remote students.

In addition to reliance on OECD and National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data, the falling standards crisis is frequently explained in economic terms. In 2018, the Public Education Federation commissioned a report on the equity gap in Australia, *What price the gap?* (Hetherington, 2018). This report detailed the decline in PISA scores across all socioeconomic levels, signalling that the drop in the lowest quartile was almost double that of the highest. This disparity reinforces the evidence of a growing equity gap discussed in the previous section. The economic effect of the widening gap was 'estimated over the six years from 2009-15 alone to have cost Australia around $20.3 billion, equivalent to 1.2 percent of GDP' (Hetherington, 2018, p. 3). The widening of Australian equity gaps has continued (Beech et al., 2023; Eacott, 2023), and standards continue to fall against global and national measures that are valued in the current policy environment.

Given teachers' roles and their work in the social spaces impacted by the assessment culture and managerial accountability conditions, the Literature Review next considers research relevant in the *context of practice*.

2.4. CONTEXT OF PRACTICE – ENACTING IMPROVEMENT AMBITIONS

This section draws on the global context previously introduced in this review and elaborates the contemporary research on topics of interest to the *context of practice* and the enactment of the education department's improvement policy mandates. Responding to the 'widening gaps' noted in the previous section, this section details research findings related to improvement, measuring improvement, standards, and teachers being at the frontline of constraining forces such as reform arrangements and accountability expectations. It considers performativity, the compression of teachers' agency as they are responsibilised, and how this impacts on teacher professionalism.

2.4.1. Improvement aspirations

The school improvement discourse has a long history. Since World War II, 'policymakers' and public officials' eagerness to reform schools has continued unabated' (Cuban, 1990, p. 3). While shifting in focus, improvement aspirations have underpinned reform for almost a century. Ball et al. (2012, p. 141) described more recent reform moves as acting in a 'climate of policy overload and initiativitis - in a period of constant reform and incitement to improve'. This incitement to

improve is probed here with consideration given to accountability expectations, external criteria, teacher centrality, and responsibilisation.

Globally, reform agendas are accompanied by ratcheted-up accountability expectations (Grek et al., 2021; Lingard, Martino, et al., 2016). Ball (2016, p. 1048) describes displays of power in the name of global competitiveness and under bureaucratic accountability regimes as 'incremental moves and tactics, a ratchet of initiatives and programmes that introduce new possibilities and innovations into policy and practice'. Once instituted, each new initiative makes further initiatives 'thinkable and doable, and ultimately make them obvious and indeed necessary' (Ball, 2016, p. 1048).

Teachers are subjected to these constant ratchetted-up attempts to '*reform* or *improve*' (Webb et al., 2020, p. 293 emphasis in original). The impacts of being subjected to reform agendas have been widely researched. An insightful summary is available in Falabella's (2014) review of 68 critical sociology sources to investigate what is known about how schools and teachers navigate policies based on neoliberal capitalism. She found endemic competition-based schemes, where educators were required to continually perform 'successfully' according to external criteria (Falabella, 2014). Her research found impoverished teaching practices, intensification of inequity and exclusion, and 'hierarchical school environments and managerial systems of control, and an increased management focus on … quick and visible solutions, leaving thorough and long-term changes aside' (Falabella, 2014, p. 4).

Teachers are subjected to education reform and are also held responsible for improvement. From the 2000s, the OECD has positioned itself as a major actor in placing teachers' work on global governance agendas, determining policy and practice (Ball, 2003; Holloway & Brass, 2018), and determining teachers' pedagogic practices in national education settings (Robertson, 2012). In situating teachers as 'frontline workers responsible for engaging students and promoting their learning' (OECD, 2014, p. 32), the OECD renders teachers accountable for their classroom practices and outcomes (Holloway et al., 2017) 'regardless of systemic factors' (MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020, p. 5).

Teacher centrality, often described as 'teacher quality', is viewed as the key to successful school reform (Gore et al., 2022; Verger & Parcerisa, 2018). The centring of teachers in contemporary improvement discourses overlooks the ways they are constrained by curriculum standardisation (Gerrard & Farrell, 2014), measured, and led by numbers (Heffernan, 2016), audited (Shore &

Wright, 2015), and experience intensification of their work (Gavin et al., 2021). Alongside efforts to shape teachers' work are expectations that if teachers work more efficiently student learning outcomes will improve (Lingard et al., 2017; Reid, 2020). Biesta problematises the notion of educators as the most important factor in education:

> *Claims about the importance of the teacher are also problematic because they tend to see the teacher as a 'factor' and believe that, in order to increase the 'performance' of the educational system, it is important to make sure that this 'factor' works in the most effective and efficient way possible. The fact that this 'factor' is a human being and, more importantly an educational professional who should have scope for judgement and discretion is all too often forgotten. (Biesta, 2015b, p. 75)*

Viewing teachers as 'the factor' makes teachers the problem, responsible for the education system's performance. On one hand responsibilised, teachers are subject to increasingly unyielding accountability associated with intensification and the widely critiqued performativity culture (Ball, 2003; Spicksley, 2022). Similanteously, the 'power and authority of professional norms' underpinning teacher commitment and accountability is undermined by reformers (Holloway et al., 2017, p. 5). The implications of measuring improvement follow.

2.4.2. Measuring improvement

This section considers how world class improvement is measured and calculated. It builds on the previous Australian *context of influence* (Section 2.3). Brought forward are two important ideas. Firstly, measurement of improvement has dominated within the context of falling standards crises (Gunter & Courtney, 2023; Skourdoumbis et al., 2023) and world class education aspirations (Morris, 2012; Mourshed et al., 2010; Schleicher, 2018). Secondly, test-based accountability of educational systems has become the norm rather than the exception (Gorur, 2020), and 'can take on too much importance in defining educational success' (Sahlberg, 2016, p. 129). In an extensively researched field, topics of interest to this policy trajectory research are elucidated, including: the universality of numbers, increased sophisication in measuring education, the broader impacts of measurement, the Australian context, and impacts on teachers' work.

A reliance on numbers sustains the faith policymakers place on test-based accountability practices and the measurement of improvement. Numbers are perceived as a source of truth and reliability (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), informing a 'public habitat', inscribing and constituting reality (Rose, 1991). Their pervasiveness and perceived trustworthiness bolster governance by numbers (Gorur, 2020; Piattoeva & Boden, 2020) and policy by numbers (Lingard, 2011; Sellar, 2015a). Similarly, accountability regimes (Gable & Lingard, 2016) and audit cultures (Keddie, 2013; Lingard & Sellar,

2013) are buttressed by numbers. Contemporary reliance on numbers is enhanced by new technologies, including 'big data' (Gorur et al., 2019; Piattoeva & Boden, 2020), data infrastructures (Clutterbuck et al., 2023; Piattoeva & Saari, 2022; Sellar, 2015b), and artificial intelligences (Sellar & Hogan, 2019; Webb et al., 2020).

The expectation that measuring outcomes will improve education is not new (Biesta, 2015a; Connell, 2013; Thompson & Cook, 2014). Recent technological sophistication supports current global education policy rhetoric that test- and/or standards-based accountability will further improve school performance (Lingard, 2013). Hardy (2021b) summarises the inherent challenges in the pervasiveness of numbers and datafication of education, pointing out that the tendency towards 'precision' overlooks how numbers are limited and fail to capture cultural practices and processes. The standardised tests employed in achieving data 'precision' have narrowed primarily to assessments of literacy and numeracy (Lingard, 2013; Cormack & Comber, 2013).

Education measurement and test-based accountability are extensively contested. As Australian governments aspire for greater accountability and transparency, and by extension quality, in schools and education systems (Thompson, 2014), researchers caution against such governing processes because they potentially narrow teachers' attention to more standardised measures of students' learning (Hardy, 2018). Lingard (2013) agrees, citing the 'reductive anti-educational effects' (p. 128) of high stakes testing. Biesta (2015) contends that measurement has become 'an end in itself rather than a means to achieve good education in the fullest and broadest sense of the term' (p. 83).

Measurement of Australian education is initated and tracked by the highest governance bodies in the country, under the oversight of the peak Australian political decision making body, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). To strengthen accountability, COAG demands public reporting 'that focuses on improving performance and student growth and outcomes for all students', using data that is 'accessible, timely, consistent and comparable' (Council of Australian Governments, 2019, p. 12). The Australian Productivity Commission, a major economic policy body, systematises the measurement and reporting of school performance to provide consistent data for policymakers (Skourdoumbis & Rawolle, 2020). Central to COAG's ambitions for accessible, timely, consistent, and comparable data, is NAPLAN. In 2008, Australia-wide NAPLAN testing replaced various states' literacy and numeracy assessment processes. To meet its purpose as 'a national, consistent measure to determine whether or not students are meeting important educational

outcomes', Year 3, 5, 7, and 9 students are tested on the fundamental literacy and numeracy skills (ACARA, 2016b). NAPLAN has provoked extensive critical debate, particularly because it has reconstituted the purpose of education and teacher professionalism (Biesta, 2015b; Reid, 2010, 2020).

Finally, this section summarises how teachers' work may be determined within test-based measurement structures (Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2022; Holloway, 2021b; Holloway et al., 2017) such as high stakes assessment enabled surveillance. The literature provides evidence that teachers are: losing their voice in education arenas (Carter & Hunter, 2023); having their professional judgement displaced by standardised data (Bourke et al., 2013; Lewis & Holloway, 2019); drowning in data (Gorur et al., 2019; Renshaw et al., 2013); and in some cases, even resorting to gaming accountability expectations (Lewis & Holloway, 2019). Daliri-Ngametua and Hardy (2022) describe demoralising effects on teachers when their work is devalued, ultimately bringing about 'the very "disappearance" of the teacher – the expunging of relational, educative interactions that enable genuine student engagement and learning' (p. 6). They go on to identify the consequence as 'an eviscerated form of schooling that may jeopardize students' long-term academic and social development' (p. 6). It is to this 'form of schooling' that the next literature review section turns. The ensuing sections consider the demoralising effects on teachers raised here.

2.4.3. Standardised responses

Having considered the drive for *world class* improvement and how such improvement is measured, the review next addresses what research recounts as the impact of these ambitions and the 'form of schooling' that results (Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022, p. 6). A brief overview of how standardisation came about in education and a range of impacts of standardisation are surveyed.

In the broadest sense, neoliberal capitalism and globalisation led to 'standardisation in economies, policies, and culture … a new normal' (Schleicher & Zoido, 2016, p. 374). Reid (2020) explicates the genesis of standardisation, describing it as technical standards that have been applied beyond any useful purpose in education. Standardisation's eminence is due to a perceived failure to achieve reform outcomes. 'Failure' led to a belief that globally benchmarked standards are required (Reid, 2020). These benchmarks were rendered meaningful by a push for worldwide core subjects to increase individuals' employability and nations' economic competitiveness (Sahlberg, 2016).

Standardisation sits in stark contrast with alternative approaches valued for a future in a globalised world: 'personalization, creativity, and the ability to differentiate teaching and learning … to match the interests, curiosity, and passion of students' (Sahlberg, 2016, p. 129).

Extensive research contributes to our understanding of educational standardisation trends. Two examples are included here. First, Steiner-Khamsi (2016a) attributes the global trend towards limiting educational success to 'what-went-right' analyses. She sees such analyses as the basis for faith in the transferability of reform packages or best practices from country to country, regardless of context. Three underpinning fallacies are identified: 'rationality, precision, and universality' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016a, p. 35). These fallacies cohere with concepts previously introduced in this review, including the perceived rationality of numbers, assumed accuracy of decontextualised data, and the value placed on and assumptions of transferability of evidence. In the second example, Brown (2015) characterises neoliberal capitalism as a stealth revolution where rationality and universality are guiding principles. It is faith in universality that buttresses standardised practices across the globe.

Across Australia, there is increasing reliance on globally-benchmarked standards as a perceived panacea to falling standards. Hardy and Lewis (2018) identify current approaches as constituting education 'as a site for the measurement and monitoring of standardised practices' (p. 14). Standardised evidence-based or 'what works' approaches proliferate. The appeal of these approaches to politicians and policy writers is well documented (Biesta, 2010; Mockler & Stacey, 2021). Despite their popularity, top-down, one-size-fits-all reform solutions adopt a deficit perspective, viewing educators and schools as broken and needing to be fixed (Savage, 2023). The resultant narrowed policy focus is underpinned by what Savage (2023) argues is false hope in the 'seductive allure of order that assumes positive outcomes will flow if we can just make sure everyone is doing what is "proven to work"' (p. 29).

Proven, or evidence-based practices, (Hattie, 2016; Mourshed et al., 2010) are extensively appraised as: narrowly rendered and objective (Ylimaki & Brunderman, 2022); based on uncertain scientific evidence (Powell et al., 2017); externally generated (Mockler & Stacey, 2021); and offering increasingly decontextualised approaches (Hwa, 2021) that replace subjective judgement and ignore complexity (Biesta, 2010, 2015b). Effect sizes are an underpinning feature of evidence-based, what works (Hattie, 2016, 2019) approaches. Evidence-based practices are contested for several reasons including: marginal outcome improvements, at best (Backstrom, 2019; Savage,

2023); promoting the 'cult of the guru' (Eacott, 2017, p. 413); overuse of scientific rhetoric (Ladwig, 2018); and extensive undesirable side effects (Zhao, 2017). Regardless of extensive critique, Australian governments have elevated evidence to new heights, 'doubling down on the need to ensure schooling practices are grounded in "the best" available evidence' (Savage, 2023, p. 28).

Aspirations for 'effectiveness' has led to associations with a range of external partners in the provision of products and services (Ozga, 2009). Increasingly, standardisation 'of education policies, provision, and practices, presents lucrative opportunities for investment and profit' (Verger et al., 2017, p. 325). Consultants and purported education experts benefit, as do so-called edu-businesses (Hogan, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2016b) and think tanks involved in 'deliverology', easily absorbed reports with simplified 'answers' (Loughland & Thompson, 2016, Thomson, 2020). The involvement of commercial programs and experts are evident across the policy cycle from 'agenda setting and policy text production, through to implementation and policy enactment' (Hogan et al., 2015, p. 24).

Australian education systems have committed to external solutions with certainty (Cormack & Comber, 2013). The involvement of education 'experts' has become increasingly commonplace (Hogan & Lingard, 2019; Ruscoe et al., 2023), triggering increased outsourcing and the hollowing out of central education departments (Thompson et al., 2021). This enables large private corporations to extend their commercial infiltration and to create, market, and sell goods and services to schools (Hogan & Lingard, 2019). A fundamental shift is the power and influence held by edu-businesses, such as Pearson (Hogan et al., 2015). The introduction of a standardised national curriculum from 2010 opened opportunities for commercial education products' entry into schools' literacy and numeracy programs, now commonplace in Australian schools (Hogan et al., 2015, 2016; Sellar & Hogan, 2019). Schools' reliance on commercial programs has grown so significantly that state education departments provide guidance and endorsements (Ruscoe et al., 2023).

The reductive effects of this exteriority of influence over teachers' work has been widely critiqued (Hickey & Riddle, 2023; Stacey, Gavin, et al., 2022a). Savage (2023, p. 30) calls for scepticism about the imposition of 'magic bullet solutions – or grand claims by "gurus of change" to sell quick fix solutions'. How bureaucratic accountability regimes, coupled with reliance on standardisation and external expertise, impact on teachers' work is considered over the next two sections.

2.4.4. Accountability and performativity

The power behind contemporary education reform derives from 'three interrelated policy technologies: the market, managerialism, and performativity' (Ball, 2003, p. 115). The emphasis and priority might alter between these technologies, but their interdependence appeals to reformers as a preferred alternative to prior policy technologies of professionalism and bureaucracy (Ball, 2003). Focusing on performativity, Ball's definition has stood the test of time:

> *Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition, and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (Ball, 2003, p. 116)*

Contemporary researchers challenge the reliability and validity of accountability systems (Grek et al., 2021; Hardy, 2021b; Mockler & Stacey, 2021) and increased scrutiny (Holloway et al., 2017; Mockler, 2022; Salton et al., 2022). Intensified external accountability processes, surveillance, managerialism, and competitive markets produce a 'culture of competitive performativity' (Ball, 2003, p. 2019) and reinforce political and policy authority measures (Connell, 2013; Keddie et al., 2011). Scrutiny and surveillance are accompanied by a 'strong discourse of derision' (Robertson, 2012, p. 591) and the treatment of educators as scapegoats (Knopp, 2012), eroding public trust (Mockler, 2022). Widespread loss of confidence in teachers as professionals has transpired.

Ball (2003, p. 117) explains that education reform using such policy technologies not only changes organisations but are mechanisms for reforming teachers and producing 'new kinds of teacher subjects'. These new teacher subjects learn new vocabulary, new ways to 'be', and new ethical systems 'based upon institutional self-interest, pragmatics, and performative worth' (Ball, 2003, p. 119). New ethics of performance and competition for incentives are a shift from previous ethics of co-operation and professional judgement and they de-professionalise teachers (Keddie et al., 2011; MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020).

Just how much impact teachers have on learning outcomes is crucial to this discussion. Gore, Jaremus, and Miller (2022) point to the widely supported estimate that teacher differences explain between one and 14% of variation in student learning outcomes. This means that 86-99% of test score variation relate to factors such as socioeconomic status, parents' education levels, and other out-of-school conditions (Gore, 2022), supporting the position that structural barriers hold greater sway over educational outcomes. Given this, the current narrow accountability-oriented logics

(Hardy, 2021b) that frame teachers as responsible for improvement are inadequate for raising achievement (Gore et al., 2022). Despite these findings, characterisations of individual responsibility for raising standards persist, in 'keeping with a highly individualist and economically driven view of the world' (Thomson, 2020, p. 194).

Teachers are not alone in being subjected to increased accountability and performativity; school leaders share this experience. Heffernan (2018a) researched how new school leaders navigate pervasive performative quality and effectiveness cultures. Her work describes the 'need to "be seen to be" effective and as a "quality" leader' and the (often unwritten) requirements for visible performativity' as common experiences for members of 'the accountability generation' (Heffernan, 2018a, p. 511). Ball (2003) describes managers as the heroes of educational reform, tasked with instilling accountability requirements, attitudes, and cultures. Foucault (1980, p. 294) describes the expectation that leaders be 'technicians of behaviour', expected 'to produce bodies that are docile and capable'. In audit or performance cultures, leaders' workload increases (Gavin et al., 2021; Stacey et al., 2023), becomes more complex (Stacey, Wilson, et al., 2022; Windle et al., 2022), and intensifies (Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2023).

Rising accountability and performativity requirements encumber teachers' and leaders' workload (Stacey et al., 2023). Unsurprisingly, mental health impacts (Spicksley, 2022; Stacey et al., 2022) and burnout and demoralisation (Santoro, 2018, 2019) are prevalent. Alongside heightened accountability, responsibilisation, performative, and intensification impacts, educators are also increasingly expected to be all things to all people (Mockler, 2022). They experience blame and derision for society's ills (Larsen, 2010) and are answerable for aspects of education well beyond their sphere of influence (Mockler, 2022).

Teacher burnout is one resulting condition. Educator burnout and demoralisation are characterised by a scarcity off emotional resources (Santoro, 2018, 2019). Santoro (2011) describes burnout as '[c]onsistent and persistent frustrations in accessing the moral rewards of teaching' (p. 1). Santoro (2011) describes the inaccessibility of moral rewards as demoralisation, a state created by value conflicts triggered by policies, mandates, and accountability expectations. Teachers need to find moral value in their work (Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2022). The conditions within which teachers now work do not align with teachers' professional view of what constitutes effective teaching and professionalism, reducing self-efficacy and autonomy (MacBeath, 2012; Santoro, 2018). These findings lead to discussion of teacher professionalism.

2.4.5. Teacher professionalism

Having canvassed responsibilisation, accountability, and performativity, this section turns to an examination of literature related to teacher professionalism. Given that the term 'professionalism' is used extensively, it is appropriate to elucidate some common aspects of this concept. Consistent with the study's approach, a sociological view is maintained. Evetts (2003, 2011, 2013) makes a distinction between professionalism from within or occupational professionalism and organisational professionalism that comes from above with an outside locus of control. Occupational professionalism is based on workers 'creat[ing] and maintain[ing] distinct professional values or moral obligations (e.g. codes of ethics)' that encourage cooperation and enable pride and satisfaction in work performance (Evetts, 2013, p. 785). This professionalisation from within promotes a discourse of dedicated service and autonomous decision-making, holding expert judgement and professional discretion as core values (Evetts, 2011, 2013). The benefits of occupational professionalism and enhanced trust in the profession (Connell, 2009; Mayer, 2011) include positive engagement with policy enactment (Hardy & Melville, 2019; Stacey et al., 2023), improved educator ownership of directions and plans (Frostenson, 2015; Gobby et al., 2022), and enhanced collaborative professional learning (Hardy & Melville, 2019).

Managerial accountability impacts the from within, occupational focus, such that '[p]rofessionalism becomes defined in terms of skills and competences, which have the potential for being measured, and rewarded, rather than a form of reflection' (Ball, 2016, p. 1050). Evetts portrays this shift in professionalism as a move from occupational professionalism to organisational professionalism. It moves from 'notions of partnership, collegiality, discretion, and trust to increasing levels of managerialism, bureaucracy, standardization, assessment, and performance review' (Evetts, 2011, p. 407). Dominant 'from above' external influences, including policy writers and politicians, take control away from educators (Evetts, 2011, 2013) and demand 'hard' evidence of compliance (Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022).

Characterised by statutory and managerial work regulation, organisational professionalism is seen to 'impoverish the quality of work and increase bureaucracy' through imposed, false, and selective discourses that limit autonomy and occupational control, facilitate rationalisation, justify change, and form disciplinary mechanisms (Evetts, 2013, p. 785). In organisational professionalism, educators experience: loss of trust from the system (Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2022), weakening autonomy (Frostenson, 2015; Holloway & Brass, 2018), domination by data (Carter & Hunter, 2023; Lewis & Holloway, 2019), reduced confidence in their classroom judgement (Anderson &

Cohen, 2015), and administrative overload (Windle et al., 2022). Braun and Maguire (2020) poignantly describe the outcome of contradictory organisational values and practices on professionalism as 'doing without believing' (p. 433).

To this point, the review has considered the broad impacts of neoliberal capitalism and global education policy on school educators, including their positioning at the forefront of and being responsibilised for improvement, being subject to accountability and performativity practices, and experiencing significant shifts in their professionalism. Finally, the review introduces research related to remote education.

2.4.6. Remote education

Remote education research is undertaken under various auspices. Condensing all spaces outside of metropolitan centres under one banner, 'rural education research' generally encompasses remote areas (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019; Roberts & Fuqua, 2021). Under this framing, it is crucial to acknowledge that 'rural' comprises great diversity, including 'topography and social, cultural and economic characteristics both within and across countries' (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019, p. 7) and complex interconnections (Reid et al., 2010). In other research approaches, 'remote' is understood as locations apart from larger towns and increasingly synonymous with First Nations communities (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024; Roberts & Fuqua, 2021). This study draws upon academic sources from these and other 'remote education' framings, seeking to focus on research congruent with the case study's remote site. These sources include those related to geographical distance (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019; Reid, 2017), challenges with access (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024), concerns for strengths and successes (Disbray, 2016; Guenther et al., 2019) and moving away from seeing remote education as a 'problem' to be solved toward 'valuing people, places, and communities' (Roberts & Guenther, 2021, p. 13).

Against these broad intentions, the literature clearly establishes the prevalence of 'persistent and entrenched locational disadvantage' (Vinson et al., 2015, p. 5). Gaps between urban and rural/remote consistently identify socioeconomic factors (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019) and little progress in addressing complex and entrenched disadvantage over the previous two decades (Vinson et al., 2015). The effects on education outcomes are widely documented (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019; Guenther et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2010). Extensive research identifies socioeconomic background as 'the strongest predictor of educational attainment' (Francis et al.,

2017, p. 415). Poverty, defined as a household's income 'fall[ing] below a level considered adequate to achieve an acceptable standard of living' (Davidson et al., 2022, p. 29), is a significant factor. More than three million Australians live in poverty, of which one million are children (MacDonald, 2020).

Having a 'very remote' postcode also has equity and outcome implications (Dean et al., 2023; Goss & Sonnermann, 2016). Baroutsis and Lingard (2017) and the OECD (2016) identify a tight correlation between standardised test results and where one lives, meaning that the further from the central metropolis, the wider the outcomes gap. This phenomenon is widely collaborated. Four examples follow. Firstly, Holden and Zang's (2018) *The economic impact of improving regional, rural and remote education in Australia: Closing the human capital gap* report reiterated the finding that levels of socioeconomic disadvantage increase with increased geographic remoteness. Secondly, Halsey (2018a) found that education outcomes worsened for regional, remote, and very remote students. Thirdly, Elgart (2017) revealed that despite decades of improvement endeavour focused on students living in poverty, locality continues to be a robust success predictor. The fourth example is the results summary from the ACER report: *PISA 2022. Reporting Australia's results. Volume I: Student performance and equity in education* (De Bortoli et al., 2023, p. 18)*.*

Figure 2.4-1 Summary 2022 PISA results for Mathematics, Science, and Reading by location (ACER, 2023)
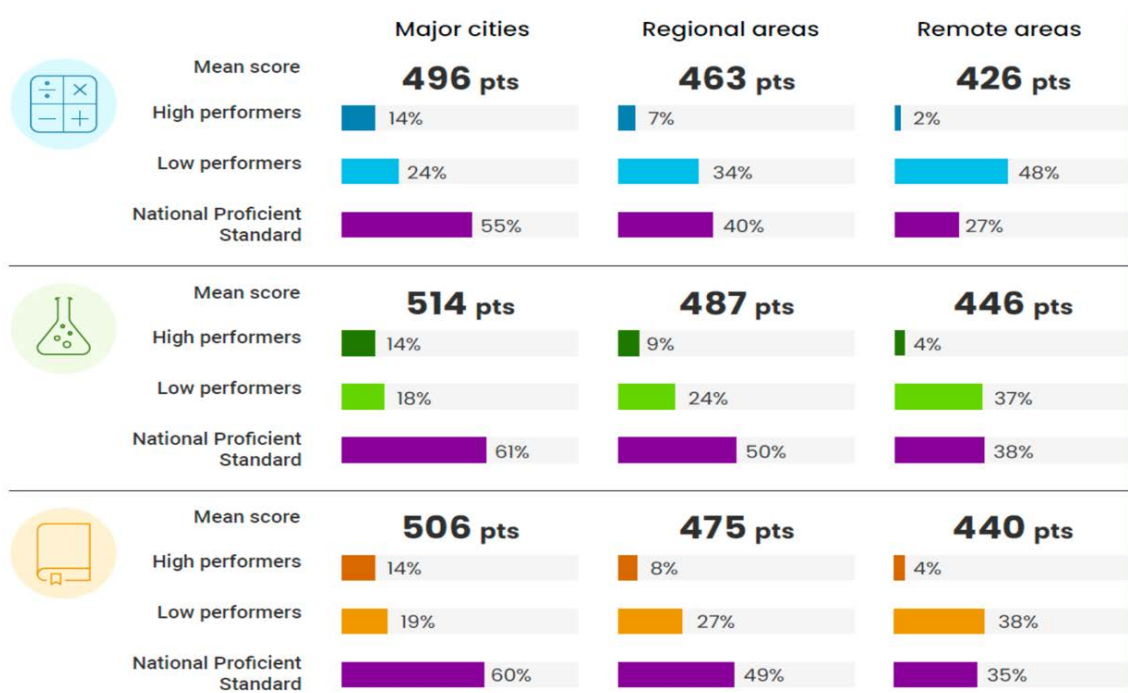
Figure 2.4-1 illustrates the significant drop in the number of high performers and doubling of the number of low performers in remote schools relative to their metropolitan peers. This is further confirmation that the equity gaps related to geographic location are enduring.

Remote school researchers have examined a range of topics and trends relevant to this study, including metro-centricity, inattention to context, improvement measurement discrepancies, declining regional and remote NAPLAN participation, deficit thinking, individualising complexities, and financial potential. These topics are summarised next.

Metro-centricity and gaps in the construction of contextual relevance between political actors and staff in schools are well established (MacDonald, 2020; Shieh, 2023). Metro-centric thinking, or the 'norm of the modern city' (Green & Letts, 2007, p. 60), prevails in public education systems. Green and Letts (2007) characterise Australian education policy as 'spatially blind'. It is centralised in capital cities and based on systems and processes standardised to match metropolitan expectations and contexts (Roberts et al., 2022b). Not only is policy guided by metro-centricity, measurement of school improvement and student learning outcomes are similarly predisposed. Roberts and Green (2013) assert that non-urban and urban schools have been simultaneously compared and considered as if they are essentially the same.

Extensive research supports the important role context plays in effective school improvement. Braun et al. (2011) asserted that in enactment, 'policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors, even though in much central policy making, these sorts of constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments tend to be neglected' (p. 585). They go on to describe four aspects of schools' dynamic and shifting context that impact policy enactment and must be taken seriously (p.595). The first, *situated* contexts, refers to location, historical factors, and community. The second, *professional* contexts, refers to teachers' values, experience, and skills. *Material* contexts, the third, concern the school's resources, infrastructure, and technological capacities. And the fourth, *external* contexts, describes the systemic influences, reporting accountabilities, and relationships with other schools (Braun et al., 2011). Keddie (2013) builds on this work, attending to the role context plays if schools and staff are to thrive in contemporary audit cultures. Another Australian researcher, Heffernan (2018), researched the role of context in school improvement processes more specifically. She identified impacts resulting from performative policy influences, pressures such as narrowed focus on curriculum and demands for compliance with department mandates and highlighted the importance of contextualised

responses. Recent research on contextually responsive education stresses the importance of curriculum and improvement processes that are connected to place and contextualised (Gunther & Fuqua, 2024).

Context also impacts the dependability of data comparisons. NAPLAN participation rates were recently investigated by the federally funded, Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). Their report, *NAPLAN participation: Who is missing the tests and why it matters*, (Lu et al., 2023) identified significant national decreases in NAPLAN participation over time. The report authors posited that declining participation leads to policy and education decisions being based on non-representative data. In 2022, twenty thousand fewer students sat NAPLAN assessments than in 2020, and 'participation rates among students from priority equity groups [were] much lower, and declining faster, than average' (Lu et al., 2023, p. 3). Predominant in priority equity groups are regional, remote, and very remote students. AERO recognised the challenge that declining non-urban student participation poses for reliable measurement of learning outcomes and monitoring of equity gaps in Australian education. This report recognises the 'importance of evidence in context, rather than considering it in a decontextualised way' (Savage, 2023, p. 30).

Default deficit thinking about remoteness and socioeconomical disadvantage has been contested. Guenther (2013, p. 2) challenged descriptions of remote education that position it as problematic and failing, and 'in terms of gaps that need closing'. Fogarty et al. (2018) identified deficit thinking as a significant barrier for remote education. Once entrenched, deficit discourses result in education policy that focuses on the 'doing', rather than on the impacts that initiatives and strategies have on learning opportunities for remote students (Fogarty et al., 2017). Roberts and Cuervo (2015, p. 1) challenged positivist and deficit orientations, suggesting that 'rural education research must engage with rural meanings and rural places as valuable and important'. This would extend to regional, remote, and very remote communities. This perspective brings 'an orientation to understanding what works for rural communities – rather than for government bureaucracies or national business' (Roberts & Cuervo, 2015, p. 1). Similarly, this perspective challenges education policy conceived amidst the powerful economic values and priorities of metropolitan communities (Roberts, 2015). Corbett (2015, p. 12) describes analogous ideas, viewing non-urban places 'as a source of wealth and strength'. Nevertheless, framing a shift away from deficit discourses 'should not be mistaken for calls to deflate the realities of disadvantage' (Fogarty, Lovell, et al., 2018, p. vi).

Neoliberal capitalism individualises problems of power and the realities of disadvantage for non-urban communities (Corbett, 2015). Individuals are 'blamed for their relative poverty and marginality' through characterisations of non-urban communities as 'deficit', 'traditional', and 'conservative' because they 'fail' to modernise and find entrepreneurial solutions (Corbett, 2015, p. 13). Individualised framing, including a lack of education, ignorance, or insufficient / inappropriate aspirations, 'actually increase rather than attenuate obstacles by operating ideologically to simplify the complexities and mute the severities of historic conditions' (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 228). Such framing also denies the 'resilient and innovative people who … solve the problems of day to day living in community' (Corbett, 2015, p. 13). Deficit framing of communities also downplays non-urban students' potential future contribution. In *The economic impact of improving regional, rural and remote education in Australia: Closing the human capital gap* Holden and Zang (2018) calculate that Australia could add more than $50 billion to its annual GDP by focusing on students outside major cities.

Speaking back to the individualisation of responsibility for and action against the impacts of disadvantage is not to deny that for a long time, children growing up in poverty have performed in the lower bands of achievement (Comber & Kamler, 2004). The work of researchers exploring effective remote school pedagogical approaches are canvased.

Contemporary rural and remote education research recognises the prevalence of metrocentric approaches (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024; Roberts & Green, 2013) and metro-normative values (Green, 2013). Metrocentric approaches to policy development, curriculum, assessment practices are dominant (Roberts & Fuqua, 2021) but extensive academic endeavour points to the importance of a more localised approach. A recent systematic review identifying success factors in remote education for First Nations students concluded with confidence 'that poverty or so-called socio-economic disadvantage is not in itself a barrier to outcomes' (Guenther et al., 2019, p. 336). This review reinforced the importance of teachers understanding that students bring local resources to their learning. Other researchers agree, describing this process for all learners as recognising their 'virtual schoolbags' (Thomson, 2002), their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992), responding to 'place-based and place-consciousness' (Gruenewald, 2003) and using critical socio-spatial approaches (Soja, 1989). Roberts and Fuqua (2021) describe the intensifying focus on such important and topical approaches as responses to the 'glocal' – navigation of local/globalisation pressures. They describe the importance role of rural education research in 'working against the essentialisation of 'place' and standardisation' (Roberts & Fuqua, 2021, p. 2).

Hardy (2013) too challenges standardisation and points to the importance of valuing local context, knowledge and traditions in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Greenwood (2017, p. 93) describes place, 'a unique and bounded biophysical and cultural environment' as profoundly pedagogical, writing that 'as centers of experience, places teach us and shape our identities and relationships'. He also explains how the dominant neoliberal understanding of globalisation steers policymakers toward the reductionist view that education's purpose is preparation for competition in the global economy and in so doing, disregard place (Greenwood, 2017). Bishop (2004) describes the importance of understanding connections to place as critical to the ability to live well as individuals and as communities. Place then, 'is a lens through which young people begin to make sense of themselves and their surroundings' (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 5).

Place based education can be described as local studies with a focus on the well-being and effective learning of students (Bartholomaeus, 2006). Local advocacy in curriculum and pedagogy is widely supported (Greenwood, 2017; Sobel, 2013; Soja, 1989) and incorporates environmental studies, service learning, local history, outdoor education and work-related programs (McInerney et al., 2011). Guenther and Fuqua (2024) suggest place based education is unique to the context, reflecting the local people, places, resources, relationships and temporality, and should reflect local priorities and aspirations. Reid (2017) calls for place based education to respond to the politics and ideology in all human geographies as a vehicle for social justice and environmental agency. Place based education is attributed with furthering student agency, and centring learners as producers of knowledge as they actively participate 'in democratic processes and devise solutions to social and environmental problems' (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 4).

In summary, place based education is recognised as 'creating opportunities for young people to learn about and care for the ecological and social wellbeing of the communities they inhabit' and result in improved student engagement and participation (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 5). Guenther et al (2019) echo this view emphasising the importance of locally contextualised curriculum and pedagogies that work with students and support their world views. How place based approaches fared in the remote school in this research will be explored in the case study.

Having considered a range of topics related to education in remote communities, I close this section of the chapter with some research findings about the outsiders coming into schools in remote communities, the teachers. Remote settings generally attract graduate teachers or those

with limited experience. Such settings need experienced teachers but find them reluctant to move to remote locations (Adoniou & Gallagher, 2017). Early career teachers can lack local expertise and may have fewer personal resources to draw upon when teaching in geographical isolation (Heffernan & Longmuir, 2019). Stacey (2019) identified a tension for teachers working in challenging remote locations, being uncomfortable with their praxis but lacking experience or access to learning to modify it. Inexperience and under preparation commonly result in high teacher turnover in remote settings. This turnover leads to an ongoing requirement to induct and support beginning teachers who are proportionally overrepresented (Halsey, 2018b). That early career teachers predominate in remote settings means that enthusiastic teachers, potentially with fewer personal resources than the complexities ahead will demand, arrive in remote settings with the best of intentions and in high need of support.

2.5.   CONCLUSION

This Literature Review canvassed academic thinking on ideas of relevance to this study's policy trajectory. This thinking has contributed to the theoretical framing of the research and provided conceptual tools for representing my findings. It began with philosophical underpinnings and moved to elaborate the *context of influence* by considering global education and neoliberal capitalism and Australian education with its aspirations for equity and excellence. Then it explored teachers' work in the *context of practice*, considering how the determining *context of influence* structures affected teachers' opportunities for agency. Attention was given to the thesis themes: improvement, measurement, and standardisation, and to broader issues such as performativity and impacts on teacher professionalism. This supported the study premise that improvement, based on 'falling standards' discourses, is measured, producing conservative standardised education reforms that negatively impact equity and teachers' work. The chapter closed with an introduction to some of the issues facing remote teachers. The following chapter explains the study's methodological approach to investigating the policy conditions and remote school case study situated in these circumstances.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research is a deeply political act. Holding this tenet close, I interrogated policy and probed the lived experiences of those who enacted it. I was particularly concerned about the impacts of Australian education policy actors' decision making on equity gaps. This chapter provides a methodological framework and explains my approach to policy trajectory research. Here, I outline the study's theoretical perspectives, the intention to be critical, and explain the research design and methodological approaches. Having spent three years as principal in the remote case study school it is imperative that I provide an account of my ethical responsibilities towards the research participants. How the rights of participants and care in relation to potential power relationships were served is also considered in this chapter.

3.1.   RESEARCH STRUCTURE: POLICY TRAJECTORY

This study is structured as policy trajectory research. According to Ball (1993), policy trajectory research interrogates policy and its navigation, using 'a cross-sectional rather than a single level analysis' (p. 16) to trace policy from its formulation through to enactment. This study's cross-sectional analysis addresses the *context of influence*, the *context of policy text production* and the *context of practice* (Ball, 1993; Blackmore & Lauder, 2005; Bowe et al., 1992; Vidovich, 2003), ensuring the analysis asks critical questions (Ball, 1993; Blaikie, 2010; Punch, 2014). These three contexts are elaborated in this chapter.

In Chapter Two, the *context of influence* was discussed, including the international context; neoliberal capitalism and global education policy; and Australian federal and state government policies and frameworks that underpin contemporary aspirations for school improvement. To better understand and investigate the genesis, intentions, and enactment of 'world class' improvement policy, this study adopted a 'critical ethos' (Ozga, 2019, p. 7).

Critical interrogation of the state's policy texts illuminated the second context: the *context of text production*. Bacchi's (1999, 2009) *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPRB) theoretical lenses were applied. The policy analysis was based on two key premises: (1) that we are governed through problematisations and (2) that we need to study problematisations (through analysing the problem representations they contain) rather than 'problems' (Bacchi, 2009). Critical discourse analysis is elaborated in the *Context of policy text production* (Section 3.4).

The third study context, the *context of practice*, was a case study of a very remote school required to respond to new improvement policy mandates. Understanding how the policy texts were interpreted, enacted, and adapted, and investigating participants' lived experiences of enactment, are fundamental to the research purpose. The *Context of practice* (Section 3.5) elaborates case study research, and the ethnographic methods used. My leadership role immersed me in the case study school culture, enabling observation and dialogic openings as part of my work. It provided opportunities to 'bring life to the people we work with and listen to' and as they responded to 'larger social and historical forces and the public questions raised' (Back, 2007, p. 23).

3.1.1. Research goals

This research aimed to better understand the context and impact of an Australian state education system's world class improvement policy aspirations in a remote school case study. Within a global context where experts make decisions, education is datafied, and standardised teaching practices are valued, this research addressed a series of questions.

The research questions are framed by the policy trajectory research's three contexts (Bowe et al., 1992):

1. *Context of influence*

- What influenced the state's aspirations for 'world class' improvement?

2. *Context of policy text production*

- Drawing on Bacchi's (1999, 2009) WPRB approach: What is the problem represented to be in the contexts of policy influence and text production? What are the embedded presuppositions? How might policy reductive representations of 'the problem' need to be problematised in terms of effects in complex contexts of practice?

3. *Context of practice*

- How did a very remote school respond to the demand for 'world class' improvement?

  o What practices changed and what were the consequences?
  o What is the impact of the department's (DE) improvement policy on teacher practice and professionalism?
  o What were the implications for equity and excellence in the remote setting?

Having detailed the research questions, the next section elaborates the theoretical resources employed to address these questions.

3.2.   THEORETICAL RESOURCES

This section makes clear my positionality and the theoretical tools accessed for my qualitative research study. Social constructionism informed my ontological and epistemological assumptions as I sought to understand how a state education system developed its new improvement aspirations and how a remote school responded. My methodology held an interpretivist framing, as I endeavoured to seek deeper meaning within the three policy trajectory research contexts (Bowe et al., 1992), using critical policy sociology (CPS) and ethnographic methods.

The epistemological assumptions and methodologies are expanded in the following sections.

3.2.1. Epistemological assumptions

The study draws on an assumption that our social reality is created through shared interpretations 'that social actors produce and reproduce as they go about their everyday lives' (Blaikie, 2010, p. 93). This ontology envisions external reality as placing constraints on and providing openings for multiple human constructions and perspectives (Blaikie, 2010; Burr, 2015). Drawing on these understandings, this study employs social constructionism as its epistemological foundation.

Social constructionism has 'well established foundations' (Cunliffe, 2016, p. 750). It is relativist, and tends not to be dogmatic, holding understandings lightly and seeking to understand the 'what' as well as the 'how' (Silverman, 2021; Weinberg, 2009). The foundation of social constructionism is that our knowledge of the world is constructed through social interaction, and 'we make sense of what is happening around us as we interact with our surroundings' (Cunliffe, 2016, p. 751). Thus, all knowledge and reality are contingent on human practices, constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1988). Social constructionists consider this socially constructed reality, understanding that language is the primary medium of cultural production (Burr, 2015; Crotty, 1998).

I adopted a socially critical lens in order 'to uncover the social relationships and broader political factors which influence the actions of the actors' (Burr, 2015, p. 29), and to recognise neoliberal impacts on the daily work of teachers enacting the state's improvement policy.

3.2.2. Interpretivism

Interpretivism is the most common lens brought to qualitative research (Blaikie, 2010; Crotty, 1988). Interpretive research, consistent with social constructivism, accepts that reality is socially constructed and that there are 'multiple realities, or interpretations of a single event' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9).

In interpretivism, social reality is seen as the product of its inhabitants, and it is interpreted by the meanings participants produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their everyday activities together (Blaikie, 2010). Interpretivism places attention on the nature of meaningful social action, its role in understanding patterns in social life, and how this meaning can be assessed (Geertz, 2008). Rather than trying to establish the actual meaning that social actors give to particular social actions, interpretivists work at a high level of generality (Blaikie, 2010) and seek deeper meaning (Garman, 2006; Latour, 2004).

Interpretivism is widely acknowledged as a sound fit in multiple methods, including case study (Blaikie, 2010; Garman, 2006). The policy trajectory's *context of practice* utilises ethnographic methods in a case study to understand how teachers navigated the determining policy structures.

3.2.3. Critical research

Those engaged in critical research interrogate hegemonic purposes, power relationships, and resistance (Crotty, 1988). Critical approaches 'interrogate facts, opinions, contexts - in essence structures and agency' (Latour, 2004, p. 243). The policy analysis and case study both offered opportunities for deep examination (Latour, 2004) and policy trajectory framing enabled interrogation across macro, meso and micro contexts, to identify interconnections.

Given my own background, and my intention to undertake policy trajectory research, the plan to bring a critical lens was self-evident. I examined the lived experiences - my own and those of other leaders in and associated with the case school – to understand how policy positions us in the world. Critical research 'is not a simplistic reflexive practice of taking a moment in research to account for one's positionality and then moving on to conduct normative field work' (Bhavnani et al., 2014, p. 170). Sellar, Savage, and Gorur (2014) identify three key functions of critical research: mapping and exploring power relations and networks, examining how political and social formations are assembled, and critiquing policy problem/solution construction. These strategies are pertinent to this study's policy trajectory research and 'implicitly or explicitly reflect a

commitment to a politics of research' (Lingard, 2021, p. 2) that strives to challenge dominant power structures embedded in policy arrangements.

The choice of one remote school as the context for understanding lived experience was based on the understanding that 'when used reflexively, limited locations offer a more critical framework from which to practice research' (Bhavnani et al., 2014, p. 173). As will be detailed, the case school offered a distinctive and vibrant context for the research, a setting ideal for identifying the impacts and limitations of applying global accountability discourses across a state education system. This will be elucidated in the *Context of practice – Case study* (Section 3.5).

3.2.4. Discourse

The Literature Review introduced power and structure/agency as philosophical underpinnings for this study. Similarly, discourse as a power structure and action (Foucault, 1980) was a key construct for this study's critical research.

Discourse is a view of language that 'looks above its words, sentences and linguistic features and focuses attention on the way language is used, what it is used for and the social context in which it is used' (Punch, 2014, p. 191). This study attended to a range of social interactions, actions, and experiences – evidenced through language as discourse – to identify intended and enacted implications of DE's improvement aspirations. Three central facets of discourse are predominant in this study: the relationship between text, discursive practice, and social practice; constitutive nature of this relationship and power relations.

Discursive events have three dimensions or facets: a spoken or written language text, an instance of discourse practice involving the production and interpretation of text, and an occurrence of social practice. This study's policy trajectory research explored the relationships between international, national, and local written policy texts and how the interpretation of these texts was reflected in policy enactment. The case study identified discourses occurring simultaneously, among the alternative versions or different interpretations of actions, events, or 'reality', aiming to see how each claimed to represent their version as truth (Burr, 2015; Gee et al., 1996). Insight into the ways in which people interpret their experiences' and then 'in turn reproduce new narratives' (Plummer, 2016, p. 36) is evident in the interview data. One focus of the policy analysis was how teachers are constituted and the impact this has on their professionalism and agency. This is further explored in the case study (Section 3.5) and tracked through the interview data (Section 3.6.3).

As explained in Chapter Two, power relations also figure prominently in this study. Power is central to the conception of discourse and identifying inherent power relations and political practices is fundamental to discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993; Vidovich, 2003). The next three sections detail the application of the theoretical resources described here in the three study contexts: the *context of influence* (Section 3.3), the *context of text production* (Section 3.4), and the *context of practice* (Section 3.5).

3.3. CONTEXT OF INFLUENCE AND CONTEXT OF POLICY PRODUCTION - POLICY SOCIOLOGY

Policy sociology underlies the exploration of the *context of influence* in the Literature Review and the critical discourse analysis in the *context of policy production* (Chapter 4). Ozga's (1987) description of policy sociology as 'rooted in social science traditions, historically informed and drawing on qualitative and illuminative techniques' (p. 144) has stood the test of time, and is cited by many current policy sociology researchers, including Ball (2021a), Lingard (2021), and Savage et al. (2021). This section provides details about the critical application of policy sociology to the development and enactment of policies of interest to this study.

3.3.1. Critical policy sociology

Policy sociology was applied with a critical lens in this study because as Ball (1993) reveals, policy is a discursive determining formation, against which teachers have to work and narrate themselves. Ball (1993) calls for policy analysis that interrogates scope, political preoccupations, and structural inequities, seeking evidence of incoherence and disarray. Critical policy sociology (CPS) recognises the intricacies of relationships 'between policy intentions, texts, interpretations, and reactions' (Ball, 1993, p. 13). It brings various methodologies and theoretical resources, requiring the researcher to stand apart from 'prevailing order and [ask] how it (unlike problem solving) came about' (Ozga, 2019, p. 6). In the process, the CPS researcher analyses policy origins, foundations, and assumptions, to examine how policies develop and illustrate 'differences between policy rhetoric/discourse and reality' (Diem & Brooks, 2022, p. 3).

CPS challenges received wisdom, asking fundamental questions and describing relationships of power, processes of power, and strategies for progressive change (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 51). This study aims 'to challenge dominant power structures and associated political and policy arrangements' (Lingard, 2021, p. 2). This research also embraces CPS with my commitment to

reflexivity, including by being self-reflexive, (Lingard, 2021), and seeking to inspire social, political, and educational change and formulating visions of a better future.

3.3.2. About policy

A policy trajectory begins with policy. This section elucidates this term. Policy, in the most general sense, is defined as 'a set of ideas or a plan for action followed by a business, a government, a political party, or a group of people' (Cambridge University, 2022, n.p.). These plans often encompass a range of elements, oriented towards achieving long- or short-term goals, such as: guiding principles, frameworks, anticipated actions, responsibilities and more. Most often in an accessible written format, policies are expected to direct or exert influence on decision making, activities, and practices inside predetermined boundaries.

Broadening this basic definition is an understanding that policy is a 'form of social action both intended and actual' (Ball, 1994, p. 10). Ball (1993) challenges unexamined assumptions about policies as 'things', describing them as 'processes and outcomes' (p. 11). Elaborating, Ball (1993) says policy is both 'text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended' (p.10).

In this study's context, policy is decided by national and state education authorities and government agencies. Since the 1990s, Australia has seen increased political engagement in education policy development and evaluation of delivery. Hence, policy documents are generally interpreted as expressions of political purpose. Applying a more critical interpretation, policy documents exercise political power and legitimate the power of the state by 'contribut[ing] fundamentally to the "engineering" of consent' (Codd, 1988, p. 235). This is not a straightforward, or linear process. How the state government's education policy texts are interrogated is discussed in the ensuing chapter, *Context of policy production* (Chapter 4).

3.3.3. Policy enactment

The third stage of this policy trajectory, the *context of practice*, investigated how teachers in a remote school engaged with and responded to the state's improvement aspirations, as expressed in policy.

Policy enactment has garnered increased research attention (Bowe et al., 1992). In keeping with this study's policy sociology approach, I am making a distinction between implementation of policy and policy enactment (Bergh, 2015). Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) identified that the language of

policy 'implementation' implies that there is 'an unequivocal governmental position that will filter down … into the schools' (p. 10). In contrast, enactment involves active interpretation and iterative negotiation between levels and actors (Ball, 2012b; Ball et al., 2011a). Policy enactment relies on factors including 'commitment, understanding, capability, resources, practical limitations, cooperation, and (importantly) intertextual compatibility' (Ball, 1993, pp. 12–13).

Consequently, it is widely understood that teachers' engagement with policy 'does not occur in a vacuum; rather, economic, political, historical, and disciplinary forces act on teachers' (Hardy & Melville, 2019, p. 4). Within these parameters, a span of responses is possible, from passive acceptance to enactment and active meaning making. In the latter, teachers engage cognitively with policy, but their actions may not be seen as coherent or consistent, nor those of autonomous actors (Hardy & Melville, 2019), because teachers are constrained within the 'discursive possibilities available to them' (Ball et al., 2011b, p. 612). Coburn (2016) describes the discursive possibilities in policy enactment as 'fundamentally about the relationship between social structure and agency' (p. 466).

The role of teachers in policy enactment has also garnered research attention. Ball et al. (2011a) suggest that teachers' roles should be considered to be in continuous transformation. While researching teachers' evolving identities, Melville and Bartley (2013) acknowledged the importance of space for teachers to challenge contemporary discourses but found that individual teachers may lack the power necessary for this. Consequently, teachers are 'constituted through their responses to the discourses and situations of their work and their emotional response to these experiences' (Melville & Bartley, 2013, p. 172).

The following two sections elucidate the use of the theoretical resources described here, initially as policy was problematised in the *context of policy text production* (Section 3.4) and secondly, as it was enacted in the case study, the *context of practice* (Section 3.5).

3.4.   CONTEXT OF POLICY TEXT PRODUCTION – PROBLEMATISING POLICY

Critical discourse analysis was applied in the study's *context of policy text production*. Discourse analysis is a 'type of textual deconstruction'. Consistent with social constructionism, it critically analyses the relationship between language and ideology, providing a valuable tool to explore broader political factors and 'highlight values and tease out competing discourses and contradictions' (Vidovich, 2003, p. 79).

The intent of this study was to interrogate the meaning of policies and the 'meaning-making that is part of policy formulation', exploring how we are governed through policy solutions to problems (Bacchi, 2009, p. vi). Such problems are constructed and reified to justify the policy solution but are not questioned to ascertain whether they are actually *the* problem. Consequently, the following sections will consider policy as problem solving (Section 3.4.1), describe and justify problematising policy (Section 3.4.2) and describe this study's critical discourse analysis approach: WPRB (Section 3.43).

3.4.1. Policy as problem-solving

Problem solving is identified as a common policy purpose. Ozga (2019), Bacchi (2010) and others highlight the prominence of a problem-solving paradigm in policy development. This paradigm assumes that problems are easily recognised and objective. Bacchi (2010) cites reliance on evidence-based policy as a clear example of assumed objectivity in a problem and solution. The focus on problem solving, providing solutions to predefined problems, has led to what Weber (1947) described as 'technical rationality' and Burawoy (2004) 'instrumental knowledge'. The concern flagged here is that while 'policy as problem solving' is flawed and endemic 'a problem-solving motif is near hegemonic' (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012, p. 23).

Questioning policy as problem solving does not contradict the fact that there are extensive, troubling social conditions demanding government attention. However, the propensity for calling social conditions 'problems' and expecting that this fixes them must be interrogated (Bacchi, 2010). How problems are constituted drives policy and becomes the way the public is governed (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012). Even when political rhetoric includes determination to find the real problem and commits to appropriate solutions, this determination and commitment produces 'problems with meanings that affect what gets done or not done, and how people live their lives' (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012, p. 23).

What follows is an examination of 'problematisation' (Section 3.4.2) before the discourse analysis, *What is the problem represented to be?* (WPRB), approach (Section 3.4.3) is considered.

3.4.2. Understanding problematisation

Shifting our examination of policy purpose from problem solving to problematisation is significant to this study's *context of policy text production.* This section will explain the term problematisation and its relevance to troubling policy as problem solving.

As a proponent of problematisation, Bacchi (2015) recognises that the term has multiple meanings and applications and has been widely adopted across disciplines. For example, Paulo Freire introduced problematisation as a strategy for developing critical consciousness. For Freire, problematisation was a pedagogical practice that disrupts taken-for-granted 'truths', seeing them as myths fed to the population by oppressors (Freire, 2005). Another example is Foucault who employed the term 'problematisation' in two ways: first, to describe his method of analysis which he called 'thinking problematically' and secondly to refer to an historical process of producing objects for thought (Foucault, 1977, pp. 185–186).

Bacchi's WPRB approach offers a Foucauldian-influenced mode of problematisation that analyses 'assumptions, or familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking' that sustain accepted practices (Foucault, 1997, p. 456). At its most elementary, problematisation is inquiry into the 'terms of reference within which an issue is cast' (Bacchi, 2012, p. 1). While 'problematisation' is used in distinct ways across diverse research traditions, Bacchi's (2012) approach to the study of problematisations 'is to "dismantle" objects as taken-for-granted and to show how they have come to be' (p. 12). Problematising and critical analysis can be seen as synonymous ways of interrogating or questioning an issue but using Bacchi's (2015) approach involves interrogating or questioning at a deeper level. As will be detailed in the Section 3.4.3, the chosen approach, the *What is the problem represented to be?* (WPRB) approach, takes the researcher to this deeper analysis.

3.4.3. Approach to discourse analysis

The approach to *the context of text production* in this study was to problematise policy and interrogate the meaning-making occurring in its formulation. This section introduces the policy at the centre of this study and explicates Bacchi's (1999, 2009) WPRB approach.

The education department (DE) announced its ambitions for state funded education to be world class by 2028 in September 2018. WPRB was applied to DE's Strategic Plan (2019b) and the assemblage of publicly accessible texts, including websites (2018a, 2018c), action plans (2021a), annual reports (2019a, 2020b, 2021b, 2022) and promotional videos (2021d). The Strategic Plan was chosen as the CDA focus because it signalled a significant policy shift and altered improvement ambitions for the Australian state. It quickly achieved acclaim across the nation and featured as a McKinsey and Company's success story (Millard et al., 2021). The Plan (2019a, 2021b) was accompanied by a significant financial investment in consultancy fees and additional

staff to support a singular focus on school improvement planning. Pursuing world class education to resolve 'falling standards', the state's education department engaged deeply with the global education reform discourses described in Chapter Two. This shift occurred during my tenure as principal in the remote case school, enabling exploration of practices before, during, and after the state's ten-year plan to move from 'good to great'.

The study utilises Bacchi's WPRB approach (Bacchi, 1999, 2009). WPRB was selected for its alignment with the philosophical and epistemological framing of this study, and as it offers a counter view to the 'problem solving' approach currently popular in Australian policy development. The intention of this study is to interrogate the representations of school improvement related 'problems' (Bacchi, 2010). Postulated 'solutions', in the form of world class aspirational policies, are explored and critically examined for their implicit problem representations (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012) (Chapter Four).

The WPRB theoretical lenses enable critical interrogation of public policies through questions and conceptual logic tools (Section 3.7.1). It starts from the premise that action proposed or described in policy documentation reveals what is considered problematic or needs to be changed. In other words, policies encompass 'implicit representations of what is considered to be the "problem" ("problem representations")' (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012, p. 22). To repeat a point made previously, this position does not deny that there are disquieting conditions that require redress. However, the emphasis of WPRB analysis is not on the nature of those disquieting conditions but rather on 'the implied shape of "problems" in specific proposals' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 31).

This section has contextualised and introduced the WPRB approach taken to discourse analysis in this study. Additional information is provided in Section 4.2, as part of the peer reviewed journal article included as Chapter Four.

3.5.   CONTEXT OF PRACTICE - CASE STUDY

This section explains steps taken to probe the enactment of DE's Strategic Plan (2019b) in a case study situated in one very remote school context. To understand the complexities of policy enactment in the remote context, the study used ethnographic methods. An explanatory case study model was chosen as it 'presents data bearing on cause-effect-relationships - explaining how events happened' (Yin, 2003, p. 5). Explanation and interrogation of cause-and-effect relationships were required to understand participants' lived experience of DE's new improvement mandates.

Throughout this thesis, the case school is referred to as Desert Sunshine Area School (DSAS). DSAS and the Desert Sunshine community are introduced in Chapter Five, to provide 'a bedrock of thick description' of the community, its culture, and social relationships (McInerney, 2004, p. 29). Methodological decisions related to case study research are elaborated in Sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.2.

3.5.1. Ethnographic methods

The case study's methods are drawn from the well-established research traditions of ethnography, the study of a culture and the way a group of people interact and communicate within certain contexts (Denzin, 1997; Wolcott, 2005). The use of ethnographic methods in case studies is common and consistent with this study's critical (Kemmis et al., 2014) and social constructionist (Burr, 2015) frames. The methods used in this study included, interviews, researcher journaling and reflections, and analysis of school data and documents.

My three-year DSAS tenure enabled access to the 'natural setting' (Denzin, 1997), that is, the school community before, and while it navigated, the introduction of DE's new improvement directives. I was concerned with examining happenings in the natural setting as '[t]hose who honor lived experience ground their work in the study of flesh-and-blood individuals' (Denzin, 1997, p. 33). An explanation of the ethical considerations and steps taken to ensure research of lived experience was undertaken in a mindful manner are detailed in Section 3.8.3. The ethnographic data collection methods are detailed in Section 3.6.

3.5.2. Case study research

Choosing a case for empirical inquiry to investigate a contemporary, real-world phenomenon in depth (Yin, 2014), arises from a desire to understand complex social phenomena (Bassey, 1999; Stake, 1995). In this study, the case highlights the unacknowledged complexities in enacting world-class education aspirations and explores the challenges and difficulties of policy enactment in the real-world context of one complex and very remote school.

This section will succinctly explore perspectives on case study research, identify the features of effective case studies, explore the potential shortcomings of such research, and outline the approach taken.

Case study research has become an embedded and accepted option in qualitative research (Yin, 2014). There are several perspectives on the definition of case study research, including definition as a method, methodology, focus of study, or research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Van

Wynsberghe & Khan, 2007). A shift away from identifying case study research as only a methodology, came with researchers, such as Wolcott (1992) who saw case studies as 'an end product of field-oriented research' (p. 36) rather than a strategy or method. Others saw case studies as 'less a methodological choice than a choice of what is to be studied' (Stake 2005, p443). This study utilises the case school as a focus of study, a site for examination of policy in action, as part of the policy trajectory that scaffolds this research.

This case study research involves the observation of a single, bounded unit (Bassey, 1999; Cohen et al., 2002). The observations and other data are probed deeply to analyse the phenomena in what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe as a 'search for meaning and understanding' by the researcher who is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis and 'produce[s] a richly descriptive end product' (p. 37).

Having considered perspectives on case study research, the following introduces the features of case study research adopted in this study: depth, uniqueness, openness to alternative interpretations, and the role of the participant-observer.

The importance of a case study being an in-depth description of a bounded system is widely acknowledged (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014; Stake, 1995). Punch (2014) describes in-depth description as developing a 'full understanding of the case' (p. 140) and Stake (2010) as 'understanding one thing well' (p. 27). The decision to study one school deeply sits well with Stake's assertion that 'a case is a noun, a thing, an entity' such as a school (Stake, 2006, p. 1). The very remote school at the centre of this case is clearly bounded by remoteness. Its characteristics are detailed in Chapter Five where a full description of the community and site, its challenges, and its staff are provided. DSAS, as a case, provided a distinctive intersection of a very remote school and the state's improvement processes, where enactment of the new improvement policy could be studied.

In addition to depth, there is also an emphasis on the uniqueness of a case, and what Stake (1995) describes as 'particularisation, not generalisation' (p. 8). Categorisation of cases is not uncommon (Punch, 2014; Stake, 1995) and, due to its uniqueness, this remote school context presents as 'an "intrinsic case", selected for its unusual characteristics and the merit it holds' (Creswell, 2014, p. 493). DSAS offered many unusual characteristics. It was an isolated site located in a community marked by conspicuous gaps between the majority experiencing poverty, unemployment, and

marginalisation and a smaller group of powerful and privileged residents. This too is detailed in Chapter Five's introduction to the case school.

Well-designed case studies identify the complexities and 'embeddedness' of social truths and highlight alternative interpretations. Case studies should attend to social situations, and 'represent something of the discrepancies or conflicts between the viewpoints held by participants' (Adelman et al., 2006, p. 59–60). This study used ethnographic methods common to case studies, including participant observation, document analysis, and unstructured interviews, to explore multiple perspectives and present alternative interpretations. These methods are detailed in the following two sections, Data Collection (Section 3.6) and Data Analysis (Section 3.7).

Participant observation in case study research accommodates the interpretivist perspective, 'acknowledging multiple realities having multiple meanings' (Yin, 2014, p. 80). To be valid, and to respect social science's unique challenge of treating others as objects for study, the case study observer's 'actions and descriptions must be justified both in terms of the truth status of findings and in terms of social accountability' (Adelman et al., 2006, p. 59). In this study, the researcher is a knowledgeable observer-participant. I was the school principal, and undertook extensive journaling, field notes, audio diaries, reflexive self-study, and documentation of site happenings pertaining to day-to-day leadership of the school over three years. Interviews were conducted with other school leaders after the researcher's employment at the school had ceased, to ensure ethical research. Insider/outsider, ethical, and reflexivity considerations are detailed in Section 3.8.

Having established how strengths in case study research were applied in this study, the next section briefly explores questions about generalisability of findings. The concern about generalisability of case study research has two main elements; whether a single case study can be generalised and the difficulties of comparing multiple case studies. For the purposes of this study, some attention will be given to the first of these aspects, widely discussed in the literature by advocates and critics.

Extensive commentary about case study generalisability was canvassed. Blaikie (2010) offers insights about using 'judgement' as the basis for generalisation. He asserts the value of analytic generalisation and thick description to facilitate transferability and reliability. Stake (1995) holds the position that while case studies focus on one case, they can be 'representative of other cases' (p. 4) asserting that 'a case cannot be generalised, but ideas coming up within it may' (p. 7). Given the study's focus on equity, the selection of a case school in a very remote disadvantaged

community was expected to provide generalisable insights into the impacts of neoliberal and capitalist informed school improvement processes on some of Australia's most vulnerable students' education.

To this point, this chapter has elucidated the study's theoretical framing and application across the three policy trajectory contexts (Bowe et al., 1992). It now shifts to consider data collection (Section 3.6) and then data analysis (Section 3.7).

3.6.   DATA COLLECTION

Extensive qualitative data was collected for this research. Bogdan and Biklen (1997, p. 5) articulate that the value of a study is reliant on the extent to which it generates theory, description, or understanding. The data collected was intended to generate description and understanding.

My insider position enabled access to emic data. When working with emic data, Stake (1995) encourages case study researchers to be cognisant of the subjectivity of relying heavily on prior experience and sense of the worth of things and recommends 'triangulation to minimise misperception and strengthen our conclusions' (p. 134). In addition to DE policy documents, I collected documents related to improvement planning and processes, school governance, site policy, meeting minutes, review reports, partnership plans, professional learning materials, and other site arrangements. Interviewing, in combination with observation and document collection, are seen as elements of rigorous, triangulated qualitative research (Blaikie, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Punch, 2014) and were undertaken in this study.

Of particular importance to the policy trajectory, I collected extensive etic data during the study period. This included DE's Strategic Plan (2019b) and other publicly accessible documents during the study period. In keeping with ethics approvals 7996/H8778, only publicly available and anonymised departmental information are shared in this thesis.

The following two sections detail policy documentation decisions relevant to *the context of policy text production* (Section 3.6.1), and case study data relevant to *the context of practice* (Sections 3.6.2 and 3.6.3).

3.6.1. Policy documentation

This study's *context of policy production* involved interrogation of DE's Strategic Plan, exploring how problems were represented, unexamined assumptions, and the conceptual logics involved (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012). I focused primarily on DE's Strategic Plan (2019b) and collected other

publicly accessible policy texts, including website links (2018a, 2018c), action plans (2021a), DE annual reports (2019a, 2020b, 2021b, 2022) and promotional videos (2021d). These texts documented the department's improvement aspirations and the steps they expected would lift their education world ranking from good to great from 2018 to 2028. They were a determining formation of work in schools, shaping the lived experiences of DSAS staff, and pivotal to my policy trajectory research.

Data collection continued after I left DSAS, and I accessed documents from open sources such as government, DSAS, and *MySchool* (ACARA, 2017a) websites, to continue to triangulate the data collected and ensure rigorous investigation.

While I was an employee of DE, I had access to the departmental intranet, and documents not publicly accessible. Other publicly available texts made references to these documents, such as best practice guides, literacy and numeracy guidebooks, and improvement handbooks. In keeping with the public references to these materials, generalised explanations of contents are provided to support readers' understanding of the documents' purposes and contents, without disclosing information not publicly accessible.

Care was taken to ensure public materials were referenced in a way that enable those interested to access copies. There was a change of government toward the end of the study period, and some websites and guidebooks dedicated to DE's improvement directives were modified. It is reasonable to expect these political changes might impact ongoing document accessibility.

3.6.2. Field notes

Van Manen (2016) describes the researcher as a research tool. Acting as a research tool, my field notes had two aspects: observations and reflections. Observation, the gathering of firsthand information while 'observing people and places at a research site' (Creswell, 2014, p. 235), was a significant source of field note data. My insider status enabled me to record information, as it occurred in the case school, as a participant observer. I made it clear to the staff at my site that I would be recording anonymised observations related to the everyday activities of the school. All understood that I had ethics approval from the relevant education department and university, and that their identities would be protected. A researcher's standpoint can be considered an 'entry into the data' (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 5), so journaling my reflections and insights supplemented my observational field notes.

I adopted an observational protocol (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). As a long-term user of the Bullet Journal productivity system (Carroll, 2023), I always carry a journal, including a diary and to do list. During my principalship at DSAS, I carried two paper-based recording systems: my usual organisational system and my research journal. The research journal was set up as a dual column recording system where I recorded descriptive and reflective field notes. Each double page of my research journal had a header with date, time, and description of context. The left-hand page was for descriptive field notes, a record of events, activities, sayings, and doings (Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2014). As factual recounts, these notes were relatively easy to undertake and were less obtrusive in my daily work because as the principal I routinely noted events, meeting content, and activities.

The right-hand page was where I recorded deeply personal and situational (Stake, 1995) reflections about my observations. I noted topics of interest to the study, insights into motivations and structural factors, links between observations, and personal experiences and thinking. Reflective field notes record researchers' 'insights, hunches, or broad ideas or themes that emerge during the observation' (Creswell, 2014, p. 239). This intellectual work occurred more easily for me outside the pressures of my role, where I could 'write right' (Mills, 2000) and develop more extended narratives about the happenings in the school. The end of each school week became a time of review and reflection.

Also, as the researcher works to 'uncover the social relationships and broader political factors which influence the actions of the actors' (McInerney, 2004, p. 29), decisions are required in relation to what is 'in' and 'out' of the research. Limitations also related to what can be physically noted. Out of hours reflections and 'thick description' (Geertz, 2008; Stake, 1995) enabled deeper data engagement. For this study, the impacts of neoliberal capitalism and global discourses on the daily work of teachers as they negotiated world class improvement mandates, measured progress, and dealt with demands from departmental support staff were prioritised.

3.6.3. Interviews

Interviews were fundamental to the case study data collection. Studying teachers' lives is central to understanding schooling because, 'teachers invest much of the "self" in their teaching practices' (McInerney, 2004, p. 29). Interviews provided a window into educators' lived experiences, decisions, practices, and perceptions of autonomy and professionalism (Phillips et al., 2024). This section will elaborate the chosen interview format, participants details, and the questions asked.

Interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured, with open-ended questions. This structure was selected because participants were all known to be confident speakers, articulate, and able to share their ideas comfortably (Creswell, 2014). It correlated with the aim of gathering in-depth descriptive and experiential narrative data, developing an understanding of points of view, illuminating perspectives, and understanding interpretations (Spradley, 2016).

Interviews are uniquely situated to bridge shared experiences and facilitate meaningful dialogue. However, this is not without complication for the researcher and participants. The context and shared experiences provide a common starting point for interviews (Silverman, 2017, 2021), but prior relationships can position the researcher as necessarily determining contextual language (Spradley, 1980). Interviewees were encouraged to speak as though I was someone unknown to them, but inevitably familiarity with the shared experiences meant that those interviewed assumed some prior knowledge in their responses. Some interview data was excluded to protect participants' identities and the study's data analysis includes explanations based on the researcher's prior knowledge and contextual understandings.

Interview venues and timings were negotiated. Where and when was decided by participants. Consent to participate in the research and record participants' accounts was obtained prior to all interviews. Interviews were between 35 and 65 minutes, with participants informed that at any stage they could terminate or delay the conversation.

Seven school leaders with direct experience in DSAS and two other external education leaders with roles associated with DSAS, were interviewed. The focus on participants with leadership experience was informed by research that identifies middle leaders as key policy translators (Ball et al., 2011a, 2012; Edwards-Groves et al., 2018; Skerritt et al., 2023) and leaders generally as instrumental in supporting policy enactment (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014).

Recruitment was voluntary. To reduce the impact of the potential power implications of a school principal interviewing their current staff, recruitment occurred in 2020 when I had left the school and the next principal was in place. Every staff member who had held a DSAS leadership role at some time through my tenure was emailed to invite them to participate in my study. Five responded immediately in the affirmative and were interviewed in 2020. Snowballing occurred during 2021 and 2022. Referrals from those initially interviewed led to two external leaders and two additional DSAS leaders also being interviewed. Two initial interviewees volunteered to

participate in follow-up interviews because their understanding of the department's direction had increased.

Care was taken throughout to protect the identity of the case study school and the participating leaders. The steps taken are further elaborated in Section 3.8.3: Ethical research. Participants were allocated an alias to protect their identity. Table 3.6-1 provides readers with some background information about each interviewee.

Interviews were carefully planned, with open-ended questions supporting the exploratory nature of this study. Reliability and validity were enhanced by avoiding pre-determined themes or establishing expectations of the responses I may be seeking (Punch, 2014; Spradley, 2016). For example, participants were asked about their experience of DE's improvement aspirations, without suggesting that this question should elicit a positive or negative response.

Table 3.6-1 Interview participants' background information.

Alias	Interview date/s	Background information
Julian	17/1/2020 15/10/2021	Employed at DSAS 2016-2020. Arrived as graduate teacher, classroom teacher for three years. Senior Secondary Senior Leader (acting in 2019, formally in 2020) – teaching and leadership responsibilities. Left DSAS for a teaching role in an outer metropolitan area from 2021 and took up a school leadership role there from 2022.
Malcolm	22/6/2020 26/7/2022	Employed at DSAS 2015-2020. Arrived as graduate teacher, classroom teacher for three years. Wellbeing Senior Leader 2018-2020 – non-classroom based. Left DSAS for another senior leadership role in a regional school.
Mark	1/7/2020	Employed at DSAS 2014-2020. Arrived as a graduate teacher, classroom teacher for three years. Aboriginal Education Senior Leader 2017-18 – non-classroom based. Deputy principal 2019-2020 – non-classroom based. Left DSAS for a principal position in a large regional area school from 2021.
Collette	17/7/2020	A classroom teacher at DSAS for 4 years as a graduate 2010-2013. Left DSAS for a city school 2014-16. Returned to DSAS in 2017 for two years as Primary senior leader – non-classroom based. Returned to a high socioeconomic city school in 2019.
Amanda	28/7/2020	Australian Education Union (AEU) Organiser with responsibility for remote/very remote school union liaison. Had prior experience as a teacher and education leader. In the AEU role for more than 18 years at time of interview.
Kelly	30/05/2022	Very experienced teacher and school leader. Had been a school principal (multiple sites). Held very senior roles in DE's central office, including Director School Improvement and Director Literacy up until 2014. Was acting as a private education consultant at the time of interview. Mentored the DSAS leadership team to support their leadership skill development and supported staff professional learning, particularly in relation to DE's *High impact teaching strategies* developed in 2017.
Tamara	4/8/2022	Employed at DSAS from 2018 to 2023. Arrived as a graduate teacher. Classroom-based Early Childhood (EC) leader from 2018. Experienced EC practitioner across multiple settings, prior to obtaining a teaching degree. Local resident of Desert Sunshine

Alias	Interview date/s	Background information
Emily	5/8/2022	Employed at DSAS from 2014 to 2020.
		Arrived as graduate teacher, classroom teacher for three years.
		Combined teaching and leadership role in the junior primary from 2017 to early 2018. Took leave and returned from leave to take up the non-teaching Primary senior leader role from 2019 to 2020.
		Won a leadership role in another remote school from 2021.
Jasmin	4/10/2022	Experienced teacher and school leader prior to transfer as a teacher to DSAS in 2015.
		Part time reading support teacher 2015 to late 2017.
		From late 2017, was the senior leader with responsibility for inclusion, supporting teachers with funding applications and differentiated teaching approaches – non-classroom based.
		From 2019 to 2023, her role has refocused as a Literacy Coordinator, implementing the school's phonics program – non-classroom based.
		Local resident in the Desert Sunshine region.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed flexibility in topics and directions. Open-ended responses such as, 'Can you tell me a little more about that?' enabled deeper probing of participants' ideas and stories, their emic meanings, without leading in any direction (Brinkmann, 2014; Foddy, 2003). I made every effort to adopt what Kvale (2007) calls qualified naïveté. This stance requires the researcher to exhibit openness to unexpected phenomena, putting aside one's knowledge about the research topic and site context. Flexibility was central to gaining participants' insights and involved careful listening for their ideas. Foremost in my interest was each participant's experience of enacting DE's improvement aspirations, and throughout this thesis, these experiences have been provided space to speak.

Participants were provided a copy of the questions and potential topics prior to interview and were informed that they could discuss topics of their choice. The initial 2020 interviews were structured around my interest in equity, or as participants understood it, 'social justice', due to the common use of this term in the school and region. The foci for interviews were:

What is your understanding of equity/social justice?

How do you see it enacted at DSAS?

How have you experienced the department's improvement aspirations?

How do these aspirations fit with your understanding of equity/social justice?

What enables and limits your autonomy as a school leader?

I was aware of the dangers of imposing expectations on the generative process of interviewing participants during data collection (Seidman, 2013). Nevertheless, it became clear that my initial questions were so open that my participants spoke at length about a range of topics that were ultimately not relevant to my study. With the help of my supervisors, I sharpened my study focus around the third question listed above – exploring experiences of DE's improvement aspirations. At the same time, the study structure evolved from an auto/ethnography to policy trajectory, research as the publication of DE's Strategic Plan further sharpened the focus of this research.

Hence, the two follow-up and two additional DSAS leader interviews were more focussed on the enactment of DE improvement aspirations with the following question:

Can you tell me about your experiences with improvement processes related to the department's new policy?

In addition to the open ended, clarifying questions previously described, including 'Can you tell me a little more about that?' other potential prompts were planned. They were used where required to support interviewees to be more specific or to suggest another topic if needed. They included: What is your view of DE's aspirations? How have you experienced school data collection? How is data used? What is the role of the improvement plan? Who makes improvement decisions? What do you know about other teachers' responses? How are students responding?

This section next explains how the interview data was managed.

3.6.4. Data management

The case study, *context of practice*, generated extensive interview data. With participants' permission, interviews were audio recorded and transcripts made. Recording of open-ended interviews extends advantages, particularly in terms of ensuring accurate transcription of collected interview data (Seidman, 2013; Silverman, 2021). Recordings and transcripts were securely stored in James Cook University's data management system, accompanied by a data management plan. Access to the interview data by anyone outside the immediate research team was restricted to maintain participant confidentiality.

Detailed rendering of data mitigates researcher subjectivity (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Inclusion of verbatim interview data in the thesis ensures faithfulness to the participants' words and

intentions. As much as possible, extended segments of interview data are presented, to provide context for quotes and to offer insights into the participants' phrasing and emphasis. For readability, speech fillers or vocal disfluencies or hesitations, such as 'um', 'er', 'yeah' and 'you know', were edited out of the transcripts, due to the minimal contribution they make to understanding the intention of speakers (Seidman, 2013).

Table 3.6-2 details the transcript conventions used throughout the thesis.

Table 3.6-2 Interview transcript conventions

Symbol	Representing
/	A short pause or natural breath
//	A definite pause, often the end of a sentence
///	An extended pause or break in the talk
(…)	Researcher's comment for clarification
[…]	An addition, subtraction, or elaboration for clarity or to protect identities

Passages of interview data are presented in two ways - as intext direct quotes or in a table format with allocated line numbers. The first format is employed where only segments of passages are required. Most frequently, a table format is used. Quotes are often referenced more than once so, four-digit line numbers are allocated. For example, quote number 5.1-07 is made up of two components. The number 5.1 refers to the thesis section. The number 07 indicates that this is the seventh segment of quoted material in thesis section 5.1. This referencing system supports readers to return to original passages for additional contextual information as required.

Having detailed the data collection processes adopted, the next section canvasses the study's data analysis processes.

3.7.   DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis occurred in two stages of the policy trajectory research – the policy analysis (Section 3.7.1) and the case study (Section 3.7.2).

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021) supported my data analysis across the research. Compatible with interpretive and social constructionist paradigms, RTA is a flexible research tool for identifying, analysing, and reporting socially produced themes or patterns in research data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When applied alongside epistemological assumptions,

such as those underpinning this study, RTA supports theorisation of the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions behind the lived experiences recounted by study participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Meaning and meaningfulness are fundamental RTA criteria (Byrne, 2022), centring researcher subjectivity as the analytic resource (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and the 'importance of deep reflection on, and engagement with, data' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Critical studies and discourse analysis intersect effectively with RTA (Byrne, 2022).

Researchers using RTA may engage with literature early in their research to inform their analysis or later if research is more inductive (such as grounded theory). My research had potentially vast scope, so I engaged with literature early in the project. While some may argue that early reading can narrow the researcher's focus, it is nevertheless useful to sensitise the researcher to 'subtle features of the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Given that this study was guided by specific questions that required attention to global education policy influences, understanding the literature early in my research was foundational.

How RTA was applied in the policy analysis and the case study is the topic of the following two sections.

3.7.1. Discourse analysis

This section works in tandem with Chapter Four where the study's WPRB discourse analysis approach is summarised. In Chapter Four, my peer reviewed journal article *The race for 'World Class' education: Improvement or folly?* (Cornelius, 2023), is presented. This current section provides additional information, including a description of the initial policy analysis, an introduction to the WPRB questions and conceptual logic tools, and establishing the central organising concepts.

In my first reading of DE's Strategic Plan (2019b), I identified the main points raised in the 16-page document, including the Chief Executive's Foreword and descriptions of the six key levers or strategy areas that were expected to move the state's public education system from good to great. Colour coding was used to link similar content. Every page of the Strategic Plan was annotated. The main topics and my questions/thoughts were extracted, mind mapped, summarised, and linked over several readings.

The Strategic Plan content was subsequently uploaded into an online word and phrase frequency counter (Adamovic, 2009) to provide lists of word and phrases in descending order of frequency. These lists were cross checked against the themes and main ideas from the first readings to

identify the highest frequency terms/concepts. The most common topics in the Strategic Plan were measurement, improvement, need for support, and accountability and standards (Table 3.7-1). These key concepts aligned with what the literature identified as elements of global education policy influence, for example, Steiner-Khamsi's (2016a) three underpinning fallacies of global reform movements: 'rationality, precision, and universality' (p. 35).

Table 3.7-1 High frequency themes in DE's Strategic Plan (2019b)

Theme	Related terms	Frequency	Total
Measurement	good to great/good/great	17	116
	better/best	14	
	growth	11	
	achievement	11	
	outcomes	10	
	data	9	
	high	8	
	measure/s/ing	13	
	progress	3	
	International comparison	3	
	level	3	
	results	3	
	NAPLAN	2	
	metrics	2	
Improvement	improve/improvement	45	74
	improvement plan/planning	18	
	improving	7	
	improvement dashboard	4	
Need for support	support/s/ed/ing	47	74
	resource/s/ing	16	
	(right) foundations	6	
	evidence-based (ways)	6	
	tailored	5	
	expert/s	5	
	guidebooks	3	
Accountability and standards	world class	18	50
	quality	14	
	standards	9	
	accountability/accountable	5	
	excellence	2	

| global reputation | 2 |

Next, to ensure information surrounding each key term was not lost in the synthesis, a sentence-by-sentence analysis was undertaken of all sentences containing these topics. Braun and Clark (2006) describe such an analysis as identifying or examining 'the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations, and ideologies' (p. 84). An example of this process with a sample sentence is provided in Figure 3.7-2.

Figure 3.7-2 Screenshot - example of sentence-by-sentence text analysis

PAGE	Before the term	KEY TERM	After the term	Links
P. 3	We studied some of the	**most improved**	education systems around the world and what they had in common.	*Global measurement trends.* *Expertise is located outside of schools.* *Rationality in expectation that 'what works' will work in all contexts*

As will be apparent in my journal article included in the next chapter, the DE policy analysis also considered the use of modal verbs in the policy text. Modal verbs, such as will and must, carry the connotation of imperative and obligation in texts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). They indicate inferred levels of demand upon those expected to enact the policy. This discourse analysis was supported by analysis of the level of obligation policymakers' language choices placed on teachers and leaders to carry out the *world class* improvement requirements.

Figure 3.7-3 identifies the percentage of modal verb association with the theme terms. It also appears in Chapter Four (Cornelius, 2023).

Figure 3.7-3 Key topics, collated terms, and modal verbs – policy analysis

Themes and collocated terms	Total USAGE /2633 words	% of occurrences linked to high demand MODAL VERBS (i.e. should, will, need etc.)
Measurement Found in the policy explicitly and implied in terms such as: good to great, best/better, growth, achievement, and outcomes.	116	74.1%
Improvement In the policy as improve, improvement, improvement planning, and improvement dashboard.	74	59.5%
Support Appears as need support or provide support and terms such as: resourcing, right foundations, evidence-based, experts, and guidebooks.	74	55.4%
Accountability and standards Both accountability and standards are used, as well as: world class, quality, excellence, and global reputation.	50	50%

Bacchi's WPRB (2009, 2012) discourse analysis approach was applied next. The WPRB approach scaffolds problem questioning as a form of critical practice (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012). Six questions support the researcher to identify underlying presuppositions and forms of problematisation which are in effect postulated 'solutions' (Bacchi, 1999, 2009; Bletsas & Beasley, 2012). The following explains the questions that frame Bacchi's WPRB approach:

Question 1: *What is the problem represented to be?* Here the word 'problem' refers to 'the kind of change implied in a particular policy proposal' (Bacchi 2009, p. xi). This first WPRB question works backwards from practical texts to identify the 'problem' (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012), exploring discursive shifts between and within documents.

Question 2: *What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?* The goal of WPRB Question 2 is to identify and analyse the conceptual logics that underpin specific problem representations. The term 'conceptual logic' refers to the meanings that must be in place for a particular problem representation to cohere or to make sense (Bacchi 2009, p. 5). Bacchi (2009) prompts analysis of binaries, key concepts, and categories to explore the conceptual logics of a policy. These logics are detailed after the six questions.

Question 3: *How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?* 'The purpose of Question 3 is to highlight the conditions that allow a particular problem representation 'to take shape and to assume dominance' (Bacchi 2009, p. 11). This step also offers the critical researcher insights into how particular policy interventions reveal the means of governing and the impacts on those governed (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

Question 4: *What is left unproblematic in this 'problem' / solution representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?* 'The objective of Question 4 is to raise for reflection and consideration issues and perspectives silenced in identified problem representations' (Bacchi 2009, p. 13).

Question 5: *What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?* The goal of Question 5 is to identify the consequences of specific problem representations so that they can be critically assessed. These outcomes include lived effects, seen in this study as the voices of case participants as they recount enactment of the *problem* and its representations. WPRB also encourages the researcher to interrogate how governmental problematisations constitute what subjects can become (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

Question 6: *How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted, and replaced?* The goal of Question 6 is to pay attention to the means through which some problem representations become dominant, and to the possibility of challenging harmful problem representations (Bacchi 2009, p. 19).

Chapter Four includes my peer reviewed journal article which addresses these six WPRB questions in an analysis of DE's Strategic Plan (2019b). The six questions are summarised as subheadings in the Analysis (Section 4.3), Discussion Section 4.4) and Conclusion (Section 4.5) in the journal article.

Based on the understanding that policy texts are elaborated in discourse, Question 2 in a WPRB analysis draws attention to the 'assumptions, values, presuppositions and accompanying signs' that Bacchi (2009, p. 7) calls conceptual logics. WPRB brings additional discourse analysis tools to understanding the conceptual logics and deep-seated presuppositions of policy texts, including identifying and interrogating the binaries, key concepts, and categories operating within a policy (Bacchi, 2009).

Binaries, or dichotomies, are at the heart of much public debate. Bacchi (2009, p. 7) explains binaries as assuming an 'A /not-A relationship' meaning 'one side of a binary is considered to be excluded from the other side'. She also identifies a hierarchical relationship in binaries where one perspective is privileged over the other, simplifying complex relationships. Clarke (2012) characterises 'lack' as not necessarily being the opposite of a presence, rather a 'productive negativity that deconstructs binaries such as absence–presence, positive–negative' (p. 178). He points out that seen this way, many political agendas demonstrate attempts to 'overcome constitutive lack through fantasies of full-presence, completeness, and harmony' (Clarke, 2012, p. 178). As an example, Table 3.7-4 shows my analysis of binaries within the Strategic Plan, identifying what is privileged and what has lower value placed on it.

Table 3.7-4 Example binaries identified in DE's Strategic Plan (2019b)

Privileged	Lower value/lack
World class	Low standards
Great (*world class* is great)	Good / Bottom of good
Improvement	Assumptions that there has been no improvement
Growth	Implies no growth
Reforms	Implies no reform action before 2018
A great education can transform a life	Implications this was not happening prior to 2018
Determines a support level	Schools/teachers cannot determine their own needs for support / do this themselves
Right reforms/foundations	Assumes previous courses of action were wrong

Key Concepts are abstract labels applied to relatively open-ended and hotly contested terms that hold different meanings. Disputed meanings applied to key concepts are 'related to competing political visions' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 8). It is vital to interrogate the meanings assigned to concepts in order to understand the premises and values behind their use. Examples of key concepts identified in the policy text can be seen in Table 3.7-5.

Table 3.7-5 Key concepts identified in DE's Strategic Plan (2019b)

World class (education)	Growth	Good to great
Accelerate achievement	Accountability	Evidence based
Improvement/plan	Standards	International comparison
Statewide standard	Best	Tailored support
Right foundations	Single source of truth	Universal scale
Progress	Unapologetically high standards	Common

The third WPRB analysis tool is **categories**. Bacchi (2009, p. 9) provides some examples: 'age categories, zoning categories, disease categories, gender and sexuality categories'. Prominent categories in the department's policy, 'measurement' and 'improvement', are interrogated. As with binaries and key concepts, categories are not taken as given, rather the way they function and the meanings they are apportioned provide insights into the problem representations (Bacchi, 2009). The use of binaries, key concepts, and categories in the Strategic Plan is further detailed in Chapter Four.

In her later work, Bacchi added a seventh WPRB step (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This step is an undertaking to apply the six WPRB questions to one's own proposals and problem representations. This self-problematisation entails reflection on how the researcher is located, historically and culturally, and subjecting one's own thinking to critical scrutiny. This requirement coheres with reflexivity (Section 3.8: Research practices) adding a demand to apply WPRB to one's own recommendations and proposals (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). In the introduction, I explained my unique positioning 'in' the research. For three of the six years this study spans, I was the principal of the case school. Throughout this study, I have asked myself how I might be perpetuating my own agenda or bias related to changes brought about because of the state's *world class* ambitions. How I have worked to be faithful to the data is recounted in Section 3.8.3.

My data analysis culminated in the identification of data themes. Braun and Clarke (2019) assert that research themes are actively created by the researcher and have different conceptualisations. Their concept of themes as 'patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept' informed my decision making (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 595). Three central organising concepts emerged as dominant in the literature and policy text analysis, as determined by the processes described in this section, such as frequency counts, sentence-by-sentence analyses, modal verb usage and WPRB.

Measurement, improvement, and standardisation were identified as the fundamental subjects that could be developed into the thesis's organising narrative. In brief, the study was investigating how a state government set out to address falling standards and improve its educational outcomes by requiring improvement plans and targets, measuring student progress, and adopting universal evidence-based practices with the support of external expertise. Accountability, equity, performativity, teacher professionalism, and other themes ran across the organising narrative and are highlighted in the detailed analysis of the thesis data that follows.

3.7.2. Case study analysis

This section details my data analysis in the *context of practice's* case study. I am conscious of the fact that 'data collection, data reduction, and data analysis can blend into one another in a cyclical process' (Blaikie, 2010, p. 208), and I will navigate these convergences as clearly as possible. Every effort has been made to 'analyse the data with all of their richness' (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997, p. 5) using RTA. As in the policy analysis, RTA supported deep reflection on, and engagement with, the case study data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Stake (1995) encourages case study researchers to use 'triangulation to minimise misperception and strengthen our conclusions' (p. 134). This section attends to analysis of the case study data.

The interview data created almost 60,000 recorded words. Care was taken in the analysis of observation and interview data to maintain reflective and reflexive practices (Harwati, 2019; Miles et al., 2014) and to 'listen' for the felt expressions of participants' worlds (Back, 2007). I used Otter.ai software (Otter Transcription, 2023) to produce a first draft of the transcripts. Accuracy was then ensured through a careful word-by-word check of the software's interpretation; corrections were made, and the transcription conventions described in Section 3.6.3 were added. Given that I had worked with the interviewees for up to three years, they occasionally deviated from the interview focus into reminiscing and personal anecdotes. This personal information, such as greeting swapping and family news, was deleted from the transcripts. Once an accurate transcription was achieved for all interviews, the data was analysed in stages.

First, each interview transcript was transferred into a data catalogue format. This involved cutting and pasting participants' responses into a table with consistent headings, an example of which is presented in Figure 3.7-6.

Figure 3.7-6 Screenshot - Example of interview data reformatted for analysis

TIME	WHO	QUESTION	PARTICIPANT COMMENTS	NOTES / KEY IDEAS
17:37	Malcolm 2020	How have you experienced data collection?	*// we should be trying to ensure that if NAPLAN results are our measure / if we're going to see better results / then we need more kids [sic] having a go at it // For more kids [sic] to have a go / then we need more to be more resilient / or be able to have that determination to push through when things are difficult //*	<mark>Measurement</mark> Students need skills, resilience, willingness to participate if NAPLAN is to be a reliable measure.

A separate line was allocated to each idea or topic raised by the participant. The first four columns of the table simply reformatted the interview data into a consistent configuration. The speaker, time and associated question were linked to each key idea, enabling me to return to the recordings for clarification and to check the question that prompted the response as needed.

Consistent with RTA, Stake (1995, 2010) and Blaikie (2010) recommend organising case study data around themes or issues, encouraging the selection of complex problems within situations and contexts. Given this advice, I added the fifth column called Notes/Key Ideas to each formatted interview transcript. A careful re-reading of the transcripts led to notes such as those seen under the green highlight in Figure 3.7-6.

The next data sorting was based on the key ideas listed in the final column of each participants' table. Comments were cut from individual's interview data tables and the entire line of data was pasted into a new table, in another document, sorted by key ideas (see left hand column in the example in Figure 3.7-7). All linked data on a topic was preserved in the new list; meaning that all relevant comments by all participants relating to each key idea were situated together.

Figure 3.7-7 Screenshot - Interview data sorted against identified themes

THEME	TIME	WHO	QUESTION	PARTICIPANT COMMENTS	NOTES / KEY IDEAS
Measurement	21:30	Collette 2020	How have you experienced data collection?	*Before the world class push / we had the chance to do / to focus on what we as a school needed / we did the NAPLAN testing / but it wasn't the focus of what we were actually doing with the kids [sic]//*	NAPLAN not key data
				like we / we looked more at detailed literacy data // like the running records and phonological awareness and all those sorts of things / things that helped day-to-day // And we also did what we were told we needed to do / but at the same time, we didn't necessarily focus on the (DfE required) data ///	Tracking development in key areas Data autonomy
				Having to have NAPLAN in your school improvement plan is all well and good /// the // majority of the kids [sic] / weren't at a level where NAPLAN information actually was useful /// So // we had the ability to / to focus on the things that were necessary for kids [sic] learning /	Usefulness of NAPLAN questioned
Measurement	21:51	Tamara 2022	Who does NAPLAN?	*not everybody's encouraged to come to school // Do they send a bus out looking for students to come now? // not really / in NAPLAN week? / especially not then /*	Who attends? Selective NAPLAN participation
				so / results are unreliable I think / because actually those students who aren't coming to school now / and aren't sitting NAPLAN tests / they aren't the most capable // and then it's just / well its interesting because NAPLAN is still not showing great results / even with just the most capable kids [sic] sitting the tests /	NAPLAN results unreliable in remote setting Capable students do test – results not better

Case study analysis is 'progressively focused', meaning that organising concepts transform and vary (Stake, 1995, p. 134). Progressive focus began at the earlier policy analysis stage when three predominant themes were identified: improvement and planning, measuring improvement, and standardised expectations accompanying the focus on literacy and numeracy and their delivery. Consistent with the policy analysis, the interview data also pinpointed these three topics, as well

as concerns about equity/social justice, views about DE's *world class* aspirations, the role of leaders, wellbeing, impacts on students, and parent opinions.

It was evident that three data chapters, responding to the focus on improvement, measurement, and standardisation, would be appropriate and could be linked to the subsequent concerns and themes arising from the data.

At this point, the study team revisited my peer-reviewed journal article, *Improving educational outcomes: Why don't remote schools in Australia measure up?* (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022). This article was written with my primary supervisor, after the initial interviews had reached the first sorting stage. The journal article is included in the thesis (Chapter Six) to provide an overview and introduction to the data. This introduction is followed by three *context of practice* data chapters organised by the topics: improvement (Chapter Seven), measurement (Chapter Eight), and standardisation (Chapter Nine). Within these chapters, the case study data also provided opportunities to explore themes such as accountability, equity, performativity, student wellbeing, and teacher professionalism.

In reporting the data in the three *context of practice* chapters, I was conscious of the need to help readers construct the meanings of the case (Blaikie, 2010; Stake, 1995) and to portray the case complexities comprehensively (Adelman et al., 2006; Harwati, 2019). The data made sense to me as an insider but must also make sense to outsiders who are interested in understanding the research context and its implications. Stake (1995) describes this as 'writ[ing] up, so as to maximise reader encounter with the complexity of the case' (p. 126). Chapters Seven to Nine are structured such that participants' perspectives lead the reporting on each identified study theme. Each new idea or contribution begins with a detailed quote before my interpretation(s) and analyses are offered.

Having elaborated the study's data analysis processes, the next section explains research practices including insider/outsider perspectives (Section 3.8.1), reflexivity (Section 3.8.2), ethics (Section 3.8.3), terminology choices (Section 3.8.4), and limitations of the study (Section 3.8.5).

3.8.   RESEARCH PRACTICES

I opened this chapter with a statement about research being a deeply political act. In this section I consider the intersection of the political and the personal in research. Researcher's orientations are influenced by their 'socio-historical locations' (Blaikie, 2010, p. 53). Appreciating Delpit's

(1988) observation that we 'do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs' (p. 297), I recognise that, while not necessarily easy, one must consciously put one's beliefs on hold. Beliefs impact where one sits with their research, and their relationship with the data. Consequently, researchers must shift their own way of thinking about social reality and be willing to step into the other person's shoes to understand why things are happening the way they are (Dean, 2017; Stuart, 2018). This section then considers how the insider/outsider perspectives and reflexivity can support the required research stances. It also explains how ethical practices support quality research.

3.8.1. Insider/outsider considerations

An 'insider' researcher is one grappling with the problematics of their own familiarity with their community and culture (Dean, 2017; Punch, 2014). In my case, insider positioning came from being the principal (otherwise known as lead teacher or head) of the case school. The insider faces the quandary of making the familiar unfamiliar (Wolcott, 2005), to re-present aspects of the school's life, such as responses to policy and decision making. In interpretive research, an advantage of being an insider is apprehending how particular activities correspond with the full picture, as 'nothing can be understood in isolation; each practice is part of a larger whole' (Foley et al., 2000, p. 38).

In this study, insider considerations played an important role in the case study. Research into the enactment of DE policy in my school brought both advantages and challenges. As a staff member, I had insider access to the lived experiences of the educators around me. This access was unique and prized. It was unique, because I am reasonably confident in asserting that policy trajectory research tracking the impact of neoliberal informed improvement ambitions, into a very remote school, has not been undertaken in an Australian education setting. Unique too because DSAS as a case study site brought varied joys and challenges. As was earlier introduced and will be elaborated in Chapter Six, this school was unlike most others in the state and its staff were well positioned to contest the intended and unintended outcomes of DE policy texts and demands for enactment.

I was not only an insider though. I held outsider status on two counts: my roles as the school principal and as a researcher. 'The boss', as many teachers see their principal, often sits somewhat on the periphery of a school's social world, especially with a predominantly early career staff, and generally is not party to all discontent and subversion directed their way. This information tends to

be heard through alternate channels. I pride myself on bringing quality relationships, trust, and openness to my leadership, but I am also aware that what the boss hears and sees can be 'sanitised' through a filter of what others expect the leader will want to hear. Data triangulation was an important aspect of this study - examining what different participants had to say about issues and using school documents, external data sources, and observation notes to identify tensions and congruences. On occasions, interviewed leaders drew parallels or contrasted practices at DSAS with those of the schools where they held new leadership positions, at the time of interview. Despite not being strictly within the case school, these perspectives have been included where appropriate, as they could be confirmatory or contradictory of DSAS events.

As a researcher, I was careful to make explicit my interests, from the very first day I arrived at the school. When asked about my research, I willingly shared information about my intentions to research social justice and leadership in a remote school and answered their questions. I was clear with staff that aliases would be used for the school and staff, and that if any event occurred that they would not want reported their request to withdraw it would be honoured. I wrote regular reflections on the life of the school and shared them with anyone interested. Staff had access to my research blog (Cornelius, 2018), public and private posts, and for many it was a way to appreciate what I was attending to. In recruiting staff for interviews, I was also mindful that staff should not feel compelled to participate because of perceived power imbalances or shared collegiality. All interviews were conducted after I had left the school, from 2020 to 2022, to reduce the likelihood that a sense of obligation to 'the boss' could be involved in their decision. Navigating insider and outside perspectives required reflexivity.

3.8.2. Reflexivity

Qualitative research 'is a dialectical process that affects and changes both the participants and the researcher' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 64). Reflexivity turns the focus of qualitative research onto both the researcher and the research act as part of the social world being investigated, and therefore it 'involves a dialectic between the researcher, the research process and the research product' (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 394). This dialectic practice supports researchers to be reflective and to be vulnerable educators who learn, adapt, and change world views and paradigms. Researchers are required to be reflexive about every decision, to ask themselves hard questions, and to 'be actively reflexive in the process of generating data' (Blaikie, 2010, p. 53).

The intention to bring a critical lens to the research meant drawing upon different ways of thinking about the nature of reality and the power relations in the research act. In particular, it meant focusing on three issues: Existential: Who am I and what kind of person do I want to be? Relational: How do I relate to others and to the world around me? Praxis: The need for self-conscious and ethical action based on a critical questioning of past actions and of future possibilities (Cunliffe, 2016, p. 749). Critical reflexivity emphasises praxis: questioning our own assumptions and taken-for-granted actions, 'thinking about where/who we are and where/who we would like to be, challenging our conceptions of reality, and exploring new possibilities' (Cunliffe, 2016, p. 751).

Archer (2013a, 2013b) takes the conception of reflexivity further, defining it as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa' (p. 1). She builds a strong case for the need to draw upon a universal reflexivity in our interpersonal and intrapersonal deliberations, or internal conversations, in response to increasingly conservative and individualistic times. Reflexivity is the mechanism with which we mediate structures and agency. It requires researchers to be sceptical of our own views and to put aside preconceived notions about why people behave the way they do. The dual journaling system, described in Section 3.6.2, provided an avenue for deep reflection and critique throughout my tenure as DSAS's principal. It was here, while in the field, that I interrogated my observations and reflections to ensure that my insider knowledge did not perpetuate taken for granted assumptions. I continued this reflective process as I applied the criticality used in the policy deconstruction to routinely consider my own assumptions, problematisations and ask myself what discourses I am attending to and what I may have overlooked.

Qualitative researchers reflexively see the value of their insights and interpretations as a research instrument, not claiming validity, but rather faithfulness to the experience (Conteh et al., 2005; Van Maanen, 2006). Blaikie (2010) calls this the requirement to be a 'faithful reporter' (p.53). In this study, I acknowledged that there could well be more than one rendering and, whenever possible, offered multiple renderings to account for divergent possibilities while recognising that the rendering could be different according to other people (Goodson, 1997; Phillips et al., 2024). Rather than attempt to clinically eliminate my own views and biases, it was judicious to render these visible. Given the likelihood that the meanings of the study representations are attached to the researcher's decisions about what to include and omit (Goodson, 1997), these decisions were

also made obvious in the account that follows. Ethics, personal and legislated, are central to reflexive 'faithfulness' in research.

3.8.3. Ethical research

Bogdan and Biklen (1997) appeal to researchers to hold a 'primary goal of add[ing] to knowledge, not to pass judgment on a setting' (p. 5). Application of ethical principles, ethics approval, an explanation of terminology, and the study's limitations follow.

Attention has been consistently applied to the protocols and processes required of me during this research. Faithfulness to the methods described in my approved ethics application included adhering to the *Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2018) through practices such as honesty in my presentation of the research data and clarity about the processes used to present data from participants.

Two issues dominate traditional ethics guidelines for research with human subjects: informed consent and the protection of subjects from harm. Study participants entered this research project voluntarily, understanding the nature of the study and the dangers and obligations that could be involved. They were supplied with plain language information[2] about the research, and voluntary participation[3] was sought with no ongoing obligation to the study. Written consent confirmed each participant's voluntary and informed inclusion (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). Care was taken in all written and spoken communications to be open, fair, and transparent.

In committing to protect participants from harm, I observed the national code, including retaining site and participant anonymity and ensuring the confidentiality of any information which may reveal personal details. Care was taken not to identify the Australian state, the school site, or any individuals involved in the study. All references to individuals and the case school were assiduously de-identified and replaced with aliases, so that all involved with the study could maintain anonymity (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). I did not relate specific information about individuals in the study to others, in or out of the study. Moreover, where participants referred to others not included in the study, their details have been redacted. This redaction was recorded in square brackets inside quotes, to clearly demarcate modifications.

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[2] See information letter – Appendix 2
[3] See letter of consent – Appendix 3

In undertaking to maintain anonymity, it is also important to acknowledge that this is a fraught undertaking (Nespor, 2000). One must acknowledge that the measures adopted cannot be perfect. Having researched in the school where I worked, it is clear that anyone determined to identify the school could do so as one has a level of visibility as a researcher (Nespor, 2000) and employee. As with all aspects of digital life, documents identifying the site will always be accessible through the use of a search engine. Qualitative studies increasingly engage in research relationships with distinctive groups for extended periods, making anomality 'a practical impossibility' (Nespor, 2000, p. 548). Given that this thesis will become publicly accessible five years after the study period, the potential concerns associated with identification of the site or individuals should diminish and continue to do so over time.

Throughout this chapter, I have made clear my intention to be a reflexive and faithful reporter. Participant data has been presented accurately and my analysis acknowledges that research is embedded in issues of power and authority (Adams et al., 2015). I have taken care to not make grand claims to truth and acknowledge that all knowledge is partial and comes from an individual or author who holds their own social position.

I acknowledge my subjectivity and the potential impact on participants in my research. I elucidated my insider role and how I mitigated power implications related to my principal position, in particular, the timing of interviews after I had left the school. This research hinged on the participation of others: their voices, insights, and views, and ideas were valued, even when I did not agree. To those who contributed to my research, I am enormously grateful.

3.8.4. Appropriate terminology for Australia's First Nations peoples

For consistency and being mindful of international readers' potential lack of familiarity with terminology related to Australia's Indigenous people, this study has adopted the one term throughout: 'First Nations peoples'. This section explains the rationale for this choice and my attempt to be respectful of the wishes of Australia's first peoples.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AITSIS, 2023), is an independent Australian Government statutory authority. Their *Frequently Asked Questions* webpage links to *IndigenousX* (Pearson, 2023) for guidance about terminology. *Indigenous X* acknowledges that selecting appropriate and respectful terminology is complicated.

Various terms are used with differing levels of comfort across Australia. *Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people/s* had wide, but contested, use. Government attempts to shorten it to ATSI

created push back and consequently the term is no longer as widely accepted. *First Australians* appears in government style guides, but has not been commonly accepted, perhaps because those called *First Australians* were the last to be granted Australian citizenship (Pearson, 2023).

First Nations, another newer term, has gained popularity, especially with younger generations of the first Australians. Although initially resisted because it has been borrowed from America, the website acknowledges that it is a satisfactory choice (Pearson, 2023). During the writing of this thesis, Australia was asked to respond to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (National Constitutional Convention, 2017) and the call from more than 250 leaders of First Nations to establish a *First Nations Voice* enshrined in the Constitution (Indigenous Law Centre, UNSW Sydney, 2017). Consequently, given this moment in time and because younger Australians have adopted it, this study uses *First Nations / First Nations peoples* to respectfully refer to ancestors of the people who have lived on this continent for more than 60,000 years before colonial invasion 250 years ago.

3.8.5. Limitations

Although accepted qualitative research methods were used, this study has limitations. Limitations are defined as potential weaknesses, shortcomings, or problems in the research (Creswell, 2014). As with any doctoral study, decisions and realities, including logistic, temporal, and theoretical, limited what was possible through the research period. Limitations related to the interpretive stance, recruitment, voices, and case selection are discussed here.

The first limitation relates to claims that can be made in research undertaken by a single researcher. Throughout, I endeavoured to be faithful to the voices of my participants. Interpretive research is by its nature an interpretation of lived activity (Van Maanen, 2006), and through my choices I have shaped the research as one interpretation of the lived experience of enacting DE improvement imperatives in a remote school. Similar to many limitations, this opens possibilities for further research, such as engaging with excluded existing data, or addressing the second limitation, the recruitment criteria. The decision to focus on participants with leadership responsibilities in or associated with the school has been explained in terms of existing research related to middle managers' access to information, roles, and insights in relation to enacting improvement. The consistency between the school-based leaders' responses meant that the study reached theoretical saturation. A larger study would have benefited from classroom teachers' and students' perspectives, another option for future investigation.

As policy trajectory research, the policy text represented departmental perspectives for this study. DE's Strategic Plan and associated texts were critically analysed through discourse analysis. Two educational leaders, associated with but outside of the school, were recruited and provided some outsider perceptions. There is the potential for future research to include central office and regional departmental staff voices to broaden available viewpoints. The policy trajectory also included a case study in which to consider enactment of the policy text. The choice of one very remote school in socioeconomically challenging circumstances was strategic but limited. Case study research is most effective when unique cases are chosen (Stake, 1995), and DSAS met this criterion. Transferability of findings might be viewed as limited, a common objection to case study research. As researcher, I held the position that equity implications should be considered in relation to the impacts of DE policy in a school that works with vulnerable and marginalised students.

3.9. CONCLUSION

The methodological design of this critical study was grounded in social constructionism and situated in an interpretive paradigm as this study aimed 'to challenge dominant power structures and associated political and policy arrangements' (Lingard, 2021, p. 2). How policy sociology and ethnographic methods were applied within a policy trajectory framework, as recommended by Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992) and Ball (1993) was elaborated. The study's structure and the theoretical resources applied to support the policy trajectory research were also explained.

The research structure is a policy trajectory framework including three contexts: *context of influence*, *context of policy production*, and *context(s) of practice*. These contexts corresponded with sites of research for the study. The Literature Review included an examination of global and Australian education policy in the *context of influence*. This chapter specifically focused on the other two study sites: a discourse analysis undertaken for the *context of policy production* and a case study within the *context of practice.*

The key methodologies related to the discourse analysis and case study were justified and described. The discourse analysis used Bacchi's (1999, 2009) WPRB and the detailing of this approach was accompanied by an explanation of viewing policy as problem solving and examination of problematisations in the analysis. The use of ethnographic methods in the case study was also justified and elucidated. The study involved collection and analysis of data in both the policy analysis and case study. Seeking to understand the conditions generated by DE's

Strategic Plan and how staff responded to 'narrowed or changed' available options (Ball, 1993, p. 12) required an analysis of the determining features of the policy along with interviews, field notes, observations, and document analysis in the case school.

The chapter closed with an account of the research practices adopted, including insider/outsider considerations, reflexivity, ethical research, limitations, and an explanation of terminology. My commitment to ethical and reflexive research was elaborated.

4. CONTEXT OF POLICY TEXT PRODUCTION – POLICY ANALYSIS

Assumptions that education policy governs and shapes educators' praxis buttress policy writers' and politicians' ambitions (Lewis & Hogan, 2019; Savage & O'Connor, 2019). Policy, a discursive determining formation, is a structure teachers must navigate in their daily work, creating a 'changing relationship between constraint and agency' (Ball, 1993, p. 14). Policy trajectory research studies this relationship, beginning with discourse analysis of applicable policy text/s, interrogating and challenging motivations and power structures, seeking to understand political and social formations, and critiquing policy problem/solution constructions (Ball, 1993; Lingard, 2021; Sellar et al., 2014). This chapter details the policy analysis that determined how DE's Strategic Plan (2019b) came to be, for whom, and with what assumptions (Blackmore & Lauder, 2005).

Motivated by neoliberal economic priorities and under global education governance, students' test scores have become the preferred evidence of education quality. Chasing 'world class' education quality, an Australian state education department sought to improve 'falling standards' with their strategic plan and accompanying policy texts. Significantly, their strategy included improvement planning with mandatory formats and targets, evidence-based approaches and expert support, and a focus on data from standardised assessments to determine whether outcomes improved. In this research, to examine whether these approaches will improve the state's learning outcomes, or are folly, critical policy sociology is employed, specifically policy analysis using Bacchi's (2009, 2012): *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPRB) approach. The DE Strategic Plan is interrogated, underscoring global themes: challenges to equity, reductive effects of test-based accountability, and the implications and impacts on teachers. The analysis identifies deep engagement in problematic global discourses and calls for a shift away from what is a source of global inequities rather than the solution (Cornelius, 2023).

What follows is my peer reviewed journal article, *The race for 'world class' education: Improvement or folly?* (Cornelius, 2023). It has been inserted into this chapter (in a different font for identification) with indications where sections were removed. The format is consistent with the open access published version, linked in Appendix Four, with minor formatting adaptations and clearly designated edits in square brackets to enhance coherence with the overall thesis. Figures and headings have been re-numbered to align with the thesis sections.

The race for 'world class' education: Improvement or folly? **Article begins here:**

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s, the international political landscape has been driven by the neoliberal agenda of expecting human well-being to be advanced through 'liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by ... free markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). This agenda is enacted ideologically through near universal application of profit-seeking corporate principles in order to drive cost efficiency and expansion (Savage, 2017). Rowlands and Rawolle (2019) suggest that neoliberalism is not a catch-all term, and its use can fail to encompass other historical and social forces including 'broad processes of change such as globalisation, managerialism, mediatisation, and the growth of the knowledge-based economy' (p. 264). Decades of intensifying global neoliberal ideology have sweeping impacts on the agendas of education systems and configure conditions for education policy. Primacy of educational efficiency follows intensification of economic principles and focus on profit-seeking.

This efficiency drive, more akin to perfecting tools in a workshop than the nuanced and adequate necessity to address equity in education, has been embodied in many policy-making processes in recent times (Ross, 2021). Webb, Sellar and Gulson (2020) argue that education is a field of policy that is 'always attempting to "reform" or "improve" itself' (p. 293). Researchers also suggest that the 'need for highly visible political action often tends to override the need for a comprehensive approach to reform and, importantly, a particularly nuanced understanding of what constitutes evidence' (Lewis & Hogan, 2019, p. 1).

Situated as an example inside these dominant narratives, one Australian state adopted an 'overly simplified, decontextualised and one-size-fits-all' (Lewis & Hogan, 2019, p. 1) improvement policy. Evidence demonstrates that Australian school systems need to do something different to 'address stagnant or declining outcomes and enduring inequities' (Eacott 2022, 34). Responding to Ball's (1993) invitation to recognise, analyse and

challenge dominant neoliberal discourses, this paper interrogates the improvement policies, expressed in [DE's Strategic Plan] (2019b). The paper locates the assemblage of example 'world-class' aspirant policies and plans within international neoliberal political discourse and the rise of global education policy. Drawing from Bacchi's (2009) *What is the problem represented to be?* approach (WPRB) it interrogates the state's education department's (DE) response to perceived 'falling standards'. The analysis will examine political preoccupations and structural inequities, how the policy will 'fix things' and bring a 'critical ethos' (Ozga, 2019, p. 7). The 'intent is to dig deeper than usual into the meaning of policies and into the meaning-making that is part of policy formulation' (Bacchi, 2009, p. vi). Employing Bacchi's approach, 'the problem' represented is positioned as unsatisfactory schools' performances on national and international assessments. The Plan, devised by the DE, to address this 'failure' includes ratcheting up accountability, improvement planning, reliance on external expertise, and increased measurement and standardisation. These actions, demonstrate the embodiment of global neoliberal processes and practices and are a significant and ongoing threat to equity and the professionalism of teachers and efficacy of schools.

* Original published Literature Review removed here (repeats thesis Literature Review in Chapter Two)*.*

4.2. METHODOLOGY

* Two original published paragraphs on the theorisation of critical policy sociology and problematisation of policy removed here (repeats thesis Methodology in Chapter Three)

Bacchi's (2009) WPRB offers six questions to guide critical interrogation of policy problematisations. WPRB probes assumed problems in important texts, such as policy documents, designed to shape enacted practices. Analysis of this problem works backwards from practical texts, exploring narratives between and within documents, identifying and analysing the conceptual logics, and highlighting 'the conditions that allow a particular problem representation to take shape and to assume dominance' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 11). The analysis then moves to reflection and consideration of silenced

issues and perspectives and to identify the effects of specific problem representations. Finally, WPRB addresses the possibility of challenging harmful problem representations. The intentions of all six WPRB questions are reflected in the subheadings in the paper's analysis, discussion, and conclusion sections.

Researchers using WPRB identify and interrogate binaries, key concepts, and categories operating within a policy (Bacchi, 2009). Binaries are rife in public debate, simplifying complex debates and privileging one perspective over another. Key concepts are abstract, open ended, and poorly defined labels for what can be seen as 'common sense' understandings of the policy context. Insufficient interrogation of key concepts leads to disputes over their meaning and a dearth of attention on competing political visions. Categories are concepts that play a central role in how governing takes place. They should not be accepted at face-value, rather exploration of 'how they function to give particular meanings to problem representations' is required (Bacchi, 2009, p. 9).

As an example of policy discourse that is a determining feature of work in schools, the [DE Strategic Plan] (2019b) is this paper's focus. In its pursuit of world class standing, DE has produced a publicly accessible, 16-page plan. It includes an overview of the vision, the Chief Executive's Foreword, an overview of six key policy levers, an outline of background and goals and then a three step: 2018-2020, 2021-2022, and 2023-2024 action breakdown for each of the six levers. The DE Strategic Plan has, in part, been chosen for its high profile across Australia and the significant investment made by the state government concerned. For example, implementation of this plan is supported by an increase from 18 to 30 education directors to monitor enactment, employment of 30 new curriculum officers to support schools and a singular focus on school improvement planning by all department personnel (DE, 2019a, 2021b). Throughout the remainder of this paper the policy will be identified as ['DE's Strategic Plan'][4], without referencing, to support readability. Where a page reference is required, an abbreviated date and page number will be used. Accompanying DE's Strategic Plan is an extensive assemblage of

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[4] Original article used 'the DE plan'. Changed to 'DE's Strategic Plan' to match the thesis formatting.

publicly accessible policy, support, and promotional materials. These are also drawn upon, and referenced, as required to illustrate, and evidence the analysis that follows.

An online word and phrase frequency counter (Adamovic, 2009) provided lists of word and phrases of various lengths in descending order of occurrence. The analysis pinpointed terms with elevated frequency ratings, filtered for their applicability to schools, teachers, and teaching, in the interest of this discussion. Excluded terms, were references to human resource plans, technology rollouts, central office improvements, and services for parents such as online mathematics tutoring and home-schooling support. These lists are the source of numerical data in the analysis.

To focus the problem presentation that follows, four [topics][5] were selected, based on rate of recurrence using the online word and phrase frequency counter (Adamovic, 2009). These [topics] were also of interest to this paper's discussion of neoliberal agendas and current global discourses around education. In order of frequency, the [topics] are Measurement, Improvement, Support, and Accountability and standards. Examples of the terminology associated with each can be seen in Figure 4.3-1. Interrogation of language used around high frequency terminology supported identification of power relationships and underpinning assumptions, such as expertise being located outside of schools and that data is an effective measure of school effectiveness.

4.3.   ANALYSIS

4.3.1. Problem representation

The world class solution or 'kind of change' (Bacchi, 2009, p. xi) promised by DE's (2019b) Plan is broadly outlined in the public vision statement: 'Provide world-class education that achieves growth for **every** child and student in **every** preschool and school' (p. 2, emphasis in original). The change model relies on data driven improvement planning, evidence-informed practice, and predetermined strategies. World class education

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[5] The word 'themes' was used in the original article. Deeper engagement with reflexive thematic analysis for the case study suggested that 'topics' was a more accurate depiction of the function of these concepts. Within the exploration of each topic a range of themes are elaborated.

aspirations are espoused in an assemblage of DE publicly accessible formats, including websites (2018c, 2018a), DE's Strategic Plan (2018c, 2019b), action plans (2021a), annual reports (2019a, 2020b, 2021b, 2022), and promotional videos (2021c), all reinforcing the message that the department's approach is 'resolute and focused' on creating world class improvement that will be measured by standardised international and national tests. A characteristic version of the aspirational 'being great by 2028' discourse is:

> *We have a plan to take the statewide standard of public education from good to great. We will be recognised as one of the best public education systems in the world by 2028 - where every children's centre, preschool and school is world-class. (2018c, p. 1)*

This expectation of achieving a world-class education system, is based on the state's view that their own education system is 'sitting at the bottom of good' (2019b, p. 2), without explicitly clarifying how this was determined. From 2018, DE's rationale for new approaches to school improvement, included repeated messages that the problem faced by politicians, schools, students, and families is 'falling standards' seen as reduced educational outcomes and quality. Since PISA 2009, political discourse and media representations have utilised arbitrary rankings and undifferentiated labelling of outcome trends to characterise the quality of Australian schooling as declining (Sellar & Lingard, 2018).

To address falling standards and achieve the shift from 'good to great', the DE (2019b) outlines six 'evidence-based' key levers in their strategic plan: Expert teaching, quality leadership, engaged communities, stronger services, resourcing and investment, and accountability and support. All six levers are purportedly underpinned by the introduction of a new model for school improvement. DE (2018c, 2018a, 2019b, 2021c) expects this 'solution' to make the good to great shift possible, addressing the problem of falling standards with improvement plans that focus on data, evidence-informed planning, and quality instruction using materials developed by experts for teachers.

In 2018, what was described as a new school improvement model was initiated. DE's (2019b) first step was a 'system level benchmarking' of every school to 'create an

understanding of their performance and subsequent support needs' (p. 11). An example of DE's (2018c) rhetoric is, 'We started by gaining a shared understanding of how a school is performing, what it needs to do to improve and the targeted support it needs' (p. 4). This action echoed global education policy reliance on measurement. By applying a 'data responsive formula' DE believed they had identified how each school was performing, based on the aggregated results of international and national assessments including PISA, National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy Program (NAPLAN) and phonics screening. While DE's Strategic Plan acknowledges that schools are variable, context (referring to geographic, socioeconomic, complexity, population, and socio-historical factors) was not a factor in the application of the 'data responsive formula'. The formula assembled all test results into a number between 0 (lowest score) and 10 (highest) for every school. In effect, test performance, aggregated as a single digit, determined system-wide evaluation of school performance. This arbitrary number also determined the level of tailored literacy and numeracy support schools were to receive to achieve their improvement goals (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022). DE (2019b) describes this as 'putting the right foundations in place' (p. 4). The implication is that schools' test performances are valid reflections of falling standards and not being a *great* education system. Further, that with the application of centrally decided - contextually disconnected - support, 'fixing' this is every individual school's improvement planning responsibility.

4.3.2. Underpinning pre-suppositions and assumptions

Bacchi (2009) argues that 'among the many competing constructions of a "problem" that are possible, governments play a privileged role because their understandings "stick"' (p. 34). Concomitantly, government versions of 'problems' become embedded in dominant discourses, or 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1988b) and are preeminent as true or acceptable accounts. Policies, and the mechanisms to administer them, lay foundations for narratives in schools based on policy 'truths'. These truths shape schools' and teachers' work. The policy language and dominant narratives formulated in DE's Strategic

Plan require examination as the 'falling standards problem' triggered ambitions for measurable improvement and world class education.

One way pre-suppositions gain traction is in a pervasive notion that concepts like 'world-class', 'standards', 'improvement', 'good', and 'great', can be reliably measured and are knowable statewide, or indeed world-wide. DE's Strategic Plan is rich with abstract, open-ended labels that hold contestable meanings but are embraced as regimes of truth. 'World class' and 'world class education' are prominent key concepts, referenced 18 times in the plan. Elaborated throughout DE's (2019b) document as improved 'standards' that will take the education system 'from the bottom of good to great' (p. 2), DE's Strategic Plan does little to explicate world class as a concept, other than by advancing further abstract terms, such as quality, excellence, and global reputation (see Figure 4.3-1). An example from DE's Strategic Plan is:

> *We have a plan to take the statewide standard from good to great and be recognised as one of the best public education systems in the world by 2028 - where every preschool and school is world-class. (2019b, p. 5)*

Initially, such statements perform an aspirational role, alluding to improved education for all students as DE addresses the falling standards crisis. Within the strategic plan nonetheless, DE is self-identifying as 'not great' and every child as 'not growing'. These are binaries of world class aspirations and implied in the positioning is the notion that good is not good enough and that great is better. One might reasonably ask what good and great signify and to whom they apply.

Figure 4.3-1 Themes/topics and collated terms – policy analysis

Themes and collocated terms	Total USAGE /2633 words	% of occurrences linked to high demand MODAL VERBS (i.e. should, will, need etc.)
Measurement Found in the policy explicitly and implied in terms such as: good to great, best/better, growth, achievement, and outcomes.	116	74.1%
Improvement In the policy as improve, improvement, improvement planning, and improvement dashboard.	74	59.5%
Support Appears as need support or provide support and terms such as: resourcing, right foundations, evidence-based, experts, and guidebooks.	74	55.4%
Accountability and standards Both accountability and standards are used, as well as: world class, quality, excellence, and global reputation.	50	50%

Taking a critical standpoint and unsettling what has been normalised allows us to understand the construction of deficit and what is seen as lacking (Eacott, 2022; Griffiths, 2009). Numerous key concepts imply that teachers are not capable of teaching for world class outcomes and that they should not have agency in decision making about their own students' learning, the classroom, and their curriculum choices. Strategies to provide teachers with 'support' (74 references, see Figure 4.3-1) so that they can provide students with the 'right foundations' in 'evidence-based' ways ultimately cast teachers as technicians who need to improve their skills. Analysis of sentences containing 'support' implications show that 26 refer to experts developing resources for teachers and 43 to expertise being located outside the school. These statements position teachers as implementing '... the ideas of others but not [holding] the professional expertise to engage in the exciting task of theorizing and designing curriculum' (Reid, 2020, p. 44–45). Deficit implications are persistent, perpetuating a conception that because standards are falling teachers are responsible. Teachers then, must employ 'particular evidence-based

inputs that have been found to "work" through particular forms of systematic research', and rely 'on a limited although predictable set of broad reductive inputs to enhance student achievement' (Skourdoumbis, 2018, p. 604). DE's Strategic Plan is an example of how limiting the 'permitted' inputs results in curriculum narrowing and leads to growing reliance on commercially produced programs because 'powerful commercial enterprises position themselves as "educational saviours" to national and state governments' (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022, p. 927).

The frequency count identified the presage that falling standards are realised in 'measurement' (116 references, see Figure 4.3-1) and demonstrated that 'improvement' (74 references, see Figure 4.3-1) is not occurring because students are not exhibiting 'growth'. Bacchi (2009) encourages analysis of 'categories' that play a central role in governing. Improvement/planning and measurement are two such categories, embedded throughout DE's Strategic Plan and illustrative of the proposed policy solutions.

System-wide school improvement planning is fundamental to DE's Strategic Plan. 'Improvement' is prominent in DE (2018c) statements like, 'ambitious goal for learning improvement' (p. 1). Analysis of the sentences holding the category: 'improvement' and its implied intentions, identify 24 incidents of conflation between achieving improvement and schools producing an improvement plan. One example, from the 2018 DE Annual Report (2018c) outcomes: 'Every school and preschool has an improvement plan that focuses on improving outcomes for every child and student' (p. 3). Overlooked is the fact that 100% of schools producing a plan on the new template is not necessarily a measure of achieving the improvement required to reach world class standards. Ball (2019) points to reform hyperactivity in Australian education policy development, and this is evident in the extensive activity involved in supporting schools to produce an improvement plan on the new template. DE (2019b) employed additional staff to champion plan development and support '...preschool and school improvement cycles through external school reviews and partnership roundtables' (p. 11). Once again, expertise for this important work is located outside the school.

Necessary to the improvement ambition is a method of determining if and how well improvement is occurring. 'Measurement' is an undefined concept and contested term that acts as a category within DE's Strategic Plan. As is common in policy texts, measurement plays a central role in determining policy effectiveness and progress. Figure 4.3-1 shows that references to measure/measurement and related ideas are prolific. Explicit in DE's Strategic Plan is an insistence that progress, as the system moves from good to great, is measurable. The DE (2019b) plan includes statements like: 'We have measured the standard of education on a universal scale that compares school systems across the world' (p. 2). DE's roadmap (2018c) said, 'We will measure our success in delivering a world-class public education system using a number of metrics based on academic achievement and developmental markers' (p. 12). How these metrics are to be used is not clear. Reference to PISA and NAPLAN in other sections of DE's Strategic Plan would suggest that these are the valued assessments of progress toward world class education. It is obvious then, that in line with global education policy, reliance on measurement is entrenched. That these measures are not elaborated, nor transparent to schools, is troubling. The likelihood of impacting equity gaps with uniform improvement plans and attention to measurement is doubtful.

4.4.   DISCUSSION

4.4.1. How the representation has come about

Global education policy supports 'a single space of comparative and commensurate measurement of the performance of school systems' (Lingard et al., 2013, p. 539). Since the 1980s, Australian commonalities with international policy discourse have intensified, resulting in the long-term national commitments to equity and excellence being overtaken by the emergence of world class nomenclature in education policy discourse. References to educational equity and excellence across policy iterations, and the advent of accountability, transparency, and world class are evident.

The Australian Education Council initiated the first national education position statement, the Hobart Declaration on Schooling, beginning consultation in the mid-1980s (Australian

Education Council, 1989). The resulting Declaration set out an agreement on ten national goals for schooling, announcing an intention to establish a national curriculum agency and introducing an annual national report on schooling. The Hobart Declaration signified commitment to social justice and curriculum excellence as part of the first national goals for Australian education.

The 1998 Hobart Declaration review led to the Adelaide Declaration on national goals for schooling in the twenty-first century, which also committed to social justice and clarified its ambitions in Goal 3.1:

> ... students' outcomes from schooling are free from the negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity, religion or disability; and of differences arising from students' socioeconomic background or geographic isolation. (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, p. 230)

Following a review of the Adelaide Declaration, MCEETYA (2008, p. 7) published their *Melbourne Declaration on educational goals for young Australians*. This declaration shifted the national narrative from 'social justice' to 'equity' as signalled in 'Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes **equity** and **excellence'** (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 7 emphasis added). Sub goals included promoting world-class curriculum and assessment, a staunch commitment to addressing socioeconomic and other sources of disadvantage and the first explicit pledge to strengthening accountability and transparency. The ambition for 'State, Territory and Commonwealth governments [to] work together with all school sectors to ensure world-class curriculum in Australia' (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 13), laid the groundwork for world class aspirations.

The work of strengthening accountability and transparency began at Education Ministers Meetings once the Melbourne Declaration was endorsed in 2008. Colloquially known as Partnership Agreements, all commonwealth funding was explicitly tied to implementation of a set of agreed national outcomes under National School Reform Agreements (NSRA). With the binding of funding to achieving outcomes, came a shift in power relations and prominence for the commonwealth in setting directions for education, traditionally the

primary responsibility of states and territories. Each NSRA has reiterated the 'agreed common goals for schooling in Australia ... These shared goals provide that schooling in Australia will be founded on the twin principles of **equity** and **excellence'** (Council of Australian Governments, 2018, p. 3 emphasis added). How evident this is in other education policies is questionable.

The current bilateral NSRA is 'a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, States and Territories to lift student outcomes across Australian schools' and 'sets out 8 national policy initiatives against 3 reform directions that all parties have agreed to implement across the 5 years to December 2023' (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2022). The most recent priorities explicitly secure compliance with measurement and accountability commitments to receipt of commonwealth education funding:

> *A program of national assessments and a common reporting framework provides the means for measuring progress against our national goals. Ongoing implementation of these shared commitments remains a condition of funding under the Australian Education Act 2013. (Council of Australian Governments 2018, p. 3)*

The revised NSRA (Council of Australian Governments 2018), review of the Melbourne Declaration informed the 2019, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education declaration* which held the primary goal: 'The Australian education system promotes **excellence** and **equity'** (Council of Australian Governments, 2019, p. 5 emphasis added). The changed ordering of equity and excellence to excellence and equity parallels a stronger commitment to world class curriculum in this, the fourth national education declaration. A pledge to a world class education system was declared, and while not explicit, is apparent in the first agreed target: 'Australia considered to be a high quality and high equity schooling system by international standards by 2025' (Council of Australian Governments, 2019, p. 7 emphasis added).

The consultation for and endorsement of the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education declaration*, the national vision statement, coincided with the development and launch of DE's Strategic Plan at the centre of this policy analysis. In parallel with the Mparntwe

declaration, 'world class' discourses have become dominant in Australia. Like many before them, DE (2019b) employed McKinsey consultants from 2017, and adopted their 'schooling in crisis' (Mourshed et al., 2010) messages and the 'proposed solution to the crisis with their school improvement consultancy "gospel" of change' (Bills & Howard, 2022, p. 7). DE's Strategic Plan's messaging replicates McKinsey Co's moving from *good to great* mantra, using common policies and practices found in *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better* (Mourshed et al., 2010).

The 'gospel of change' was communicated at the launch of the 'new' improvement agenda. The Minister for Education and Chief Executive's addresses included a new approach to improvement, 'as if the audience, many with decades of leadership experience, had never considered that improvement might be a good idea and weren't constantly working to improve [their] schools' (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022, pp. 934–935). Speeches included narratives of:

> *... falling literacy and numeracy levels, as evidenced by national testing regimes and international assessment rankings, appalling data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes and the need to 'fix' these problems and become a "world class system". (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022, p. 935)*

Consequently, this analysis will next reconnoitre the unproblematised in reliance on measurement in determining falling standards, the implications of measuring, and the improvement imperative.

4.4.2. The unproblematic in the problem representation

While the DE vision of an equitable and world class education was prompted by the national (Mparntwe) statement, the influence of global discourses around comparison and measurement are more prominent. Unproblematic in DE's whole-hearted embrace of a world class quest is the lack of interrogation of 'falling standards'. The absence of analysis of how test scores are obtained, what they mean, how context impacts, and what underpins or causes the waning test scores, silences a wide range of important issues. Indeed, also conspicuously absent from the policy's narrative are the impacts of the measures it uses.

Considerable research attention identifies prevalent unproblematic assumptions about what is tested, and how, and the discursive effects of testing on students, teachers, and the profession. Lewis and Holloway (2019) highlight the lack of empirical reality in numbers and the way data 'are deeply implicated in constructing the very phenomena they seek to measure' (p.37). DE's Strategic Plan assumes standardised assessments represent empirical reality and are valid. Seen as DE's (2019b) 'single source of truth' (p. 13), a number of data points set the standards for realisation of world class education, 'with students' results in phonics, PAT [Progressive Achievement Testing (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2022)], NAPLAN and [senior secondary results]' positioned as reliable (2019b, p. 1). One Australia-wide key measure of success is the percentage of students reaching national minimum standards (NMS) on NAPLAN. NMS are important to policymakers, but they are set very low. Goss and Sonnermann's (2016) analysis of national minimum standards shows an inbuilt assumption that underperforming students 'will slip one year of learning further behind each time they sit the NAPLAN test' (p. 23). The arbitrary nature of establishing minimum standards is also mirrored in mismatches between national and international assessments. Australian NAPLAN minimum standards are low on international comparisons. For example, Australia's numeracy standard for Year 9 students is about two years below the minimum standard set by the OECD in PISA mathematics for 15-year-old students (Goss & Sonnermann, 2016), and even further from world class achievement than local measures suggest.

One challenge to the assumed reliability of large-scale assessments arises from attention to the assumption that standardised tests such as PISA and NAPLAN are universally relevant to all students (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022). Test validity can be contested on the assumption of consistent student participation in standardised assessments. Large-scale assessments can test skills for students sitting the tests, but many underperforming students do not sit standardised tests. Research identifies hidden factors resulting in irregular NAPLAN assessment participation, including withdrawals and exemptions, differences in local and broader departmental policy expectations and a range of complex issues, all having major impacts on the comparability of data (Cornelius &

Mackey-Smith, 2022). Context is largely assumed irrelevant (Gable & Lingard, 2016). Cornelius and Mackey-Smith's (2022) research identified an apparent 'blindness to context' (p. 931) as an either overlooked or misunderstood factor and the tendency to blame students and teachers for testing outcomes. In this way, NAPLAN data acts to reinforce the equity gap and 'persistent "othering" of remote students and their families in terms of disadvantage, deficit and failure' (Guenther, 2013, p. 157). Undifferentiated labelling of outcome trends is part of the narrative around school failure (Sellar & Lingard, 2018) and falling standards. The assemblage of DE (2018c, 2019b, 2021c) policy texts unproblematically lists excellence measures involved in being world-class. There are references to aggregated and undifferentiated student outcome data, drawn from international testing (specifically PISA), national testing (NAPLAN) and state-based assessments of students' phonics skills (Phonic Screening Check) and end of schooling results as well as Progressive Assessment Tests (PAT) in reading and mathematics (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2022). The DE (2019b) Chief Executive's Foreword claims students are demonstrating 'year on year' (p. 1) progress in these assessments. It should be noted that PISA sample testing occurs every three years (OECD 2016), NAPLAN is administered to students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, Phonics Screening is undertaken in Year 1, and SACE at the completion of the senior years of school. The need for highly visible political action often tends to override the need for a 'comprehensive approach to reform and, importantly, a particularly nuanced understanding of what constitutes evidence' (Lewis & Hogan, 2019, p. 2). The CEO's claim (2019b) of improvement in 2018, in the first year of implementation of the 10-year strategic plan, is politically compelling, but the amalgamation of such disparate assessments, across years 1 to 12 of schooling warrants further interrogation.

Responding to their [un]reliable data, DE seeks to address falling standards through school improvement and improvement plans. This improvement imperative reflects global trends toward increased performativity and an audit culture (Verger et al., 2021). DE's Strategic Plan and supporting documents have extensive references to development of school improvement plans leading to improvement. DE (2019a, 2020b, 2021b) annual

reports celebrate all schools' plan development, and the department's (2020b) website states: 'There was a 100% delivery of school improvement plans to education directors'. The evidence of 'improvement' is datafied, for example, we 'benchmarked our understanding of how a school is performing and identified what it needs to do to improve' (2019b, p. 11) and 'educators now have access to an improvement dashboard as a single source of truth for school-level measures of improvement' (2019b, p. 12). These actions further embed the inequities and standards incongruities identified above. The reliance on data also solidifies the apparent necessity of data and reinforces the fluid shift from 'equity' to 'excellence' previously described (Mockler, 2014).

The DE improvement expectations promote evidence-informed and evidence-based teaching practices. An example of this in the DE (2019b) plan is: '... introduced a model for school improvement which focuses on data, evidence-informed planning and teaching practice' (p. 6). Unproblematised is what constitutes evidence informed. Across the literature, one-size-fits-all solution finding is called into question (Skourdoumbis, 2018). Despite increasing research attention on 'what works for whom and in what circumstances', 'there is still considerable attention to decontextualised "best practices"' (Hwa, 2021, p. 1). DE (2021b) policy texts extend this decontextualisation, with the announcement of prepared lesson plans for teachers to utilise to teach the curriculum; 'developing and rolling out new, high-quality, classroom-ready curriculum resources for our educators in what was the biggest curriculum development initiative ever seen' (p. 3). Also left unproblematic is the consequence that improvement is constructed as an industry in and of itself, and the beneficiaries further decontextualise students' learning experiences (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022).

4.4.3. Effects of the problem representation

As systems address falling standards, (Henig, 2013) identifies a common international rush toward datafication of accountability processes and a push to enshrine them 'in legislation and bureaucratic processes' (p. x). This urgency preceded evidence that datafication positively impacts on teaching and the profession. As previously described, the strategic

plan adheres to global directions and exhibits extensive reliance on data to measure improvement. This has ramifications for teacher professionalism, deflection of responsibility and impacts on teachers' work.

'Professionalism' as a term is used widely within educational discourses and, as is the case for many terms in this analysis, utilised with an assumption of shared meaning (Lewis & Holloway, 2019). For the purposes of this paper, an emancipatory stance is taken, meaning that professionalism can be read as teachers' ability to achieve more socially just ends, to challenge oppressive structures, and to make decisions about learners in their care beyond the data gathered (Gerrard & Holloway, 2023).

Reliance on test-based accountabilities has overtaken other potentially more educative accountabilities. Accountability policy moves intend teachers to be 'held to account' (Lingard et al., 2017, p. 1), but in reality, they separate accountability for education from informed judgement of teachers as professionals (Henig, 2013; Lewis & Holloway, 2019). The combination of wholehearted engagement with datafied accountability and policy as numbers can be seen in the Australian context, as unproblematised use of NAPLAN outcomes and commensurate growth in deficit educational discourses about teachers and schools (Stacey, Gavin, et al., 2022b). For more than two decades, public debates about teacher quality have been prominent in international media. Policies, like DE's Strategic Plan, position teachers 'as lacking in skills and as needing external assistance' (Thomas, 2011, p. 379), feeding into discourses that unsettle public trust in teachers.

The blame for policy failures in the education arena, is placed with teachers, schools, or communities, giving rise to the need expressed; to 'fix these problems and become a world class system' (Cornelius & Cornelius-Bell, 2022, p. 66). Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashu (2013, p. 544) note deflection of 'accountability and policy responsibility concerns away from governments, and onto schools and teachers'. One mechanism for pinpointing how responsibility is positioned, in a policy text, is analysis of modal verb use. Considered scrutiny of each sentence related to measurement, improvement, need for support, and accountability and standards, found that 67.8% of [topic] related terms were linked to a

modal verb (see Figure 4.3-1 for the percentage of modal verb linkage to each [topic]). A DE (2019b) plan example of conative imperative and implied responsibility shift is: 'Quality leaders **will** lead change, provide clear direction, foster great culture, and **will** be accountable for educational performance' (p. 7 emphasis added).

Not only are teachers and school leaders held responsible, the ways in which they enact this responsibility are prescribed. A paradoxical result of increased datafication and accountability is narrowing of practice. This is evident in DE's Strategic Plan's emphasis on development of resources by experts (26 references) and the focus of expertise as external to schools (43 references). Sahlberg (2016) argues that the generalised standardisation of learning 'narrows the freedom and flexibility of schools to teach in ways which make sense to them, prevents teachers from experimentation, and reduces the use of alternative pedagogic approaches' (p. 134). Following a 2022 change of Australian federal government, the spotlight is firmly focused on teacher shortages and teachers' work. Ample evidence exists to point to workload, diminished autonomy, stifled collaboration, and cultures of distrust (Holloway, 2021b) as significant factors in teacher shortage. This discussion has pointed to the structural and systemic dynamics that lead to apparent issues with teacher and school effectiveness, rather than there being an inherent deficiency in schools or teachers themselves. Achieving excellence, let alone equity, with a demoralised (and exiting) teaching force is also not likely.

4.5.   ARTICLE CONCLUSION

4.5.1. Replacing this problem representation

In closing, WPRB provides a way to consider how the problem representations could be otherwise. Policies aim to fix things. DE's Strategic Plan intends to address falling standards and have its system become world class. Entangled in the dominant 'falling standards' narrative is the naturalising of schools' test performances as declining and the elevation of test scores, such as NAPLAN results, in importance. This has in turn been married with school effectiveness. That school performance and test scores have become synonymous, reflects' DE endorsement of global education discourses, overlooking

context, embracing datafication, and conflating improvement with improvement planning. This acceptance of global discourses sits in contradiction to national education policies that position equity as a primary driver, alongside excellence (Council of Australian Governments, 2019). The DE (2019b) plan word frequency count for 'equity' produces one reference, that is: 'High achievement, growth, challenge, collaboration and **equity** are central to our culture and we uphold the Public Sector values' (p. 2 emphasis added). That this is the only reference to a matter of international concern, reflects the way DE's problem representations silence structural and contextual barriers, and stand in the way of potential future success.

A starting point for changing the problem representation and transforming how improvement occurs in DE schools, is repositioning teachers' and schools' agency with a focus on the values of democracy and equality (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Relegation of neoliberal values, such as efficiency and accountability, to relevant management areas, will re-enable humanised educative processes. This means, embracing approaches that identify and address structural inequities, and engage teachers as professionals to collaboratively contextualise and enact improvement.

Much has been written about this need to treat teachers as professionals, respect their expertise and enable increased collaboration (McLean Davies & Waterson, 2022; Twining, 2022). Prior to the 2018 launch of world class ambitions, it was customary for DE schools' improvement planning processes to involve 'staff, student and community consultation [which] led to the creation of ... collectively owned improvement plan[s]' (Cornelius & Cornelius-Bell, 2022, p. 68). Schools' compliance with the DE expectation that they use the provided template and required strategies to plan for improvement, replaced contextually relevant, shared ambitions developed by school communities. As identified in this paper's discussion, that schools have complied with directions to use a template and planning format is not evidence of improvement nor of improved learning outcomes. Decontextualised plans, without community collaboration and engagement, are unlikely

to address equity gaps. Enabling more contextually responsive planning with staff and community collaboration is crucial to improvement.

Equally, the present-day reliance on experts, development of resources for schools and reliance on best practice materials would be a better considered process with permission given to educators to attend to the effects and relevance of new policy directions in their sites. Authorising educators to value local knowledge in decision making and act in collaboration with the community will better address inequities and increase the likelihood of achieving world class ambitions.

Similarly, broadening measures of success, has potential to be advantageous. Corresponding with global testing culture (Addey & Sellar, 2017), DE's Strategic Plan relies on a limited set of datafied assessments. The narrowness of DE's (2019b) data reliance is seen in actions like: 'Developed an improvement dashboard as a single source of truth for school level measures of improvement' (p. 9). Widespread, unsophisticated adoption of measures, such as NAPLAN, encompass uncritical expectations that data is a 'source of truth' and a reliable assessment of school and teacher effectiveness. These assumptions too might reasonably be contested. Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti (2013) speak back to such reductionism emphasising that other modes of accountability, or giving an account, 'ought to be utilised, such as narratives, for example, and be linked to the wide plethora of a school's social and academic goals' (p. 545).

Accordingly, educational accountability is not at issue, rather the approaches taken challenged. One example of speaking back to global discourses is Lingard, Baroutsis and Sellar's (2021) research on collaborative public discourses. They present an alternative model and theorisation, enriching educational accountability by means of 'giving account'. Calling for systemic learning and dialogue with capacity for flexibility, giving account also enables systems to learn and in so doing improve policy (Lingard et al., 2021). DE would benefit from attention to the intended and unintended consequences of their policy texts.

In conclusion, this article has explored how a policy document shapes the discourse around important constitutions of schooling as successful or not. The probability of the strategic plan and, in all likelihood, any similarly positioned plan, achieving world class education has been interrogated. This paper suggests that without significant adjustments, it is unlikely that equity and excellence ambitions will be achieved. Indeed, it is a folly to embrace neoliberal and global education discourses and expect that the same market technologies responsible for 'exacerbating inequities' will 'provide the solutions' (Savage, 2017, p. 187).

Rather, attention must be given to broadening measures and addressing structural inequities, context, community expertise, and teachers' opportunities to be professionals. Scant attention to equity does little to position schools for success and create a world class system.

End of journal article.

4.6.   CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Central to policy trajectory research in education is interrogation of the discursive determining formations that teachers must navigate in their daily work. This chapter detailed my policy analysis findings related to DE's Strategic Plan (2019b).

The analysis identified 'crisis' and 'falling standards' discourses that dominate commentary on the fitness of Australian education. DE's (2019) discourses were accepted unproblematically, as were the proposed solutions expected to take the education system 'from the bottom of good to great' (p. 2). The policy set out a quest for world class education based on data-driven improvement planning, evidence-informed practice, predetermined teaching strategies, and focused curriculum delivery.

The new model for school improvement was introduced to make the good to great shift possible. Mandated improvement templates required a focus on data from standardised assessments and limited the 'permitted' inputs and focus areas. The analysis contested expectations that improvement plans 'fix' learning outcome shortfalls, questioned the celebration of 100% compliance with the planning process, and pointed to 24 incidents of conflation between

achieving improvement and schools producing an improvement plan. The consequences of this approach to improvement planning are interrogated in Chapter Seven.

As is common under pervasive neoliberal capitalism, DE advocated for the reliability of standardised testing data in its policy. For the study state, such measures became a source of 'truth', used to 'reliably' determine the status quo, monitor progress, and allocate support to schools. The analysis troubled DE's confidence in the data that was ultimately high stakes, noting that little attention was applied to questions of reliability, how test scores are obtained, the impacts of the measures it uses, or how context impacts on scores. These potential outcomes are canvassed in Chapter Eight.

The policy text commended evidence-informed teaching practices, a focus on literacy and numeracy, and quality instruction using materials developed by experts for state-wide use by teachers. It asserted that all teachers would be provided with materials and teaching approaches that provide students with the 'right foundations', despite context and student variations. The analysis identified a range of issues including curriculum narrowing leading to a growing reliance on commercial teaching programs, and that requirements to teach in 'evidence-based' ways ultimately cast teachers as technicians who need to improve their skills. These and other matters are investigated in Chapter Nine.

The policy analysis also identified themes such as deficit representations of teachers and schools and their impact, responsibilisation of teachers, blindness to context, and absence of attention to equity. While equity holds a prominent position on international and Australian education agendas, and more than 3.3 million Australians live in poverty (MacDonald, 2020), accommodating difference was not apparent in the policy document. Tracing these themes will continue through the case study that follows as the thesis moves into the *context of practice*.

5. CONTEXT OF PRACTICE - INTRODUCING THE CASE SCHOOL

Having critiqued the policy text underpinning this study's policy trajectory, the next five chapters investigate the *context of practice.* Situated in a very remote school case study, the study addresses research questions about how staff responded to the demand that they enact the education department's (DE) new improvement policy. Understanding participants' lived experiences of enacting the Strategic Plan and how its intentions were interpreted and adapted are fundamental to the research purpose.

This chapter introduces the very remote school at the centre of the case study, Desert Sunshine Area School (DSAS), the site where enactment of DE's improvement policy intentions will be explicated and analysed. Every context has unique socio-historical becomings and geographies. Context is an 'active' force, not a backdrop to be unheeded (Ball et al., 2012). Multilayered and complex, context is fundamental to determining what works and what does not in an education setting (Guenther, 2013; Halsey, 2018a). Therefore, the case study begins by developing an in-depth understanding of the case context or bounded system (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 1995). Desert Sunshine (alias is a community bounded by desert, remoteness, distance from other towns and schools, and a gamut of complexities which are elucidated in the following sections: the locality, the community, its school, the students, and the staff.

5.1. THE LOCALITY

The case school is situated in the very remote zone, as classified by the Australian Statistical Geography Standard Remoteness Structure (Hugo Centre for Population and Migration Studies, 2021). This standard defines five classes of relative remoteness: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote.

Population statistics provide insights into life across the regions. The most recent national census, in 2021, determined that 66.9% of the 25,422,788 people making up the Australian population live in major cities. Nationally, 33.1% of the population lives outside the metropolitan area, a vast land mass. In the study state, the percentage living in these regions is 22.2%. Nationally, 0.8% of the population live in very remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Desert Sunshine is located almost 900 kilometres from the state's capital city, sitting at the edge of Australia's largest desert. The Australian Government's Bureau of Meteorology has recorded a

summertime maximum temperature of 47.8°C (118.0°F), a winter night minimum of -2.2°C (28.0°F), and an average of 168mm (6.6 inches) of annual rain. The surrounding desert comprises expanses of sand hills, partially held by tussock-forming spinifex grass, and extensive desert pavements or gibber plains, made up of closely packed interlocking pebble-sized rock fragments. This is an isolated and beautiful part of the world. Those living in this locality are introduced next.

5.2.   THE COMMUNITY

Colonised by Anglo-Australians in 1915, Desert Sunshine is a dusty, red, desert town situated on the intersection of the lands of three First Nations' peoples and is home to many others including Antakirinja, Matu, Yankunytjatjara, Arabunna, Adnyamathanha, Dieri and Wirangu. Fourteen percent of Australia's First Nations people live in very remote locations (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018). The local council's State of the Town report (District Council, 2020) identifies that First Nations residents make up 17.1% of Desert Sunshine's population.

Cultural and linguistic diversity is a feature of the Desert Sunshine community's more than two thousand residents.[6] In addition to First Nation peoples, many in the community identify as having Eastern or Western European or Asian heritage. The school census identified that forty-nine cultures are represented, with some students identifying as being of mixed heritage. Recent arrivals included families of Indian, Sri Lankan and Pakistani descent (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022).

Given the population density in geographically very remote regions, Desert Sunshine is considered a 'large' town (Hugo Centre for Population and Migration Studies, 2021). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) census data for 'data by zone' offers insights into the community. Data collected from Desert Sunshine residents is situated in the 'Outback' census zone. Table 5.2-1 highlights key data points that illustrate the structural underpinnings of the Desert Sunshine community:

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[6] Population counts vary significantly across sources. Approximately 2000 completed the 2021 national census paperwork.

Table 5.2-1: Screenshot - Key Desert Sunshine data from the 2021 Census (ABS, 2021)

Census Criteria		DS
Adults attained Year 12 (or equivalent) school outcomes		34.1%
Percentage of census respondents employed		39.2%
Engagement in employment, education, or training	Fully	24%
	Partially	19%
	Not engaged	58.1%
Persons living in an appropriately sized dwelling		71.8%
Population members born overseas		26.2%
Number speaking a language other than English at home		22.2%

On census night almost two thousand people completed the census survey and were counted as living in Desert Sunshine. The District Council Chief Executive Officer reported the town population as closer to three and a half thousand who call Desert Sunshine home. In a meeting with the mayor, the researcher noted his conviction that illiteracy and distrust of regulatory and colonial systems are two reasons residents avoid the census data collection process, leading to under-reporting of the town's size (Field notes, 2018). Even without the additional residents' census data, capacity, and opportunities to undertake paid employment are below national averages (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

The national unemployment rate is 3.4% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This is not the case in Desert Sunshine. With just over a third of the post-school age population holding Year 12 (or equivalent) qualifications, and less than 40% employment, it is unsurprising that the median total income of census respondents is $45,821, 11% lower than the Australia-wide census average of $51,389 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This median income level should be viewed with an appreciation of the relative wealth of the owners of tourism operations and central businesses such as the supermarket, hardware shop, and alcohol outlets.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics determines an Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage (IRSD) as an indicator of the disadvantage faced by communities across Australia. The index is based on the social and economic features of the population living in an area and is a summary measure reflecting the patterns of social and economic advantage or disadvantage. Desert Sunshine's IRSD score of 879 is below the study state's regional areas average score of 945, and well below the average of 1000 across Australia. This score is a sound indicator of socioeconomic

disadvantage, further revealing the depth of poverty in the community (Public Health Information Development Unit, 2019).

Health and welfare data paint an additional layer of complexity and challenge for those living in very remote parts of Australia. There is a direct correlation between higher mortality rates and increased remoteness, such that people in very remote areas have a mortality rate 1.4 times higher than those living in major cities (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018). Desert Sunshine's premature mortality rates are 2.1 times higher than metropolitan residents, for females and 1.7 times higher for males (Public Health Information Development Unit, 2019). The statistics for disease burden, 'a measure of the health impact of disease on a population in a given year: both from dying, and living with, disease and injury', is 2.93 times higher for those living very remotely compared to those living in major cities (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018, p. 6).

The prevalence of family violence, also known as partner violence or domestic violence, is another factor to consider in understanding the context. The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (Mishra et al., 2014) ascertained that women in remote areas were liable to experience more family violence than women living in capital cities. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013 Personal Safety Survey identified 21% of women living outside of capital cities experienced family violence, compared to 15% living in cities (Campo & Tayton, 2015). In a 2017 meeting with the local Police Superintendent, the researcher recorded his claim 'that [Desert Sunshine] is the domestic violence capital of [study state]' (Field notes, 2017). Extensive state government and local council data confirms this assertion, with the State of the Town (2020) report identifying 68 domestic violence offences per 1000 population, the highest in the state.

5.3.   THE SCHOOL

DSAS is a state school under the jurisdiction of the state government's education department. While Australia has three education systems, public, state, or government schools, Catholic, and independent, 84% of schools outside of major cities are state schools. Almost all outer regional, remote, and very remote schools are state schools (Halsey, 2018a, 2018b; Roberts et al., 2022b).

DSAS, the only school in the region, is an inclusive Preschool to Year 12 area school, situated in the heart of the town, just metres from the main street. The school's appearance mirrors the physical features of many Australian public schools. It is a spread out, low-lying ensemble of demountable

classrooms and recreational areas that have sprung up, over time to meet the needs of the school. The administration buildings and gymnasium are constructed of brick, and at the front of the school is a 25-metre community swimming pool, surrounded by grass and trees. The local tourist buses stop regularly outside of this desert oasis to marvel at the greenery (Field notes, 2018). It is in the appearance of the school that one might be tempted to view DSAS as just another Australian state school. Hidden are the impacts of community factors discussed above.

The school is isolated from other schools. A small Aboriginal School is located two hours away by car (further into central Australia), while the two nearest similarly structured schools are located five and a half and six hours away (closer to the urban centre). As reported in Chapter Two, having a 'very remote' postcode has equity and outcome implications (Goss & Sonnermann, 2016; Guenther & Bat, 2013; OECD, 2018). For Australia, this disparity means that the further a school is from a city's central business district, the wider the educational gaps (Halsey, 2018a; Smith et al., 2019). Holden and Zang's (2018) *The economic impact of improving regional, rural and remote education in Australia: Closing the human capital gap* report reiterated the finding that 'levels of socioeconomic disadvantage increase as geographic remoteness increases' (p. 8).

DE classifies DSAS as Category 1, meaning that the school serves a highly disadvantaged community. In 2018, DSAS's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) rating on the *MySchool* website (ACARA, 2017b) was 780, compared to the average of 1000. This ICSEA value placed DSAS on the second percentile. This positioning was based on 80% of the population in the lowest socioeconomic quartile and 1% in the highest. These numbers underpin complex social, emotional, and economic circumstances for a significant cohort of the student body. From 2017 to 2019, these circumstances meant that more than three quarters of enrolled students qualified for financial support to pay their school fees. The state government legislates annual parental contributions for stationery and to support learning programs. This fee is waived, and covered by the government, when students' families earn less than the national minimum wage, an additional indicator of the levels of poverty experienced in the school population. The case school's students feature in the following section.

5.4.   THE STUDENTS

From 2017 to 2019, the DSAS student population increased from 229 to 276 students. It included students aged three to twenty years (School data). Many students were non-English speaking on commencement of their schooling. The 2021 national census data characterised 22% of community members as speakers of a language other than English in the home (Table 5.2-1). School data though recognised that more than 50% of students spoke First Nations, European, and Asian languages as a home language. Many students spoke four or more languages and dialects fluently, and English was not always one of them in the early years of school (School data).

By 2019, the school population included 68% First Nations students. As highlighted in Section 5.2: Community, First Nations students came from various language groups, and diverse cultural backgrounds. This diversity was also evident in the variety of aspirations they brought to school. Some aspired to attend university and others held vocational training plans. Another group were committed to more traditional/community life, pledged to cultural rather than colonial or 'Western' understandings and expectations of pathways. For several First Nations families, cultural, ceremonial and family expectations meant extensive travel between DSAS and towns in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands or elsewhere. The school transience that results from this mobility compounded students' difficulties in identifying with schooling as 'for me', leading to high rates of absenteeism and low academic engagement (Interview data: Mark). This disengagement from the project of school was compounded by the prevalence of 'bright' First Nations students being enrolled in distant metropolitan schools (Macdonald et al., 2018). This process provided individuals with opportunities but reduced the number of academically oriented peer role-models for other DSAS First Nations students, making it more difficult for them to 'see' and envision well-planned transitions for themselves (Field notes, 2018). The availability of scholarships to more able rural and remote students to support their attendance at city schools was not limited to First Nations students and had similar impacts across the student population.

In 2017, DSAS conducted an Aboriginal Student Wellbeing Survey. The survey results showed that all First Nations students reported experiencing at least one of the following: grief/loss, trauma, or poor health/wellbeing. Forty percent reported having to deal with grief/loss, 50% with trauma, and 80% were experiencing poor health/wellbeing. In his interview, leader Mark reported that if a wider survey had been conducted, he was confident the results 'for our non-Aboriginal students would be very similar' (Interview data). This observation highlights the fact that this case school

supports students in a very remote zone of the state, with most experiencing disadvantage to some extent. This study is not specifically about First Nations students, but they are an important group within the case context.

A 2017 department project to identify gifted First Nations learners recognised eight students, who had been overlooked by school staff. This was one trigger for a school-wide priority to attend to students' strengths, pathways, ambitions, role models, leadership opportunities, and the inclusion of more consistent culturally relevant content.

2017 to 2019 DSAS student attendance was between 68% and 72% (School data - annual reports) in comparison to 90.6% state average attendance (DE, 2018b). Deidentified Australian Government *MySchool* website (ACARA, 2017b) attendance rates are shown in Table 5.4-1. Attendance data for 2020 was not recorded in this and other schools due to the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns across the country.

Table: 5.4-1 Student attendance rates across the period studied, expressed as a percentage (ACARA, 2023)

	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022
All Students	72	67	68	57	50
First Nations	57	52	54	38	32
Non-First Nations	86	82	79	78	71

The data potentially indicates decreasing engagement with schooling in DSAS (Lowe & Weuffen, 2022). Factors including trauma and grief/loss impacted large numbers of DSAS students and their ability to engage with and attend school. Many First Nations students saw education as a colonising influence and resisted aspects of the curriculum. This disconnect was reflected in below state average attendance.

The staff came to recognise that remote students' life experiences tended to be different to those living in metropolitan areas. One teacher recounted his surprise when a Year 6 student did not know what a cinema was. That such taken-for-granted terms were misunderstood heightened his awareness of the different life experiences of those he taught (Field notes, 2018). Staff appreciated that students' different knowledges and experiences are not recognised and celebrated, a factor in their engagement in the project of school. Students must, at least to some extent, see themselves in the curriculum, and it must hold relevance to their lives (Legbo, 2022; Yishak & Gumbo, 2012).

Community poverty, family violence and trauma were also implicated in frequent incidents of challenging and disruptive student behaviour. In 2017, police support was frequently required to manage school yard violence. Over the following two years, this requirement for support reduced dramatically, and police were only called three times in 2019 (School data). Proactive, strengths-based initiatives to support anger management and resolution finding, and consistent, positive expectations accounted for this improvement (Field notes, 2019).

Torrens University's Public Health Information Development Unit (2019) also provides a range of additional data about young people living in Desert Sunshine. In 2016, 54.5% of young people aged 16 to 24 were engaged in 'learning or earning', far less than their metropolitan counterparts at 86.6%. Of this age group, 11.1% were receiving unemployment benefits, an 88% higher rate than other regional groups. Compared to an average 12% of metropolitan 16-year-olds, 63.2% of Desert Sunshine 16-year-olds did not participate in full-time secondary education.

5.5.   THE STAFF

This section completes the Desert Sunshine picture by introducing the staff who worked at DSAS.

2018 human resources data captures a picture of the total number of staff[7] that year:

Figure 5.5-1: Screenshot - 2018 School annual report staffing data.

School workforce composition including Indigenous staff

	Teaching Staff		Non-Teaching Staff	
	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Full-Time Equivalents	0.0	24.1	4.9	14.5
Persons	0	25	6	19

Data Source: Department's HR Management Reporting System, extracted Term 3 2018.

The 25 teaching staff included six people in leadership roles, and one preschool, nine primary and nine secondary teachers. 15 teachers had permanency with the department and ten were on contract. DE policy required teachers on contracts to work in a remote or very remote setting for four years in order to become permanent members of the public service teaching workforce, providing guaranteed access to a position in a school within a specified distance from their home.

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[7] Screenshot taken of DSAS: 2018 Annual Report. Deidentified to protect the identity of the school. The school's annual reports are public documents, displayed on schools' websites.

Staffing remote schools is difficult (Downes & Roberts, 2018) and the 'come-and-go syndrome' is problematic (L. Hall, 2012, p. 187). Between 40% and 50% of DSAS teachers turned over most years. Of the 2017 staff, thirteen teachers, most from primary, were replaced for 2018. For 2019 ten staff, mainly secondary teachers, left the school, and for 2020, thirteen teaching staff were replaced. Almost all new staff were early career teachers. Staff turnover was flagged as a challenge by many of those interviewed for this study. Collette – the DSAS primary leader in 2017 and 2018 - described the staffing changes during these two years:

| Collette 2020 | 5.5-01 | *… while I was up there in leadership / we had only one primary teacher stay on after the first year and the next year it was more than half the primary staff were new again //* |
| | 5.5-02 | *So / we were constantly having to retrain people / And it's all well and good having someone come up and do the training and doing the work to get someone up to speed / but then the next year we needed to start all over again //* |

With each group of newly-appointed graduate teachers came the necessity to induct, support, and provide professional learning. Remote sites need experienced teachers but find them reluctant to move to remote locations (Halsey, 2018a). Consequently, graduate and early career teachers are those most willing to travel greater distances to start their career (Adoniou & Gallagher, 2017).

Graduate teachers, many of whom were away from home for the first time, needed more than rent subsidies and remote allowances to find their way in a complex and demanding site. Many were unprepared for the personal adjustment required for coping with the realities of complex, low socioeconomic communities. Many thrived, joined the community, and found their work and personal lives enriched by the experience. Others struggled and stayed or moved on.

Supporting the necessary professional adjustments presented quandaries. During 2017 to 2019, only three of 28 teaching staff were experienced teachers and local residents. The majority started at DSAS as graduate teachers, and a few as early career teachers (in their first five years). This weighting toward novice teachers meant that there was little expertise in the school to provide the mentoring that early career teachers require. Not only was access to mentor expertise an issue, capacity to learn on the job was also limited. In remote schools, there are fewer staff to share and interact with and often vast distances between schools. In DSAS's case, the nearest comparable schools were a day of driving each way for collegial support.

An additional tension for new staff was how their own socioeconomic circumstances and life experiences could be tested as they came to understand the Desert Sunshine community context. Malcolm, the wellbeing leader, gave an example in his interview:

| Malcolm 2020/2022 | 5.5-03 | *I spoke to one of our staff members who / after nearly a year at the school had only just realised that poverty is an issue in our community // they hadn't even recognised that / up until we had a chat about the water and power costs going up / and I said that we've got people already living on their bare bones / and that even just an extra $5 a week is enough to create problems // [Families] are needing to think about what they will take away / to be able to pay that extra $5 a week // the teacher had never actually considered this //* |

Across all schools, teachers have a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, and awareness of or experience with the impacts of poverty are not universal. In a complex setting like DSAS, many factors, including trauma awareness, appreciation of long-term impacts of poverty, and cultural awareness, add to staff professional learning needs. Given the high turnover rates, this professional learning must be provided annually.

Principal turnover at DSAS occurred at an even higher rate than teachers. Collette, who first came to DSAS as a graduate in 2010 and left in 2013, raised this in her interview:

| Collette 2020 | 5.5-04 | *I guess it's things like the first time I was in DSAS / going through / like so many different principals and trying to get someone that was going to stay for a bit was one of the first challenges /* |
| | 5.5-05 | *… as well because when you're going term by term / that [short term principal's] aim is really just to keep the school afloat as opposed to actually doing anything //* |

Collette exposed an underlying issue common in many remote and very remote schools. Accessing and keeping experienced principals has proven a departmental and international, challenge (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Halsey, 2018a). The inability to fill principal positions in remote settings can mean that an experienced urban principal is recruited for one term (10 weeks) and housed in a local motel, while a merit process is undertaken to find a longer-term principal.

I was recruited to a tenured contract in DSAS from 2017. As part of becoming better acquainted with the staff team, I met one-on-one with everyone. The intention was to understand their perspectives and identify strengths and interests. The conversations covered a range of topics. My notes from one conversation underscore the difficulty teachers face in high principal turnover environments:

> *[One early career DSAS teacher] asked tearfully what the new priorities would be now that I was the DSAS principal. I was her seventh [DSAS] line manager in her first six terms teaching since graduation. (Field notes, 2017)*

For many teachers, the allure of remote and very remote schools was the opportunity to return to urban or rural schools as a permanent DE teacher. This job security was not generally available to graduates taking up metropolitan contract positions or relief teaching. Newly appointed graduate teachers learnt their craft in highly complex classrooms that even the most experienced teacher would find taxing. Complex student needs demanded skilled classroom management, capacity to adapt curriculum to wide ranges of ability and interests, and inclusive pedagogical practices. Newly appointed staff often navigated these difficulties without a principal or with one also inexperienced in the school.

Besides a new principal in 2017, a new leadership team was appointed. These five leaders had all taught at DSAS. They were a deputy principal and four senior leaders who held responsibility for staff support in the primary and secondary sections, student wellbeing, and First Nations students' learning outcomes. The newness of school leaders is another factor in staffing complex schools.

In addition to the teachers and leaders, 25 support staff were employed to manage school administration, finances, the library, and to provide classroom and wellbeing support to students. Deep community experience was situated with these casually-employed local staff. Their community knowledge and capital were available to new staff, and they were valued for their insights, background and general information about the community, students, and current events (Field notes, 2018). As temporary employees, most had only 40 weeks of income per year, and waited for each fresh principal to decide if they were needed. This precarity meant that highly skilled support staff would elect to take other employment in the town if work conditions were more stable there, even when they preferred the work in the school. Through 2018 and 2019, 18 permanent positions were created to offer job security to the skilled and experienced support team members. This meant that while teacher and leader turnover continued, there were skilled, experienced support staff to ensure consistency in administrative and student support functions.

5.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter rendered a picture of Desert Sunshine and DSAS, the case study *context of practice*. The picture affords insights into the complexities and challenges for the community, school, students, and staff. As identified in the Methodology chapter, case study research is most effective when unique cases are chosen (Stake, 1995). Being granted a tenure as principal in this isolated, unique, low socioeconomic community's distinctive school, was a treasured one-off career experience.

The four subsequent chapters detail the data that resulted from leading this school with a team of senior leaders. Chapter Six includes a peer reviewed journal article published with one of my supervisors, after the 2020 interview data was collected. Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine focus on the topics that were prominent in the reflexive thematic analysis of the policy and the case study data. Improvement planning, measurement, and standardisation are at the centre of these chapters.

6. CONTEXT OF PRACTICE - IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES: WHY DON'T REMOTE SCHOOLS MEASURE UP?

The previous chapter introduced the research's *context of practice*, the case study school Desert Sunshine Area School (DSAS). It probed the case study community and school, providing a contextual backdrop and rendering a picture of remoteness, isolation, socioeconomic disadvantage, the imprints of poverty, and uniqueness. Against the picture, this chapter, and the three following, explore the enactment of the education department's (DE) improvement aspirations in the case study school.

This, the first of the four data chapters, considers what neoliberal policies around 'improvement' and 'success'—largely formed and mandated in metropolitan centres of education governance— mean for students living in remote locations. I have included a published peer-reviewed journal article that I co-authored with Dr Mackey-Smith, as it provides a 'big picture' overview. The article, *Improving educational outcomes: Why don't remote schools measure up?* (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022), was the result of data analysis from the initial 2020 participant interviews. [8] Creating this journal article significantly shaped my thinking and the subsequent research direction and it introduces the major findings from the case study.

The link between one's postcode and probable school 'success' is well recognised. For those in remote schools, such as DSAS, it is an indicator that the further a student lives from the metropolis, the less likely they are to be academically successful. Improved educational outcomes are desirable for students in remote communities to broaden their future life choices. In 2018, proposing to move state education from good to great, DE (2019b) announced their intention to '… raise the learning outcomes of every child and student, in every preschool and school' (p. 3). Data is drawn from the case study school, introduced in the previous chapter, as the leadership team navigated DE's *good to great* aspirations. Consideration is given to whether educational

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[8] Some changes have been made to the format of the inserted published article, to be consistent with the layout of this thesis. For example, leaders were identified as numbers in the article but have been allocated their thesis aliases here. Interview quotes were formatted in line with the journal's requirements but have been reformatted to match the thesis style, with allocated numerical identifiers for ease of cross referencing. All other changes are marked by [square brackets] to support identification of deviations from the original. Two sections have been removed from the article for this chapter. The school context section was subsumed by the previous chapter's introduction to the case school. The methodology chapter of the thesis offers a deeper explanation of methods than those summarised in the article; consequently, it has been removed from this chapter. The font has been changed for the article to assist in its identification. The link to the published version of the article is available for reference in Appendix 4.

success for students in remote schools can be readily evidenced through standardised testing alone, and what this means for teachers teaching in a remote site.

***Improving educational outcomes: Why don't remote schools measure up?* Article begins here:**

6.1.   INTRODUCTION

Andreas Schleicher pointed out the widening equity gap across the Western world in a 2019 address to Australian school leaders and teachers about PISA testing—the OECD's measures of a 15-year-olds' ability to use reading, mathematics, and science skills to meet real-world challenges. In doing so, he cited the close correlation between PISA results and a child's postcode, acknowledging not just economic disparities but the socio-educational disadvantage between metropolitan, regional, remote, and very remote schools. For Australia, this discrepancy means that the further a school is from a city's central business district, the wider the educational gaps (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2017; Guenther & Bat, 2013; Halsey, 2018a; OECD, 2017, 2018; Smith et al., 2019). Roberts and Green (2013) lament the persistence of rural and remote students' generally lower educational outcomes in comparison to those of metropolitan students. They assert that 'rural and urban schools have been simultaneously compared and considered as if they were essentially the same throughout the educational history of the nation' (p. 765). As a basis for this discussion, a very remote desert bound Australian school is referenced, to show how this propensity across Western schooling systems to treat schools as *essentially the same* presents many challenges and how the growing reliance on one-size-fits-all solutions is inappropriate (Lingard, 2020; Lingard et al., 2017; Redden & Low, 2012). Here, we call the exampled school [Desert Sunshine] Area School (DSAS).

Understanding the unique socio-historical becoming and geographies of remote contexts is integral to understanding sustained improvement, or lack of it, in remote schools (Guenther, 2013; Guenther & Ober, 2017; Halsey, 2018a). After sketching the national policy landscape, which in our view contributes to the problem for remote schools; a 'picture' of the DSAS context is provided. Following these, excerpts of data are cited to

illustrate the practical and contextual incongruities of balancing the competing forces of local need and policy before conclusions are offered.

6.2. INCREASING STANDARDISATION

Across the Western world, and unmistakably prominent in Australia, is a national focus on data and measurement that underpins increasingly standardised approaches to education (Biesta, 2015b; Connell, 2013; Holloway & Brass, 2018). Following international trends, Australian comprehensive schools are under pressure to conform to national standards presented as government priorities. Arguably, the move toward greater standardisation has its genesis in the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Verger et al., 2019). After decades of state-managed literacy and numeracy testing, in 2008 the federally backed NAPLAN was introduced to track student achievement against national minimum standards. NAPLAN is in fact, a national primary data-source, and today it is used to compare students' performance between schools (ACARA, 2017b). In comparing [First Nations] and remote students' performance against national outcomes, scant attention is paid to the context from which the data is obtained (Gable & Lingard, 2016; Heffernan, 2018b; Keddie, 2013; Macqueen et al., 2019; Vass, 2012). NAPLAN data acts to reinforce the education gap, and 'persistent "othering" of remote students and their families in terms of disadvantage, deficit and failure' (Guenther, 2013, p. 157). Since the introduction of *MySchool* (ACARA, 2017a), a government website that displays NAPLAN data from every Australian school, media reporting has ubiquitously made comparisons between schools (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Redden & Low, 2012), despite initial government assurances that NAPLAN would not lead to data being used to compare school 'quality' (ACARA, 2017b; Reid, 2010; Rose et al., 2020). The unproblematised use of NAPLAN outcomes has seen growth in deficit educational discourses about poorer and/or geographically remote schools (Stacey, 2019; Vass, 2012).

In parallel to data driven pictures of deficit painted for remote schools, a discourse of failure around teachers' practice is now also evident (Thompson, 2014; Vass, 2012).

Despite the growing body of scholarship that identifies teachers' work as more than developing testable skills (Biesta, 2009, 2015b; Cranston et al., 2010; MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020), there remains a persistent push towards narrow measures of teachers' work at all levels (national/state/local) of government (Connell, 2013; Cormack & Comber, 2013; Gable & Lingard, 2016). Further, this narrowing is seemingly aligned with panacea solutions around students' performance, i.e. if central governance specifies what teachers are to teach, then test scores will improve (Cormack & Comber, 2013; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Lingard, 2013). In 2011, the professional teacher standards (AITSL, 2015) were implemented with a clear premise to standardise teachers' practice (Adoniou & Gallagher, 2017). The rationale for the standardisation of teachers' practice, like the rationale for a national assessment in literacy and numeracy for students, largely assumes context is irrelevant to teaching practice (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Gable & Lingard, 2016; Keddie, 2013; Macqueen et al., 2019). This, we will show, has serious and ubiquitous implications for teachers and teaching in schools disadvantaged by their postcode.

The next sweeping federal initiative came between 2010 and 2014 in the shape of a national curriculum (ACARA, 2016a). As a result, all Australian schools were expected to embrace the move to deliver the standard Australian Curriculum managed by the 'independent' ACARA. The curriculum is designed to take students from the first to tenth year of schooling and relieves states and territories of the burden of curriculum development (ACARA, 2016a). Subsequently, states and territories took their own approach to implementing and delivering the national curriculum. Some expected teachers to use the Australian Curriculum as presented, some did extensive work to marry the new national and existing local curricula. A number of states, including that which oversees DSAS, are taking the option of developing specified units of work, aligned to the national curriculum, for teachers to use. Most often these units of work are being created in metropolitan centres for use across states and territories. These varied state responses to the national curriculum have brought tensions to bear on leaders' and teachers' work, as they balance increasingly standardised approaches and the need for contextually relevant learning (Angelo, 2013; Macqueen et al., 2019).

These tensions are playing out globally; school leaders are increasingly compelled by district and state managers to encourage teachers to comply with narrowly constructed improvement expectations (Biesta, 2009, 2015b; Connell, 2013; D. Hall & McGinity, 2015; Joseph, 2019). In many Australian states, school improvement policies and standardised planning formats are used to ensure compliance with expected improvement priorities. While the expectations vary, state to state there is increasing pressure to comply with a narrow set of curricula and practices. For the state where DSAS is situated, DE's (2019b) improvement agenda was designed by external consultants and DE staff in metropolitan-central offices, to improve test scores. Despite widely acknowledged effects of policy on practice, narrow definitions of educational success were operationalised to shape how improvement work can be talked about and undertaken in schools (Holloway & Brass, 2018; Joseph, 2019; Lewis & Hogan, 2019).

This narrowing of the curricula has enabled prime conditions for commercial practice providers to thrive into multi-million—and in the case of educational colonisers such as Pearson Education Company, multi-billion—dollar enterprises (Hogan et al., 2016; Lewis & Hogan, 2019; Shahjahan, 2011; Tierney, 2018); and growing reliance on commercially produced programs. These powerful commercial enterprises position themselves as 'educational saviours' to national and state governments, who are happy to see them promoted to school communities as the answer to improving academic outcomes; therefore, NAPLAN scores (Hogan et al., 2016; Lingard et al., 2015; Loughland & Thompson, 2016). It should be noted that not only are these commercial programs designed and conceptualised in the metropolis, most often they are produced outside of Australia (Lewis & Hogan, 2019).

In the state in which DSAS is situated, a mandate for school leaders today is directed to supporting the state governments' vision for a world class education and delivering at least one year of growth annually for every student (DE, 2020c). '[P]olicymakers and policy making tends to assume "best possible" environments' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 6) for implementation and make the same demand for outcomes from all schools. This means

treating remote schools as essentially the same as their metropolitan counterparts. For DSAS this ignores its ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) status, which is significantly low compared to other schools in the state. ICSEA is a numeric scale representing a level of educational advantage, accounting for student, community, and school factors. On *MySchool*, an ICSEA score of 1000 is average (ACARA, 2017). 'Top' performing schools in high socioeconomic areas of the metropolis have an ICSEA score up to 1190. DSAS has an ICSEA score of 780, very few schools sit below this.

* Original published School context and Methodology sections removed here.

6.3.   TALES FROM THE FIELD

To present a picture of the happenings at DSAS, necessarily requires presenting the perspectives of the school leader and those who agreed to participate in the study and the 'tales' they recounted. No doubt other insights could be brought to bear, and we acknowledge this article represents a microcosm of life at DSAS. Our aim is to do justice to this representation. Further, while it is well documented that remotely living [First Nations] students are particularly impacted by 'gaps' in educational outcomes (Gonski et al., 2018; Guenther, 2013; National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2020) we understand this phenomenon belongs in varying degrees to all remotely living children. [Collette, a primary leader] said at interview, 'You've got kind of an isolated community and they don't see many of the opportunities that kids (sic)[9] in [capital city] see'.

It is important to begin with an acknowledgement of the hard work and dedication of DSAS staff. They supported student achievement and wellbeing every day. Most, as early career teachers, were honing their craft while also learning the context and coming to terms with complex student needs. A significant distance away from their family and support networks, and challenged by the context, many teachers struggled with the demands at DSAS. Community poverty, family violence and trauma impacted the lives of

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[9] 'Kids' was a term widely used by participants. It has been quoted as it stands, in the original, throughout the thesis without a (sic) designation.

many students, and there were frequent incidents of challenging, and disruptive student behaviour. Student disengagement and distrust of authority were prevalent in every classroom. Even more experienced teachers found maintaining quality relationships, differentiation and reflexivity in their practice demanding. Rates of staff turnover were high. [Collette] described the change-over of primary staff from her first to second year in leadership: '… like we had one [group of] staff for one year, and the next year all but one of the primary staff were new to the school'.

Having canvassed the context, against the presented backdrop of remoteness, poverty and staff turnover, the impact of implementing (i) *standardised improvements* and the associated (ii) *measures of success* will be explored. While these two policy directions were interwoven and overlapped, the next section will address issues generated by the focus on NAPLAN as the measure of student progress, followed by a discussion of the, so called, 'new' improvement agenda.

6.4.   MEASURING 'SUCCESS'

Given the focus on NAPLAN as a 'reliable' measure of success, testing processes came under scrutiny. The DSAS leadership team, comprising the principal, deputy principal, two team leaders, a counsellor, and an Aboriginal education coordinator, were directed by policy leaders, central city and regional managers to work with the staff to improve NAPLAN outcomes. Concomitantly, there was a directive to increase rates of participation in NAPLAN testing. Field notes, recorded at the time, comment on the apparent 'blindness to context' underpinning such directives, an either overlooked or misunderstood factor as the staff struggled to meet requirements. In reality, a range of socio-cultural factors made NAPLAN participation unpredictable, and this was often beyond the school's control. As previously described, cultural activity in the community drew large groups away from the community and school for various reasons. Other factors were also beyond the school's influence, such as the distances required to travel to major centres for medical treatment that meant some families were regularly away, for weeks at a time.

The demands to 'improve' NAPLAN outcomes and 'increase participation' were enacted in a range of ways. A few teachers had prioritised the expectation that NAPLAN scores improve, by subtly working to 'curate' attendance and participation.

> *Teachers expressed the strategies they employed in response to the pressure they experienced to improve NAPLAN outcomes. Whilst understanding that their behaviour is not officially condoned, and I suspect not the way they would prefer to work – they are working to include and exclude students based on perceived ability to successfully undertake NAPLAN. (Field notes, first NAPLAN as the school leader)*

For example, several teachers regularly announced that 'next week is NAPLAN' to provide those students who might struggle with the tests an opportunity to absent themselves ([Collette] interview data). Historically, some students with poorer academic capacities acted out as testing drew near and avoided attending. These behaviours reflect what Wiliam (2005) describes as 'challenge avoidance', resulting from students' low skill and confidence levels, and the preference to be 'thought lazy [rather] than stupid' (p. 34). Claxton (2013) describes how student stress, based on a perception gap between task demand and personal resources, can result in a range of student behaviours seen as inappropriate. In response, teachers described quiet, off-the-record conversations with parents about the challenges their child faced with upcoming test participation (Field notes). The outcome of attendance discouragement was lower attendance on NAPLAN days, compounding the usual non-attendance factors, and producing unreliable school-wide literacy and numeracy data.

In response to state government directives that NAPLAN attendance and participation be improved, DSAS staff were tasked with having as many students as possible sit the test. At interview, [Mark] described the pressure experienced whilst acting in the role of principal [in 2019]:

> *Mark   6.4-01   The work around NAPLAN was underway / and the pressure*
> *2020   to have everyone in [school] to do the NAPLAN was*
> *   enormous // whereas in the past / it was / you need your kids*
> *   who are here regularly to be in NAPLAN / that shifted to you*
> *   need every single one of your students to be doing NAPLAN*
> *   / and you as a principal need to be operating NAPLAN //*
> *   managing it / running it / analysing it //*

An experienced teacher later reported to the researcher that, 'five of mine just sat and looked at the pictures. I had to help them write their name. That's the only marks that will be on their test paper' (Field notes). The discussions that ensued about priority alterations and the school context highlighted teachers' feelings of being 'betwixt-and-between' (Turner, 1987), caught between their personal understanding of the *local* and broader departmental expectations.

One data snapshot illustrates the impact of increased NAPLAN attendance. In the year all staff went to lengths to improve attendance 42% of the Year 5 DSAS students who sat the test, achieved above average progress based on their Year 3 results from two years earlier. The previous year identifies 70% of the Year 5 DSAS students who sat the test, achieved above average progress based on their Year 3 results two years before that. Why the difference? In the year staff co-opted as many students as possible, higher numbers of students sat NAPLAN. This meant that those previously likely to be 'curated out' of the test predictably produced poorer outcomes, especially as some were non-readers through both testing periods. This meant that the percentage who had improved on overall average rates was disproportionately lower. We want to be clear; we are not arguing for or against the method of garnering attendance around NAPLAN. What we want to draw your attention to is how data can be skewed when historical practices and the context itself is silenced as particular policies encourage different practices. It is clear when students attend with some regularity, DSAS makes inroads on literacy deficits for individual students.

Teachers at DSAS were invested in improving outcomes for all students and maintained a prior improvement strategy known as: *putting a face on the data*. This phrase was used to describe a student's progress as a *being*, in context and with needs, over time. Staff's continued use of the term seemed to be speaking back to the tendency for the department to talk about students in terms of data/numbers. The following recount describes an individual success story tracked in this way, and the impact on his *identity*:

'Barry'(alias), a ten-year-old, Aboriginal student, learned to read after 18 months of daily one-to-one reading coaching and wellbeing support. As his confidence grew, success grew success and results followed. From non-reader to proudly parading around the school with novels under both arms, Barry was celebrated by the school community and regularly called to the office for the congratulations of visitors from state office and the education director. (Field notes)

Learning to read was undoubtedly a life changing skill for Barry. Teachers explored his case for insights into what could be replicated. This exploration made it clear that each child at DSAS must be seen as more than the sum of their data. Key to Barry's success, alongside targeted instruction, positive teacher relationships, [First Nations] support officers and attention to relevance in the learning, were narratives of strength connected to aspiration and future choices (Comber, 2016; Stacey, 2019; Vass, 2012). Individual success stories, such as Barry's, are not captured in whole school or NAPLAN data. NAPLAN cannot capture the positive life changes for Barry; the hope and potential role modelling created for other students as they watched his joy in having success. Given the focus on NAPLAN results, as the only reliable measure of success, staff felt individuals' achievements and intangible contributions were silenced behind averages and targets [Interview with Mark, deputy principal].

The value placed on NAPLAN to measure improvement was illuminated at a regional meeting for five remote school leaders with the regional director. The meeting focus was literacy improvement, and the five school leaders were asked to share their in-school strategies. Three of the five leaders shared a detailed, question-by-question analysis of their students' NAPLAN responses as their improvement strategy. This was met with enthusiasm from the director (Field notes). The researcher/principal's questions about the benefit this kind of analysis might offer schools and literacy planning more generally were discounted. Subsequently, at a school level meeting with the DSAS leadership team, the process of analysing students' responses question-by-question was tabled for their consideration. As the principal, I tabled them reluctantly because students are tested biennially, and results come back many months after the assessment and it would be reasonable to think some more literacy learning had already occurred. Discussion about

whether a similar analysis of DSAS's previous years responses should be undertaken prior to the director's upcoming visit, reflect aspirant senior leaders' concerns about compliance with a favoured direction, even though they failed to see merit in it (Field notes).

The tension between those who practice teaching day-to-day and what is seen to be valued by those who govern, could be described by Gonzales and Firestone's (2013) 'educational tug-of-war'. This is evident in team members' expressions of understanding the low value of such analysis and their 'want' to be seen in a favourable light by the director. The leadership team also expressed concern about the impact of receiving lower results on students' wellbeing ([Julian, Mark, Malcolm, and Collette] interviews).

[Mark] worked with the DSAS Aboriginal support team and identified that 106, of the 135 [First Nations] students regularly attending school, were actively experiencing grief and loss, trauma, and/or health challenges. As a result, DSAS staff committed to using *trauma aware* approaches in the school. Young people's wellbeing needs are well documented with the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2018) identifying six areas impacting wellbeing including learning, participation and a positive sense of identity and culture.

At interview, [Malcolm, the wellbeing leader] said,

Malcolm 2020	6.4-02	*// we should be trying to ensure that if NAPLAN results are our measure / if we're going to see better results / then we need more kids having a go at it // For more kids to have a go / then we need more to be more resilient / or be able to have that determination to push through when things are difficult //*

Community consultation, prior to the 'new' improvement processes [Section 6.5], also supported the decision to focus on wellbeing and trauma aware approaches. The needs of the student body and new staff underpinned the decision. On the question of continuing the focus on wellbeing when the 'new' improvement processes were launched, [Malcolm] said, '… it has this really direct correlation to the data collection. We can't

collect data if we don't have kids who are willing to give us the data'. Another consequence for student-teacher relationships was articulated:

Malcolm 2020	6.4-03	*As the system moves more and more toward improving NAPLAN results / it's potentially at the expense of relationships / because we've got teachers telling their students that they have to do this thing / that students know is really / really difficult //*
	6.4-04	*There's so many with low literacy skills / and NAPLAN is well outside of their comfort zone / but they're told that have to do it because it's important to the department // Students start to go / 'What? Do you care more about the department or do you care more about me?' // That's something that's worrying me / the teacher-student relationship is really important //*
	6.4-05	*// as we're forced to do things with our students / that we're not comfortable with / and that the students aren't comfortable with and aren't ready for it / that's where a breakdown in relationship really occurs //*

Here, when faced with negotiating compulsory NAPLAN participation, we see potential fracturing of staff-student relationships. Put simply, NAPLAN testing is not a straightforward measure of student success in remote contexts. Influential, and not well accounted for, are implicit and/or explicit local narratives about testing and attendance, disengagement or inability to participate in testing, as well as the broader effects of moving attention from individuals to national data and the ensuing impact on wellbeing. We go on to explore the concurrent changes to improvement planning and expectations of improved outcomes.

6.5.   'NEW' IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES

In this section, the happenings described are connected to the 'new' improvement agenda. This gathered momentum in 2018, with significant fanfare, at Leaders' Day, the annual gathering of principals from across the state. After the event, I reflected:

I sat with hundreds of colleagues, all government school principals from across [the state], in a huge auditorium, to hear the Minister for Education and Chief Executive's annual addresses. We were regaled with the positive outcomes of some of the new government's initiatives, a litany of issues still to be addressed and a promise of improvement to come. Both spoke of a new approach to improvement, as if the audience, many with decades of leadership experience, had never considered that improvement might be a good idea and [that we] weren't constantly working to improve schools' processes, student experience, and learning outcomes. (Field notes)

Predictably, DE (2019c, 2019d, 2019b) narratives included falling literacy and numeracy levels, as evidenced by national testing regimes and international assessment rankings, appalling data for [First Nations] student outcomes and the need to 'fix' these problems and become a world class system.

DSAS's historic processes for addressing academic gaps included needs analysis, tracking of progress, and identification of effective strategies. Teachers did a lot of work to hold students in a positive light for the purpose of maintaining learner identity, even when academic gaps were considerable.

Ninety percent of the primary student cohort were reading below or well-below age expectations, or not at all (DSAS assessment data). The secondary years data looked similar. Where teachers might reasonably expect their lessons to be planned on an assumption that students could read-to-learn, few students had the skills to read effectively, and most were learning-to-read. An illustration of the complexity teachers faced can be seen in an example of a Year 8 teacher's description of her class, 'I have three students on track for university. Five others are doing okay. The other sixteen cannot read what I write on the board or hand out to them. I just don't know where to start' (Field notes). She was not alone.

Not only were teachers unsure about how to teach in classrooms with such variation in learning needs, many used undemanding pedagogies to circumvent 'challenge avoidance' (Wiliam, 2005). Comber (2016) describes these low-demand practices as 'fickle literacies':

… doing 'word finds' in Year 8 History on a Monday morning, copying out words with an array of coloured markers during the literacy block in Year 1, cutting and pasting instructions for how to make popcorn and drawing a picture on the popcorn bag in Year 5. These kinds of tasks buy student compliance and deliver nothing. (p. 205)

There was expressed a widespread understanding that students hid complex needs behind defensive/face-saving responses to challenging tasks and high expectations ([Malcolm] interview). In an interview, [Malcolm] explained why teachers used 'low level' tasks and were reluctant to increase intellectual demand. He said,

Malcolm 2020	6.5-01	*Quite regularly / students chose exit strategies / like flipping a table or shouting abusively / to avoid a task that they predicted they won't be able to complete // This is probably fear of being seen as incompetent // That seems to drive much of the difficult classroom behaviour //*

Widespread teacher reluctance to risk challenging learning tasks at DSAS looked like a reliance on worksheets and tasks that ancillary staff could support students to complete, and the viewing of YouTube clips on the current learning topic (Field notes). DE (2020c) developed standardised 'High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS)'. It was clear that these required practices would test DSAS teachers' responses to contextual complexity and ensuing student behaviours.

Previously, with its genesis in Australian Curriculum implementation, a central curriculum team and a regional officer supported schools to implement localised curricula. With flexibility to tailor support, consider schools' contexts and address local improvement planning priorities these officers supported DSAS's strengths-based and inclusive initiatives, resulting in pedagogical improvements. Gains were evidenced by increasing enrolment and attendance data (Document collection). With the new improvement processes came a replacement central team, appointed to support the new mandates and, along with regional staff, they began regular visits to ensure implementation of prescribed practices (DE, 2019c, 2019d).

In addition to the new central 'support' staff, compliance expectations were also enforced by an increased number of regional directors. Their roles pivoted to tightly focus on each

school's improvement planning (DE, 2020c). Templates were provided to ensure compliant improvement plans were written. Astutely, [Malcolm] recognised the tensions between developing a plan and acting to improve outcomes:

> Malcolm 2020   6.5-02   *We're one of the most disadvantaged schools in the state // Let's do it / no worries / we were on board / … World class is not going to come through writing improvement plans that's for sure / through setting high literacy targets? / Nup / not that either //*

A central review team assessed and provided feedback on schools' plans and outcomes. The DSAS context was poorly understood by reviewers not familiar with the school and community. Following is an excerpt from [Mark's] interview, talking about the mismatch in understanding between the school staff and the reviewing team:

> Mark 2020   6.5-03   *… as a leadership team / we presented a lot of data that spoke to what we knew about our kids // addressing that / and what additional support we identified that we needed to close the gaps // … I think there's not a system in the department that allows for our context / our complexity // they just think we're making excuses // Our situation needs to be taken into account // In the current set up with the department it's all outcome based // it's around getting the literacy and numeracy outcomes // but it's not about supporting our kids to access the learning //*

What [Mark] meant by this is, that there were well documented contextual and wellbeing issues that impacted on students' ability to attend school and access learning experiences. Staff spoke about 'a kind of outsider blindness' to cultural and wellbeing needs of students ([Malcolm] interview). Schools were explicitly told that the new improvement processes left no space for wellbeing goals. In fact, there was active discouragement of attention on wellbeing from the director and regional and state office staff ([Malcolm and Mark] interviews). One [department] literacy coach declared, 'Wellbeing isn't in the guidebooks' (Field notes), referring to the improvement guides provided for all schools to use.

Central office and regional support staff regularly visited DSAS to provide professional learning and support to classroom teachers' implementation of the new improvement

practices (DE, 2019c, 2019d). Teachers were encouraged to identify what should be taught, based on the previous year's NAPLAN outcomes. In response to the heightened expectations and external pressure, extensive revision sessions were held in the weeks and months prior to NAPLAN week. This occurred despite teachers and leaders tacit understandings that these 'improvements' were not advantaging every student (Angelo, 2013; Macqueen et al., 2019; Mayes & Howell, 2018; Wiliam, 2005).

Prioritising test practice over other learning opportunities was an observable and talked about phenomena between DSAS staff, as captured in field notes recorded after observing this interaction:

> *Teacher A:*   *We have asked Uncle Don [alias for a [First Nations Elder]] to talk with the middle primary classes about Aboriginal land care strategies for our environmental theme. I'm excited about the chance to learn more with the kids.*
>
> *Teacher B:*   *When's this happening?*
>
> *Teacher A:*   *Uncle Don is in town next week. He only has a little time, so we'll have to plan around his availability.*
>
> *Teacher B:*   *What? That's NAPLAN practice time. We can't do that!*

Abandoning an opportunity to involve a [First Nations] Elder in the classroom was one of many compromises made prior to the annual NAPLAN week. This brief staffroom exchange demonstrates what staff forego, in the process of negotiating curriculum choices in the hope of lifting NAPLAN results. [Collette] reflected that many teachers recognised that a lot of effort was going into revision of concepts well beyond most students' capacity. Teachers acquiesced to the pressure from outside officers to improve test results, abandoning previously successful practices and pedagogies, 'to "drill" the test content they expected students to face' ([Collette], early years leader] interview).

To embed the new improvement processes, state office recommended teachers at DSAS engage in professional learning, peer observations, strategy coaching, data analysis and collaborative feedback sessions – and they complied. While all teachers and leaders participated, many teachers found the improvement expectations overwhelming and

struggled to make connections between their students' needs and the outcomes expected, especially those utilising 'undemanding pedagogies' to cope with challenging behaviour ([Malcolm, wellbeing leader] interview).

The external consultants spoke of 'failure' and labelled the teachers' struggles in the classroom as 'resistance'. Teachers, however, spoke of difficulties with classroom management. They said that as classroom learning moved to whole class explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy skills, student engagement declined, and behaviour issues increased (Field notes). Some leaders, and teachers, were concerned that prescribed practices were insufficient; for example, saying:

Julian 2020	6.5-04	*We've got our local [First Nations] cultures / an oral culture / storytelling culture and strong commitment here // they're having decisions made about them [students] / in ways that aren't inclusive // how to be inclusive isn't in the guidebook //*

Further, some teachers expressed frustration at being 'unable to innovate' or implement pedagogies outside of those designated. However, teachers and leaders also spoke about their fears for their careers if they challenged the prevailing edicts in any assertive way (Field notes). Underpinning the deficit discourses of 'failure' and 'resistance' expressed by external consultants and the new implementation team can be attributed imposing changes in practice based on narrow measures of teachers, as well as students; without listening to the remote context in which the changes are prescribed.

6.6.   ARTICLE CONCLUSION

While these tensions are replicated in other localities, this paper offers a perspective from a principal/researcher, reflecting as faithfully as possible the concerns of leaders and teachers in one remote Australian school, as they navigate improvement expectations that are measured against standardised metrics. The authors have outlined the impact of single measures of 'success' and metrocentric improvement initiatives. The web of imposed expectations created by national assessments, comparisons with other schools, teaching standards, mandated curriculum and predetermined improvement priorities has

been problematised. A range of 'tales from the (very remote) field' were recounted to demonstrate that the issues facing remote schools are not straight forward and cannot be addressed with universal solutions. We suggest, ways forward include attention to context and student wellbeing, broader and individualised measures of success and more recognition that young learners are not the sum of their data. They, and their teachers, are individuals with diverse lived socio-cultural experiences that require more community-connected and inclusive experiences than current standardised approaches offer.

End of journal article.

6.7.   CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The inserted journal article, based on the 2020 leader interviews undertaken for this study, introduced findings related to the impact of neoliberal policies around 'improvement' and 'success' on students living in remote locations. Addressing the crisis of falling standards, new approaches to improvement, measuring success, and standardising approaches, reflected the metro-centric nature of DE's improvement aspirations and the discounting of the relevance of context and socio-cultural factors in enacting improvement policy.

Expectations of compliance with mandated improvement plan formats and narrowing of improvement targets supported narrow definitions of educational success. DSAS leaders described the expectation that they focus on NAPLAN results, despite perceived difficulties with data reliability related to who participates, enrolments, attendance, and behaviours such as challenge avoidance. In parallel with this was the expectation that staff focus on standardised test results instead of individual student progress, ignoring the unique skills and learning support needs of each student.

The article also introduced matters that subsequent interviews reinforced, including imperatives to improve data, a focus on whole class explicit teaching, and sidelining of innovation, wellbeing needs, and cultural content. These topics are further developed in Chapters Seven to Nine – the remaining data chapters in the *context of practice*.

While writing this article, it became clear that the determining formations of policy were of pronounced significance. This prompted expansion of the original ethnographic study into a policy trajectory. Simultaneously, my study's focus tightened around DSAS's leaders' responses to the requirement they enact DE's improvement imperatives.

The following three chapters drill down into the leaders' responses to the mandates accompanying DE's improvement expectations. The Strategic Plan propelling DE's (2019b) new improvement aspirations '[l]aunched a new approach to school improvement with data, planning and tailored literacy and numeracy resources' (p. 11). The subsequent chapters are based on the original and additional data collected to elucidate the main study themes: the improvement imperative (Chapter Seven), how improvement was measured (Chapter Eight), and how teaching and learning was standardised to facilitate improvement (Chapter Nine).

7. CONTEXT OF PRACTICE - IMPROVEMENT AND ENACTING WORLD CLASS ASPIRATIONS

This is the third of five chapters situated in the policy trajectory research's *context of practice*. Chapter Five elaborated the context for the remote school case study central to understanding enactment of the education department's (DE) strategic intentions. Chapter Six provided a big picture overview of changes related to aspirations for 'improvement' and 'success'. It introduced departmental strategies, including mandated improvement planning processes, measuring progress with high stakes assessments, and standardising teaching practices and content to facilitate improvement.

This chapter provides a deeper exploration of the case study data related to enactment of DE's improvement planning expectations. Participant voices, researcher field notes, and school documents and data direct discussion of this enactment. The changes rendered are located against an introduction to the processes and systems the department and its staff employed prior to DE's new improvement initiatives. Participants' first impressions are canvassed to establish their initial hopes and thoughts. The chapter then builds on the previous introduction of expected compliance with mandated improvement plan formats and narrow improvement targets. How DE's 'focussed and deep' mantra (cited in Cornelius & Cornelius-Bell, 2022) developed into resolute attention on improvement plans and resulting impacts are explored.

Seven interviewed DSAS school leaders and two systems leaders communicated their experiences of enacting DE's Strategic Plan. As for all three of the remaining *context of practice* chapters, data related to DSAS/DE practices and processes before DE's improvement directions are introduced to provide context. In summary, this chapter outlines participants' initial reactions to the 'new' improvement processes, and the directions observed as the strategic plan was enacted. The shifts interrogated include a focus on improvement planning, teacher participation, narrowing of goals, external accountability, and concerns about staff's future aspirations.

7.1.   PRIOR TO DE'S ASPIRATIONS FOR WORLD CLASS IMPROVEMENT

This section paints a picture of school improvement practices prior to enacting DE's new directions. Insights, from a departmental and case school perspective, are presented in two sections. Section 7.1.1 traces the department's improvement systems through the lens of Kelly, a DE Director, who was reporting to and advising corporate and political decision makers on matters

of school improvement. Kelly established the intentions of those engaged in leading improvement processes, leading into the post-September 2018 era. She provided insights into structural and institutional priorities and enactment processes and the degree of agency available to her team, and DE staff more broadly. In Section 7.1.2 case study school leaders provide insights into their experiences with DE's improvement processes before DE's Strategic Plan was launched. This section also offers perceptions of structural and agentive factors already in place at school level.

7.1.1. DE's improvement history

Here, the genesis of school reviews, the development of DE's prior improvement cycle, and improvement priorities are recounted. This background supports the discussion about how the focus, function, and interpretation of improvement activity changed.

In explaining how external reviews were conceived, enacted, and enhanced, Kelly began by explaining how they operated from 2001 until 2012:

Kelly 2022	7.1-01	*We had a lot of political interest in external reviews // they [political and corporate education leaders] backed off from some ideas / like that external review for all schools was a good thing / they didn't think it was financially affordable //*
	7.1-02	*And so / they became reviews by exception // an exception was when the shit hits the fan who are you going to call? // and we would go in and do a review // / so / when there was blood / we went in / it was always at a political behest that we were sent in //*

Decision makers' financial concerns inhibited the initial request for all schools to be externally reviewed. Consequently, the first external reviews were linked to schools in crisis only, 'when there was blood'. By this, Kelly meant that when there might be potential political fallout schools would be reviewed. She then spoke about how support for schools in crisis came about:

| Kelly 2022 | 7.1-03 | *The first couple of schools we reviewed / I felt we'd walked in with / told you / you're rubbish // and then we'd walked away / knowing that they didn't have the internal capacity to improve // and I just thought it was unethical // … so I felt much better when I could stand up and say // yes / we're here to review your school / … and then we'll be talking and planning with you / … to help get you back on track //* |

Kelly held the view that external reviews must focus on how to best assist schools in crisis. She acknowledged that such schools were not well-placed to adopt, act on, or benefit from review findings. Kelly's reference to talking and planning 'with you' demonstrate a commitment to enact post review support in collaboration with school staff. Elsewhere Kelly asserted that her team had

agency, within financial constraints, to work alongside sites and offer support for up to 18 months after a review (Interview data).

The national policy context shifted with the election of the federal Rudd government in 2007. It heralded 'an education revolution', and elevated federal/state cooperation, federal funding tied to state initiatives, equity at the heart of education reform, the demand for accurate and transparent information about student outcomes, and increased accountability (Reid, 2009). The federal/state education partnerships, or National Schools Reform Agreements (NSRA), tie significant federal funding to agreed state initiatives (Council of Australian Governments, 2018). The then federal Labor Government's demand for increased accountability and tied funding stepped up DE's commitment to external reviews. Three yearly reviews for all schools were instigated from 2013, to meet NSRA commitments (Interview data: Kelly).

In addition to school reviews, Kelly's team was responsible for the development of an improvement framework used ubiquitously across DE, in most central office teams, all district offices, and all schools until 2018. As a department policy, it was a determining formation for system-wide improvement work, with underpinning principles of equity and a focus on every student's learning progress (Interview data). Kelly spoke about the importance of improvement occurring within a framework:

| Kelly 2022 | 7.1-04 | *… you need a framework for improvement / and that framework gives you the guiding values or guiding principles / and it gives you a cycle for improvement / So schools self-reviewed / set goals / did the strategic planning to meet those goals / monitored the implementation and collected the data to review against that / and every now and again / we had this external loop / external review / to help give credence to your perception / So [the cycle] was not just navel gazing //* |

The improvement cycle Kelly described here provided clear structural guidance to schools. The basis for improvement was self-review, and then schools developed a plan, collected data to monitor improvement and returned to the self-review stage. Other than the three-yearly external review loop, schools assessed their own needs, determined their priorities, developed and tracked their own plans, and monitored and reported their progress.

Kelly offered further insights:

Kelly 2022	7.1-05	*So / [DE's] released some useful resources / but to me / the other huge issue is there isn't a framework / underpinning the improvement steps // …*
	7.1-06	*We focused highly on a framework and system improvement / but now it's improvement events // which we fought so hard for improvement not to be an event driven process / but to be / that annual cycle and with self-review and reporting and recording / and all of those things put into an improvement cycle //*

While acknowledging the value of some of DE's curriculum resources, Kelly reasserted her disquiet about the problematic lack of an improvement framework. In her current private consultancy role, she observes the tendency for schools to undertake improvement *events* rather than to work within a well understood improvement cycle.

Kelly 2022	7.1-07	*So / when I'm working with younger leaders who haven't had that framework / they will be trying really hard / but they don't have … / that idea of a cycle of improvement // they'll say / we're working on step four / but if you ask people / so what are steps 1, 2, and 3? / they don't know //*

Reinforcing the notion of improvement as events, rather than as part of school-directed improvement cycle, Kelly points to the implications of insufficient clarity around the cycle of improvement. Particularly for school leaders who have not experienced the previous model, each step in DE's mandated improvement planning process becomes an independent event, unconnected to other improvement events. How this played out in a remote context will be probed later in this chapter. Improvement events, such as writing a plan (Section 7.3.1) and being externally reviewed (Section 7.3.4), are detailed.

In summary, Kelly's account established the school improvement landscape prior to the changes associated with DE's *world class* aspirations. She provided insights into the workings of the previously enacted improvement processes and what she understood to be overlooked in the new improvement drive. She identified a need for an improvement framework, and a cycle of well understood, interlinked processes. Consultation, review, responsiveness to feedback, and grounding in quality teaching and learning characterised Kelly's descriptions of DE's earlier system-wide improvement work.

7.1.2. DSAS improvement journey

Against the improvement back drop provided by Kelly, this section moves to provide on-the-ground, in practice recounts from DSAS. This section relates how the school leadership team guided the case school's improvement processes before DE's late 2018 policy shifts. DSAS improvement processes are examined: collaborative planning, improvement plans, and receiving confirmation of progress through an external review.

While inexperienced, the leadership team had all been classroom teachers at DSAS, and they unanimously supported a focus on improving teaching and learning to increase learner engagement (Field notes, 2017). The leaders willingly adopted 'problem ownership' as a principle to engage staff in planning for improved teaching and learning and to build collaborative capacity. How the staff addressed inconsistent classroom practice was an example of collaboration in action. Agreements about pedagogy, curriculum, and approaches were jointly constructed. Central DE personnel's expertise was requested, and then adapted to match teachers' growing understanding of their students' needs and the context. As momentum gathered, the intention to include staff in decisions that impacted their work and to contextualise and adapt improvement plans was front and centre. DSAS staff created their own criteria for effective practice, including formative assessment processes, discussion protocols to develop vocabulary, and pedagogic practices to facilitate differentiation and engagement. Teachers were released to learn from each other and observe others at work, looking for strengths against the criteria and suggesting a growth point (Field notes, 2017). Teams made up of teachers and support staff discussed the relevance and usefulness of initiatives, timelines, resources, and foci (Field notes, 2018).

Julian, a classroom teacher for three years, and then senior secondary leader, commented on the collaborative approach:

| Julian 2021 | 7.1-08 | *Like it wasn't the top-down approach / we were working on it being a with approach // I sort of feel / we tried more innovations / and more systematic approaches to where the help was needed // or might make a difference // it felt like we wanted to do it right / together ///* |
| | 7.1-09 | *we actually didn't try to apply a recipe that works /* |

Julian addressed some key features of the initial work in DSAS, avoiding top-down impositions where possible, enabling innovation, and providing support to students and staff as needed. His comment that 'it felt like we wanted to do it right' indicates engagement in collaborative thinking, 'with' all staff, about DSAS's purpose and developing shared ownership of the direction. Julian

acknowledged the impact of the leadership team's solution ownership principle and efforts to foster teamwork as changes were brought about.

Tamara, who led the school's early years section throughout the study period, agreed:

| Tamara 2022 | 7.1-10 | *I think that how we approached it in DSAS my first year // we had a very collaborative feel towards planning for improvement / we were all part of it //* |

The collaborative feel Tamara identified on her arrival as a graduate teacher was a conscious leadership decision, working toward shared direction, ownership, and capacity building (Field notes, 2017). Teachers were deemed professionals, and all views were canvassed.

Malcolm was a DSAS classroom teacher for three years and the senior leader with responsibility for student wellbeing for three years. He subsequently won a leadership position in a regional school. He stated:

Malcolm 2020	7.1-11	*I think we were starting to move towards a place as a school / where we were seeing what was needed to be able to create equity //*
	7.1-12	*we were a team / we had connections / we were listening to the community / we were trying to be responsive //*
	7.1-13	*we had widespread commitment to our school goal: Everybody Reads // It's not like we didn't know that reading is important / it's just that our goal was doable and it was ours / and we were getting results //*

Malcolm described the approach as staff working collaboratively towards improvement, as a team and through listening to the community. He articulated confidence that there was widespread commitment to improvement goals developed through consultative processes and enacted collaboratively through 2017 and into 2018. He also recognised the importance of reading and valued the goal that *Everybody Reads*. Julian, Tamara, and Malcolm pointed to the importance of working *with* students, staff, parents, community members, and First Nations Elders in the decision-making process.

From 2017, consultation and shared decision making were set against the department's identification of DSAS as a 'one-year return' school. All schools were externally reviewed, and the usual pattern was a three-yearly cycle (Interview data: Kelly). Schools not found to be 'on-track' were designated 'one-year return' schools. This meant they were externally reviewed annually and were expected to develop a Priority Improvement Plan (PIP) outlining systemic improvements so that there could be a focus on quality teaching. Kelly reported reviewing DSAS when it was

designated 'at risk' early in her time with the central improvement team. It was clear that the challenges facing DSAS were on DE's radar for well over a decade before the *world class* aspirations were initiated (Interview data: Kelly).

The DSAS leadership team were required to consider nineteen recommendations for change from one-year-return external review reports from 2014, 2015, and 2016 (Field notes, 2017). The team's efforts to consolidate the report recommendations and to include the first stage of staff and community consultation produced several priority action areas to establish conditions for sustained student engagement in learning (see Figure 7.1-1).

Figure 7.1-1: De-identified DSAS Priority Improvement Plan, 2017

Area School: Priority Improvement Plan 2017

SUSTAINED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING			
1. Commitment to a positive, values driven culture	**2. Using values and restorative-practices to support behaviour learning**	**3. Increase challenge in learning**	**4. Address roadblocks to regular attendance**
Objectives: • To embed our school values across all aspects of school life; to support a just, compassionate and proactive learning community. • To develop, with our learners, a reason to believe/hope, and an environment where an optimistic outlook can be fostered.	*Objectives:* • To use a proactive approach to behaviour management and maintaining a positive learning environment. • To respond to misbehaviour as a need to learn, not a cause for punishment. • To proactively develop students' social competencies and social problem solving skills.	*Objectives:* • To engage students in goal setting in their learning for higher engagement. • To ensure that all students have input into their own learning and assessment. • To 'pull' students to school with innovative learning opportunities, cross curricular projects and electives and student-led committees and projects. • To improve the level of challenge and engagement using consistent differentiated approaches across all levels of learning.	*Objectives:* • To increase attendance to 85% by the end of 2018. • To 'wrap around' support for 'at risk' and pre-(English) literate students, especially those returning to school (and yet to return). • To develop effective support for students who have had interrupted schooling.

Given that the school already had three external review reports, the school team requested that the scheduled 2017 external review be delayed until the beginning of 2018. This delay enabled the new leadership team to continue their work *with* students, staff, and community on the PIP priority areas. Processes of collaborative self-review, based on the preliminary PIP goals, and shared consideration of the data DE held about the school, built staff and community confidence and a collective sense of direction (Field notes, 2017).

Externally reviewed in 2018, DSAS was denoted 'on track' and returned to the usual three yearly cycle of review. This meant that the school moved from the prescriptive PIP goals determined by annual 'on track' external reviews, to the more flexible context-relevant School Improvement Plan (SIP) processes. Staff celebrated their return to three-yearly external reviews and receipt of a positive report. An excerpt from the *2018 Outcomes of DSAS on-track evaluation.*[10]

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[10] All external review reports, including On-Track reports, are public documents, displayed on school websites. This report is no longer on the DSAS website, so cannot be formally referenced due to inaccessibility.

> *Based on the evidence provided, [DSAS] is on-track to effectively implement the External School Review directions …. Perception data collected during the review, from students, staff and parents affirms the directions and purposeful actions being taken to improve learning at [DSAS] … The school is now better placed and on-track to improve its performance and effectiveness than it was in late 2016. A solid foundation has been strategically established. (External review report, 2018)*

The additional time before the external review enabled extensive consultation and increased familiarity with DSAS's context. After the review, the school's improvement planning focus shifted, as seen in Figure 7.1-2's goal priorities on the DSAS SIP.

Figure 7.1-2: DSAS 2018-20 School Improvement Plan
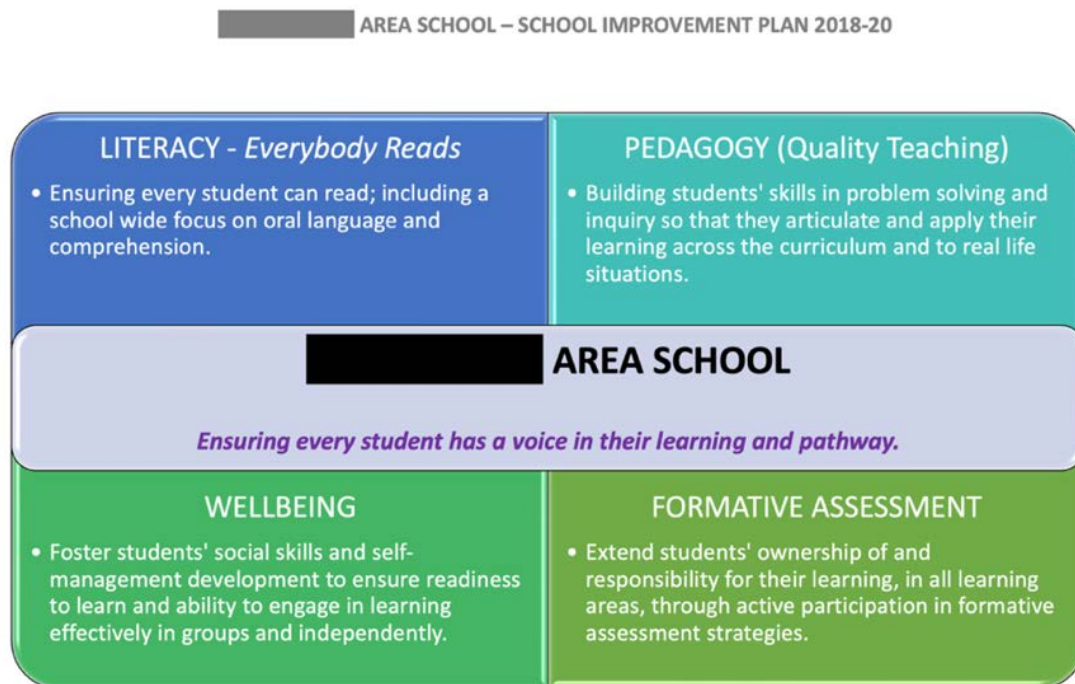
The SIP responded to DE requirements of tri-annually reviewed schools. Figure 7.1-3 supports the text explanation of the changed priorities between PIP and SIP.

Figure 7.1-3: From DSAS's Priority Improvement Plan to the School Improvement Plan

Priority Improvement Plan (PIP)	School Improvement Plan (SIP)
Sustained engagement in learning	*Every student has a voice in their learning and pathway*
• Increase challenge in learning	• Literacy / Everybody reads • Pedagogy / Quality teaching • Formative assessment
• Positive, values driven culture • Restorative practices to support student behaviour • Address attendance	• Wellbeing for learning

The PIP goal 'Increase challenge in learning' became three SIP curriculum goals: Literacy: *Everybody Reads*, Pedagogy and Formative assessment. The first, second, and fourth PIP goals were subsumed by the SIP Wellbeing goal. Other than increasing school attendance, significant progress had been made on the other PIP objectives. Given the complexity of the DSAS context, the wellbeing goal was highly valued by students, staff, and the community. The 2018 Plan embedded practices established the year before (behaviour and culture supports) and propelled a focus on wellbeing *for* learning. *Everybody Reads,* as the SIP came to be locally known, had wide-spread community and First Nations Elders' support.

The SIP reflected DE priorities. *Everybody Reads* included improving students' literacy outcomes. The Pedagogy goal in the SIP built on the 2017 teaching and learning work on pedagogic approaches and differentiation of learning that was supported by the district office team. The Formative assessment goal was informed by the professional learning DE provided to DSAS's secondary teachers in 2017 and 2018 (Field notes, 2018).

As noted, extensive consultation and broad ownership underpinned the SIP, and the leadership team committed to operating from these principles into 2019. The team worked to continue the planned SIP – against the tide of demand accompanying DE's improvement policy changes. This meant that valued goals, the result of consultation, were retained but reshaped. School data supported staff assertions that the goals were appropriate and working:

> *… In just one year, 17 of the 23 students in the junior primary reading intervention program closed the gap to 'age-appropriate' or better reading levels. Over 2 years, there was a 500% increase in the number of 5- to 13-year-olds reading competently. (School data) (cited in Cornelius & Cornelius-Bell, 2022, p. 68)*

The interviewed leaders valued collaboration between students, staff, and community in planning for improvement and maintaining a positive school culture. They spoke about innovation, trial and error, careful review based on knowledge of individual students and their development, and data analysis. The value of this level of community and staff engagement in effective plan development is well substantiated (Chiong & Pearson, 2023; Gonzales et al., 2022).

Just six months after staff debriefed their external review learnings, celebrated their final on-track review, and set up their 2018 to 2020 SIP, the goal posts shifted again as DE launched its new policy agenda in September 2018.

7.2.   PARTICIPANTS' INITIAL THOUGHTS ABOUT DE'S ASPIRATIONS

The official launch of DE's new improvement policy was in September 2018. Mandated planning templates were distributed to replace schools' existing SIPs, and DE's district and central support staff began intensive scaffolding to ensure compliance with the changed planning expectations. This section is based on Julian, Mark, and Malcolm's initial responses to the *world class* aspirations, including staff experiences, and expressed views about the likelihood of success.

In their own ways, staff expressed familiarity with and questioned the discourse around DE's Strategic Plan requirements and how this affected their actions and agency. Julian explained how he understood DE's aspirations to be world class:

Julian 2021	7.2-01	*I guess / I don't really mind that we're aiming to be world class / but like // it's a good aspiration and all / and / I mean / you see it in business all the time / you want to be the leader or whatever else // so like / being part of an organisation that wants to be the best // I'm on board with that //*
	7.2-02	*But then // it raises other questions // well / world class according to who? / according to what metrics? //*
	7.2-03	*People from Bhutan walk around with cheese neck laces / and they measure gross domestic happiness instead of GDP // like // so what are the parameters in which we're doing [world class] teaching and learning? / and world class for who?*

Julian expressed in-principal agreement with the idea of having a high-quality education system, given that *world class* aspirations are broadly accepted across the business world. He questioned what might underpin such rhetoric in education. Julian critically questioned the notion of world class education asking: Who decides what world class is? How will world class be known? What measures? Who is world class for? Julian was not alone in raising questions.

Mark began his career at DSAS. He could be considered a 'long-termer' in a remote school renowned for its high staff turnover. Mark had seven years there as teacher, leader, and deputy principal. He left DSAS when appointed as the principal to a regional school. He said:

Mark 2020	7.2-04	*When we talk about / as a state having a world class system / well how does [DSAS] become world class / from where we are beginning from? //*
	7.2-05	*What we have is a huge difference in equity / and will need a huge effort to close that gap for a complex school like [DSAS] /*

> 7.2-06   *there's so much groundwork to do / and we have started / we're already working on improvement / with our community / but much more needs to be done to be able to close the gap / just to build up to being in line with what one would expect a [study state] education system to be //*
>
> 7.2-07   *Meanwhile the department's talking about trying to strive forward and be world class / whatever that is //*

Mark's concerns pointed to the tensions between determining formations of his work, expressed as policy, and lived context. Considering the school's low starting point, among the lowest in the state, Mark indicated the 'huge' equity gaps to be addressed. That a school like DSAS, in a complex disadvantaged community, might reach world class standard was contested. Research indicates that the gap between remote and disadvantaged schools and parity is growing (Hetherington, 2018; Holden & Zhang, 2018). Julian and Mark's concerns are reflected in such research.

Statewide learning outcome expectations are published in DE's (2020a) *Standard of Educational Achievement* (SEA), under the banner, 'All children and young people progress and achieve at or above their year appropriate level' (p. 7). Mark suggested that the gap between many students' achievement and the state standards was significant (7.2-05). For a remote school such as DSAS to reach the state SEA would require a concerted, individualised, and focussed effort, well beyond what current resourcing makes possible. Whether the school's outcomes could then be deemed world class was questioned.

Similarly, Malcolm, spoke about DE's aspirations and asserted that writing improvement plans and setting high targets would do little to close the significant equity gaps nor account for substantial complexity in remote schools (Interview data). He reinforced the importance of contextual understanding:

> Malcolm 2020   7.2-08   *There's this real lack of understanding about what this community context is // the generational disadvantage that this community has been under / that it's / now expected to suddenly sit at a level with everybody else / across the world //*

Malcolm identified a 'real lack of understanding' of DSAS's community context and generational disadvantage, echoing Mark's concerns about the school's starting point, the challenges of closing achievement gaps, and the complexity staff must address to make progress.

This section canvassed the lack of clarity about what world class would mean, apprehension about the capacity of a complex site to achieve the state averages, let alone exceed them, and questions

about how context would be respected. The subsequent sections explore what participants revealed about the enactment of world class aspirations.

7.3. CHANGES AS WORLD CLASS ASPIRATIONS WERE ENACTED

DSAS's school leaders consistently demonstrated a commitment to improvement and most believed it was already underway. Corroboration is found in previous transcripts: Malcolm's comment 'we were on board' (6.5-02), Julian's remark about working on innovation together (7.1-08), Tamara's reference to a 'collaborative feel towards planning improvement' (7.1-10), and Mark's assertion that the school had started, *with* the community (7.2-06).

At the commencement of DE's new improvement mandates, schools' various complexities were simplified to a decimal between zero and one. This number was based on a complicated algorithm using centrally-held data sets, including NAPLAN. This number prescribed one of five stages of improvement to every school, with the lowest level called Building Foundations*.* The allocated stage came with imposed school improvement priorities and strategies, in the form of *Literacy and Numeracy Guidebooks*. When the leadership team discussed the allocation and new expectations, the conversation 'included a comment, "No prizes for guessing which stage we're at". Of course it was Building Foundations' (Field notes, 2018) (cited in Cornelius & Cornelius-Bell, 2022, p. 66). This was the case for many schools in very remote, remote, regional, rural, and lower socioeconomic areas (Field notes, 2018).

Realigning their improvement commitment to engage with Building Foundations expectations, the school leaders sought to understand and enact the latest expectations. Their perspectives on the changes that occurred in DSAS as the department's aspirations were enacted, are presented. Their input is organised under five headings covering: creation of plans, staff engagement, improvement goals, external reviews, and employment precarity.

7.3.1. It's all about the SIP (School Improvement Plan)

Central to DE's (2019b) improvement intentions was an expectation that every site would have an improvement plan, an 'ambitious goal for learning improvement' (p. 1), that would deliver at least one year of growth for every student every year. That 100% of schools produced an improvement plan on the required template was widely celebrated. For example, reported in the 2019 DE (2020b) Annual Report outcomes: 'There was a 100% delivery of school improvement plans to

education directors' and '100% adoption in schools of the relevant aspects of the School Improvement Model' (p. 13).

Significant pressure underpinned the '100% delivery of plans' to Education Directors (EDs). After the September 2018 launch, school leaders were expected to prepare improvement plans on the mandated template and submit them to their ED for approval within five weeks. This provided little time for staff consultation, let alone community or student participation in this important decision-making process (Field notes, 2018).

EDs provided improvement plan feedback in meetings with all schools. Referring to the first such meeting at DSAS, soon after submission of the new plan in late 2018, Malcolm said:

| Malcolm 2020 | 7.3-01 | *When the education director came / to check that our new SIP was compliant and on the department template / we had a conversation to remind him about the way we had developed the first SIP / Everybody Reads / before the new policy / we talked about the extensive consultation / we reflected that we had met DE and community needs and wishes with our Everybody Reads plan // we weren't heard //* |
| | 7.3-02 | *Wellbeing was on that one // but despite the obvious need / we had to take it off the SIP in the new world order / only literacy ambitions, and a [senior secondary] one, were allowed ///* |

Compliance visits became a regular occurrence in the team's experiences (Field notes, 2017). Malcolm's comments indicated the pressure on school leaders to conform with the mandated template and approved targets. He revealed the ED's apparent undervaluing of the school's prior work to collaboratively establish a context-relevant and department-compliant SIP. Despite the short timelines, the leadership team held onto the principle that those impacted by decisions should participate in the process. Malcolm was one leader who spoke eloquently to defend the engagement process undertaken to collaboratively develop the team's first SIP (Figure 7.1-2) and the value of linking the new SIP to previous consultation. Perhaps because of the demand from his own superiors, the ED did not approve this compromise. Malcolm also advocated for the importance of wellbeing targets in the DSAS context. This issue is detailed in Section 7.3.3. Here, the ED's dismissal of a school identified improvement priority – wellbeing – speaks to the tenor of compliance expectations that followed. This initial world class SIP meeting set the tone for future interactions with the ED and other central and district office staff.

Emily, the co-ordinator of the first years of school at DSAS, said:

| Emily 2022 | 7.3-03 | *It's been getting more and more common / and now the education director only wants to see the SIP // the SIP is driver for all changes / every school activity / nothing else is valued // nothing else is discussed /* |
| | 7.3-04 | *[The ED] only talks about the SIP when he visits us and at our leaders' meetings // It's like that's all there is /* |

Emily referred to increasing compliance demands and focus on the SIP over four years of DE's Strategic Plan enactment (2019-2022). She referenced her time at DSAS and then in her current regional school leadership role with a second ED from 2021. By 2022, Emily demonstrated concern about the narrowness of the hierarchy's focus on improvement planning, as permeating 'every school activity', such that the plan appeared to be the only valued school activity and the only discussion point between EDs and school leaders.

While I was the DSAS principal from 2017 to 2019, many encounters with the singularity of focus on improvement planning were recorded in my field notes. One example is cited. It originated from a 2019 district meeting of site leaders with the ED:

> *[ED's name] ran through a presentation that all EDs were to show their leaders, across the state. About halfway through, he explained how the department's expert international consultants, Learning First, were tracking the development of improvement plans in every site. I copied this from his PowerPoint slide: 'Learning First advice shows there has been **universal adoption** of the improvement planning cycle with **an increased consistency** of leadership practice (emphasis on slide)'. The first question that popped into my mind was: How could an international consultancy group know what all school leaders were doing? Followed by: What measure of leadership capacity can be seen on a school improvement plan? What does universal adoption mean? Isn't this just compliance? What real meaning can be made of the fact that we have all written a compliant plan? Is achieving world class improvement just about plans? Surely there is so much more. (Field notes, 2019)*

Sitting through the presentation, I was struck by the hollowness of the notion that international consultants could draw firm conclusions linking universal plan adoption to increased consistency of leadership practice, and took pause to consider what EDs, as experienced educational leaders, might be facing in their sessions with Learning First and other external experts. In my meeting notes, I also wrote a question about how this slide situated leadership (Field notes, 2019). In my view, compliance with the mandatory task of completing the improvement plan template would appear more related to management practices. The DE Strategic Plan analysis identified 24 occurrences of conflating improvement planning and improving outcomes (Section 4.3.2). Similarly, the ED's presentation upheld these messages, enhancing the insights with an assertion that leadership practice was advancing through increased consistency.

The implications of this focus for staff and for DSAS are clarified in the next two sections.

7.3.2. Engagement with the SIP

While there was increasing pressure to produce a SIP that matched DE expectations, there were mismatches in how school leaders and staff perceived the importance of and engaged with the new SIP. This section presents Emily and Jasmin's views of staff SIP engagement and enactment.

Speaking about her experiences, in her post-DSAS school, Emily raised concerns:

Emily 2022	7.3-05	*However // depending on who you talk to / you'll find different stories / school leaders believe that everyone is across the SIP priorities / that everyone understands what is required and how we are getting there /*
	7.3-06	*and leaders say that teachers are all a part of it / that they review it regularly // that it's their work / that they are happy about it //*
	7.3-07	*but teachers definitely tell a different story / they are not involved in the plan development //instead / what they see happening is things that limit their teaching /*

Emily pointed to the different perspectives of teachers and school leaders in relation to ownership and connectedness with the SIP. One rendering of this gap might be that school leaders' more intensive and regular interactions with DE hierarchy, influenced their perspective because their line managers and department leaders placed high value on the SIP. This sense of high priority and obligation may not have been transferred to teachers. Another reading of the disparity may be that the lack of plan development time meant that school leaders did not involve teachers to a degree that promoted their sense of ownership of the plan. The external pressure on school principals will be developed in Section 7.3.5.

Jasmin led literacy improvement in DSAS for six years. She related her view of staff engagement with the SIP from 2020 to 2022.

| Jasmin 2022 | 7.3-08 | *Well, no, we're not really that engaged in the plan now / its development / not really // we do get to see the improvement plan //* |
| | 7.3-09 | *But having said that / we did have a visit from [name] from the district office // she works with the education director // her job is to get all the improvement plans right // she and [the principal] talk about it //* |

Jasmin indicated that staff were not involved in the development of the improvement plan, but that they did get to see it. Seeing a plan and being part of a plan's collaborative development are different agentive experiences. That the principal and ED's staff member spent time getting the improvement plan 'right' can be seen to support the position that power over, responsibility for,

and ownership of school improvement plans sat with external staff and school principals. Emily's insight supports the impression that improvement planning was one step removed from teachers and their classrooms.

The role of power in enacting DE's ambitious aspirations and the potential disconnect between improvement planning and classroom enactment are themes throughout this study. That these factors impacted improvement planning goals is the next focus.

7.3.3. Impact of narrowing focus

DE's Strategic Plan intended that the narrowing of improvement goals would ensure that DE (2019b) was 'one of the best public education systems in the world by 2028 - where every preschool and school is world-class' (p. 3). The Plan started 'with literacy and numeracy because they are the proven foundations that allow children to learn across the entire curriculum' (2019b, p. 4). These aspirations are evidenced across the DE's (2018c, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d) supporting documentation and promotional materials. Starting with literacy and numeracy was not new.

> *A focus on literacy and numeracy is not a new direction for [DE]. In many ways, this is a re-versioning of the status quo. The department has been focused on literacy and numeracy for decades, I can trace my professional journey through numerous iterations of literacy initiatives. Between 1990 to 1996, I was out of schools for two different roles that involved leading district wide literacy change. It's been happening for a while now. (Field notes, 2018)*

One reading of DE schools' willingness to recreate an improvement plan with approved literacy and/or numeracy goals is that this was a continuation of historic, widespread, pre-existing engagement with literacy.

Julian, a secondary teacher and leader, commented on his 2020 experience of DE's (2019b) 'particular focus on literacy and numeracy' (p. 4) at DSAS:

| Julian 2021 | 7.3-10 | *and a lot of the DSAS stuff was already literacy and numeracy focussed / and with the new principal (who started in 2020) it was / and nothing else / and I felt like / I'm the [secondary subject] teacher / I don't have a place in / in this vision of literacy and numeracy as kings // with the focus on 'No, we only do literacy and numeracy' //* |
| | 7.3-11 | *and his comment at the beginning of the year was 'literacy and numeracy, and anything else is a time-wasting subject' // and he said that more than once /* |

Julian explained that the increased focus on literacy and numeracy 'as kings' involved an intense narrowing of goals and the devaluing of his secondary subject area. This, despite Julian's active

participation in the previous DSAS *Everybody Reads* improvement plan which included an appreciation of the role of every teacher and every subject in students' literacy development. One could expect that, despite previous commitment to incorporating literacy and numeracy across the curriculum, teachers' feelings of alienation were an unintended consequence for policy writers. DE's intensified emphasis on direct instruction and explicit literacy and numeracy teaching will be interrogated in Chapter Nine.

Emily also spoke about restriction of SIP goals to literacy in her current remote district:

Emily 2022	7.3-12	*… the goals are very narrow // the goals are in set areas // all are literacy now // and that's all schools in [district name] are supposed to do / everyone has to do it /*
	7.3-13	*but as for what teachers do with those goals / it depends // for instance // we've got reading comprehension as a goal / … some think it gives teachers the ability to focus on phonics and vocab / so that you can build up reading comprehension // others think they're just going to teach Sheena Cameron reading comprehension strategies and / and that's all*
	7.3-14	*// and so / the SIP is not necessarily useful in the classroom // so being told to put reading comprehension on the SIP // doesn't mean consistent reading comprehension things will happen in classrooms //*

Similar to Julian's description of DSAS's emphasis on literacy and numeracy 'as kings', Emily described a singular literacy improvement effort across her latest remote district. While schools enacted the requirement to have at least one literacy goal on their improvement plan, Emily's comments suggest that teachers responded to being required to improve reading comprehension in ways that could not necessarily be anticipated. She signalled that policy intention and enactment were not necessarily aligned. Despite intentions that a singular focus would result in improved learning outcomes, this narrowing to specific literacy and numeracy goals did not necessarily determine practice as intended. Teachers interpreted the goal in ways that matched their expertise, their expectations, and their understanding of what the students in their classrooms require.

As literacy and numeracy became 'kings' at DSAS, space in the curriculum for other learning areas contracted. While frequently optimistic about the directions she observed, Jasmin retained some caution about curriculum losses for students:

Jasmin 2022	7.3-15	*But I sometimes think / we've taken the fun out of things / we don't have much music / they have one lesson of PE (physical education) a week / there's not a lot of the other stuff which in an integrated approach they'd get*
	7.3-16	*The argument is / that because we are still a Building Foundations school / we need to build those foundations / those literacy and numeracy foundations /*
	7.3-17	*I will say there's part of me that goes 'so I hope we are right' //*

Jasmin indicated that the specific goals set out in the *Building Foundations Literacy Guidebook* had taken 'the fun out of things' for students, removing music and minimising physical education. She contended that it was necessary to withdraw access to other learning areas, in this case the Arts and Health and Physical Education, to build foundations in literacy and numeracy. She would not be the only teacher who hoped that the approach would be effective.

Jasmin also spoke about culturally relevant curriculum and approaches:

| Jasmin 2022 | 7.3-18 | *All that culturally relevant curriculum stuff we were doing with you (the researcher when principal) is squeezed out now too // we think about cultural approaches sometimes / but the department literacy and numeracy guidebook requirements fill every minute //* |
| | 7.3-19 | *Setting up yarning circles was started when you (the researcher) were here / we've been talking about it / but no / they're not happening now // they would be really good //* |

Culturally relevant curriculum, in Jasmin's words, was 'squeezed' because of the tight focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes. Work to increase First Nations perspectives across the curriculum was wound back in the quest for world class improvement. Culturally responsive pedagogical practices were also not possible. Yarning circles are based on traditional practices of 'listening to learn, rather than by asking questions' (Mills et al., 2013, p. 289). The benefits of yarning circles to literacy learning, such as speaking and listening skill development, and as preparation for writing, are well established (Cumming-Potvin et al., 2022). Despite their relevance and effectiveness, cultural curriculum content and pedagogies were replaced by the demands for explicit literacy and numeracy direct instruction. Considering DSAS's declining attendance (Table 5.4-1), one could argue that the removal of learning areas known to be engaging for students and the loss of culturally relevant approaches contributed to falling attendance.

In addition to leaders' views that DE's steadfastly contracting focus had significant curriculum implications, they also reported that the narrowing of improvement goals came at the expense of wellbeing and support for students.

Malcolm 2020	7.3-20	*I guess / just to cap off // it's becoming more and more visible as the new improvement processes gain traction / that the view is / that the prevailing view is // wellbeing people look after wellbeing but teachers teach / you really can't have one without the other / they support each other / learning and wellbeing mutually support each other //*

Malcolm was committed to the key role of wellbeing in supporting students' ability to engage with the curriculum. He asserted that wellbeing and learning could not be separated as the work of different people, that they were interwoven. This will be further discussed in relation to student participation in standardised assessments in Chapter Eight.

At interview, Kelly spoke about insights related to wellbeing in a literacy improvement initiative she led. The project ran from 2008 to 2012, in 50 low socioeconomic, underperforming schools, with the objective of improving literacy outcomes. Kelly indicated that this project led to systemwide messaging about the importance of high-quality teaching and learning to engage all learners and wellbeing *for* learning (Interview data). Malcom's assertion that wellbeing and teaching mutually support each other coheres with DE's understanding prior to launching its new improvement directives (7.3-20).

I now turn to how wellbeing *for* learning occurred at DSAS, including cultural issues, hunger, and teaching learning skills proactively.

Mark 2020	7.3-21	*the school finds itself in a tricky spot / trying to take on supporting families with things outside of education / to allow our kids to be able to be in a place where they can access education when they are at school / but that's much less acceptable now that wellbeing is right off the agenda / we're not supposed to do it anymore //*

Mark identified that staff were actively discouraged from taking responsibility for pragmatic matters of student wellbeing in the push for world class improvement. Mark provided a range of extended examples, illustrating the support students required to access educational opportunities. One example was:

Mark 2020	7.3-22	*so here we do what we can to take kids on trips to [the city] / some kids are quite able to bring all their bedding and toiletries and provide // the 'funeral clothes' / as they call their tidy clothes for the graduations /// if they can't / we take them shopping the day before / so we can get them to go to camp feeling like they have everything the*

> *others have // they need their black pants and nice clothes / and we make sure they've got a blanket for the night time …*

    7.3-23   *they're leaving their family for a week / and it is a big deal // if we can make them as comfortable as possible and it costs a little bit more /// so be it // we've got to do it / otherwise we lose them and then we can't keep them learning with us //*

Mark described how the school ensured that First Nations secondary students had access to required clothing and equipment for a highly valued, tailored learning experience in the city. For many, it was their first time away from family. This story epitomises the numerous broader community concerns that are not well understood within dominant Western paradigms. To take First Nations students to the city for a week is 'a big deal'. Macro cultural and socioeconomic factors, including strong family affiliations and challenges accessing the required items, are experienced in a way that outsiders may not appreciate. It was not within the school's scope to address all issues. Providing the physical items to make these students as comfortable as possible, was an essential starting point and contributed to student engagement.

Julian provided another wellbeing insight:

Julian
2021

    7.3-24   *I find it hard now / with the new highly focussed approaches / that we aren't supposed to attend to the wellbeing of our kids //*

    7.3-25   *that's a nonsense // they can't learn if they're not supported // and // if a kid comes in hungry / we give them a piece of toast // we need to manage the emotional needs and wellbeing of the child because if the child's not right / they're not going to learn.*

Julian highlighted an immediate wellbeing challenge frequently confronted by teachers in low socioeconomic settings. That students living in poverty can come to school hungry is widely acknowledged. During my principalship, DSAS classrooms were equipped with toasters, microwaves, and freezers full of bread and other food items, used every morning and during the day to feed hungry students (Field notes, 2018).

Hunger was not the only classroom wellbeing issue that required attention:

Emily
2022

    7.3-26   *I think that in the last four years / that social emotional learning has also been taken off the radar // it hasn't been the biggest priority // actually / I see it as ignored / if not stopped //*

    7.3-27   *but I think now that we're finding that it was a bad idea to stop // kids aren't doing well if their social and emotional needs aren't taken care of // and teachers are having more behaviour struggles /*

    7.3-28   *the kids don't have the skill set to be able to engage in the learning that the department wants //*

Emily explained the impact of removing social emotional learning from the curriculum and suggested that students cannot be taught literacy and numeracy skills in a vacuum. Being resilient, learning to work together, dealing with mistakes, managing anger, and a gamut of other skill learning has been squeezed from classrooms in the tight focus on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes. That students in communities such as Desert Sunshine required significant support to access education institutions was disregarded. Emily's experience of these skills being off the radar led to her suggestion that teachers are dealing with an increase in challenging student behaviour, likely another unintended consequence of DE's insistence on a narrow focus.

Malcolm also spoke about student skill development as part of wellbeing:

Malcolm 2022	7.3-29	*those conversations that we had with our ED at the start of the world class push / when we were trying to talk about our improved engagement data and the better behaviour that we were seeing in classrooms // that our kids could self-regulate better … having that grit and perseverance that people like to talk about // the ED just said we had to stop / wellbeing was off the agenda //*
	7.3-30	*and // the relationships that our teachers have with our students aren't valued // and I think that's just getting worse //*
	7.3-31	*we had made great progress with creating welcoming and encouraging environments at [DSAS] / as a team // it's so / so key to seeing student success and to being able to build students up / and to getting better outcomes // we can't stop //*

Like Emily, Malcolm identified the need for, and early successes at DSAS with, teaching skills for self-regulation and perseverance, and using trauma aware pedagogies. He added the importance of positive teacher-student relationships and welcoming classroom environments, a cornerstone in education research for decades (Liberante, 2012; Roorda et al., 2011). It is disquieting that Malcolm claimed that the value placed on teacher-student relationships was declining.

Despite DE's 2018 insistence that the SIP should only have literacy and numeracy goals, the team's draft improvement plan included a wellbeing *for* learning focus. The following figure is a screenshot of the Wellbeing goal added to our re-drafted SIP in September 2018.

Figure 7.3-1 Proposed wellbeing SIP goal for 2019-2021 Improvement Plan

ENGAGEMENT & ACHIEVEMENT	Build students' learning expertise, self-regulation, and readiness to engage in learning	• Design and explicitly teach tasks that build students' problem solving/ inquiry skills • Use formative assessments, reflective writing, and demonstrations of learning to monitor students' understandings, target teaching, and build learner responsibility and confidence • Consolidate self-regulation practices • Implement cultural inclusion strategies in classes	Students will: • Develop greater ownership and responsibility for their learning • Be able to discuss and demonstrate their thinking • Greater self-regulation and control for effective learning

This goal was not approved by DE and was subsequently removed from the approved SIP.

The withdrawal of permission to attend to wellbeing continued for five years. Mark (6.5-03), Emily (7.3-03), and Malcolm (7.3-02 and 7.3-29) described their experiences of the relegation of wellbeing when planning for improvement. The pressure to stop wellbeing initiatives came from EDs, the central literacy support team, and other DE district and central office staff. 'Literacy and numeracy only' was a consistent message (Interview data). A central office literacy coach told me that 'Wellbeing isn't in the guidebooks', referring to the department literacy and numeracy resources provided to all schools to support DE's new improvement directives (Field notes, 2019).

During the research interviews, wellbeing concerns were consistently raised. The school leaders acknowledged that wellbeing *for* learning was core business, recognising the breadth of ways wellbeing needs may present. The team conceded that wellbeing needs in a very remote, low socioeconomic school, may not match the expectations of a metropolitan or higher socioeconomic school (Field notes, 2018). DE's policy to narrow the goals of schools indicated a lack of understanding of and attention to site context.

Leaders indicated that there was a lack of systemic understanding about the likelihood of DSAS achieving state levels, never mind world class. They were concerned about the intense focus on developing compliant SIPs. They were also unsettled by the narrowed improvement goals; the lack of engagement with staff; the reduction in curriculum offerings and wellbeing initiatives; and they questioned how compliance could be achieved. External reviews are discussed next.

7.3.4. External reviews

Accountability for compliant planning and improvement practices was amplified through the external review of every school. As noted, external reviews of schools had been in place for more than a decade. When DE envisioned ambitious school improvement, they made significant additional staffing investments. Jasmin described the appointment of extra staff to district offices

(7.3-09) to support improvement planning processes and ensure compliant plans. According to DE (2019b), additional staff were also employed centrally to support '… school improvement cycles through external school reviews …' (p. 11). Here, Mark, Emily, and Collette's experiences of schools being reviewed by departmental central officers are recounted.

In Chapter Six, Mark described his first experience with an external review, the 'on-track review' of DSAS in 2018. The review team included a central senior officer and a specialist school principal. Neither were familiar with remote communities or low socioeconomic settings. The review team flew into Desert Sunshine at midday one day and returned to central office the next day at the same time, allowing less than a day in the school (Field notes, 2018). The first agenda item was a presentation by the school leadership team. Mark said, '… we presented a lot of data that spoke to what we knew about our kids', who they are, and experiences they bring to school (6.5-03). He also expressed the view that despite clear documentation of contextual and wellbeing issues, the external review team was unable to 'hear' the DSAS story in the short time they were in schools. Mark described 'a kind of outsider blindness' to cultural and wellbeing needs of students (Section 6.5).

Emily participated in the external review process at DSAS in 2018 and at her current remote school in 2022, she noted:

Emily 2022	7.3-32	*you'd have an external review // like both times / they'd be in the school less than 2 days // and that had so much more / so much more influence on what was to happen / than what we already knew about our school / and what we were already doing //*

Authority to determine directions in schools was situated with external review teams who often spent less than 10 hours on site. Echoing Mark's insights, Emily contrasted the level of knowledge about the school between the review team and school staff.

Centrally generated data, including NAPLAN, was valued. The review team arrived in DSAS with thick data folders which they had studied in advance, annotated, and used to frame their review questions (Field notes, 2018).

Emily 2022	7.3-33	*there has been such a big focus on external reviews / informing the site improvement plan // and they look more so / at the Department data than the school's data // and even less on the assessment that's going on in the classrooms / and not at all on letting teachers decide what's relevant and meaningful for their kids /*

Emily indicated that review teams' brief visits and central data sets held a high degree of influence over the direction of improvement planning in both schools. She described external reviews as determining schools' improvement priorities. The reliance on centrally held data, and its priority over classroom data, will be explored in Chapter Eight. Emily indicated that teachers' assessments of their students' learning were not valued. Teachers' classroom decision-making was also not well regarded, despite the depth of knowledge they gained through regular contact with students.

Collette, in her first leadership role, said:

> Collette 2020   7.3-34   *it's a lot harder to get people / like visitors / to understand some of the issues and the needs / and stuff / especially when they show up for a short time //*

Collette spoke about hearing the news of the death of a staff member during the leadership team's presentation to the external review team in 2018.

> Collette 2020   7.3-35   *[The review] was when we'd had, like a series of different things go wrong in the community, including [name's] death and we still had the [review team] going / oh you just have to deal with it ///*
>
>   7.3-36   *and having them not realise / like not getting that / like it's all of the challenges we talked to them about / and then the tragedy on top of it / plus being remote / plus us being a close-knit community // like having all of these things happen / is just that much more intense // but getting them to / start to see what all these things / what they meant to us all /// wasn't happening //*

The announcement of the staff member's passing, while expected, had deep ramifications for students, staff, and the broader Desert Sunshine community. It was the second of three staff deaths that year. The review team could not be convinced of the necessity to pause their process to ensure that the news was delivered to staff and students fittingly and that planned supports were activated. Half the leadership team excused themselves from the review process to handle the logistics (Field notes, 2018).

DE's narrow focus, and their lack of interest in the DSAS context is illustrated by three points in the interview data: firstly, the 'just deal with it' messages perceived by Collette; secondly, Martin's comment, 'they thought we were just making excuses' (6.5-03); and finally, Collette's belief that the review team couldn't understand the significance of complexity and hardship in a close knit, very remote community. Emily, Mark, and Collette offered their insights into the priority given to external reviewers' perspectives, over school staff knowledge, despite the brevity of the

reviewers' visits. They also recounted their experiences of reviewers' lack of understanding of context, bordering on indifference.

Having surveyed the elevation of the SIP, to primary driver of narrow goals, the consequent reduction in staff engagement, and the role external reviews occupied in achieving that primacy, this chapter turns to staff work conditions.

7.3.5. Employment tensions

Leaders' inability to speak back to power caused tensions. Many leaders interviewed freely offered commentary on their discomfort with DE's enactment mandates and inability to address their concerns. Amanda, Mark, and Malcolm offer their perspectives.

Amanda, the remote teachers' union liaison, noted:

Amanda 2020	7.3-37	*The other change I've seen / is that there are more and more principals who are worried about getting their next jobs / or trying to meet the targets // not that they're bad people / but they're the meat in the sandwich // they don't feel they can ask questions or challenge their education director //*

As previously stated, EDs were agents for the implementation of DE's new improvement policy. They also conducted recruitment panels to fill principal vacancies at the end of tenures and were compulsory referees for any applicant applying for a principal role. Amanda described principals as the 'meat in the sandwich', caught in a power relationship that was complicated by the tension involved in feeling incapable of asking questions or challenging their ED, the gatekeeper for their next position.

Mark describes his relationship with the ED when he acted in the principal role while the researcher was on leave in 2019:

Mark 2020	7.3-38	*Whereas I found // in the acting principal role / and being hit with the system pressures was a huge challenge // I am early in my leadership career and want to continue as a leader // I plan to be principal in another school soon // so / I need to keep the ED as referee / trying to balance that against the fact that I was in a temporary acting role was interesting//*

Mark experienced the compliance expectations of EDs and their willingness to exert this power, particularly over beginning and aspiring school leaders. Mark was loyal to the work done to build ownership of the school's directions and achieve positive results. He knew that the school's NAPLAN data was unlikely to demonstrate the breadth of the improvements occurring – learning

outcome improvements he believed that the ED had supported. That as a short-term acting principal he was asked to dramatically alter the school's direction did not sit well with him.

Malcolm also commented on experiencing tensions due to the precarity of leadership appointments:

Malcolm 2022	7.3-39	*… and it's all made to happen / there's pressure applied / because it's when we start to look at winning one of those roles and raising aspirations /// if you want to grow in your role / get a promotion / you need to have a level of compliance that will impress those people that are above you //*
	7.3-40	*whereas your duty should actually really be to empower those who are below you in the hierarchy / so they understand what's going on // but when you're aspirational / it's about trying to please those that are in charge / and on not shaking up the cage too much //*

Malcolm also aspired to be a principal. He expressed difficulty with tensions between feeling compelled to comply with departmental pressure, through the ED, and his sense of duty to the staff in his school. Malcolm identified the ED's role as referee for principal positions as a key factor in feeling compelled to acquiesce to the pressure from those above.

These early career leaders' expressed tensions created by the ED's role in ensuring compliance with DE policy. Mark and Malcolm described a mismatch between their values and the aims of the project of power. They identified difficulties in injecting their voices and feeling the precarity of their employment ambitions as a result. Foucault (2001) would describe this as the need to be 'docile', or in participants' own words 'compliant'. Underpinning the ED-principal power relationship is the fact that school principals are on five-year contracts and if, at the end of their contract, they fail to win another principal contract in their own or another school, then they must return to the classroom. In most cases, this is not seen as a desirable outcome. Demonstrating that DE's world class improvement strategies have been fully embraced when one is in a leadership role has become a key criterion for successfully holding or winning a principal position (Field notes, 2019).

7.4.   DISCUSSION

Improvement planning is not new to DE schools. Kelly provided insights into the long-term system-wide improvement processes already in place and the guidance provided by the quality improvement unit prior to September 2018. This unit engaged in extensive consultation with school leaders to set its direction and guide resource development. Central to this work was a

well-understood improvement cycle that included improvement plans as one step. While complying with 'one-year return' requirements and the subsequent school improvement planning expectations, the DSAS leadership team consulted widely, facilitated collaboration, and championed shared staff and community ownership of planning decisions. Evidencing the benefits of this ownership and its impact, Malcolm stated, 'our goal was doable, and it was ours, and we were getting results' (7.1-13).

With the announcement of world class aspirations, structural and institutional improvement priorities and enactment processes shifted. Improvement planning was positioned as the crux of DE's improvement aspirations. Mandatory improvement plan templates, with required focus areas and enforced targets, were initiated. DE purposefully limited improvement priority areas, in line with global education policies. The tensions created by this narrow focus has been explored extensively (Fink, 2003; Marques et al., 2017). As an example of how government understandings 'stick' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 34), the prioritisation of literacy and numeracy improvement activity led to the demand that there be no other foci in the study state.

The effectiveness of improvement plans more generally is contested. For example, a North American study of 1,316 school improvement plans found that 'plans failed to create substantive, visible change in most schools' (Coker, 2022, p. 75). The failure of improvement plans to meet expectations of improvement is widely documented (Backstrom, 2019; Redding & Searby, 2020). Data from the leaders in this current study aligned with existing research, and identified additional tensions associated with the *world class* policy changes, including power relations in compliance practices, a shift in plan ownership, the discounting of context, and an inability to attend to student wellbeing.

The earlier structural supports Kelly described were replaced by additional staff in regions and central office. Their role was to monitor support compliance and surveil progress (Robertson, 2012) through narrowly-focused school visits and external reviews. The appointment of extra staff presaged a shift in plan ownership away from the community and staff to the principal and district office staff.

The phenomena of leader-led improvement planning is noted for its ineffectiveness in improving outcomes (Redding & Searby, 2020). The research participants' assertions that shared ownership of improvement planning was effective is supported by Ingersoll et al. (2018). Despite research indicating that sustained improvement requires collaborative planning based on positive cultures,

dialogue, and engagement (Hollingworth et al., 2018), the leaders in the current study felt unable to voice positive aspects of the previous, more democratically aligned improvement processes or to question the new departmental initiatives.

The leaders interviewed identified additional challenges that resulted from the loss of time for collaboration and for building whole staff ownership of improvement plans. Examples included the differences between teachers' and leaders' perspectives, and a description of staff 'getting to see' the improvement plan (7.3-08). Research suggests that the degree of agentive engagement experienced by staff results in different levels of buy-in from staff (Coker, 2022; Elgart, 2017; Scott, 2023). 'Seeing a plan' is a distinctly different agentive experience to that experienced prior to DE's policy launch. A substantial body of research highlights the positive impact of collaborative engagement of stakeholders generally, and teachers specifically (Elgart, 2017; Gonzales et al., 2022; Scott, 2023).

The shift in plan ownership toward principals and district staff reflected a shift in power relationships. School leaders provided insights into how top-down control over the new improvement ambitions operated. Mark described his time as acting-principal and finding that 'even with our hugely improved data' he was required to change the schools' direction to comply with the ED's decisions and priorities (Interview data). Increasingly, power imbalances underpinned how DE's aspirations were enacted in schools. EDs were recognised as powerful figures (Interview data: Amanda). Compelling examples of this power relationship were detailed by Malcolm and Mark. As beginning and aspiring leaders, they were markedly vulnerable to the ED's positional power. Both were planning future careers as principals. During their research interviews, they revealed their dilemmas when faced with the ED's demands and unwillingness to hear their faithful accounts of context. They described their apprehension as they wanted to be well positioned for promotion and the ED was their referee for future job applications.

Marginalisation of context was another tension that arose throughout the data. Community, student, and school contexts were discounted as part of DE's improvement story. Mark and other leaders identified an evident 'blindness to context' underpinning DE directives and their enactment (6.5-03). Sustaining this under-consideration of context was a prevailing assumption about the sameness of metropolitan and remote schools (Lingard, 2020; Roberts & Green, 2013). Globally, contemporary education system reform is built on the premise that education policy making should be decontextualised and 'solely based on evidence and learning from others' (Grek,

2012, p. 244). But Power and Frandji (2010) point to the impossibility of separating schools from their contexts. Heffernan (2018b), Ylimaki and Brunderman (2022) and Backstrom (2019) recognise the importance of a school improvement process that is contextually based. Individual schools come with distinct challenges, requiring tailored, contextualised responses (Gonzales et al., 2022; Redding & Searby, 2020) and 'better school improvements are associated with the ability to carry out a careful analysis of the context' (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014, p. 72).

A key aspect of context, sidelined in DE's demands for improved literacy and numeracy outcomes, was student wellbeing. The leaders described how student wellbeing was marginalised and pushed underground. Malcolm voiced this as the requirement to 'take it off the SIP in the new world order' (7.3-02). The removal of all wellbeing-related initiatives from improvement plans started in late 2018. There were explicit instructions to remove wellbeing references from the plan and Mark described how attempting to explain the DSAS context was perceived as making excuses (6.5-03). Removing wellbeing initiatives from improvement plans, despite the vital importance of relationships in the learning process (Cahill et al., 2021; Riddle et al., 2021), is another illustration of how those with positional power shifted the focus and ownership of schools' improvement directions, as DE's world class aspirations were enacted.

7.5.   CONCLUSION

This chapter identified challenges that arose in the enactment of new improvement policy. Prior improvement practices included commitments to consultation, collaboration, shared decision making, and agency. These aspects of teachers' work were curbed when the DSAS staff were expected to enact DE's mandated improvement planning expectations. They were required to comply with mandatory planning templates, specific literacy and numeracy goals, and tight timelines that inhibited collaboration and teacher engagement. There was a shift of plan ownership to principals and DE's external experts, further hindering staff engagement and ownership of improvement plans. Restrictions on the key policy enactors use of local knowledge and agency were accompanied by the discounting of context and constraints on curriculum.

Next, Chapter Eight considers the implications of DE's reliance on data and commitment to measure improvement with standardised tests.

8. CONTEXT OF PRACTICE - MEASURING WORLD CLASS AMBITIONS

Measurement is a policy solution that plays a central role in governance (Bacchi, 2009; Gable & Lingard, 2016). What Ozga (2009) called the 'government turn', an appearance of deregulation coupled with decisive central control, was characterised by accountability technologies such as collecting standardised data for measurement. Thompson (2014) identified how 'a regime of testing' (p. 62) has linked governance expectations of increased school accountability and transparency with raising teacher quality. Henig (2013) asserted that schools and education systems have been totally restructured by the exigencies of test-based accountability.

Reform implementation approaches such as *McKinsey and Company's* 'deliverology' (Barber et al., 2011), that advocates for sophisticated data collection to track targets and implementation success, were applied in the study state. Thomson (2020) explains how deliverology is based on a 'benefits of a public value productivity approach' that is in 'keeping with a highly individualist and economically driven view of the world' (p. 194). Deliverology advice epitomised the findings of researchers such as Lingard (2013) who identified expectations that test-based accountability would improve school performance and Hardy (2021b) who observed the limitations inherent in the tendency toward numerical precision. The impacts of measurement-based approaches are explored in this chapter.

In the *context of policy text production,* DE's Strategic Plan was interrogated. Eight of the 13 explicit 'measurement' references in the Plan, mention 'better' and 'right' data and making data accessible to leaders and teachers. For example:

> *We are putting better data into the hands of our leaders through our [digital system name][11]*
> *to help them make more informed decisions to improve learning for students. (2018c, p. 5)*

On the face of it, this appears a logical use of data, but this chapter raises questions about how 'better data' is assembled and whether *all* data is equal in *all* contexts. How the policy expectations related to measurement and data were enacted in the remote case school are examined, with the first section attending to practices before DE's Strategic Plan was launched, and subsequent sections surveying descriptions of enacting 'using the right data' to measure improvement.

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[11] The digital system is referred to as the *Leaders' data dashboard,* or the dashboard, throughout this thesis to protect the identity of the state under scrutiny.

8.1. PRIOR TO DE'S ASPIRATIONS FOR WORLD CLASS IMPROVEMENT

Many of the systems and processes utilised by DE in their improvement drive were already in operation or in development prior to the 2018 launch of world class ambitions. Elaboration of prior practices renders clear what was in place before the launch, and what DE subsequently sought to constitute as 'better' and 'improved'. Hence, to clarify how DE measured improvement, prior to the launch of new directives in 2018, this section provides background and describes leaders' experiences with two improvement processes, presented chronologically: large-scale literacy and numeracy testing, data collection and systematic analysis.

Critical debate has accompanied widespread literacy and numeracy testing since its inception (Gable & Lingard, 2016; Hardy, 2014). In the study state, the degree of attention on NAPLAN results significantly shifted and deepened as *world class* aspirations became established. Amanda, the remote schools' union liaison, expressed her view:

Amanda 2021	8.1-01	*And don't even get me started on NAPLAN / and what a waste of time that is … // How about actually educating kids //*

Amanda spoke frankly and cast doubt over the value of NAPLAN data as the right data (Interview data). In this example, she refers to time taken to administer the tests and follow up annually. Her opposition to NAPLAN, based on time wastage, is supported by researchers such as Ragusa and Bousfield (2017) and Thompson and Harbaugh (2013). Amanda located NAPLAN as a distraction from the important work of schools: 'actually educating kids'.

Since the establishment of NAPLAN, there has been an increase in the priority given to certain data sets over others. Collette, as a primary leader, said:

Collette 2020	8.1-02	*Before the world class push / to focus on what we as a school needed / we did the NAPLAN testing / but that wasn't the focus of what we were actually doing with the kids //*
	8.1-03	*we looked more at detailed literacy data // like the running records and phonological awareness and all those sorts of things / things that helped day-to-day // And we also did what we were told we needed to do / but at the same time, we didn't necessarily focus on the (DE required) data ///*
	8.1-04	*Having to have NAPLAN in your SIP is all well and good /// the // majority of the kids / weren't at a level where NAPLAN information actually was useful /// So // we had the ability to / to focus on the things that were necessary for kids' learning /*

In describing how DSAS used data in 2017 and 2018, Collette highlighted the dichotomy between compliance with DE obligations and DSAS staff's requirements for student-specific data to track individual students' needs. Collette understood DE expectations but valued targeted data that informed learning directions for students. Collette's leadership role included supporting teachers to track individual student's progress, tailor support programs where required, and work with classroom teachers to establish learning goals and monitor progress. She identified the right data as that which provided a more detailed understanding of students' reading skills and shaped classroom practices and intervention programs.

Both Amanda (8.1-01) and Collette (8.1-04) contrasted DE work with what they considered was 'actually' the real work of using testing and data to 'focus on the things that were necessary for kids' learning'. Collette also flagged her reservations about NAPLAN as the required measure of school progress and the requirement to document cohort goals in the SIP (Interview data).

Having drawn on Collette's expertise and recollections to illuminate competing demands between compliance and school-based data collection, I now turn to the interview with Emily, who followed Colette as the primary leader, and who identified a similar intersection in DSAS's data decision making processes:

| Emily 2022 | 8.1-05 | *In [DSAS] / before this world class stuff // we had debates about / about what is the right data to collect // we wanted data that gave us insights into every child // we were looking at each individual child / and the data wrapped around them // we called it 'putting a face on the data' //* |
| | 8.1-06 | *Whereas now it's much more now about / the leaders' [data dashboard] / and that high-level data that the department sees as the priority //* |

Emily also questioned identification of the right data. She indicated that, in the earlier DSAS context, there was a level of teacher agency in debating and deciding what data was useful. Similar to Collette, Emily prioritised data that provided insights into individual children's progress, revealing her intentions to use data in making important day-to-day decisions about intervention needs and to accommodate learning variations in classrooms. Collette and Emily saw specific and appropriate data that supported planning for teaching and intervention as the right data.

The concept of 'putting a face on the data' has been discussed by other researchers (e.g. Keddie, 2013; Sharratt & Fullan, 2013). Bishop and Bishop (2017) found, that in addition to context-specific

approaches and collaborative educator discussions, there was considerable value in data that was complemented with a multi-layered understanding of students as individuals with unique needs.

For at least a decade before *world class* ambitions, capturing the human side of learning was a DE expectation. Tracking individual data was required and compliance monitored. Commonly, this expectation was evidenced by *data walls*, a displayed list of student's names, data points, and next steps (Keddie, 2013). These walls were presented to EDs as evidence that every individual learner was being tracked.

Data walls are intended for visual charting of student data and to help educators 'make sense of data and see useful patterns and variances, with interpretations supporting informed educational decision-making' (Adie et al., 2020, p. 2). In early iterations of data walls, contextual and socio-emotional information was attached to individual students' data points (Stratford et al., 2022). Ying and Shakra's (2022) research confirmed that context-specific approaches and collaborative discussions improved the efficacy of data walls.

Similar tracking was embedded in DSAS's *Everybody Reads* improvement plan. Digital, rather than physical wall displays, were used but the process built a team approach to learner progress (Field notes). The team approach was based on having those invested in decisions involved in making them. Decisions were based on day-to-day data collected on individual students in classrooms and intervention programs. In summary, understanding students as individual learners underpinned DSAS staff's conviction that the right data informs and tracks the unique learning pathways of all students.

I am not suggesting that, prior to 2018, DSAS' data work was always easy and straightforward. Mark, a senior leader then deputy principal, described a sense of drowning in data (Interview data), referring to the abundance of mandated and school data collected. DSAS staff valued their professional judgement in focussing on individual students' data to inform teaching programs and to plan for student learning support, described by Collette as focusing on what was necessary to student learning (8.1-04). As noted in the previous chapter, using data in this way resulted in substantial progress against DSAS's *Everybody Reads* improvement plan.

In line 8.1-06 Emily referred to the contemporary use of high-level data in dashboards. This was another practice in development prior to *world class* ambitions (Interview data: Kelly). The global use of such dashboards has been facilitated by recent technology advances, including big data and rapid innovation in digital platforms and artificial intelligence (Clutterbuck et al., 2023; Gorur et al.,

2019). Across Australia, education departments now access Business Intelligence strategies for predictive analytics and data visualisation (Sellar & Gulson, 2021) and make this information accessible to school leaders (Stratford et al., 2022). Following other states' examples, DE consolidated centrally-held data and released a leaders' data dashboard in 2018, to facilitate leader access to data. This change, and how standardised tests rose to prominence, are explored in the subsequent sections.

8.2.   CHANGES AS WORLD CLASS ASPIRATIONS WERE ENACTED

How data was perceived and what data was valued shifted and intensified with DE's Strategic Plan launch. The DE (2018a) promotional web page described their plans and stated: 'We've measured the standard of education on a universal scale that compares school systems across the world. It is mapped using a range of national and international skill-based assessments' (p. np.). Reflecting international trends towards reliance on comparable data, the Australian government put their faith in consistent literacy and numeracy assessment data, and NAPLAN gained prominence in schools' data collection and analysis processes and shaped the way schools were viewed. In the sections that follow, these directions are investigated, based on interviewees' post 2018 experiences.

8.2.1. Standardised tests as trusted measures

Leaders' views on the rising prominence of NAPLAN as the true measure of success, their calls for a broader judgement base, and appeals for contextual recognition are disclosed as existing DE processes were strengthened and intensified to meet their need to measure and demonstrate improvement.

Julian, a DSAS secondary senior leader, asked what metrics were going to measure improvement (7.2-03):

Julian 2021	8.2-01	*I struggle with this idea of / well / that NAPLAN testing or / any standardised test is the true measure of progress / but that's the only valued measure now /*
	8.2-02	*… for me, the idea of standardised measures never sat well // it was never a complete picture of someone's education if we're not including the broader stuff // as part of measuring //*

The value of NAPLAN as a true measure of progress was disputed. Julian's position has parallels with research findings, such as data misuse (Ragusa & Bousfield, 2017; Skourdoumbis & Rawolle,

2020) and the impacts of datafication (Gorur, 2020; Grek et al., 2021). Many researchers concur with Julian's view that 'the true measure of success' must be more than standardised test results and echo his call to include 'broader stuff' such as learning dispositions (Hardy, 2014; Thompson, 2014).

Mark also appealed for a broader understanding of student learning when describing the leadership team's presentation to the external review team in 2018. He asserted that a lot of data 'spoke to what we knew about our kids' and told the review team 'some great stories of change' (6.5-03). His feeling that the review team 'thought we were just making excuses' for the quality of DSAS's data (6.5-03) resonates with research findings that datafication depersonalises and decontextualises data that educators believe counts (Lewis & Hardy, 2017; Lingard et al., 2016).

Having probed Julian and Mark's assertions that right data reflects the uniqueness of individual students rather than the outcomes of standardised tests, I turn to Emily's reflection on the growing dependence on standardised measures. She described her 2022 experiences of accounting for student outcomes with her local executive team (LET) in her current remote school:

Emily 2022	8.2-03	*Where I am now / we've been told by our LET that we can't make excuses for our data // and that our data is the only thing that matters //*
	8.2-04	*So even though our community has experienced bushfires / and a lot of trauma / and all sorts of stuff / and we've had COVID of course // and we've had students who've had a parent that actually suicided after the / the fires // so then we realised / okay / so this child hasn't achieved the department's expectation / and we've thought that's not surprising //*
	8.2-05	*And we are told by the LET that we can't explain why / that it's just the data point that matters / how did they go on NAPLAN? / did they reach the standard? //*

Here, Emily described active discounting of context and student circumstances, such as COVID, drought, bushfires, and suicide. Students' wellbeing needs in these situations were deemed irrelevant. The data analysis lens imposed the expectation that no matter what, schools will be judged on their ability to have every student reach or exceed DE's *Standard of Educational Achievement* (2020a). Having earlier led the DSAS staff through tailoring local data collection to student learning needs and actively tracking learning progress with her team (8.1-05), Emily described a noticeable shift in focus.

Earlier, I observed that wellbeing initiatives were no longer allowed in school improvement planning (Section 7.3.3). Here Emily describes how an individual student's personal circumstances

were not to be considered in data analysis. Previous commentary on wellbeing in improvement planning included the observation that not only can schools not include wellbeing initiatives in their improvement planning, but they also cannot consider individual student's personal circumstances as part of analysing their data. This shift away from appreciating the uniqueness of each student and putting a face on the data is further illustrated by Emily's subsequent recount of similar experiences during her time at DSAS (2019-20):

Emily 2022	8.2-06	*It was just like at DSAS / when the [central office literacy team] got involved / we couldn't say / this child actually started at this point / where everyone else has started up here // and this child has grown to here / not quite caught up but making great progress and catching up //*
	8.2-07	*The department's attitude was like it / it's not about excuses / it's not about growth / it's about the 'standard of educational achievement' (Emily used air quotes) // Did they get there or not?*

DE's quest for using the right data in remote schools shaped demands that staff discount students' personal circumstances and their learning progress. Interactions with district and central DE officers were focussed on NAPLAN results and the school's progress against the SIP. The conversations conveyed clear messages that numbers were valued, and the unique human component was discounted.

Malcolm, DSAS's wellbeing leader, spoke about the importance placed on data when he was in his current regional school as the deputy principal in 2022:

Malcolm 2022	8.2-08	*I'd like to talk about NAPLAN // … / department staff keep repeating the mantra / 'it's not all about the NAPLAN' / and 'it's not all about improvement plans'/*
	8.2-09	*/ but when Term 3 rolls around / and submitting the SIP is the most important thing in the world then it actually is all about the plan / and all about the NAPLAN results // …*
	8.2-10	*and NAPLAN results / measured against the plan are all consuming // NAPLAN targets are checked off in exquisite detail // they are the only results requested by the education director / and no doubt state office / and those NAPLAN results are the things that are published to tell everyone how we are going as a school //*

Malcolm contested the differences between the rhetoric that 'it's not all about the NAPLAN' and his experience of reviewing and accounting for NAPLAN data improvement with his ED. Despite central and regional staff's assertions, Malcolm's perspective was that NAPLAN improvement plan targets were valued and monitored 'in exquisite detail'. This prioritisation of NAPLAN data was

viewed by Julian, Emily, and Malcolm as progressively more robust reliance on NAPLAN as 'the' measure of improvement outcomes, or in DE terms, the best and right data.

Malcolm's reference to NAPLAN results being published, relates to DE's expectations that NAPLAN data be included in schools' Annual Reports and reports be publicly accessible on their websites and the national publication of data on the *MySchool* website (ACARA, 2023). ACARA states that *MySchool* 'supports national transparency and accountability of Australia's schools by publishing nationally consistent school-level data about every school in Australia' (ACARA, 2023, para 1). This digital architecture has been the focus of critical debate and its impacts on education have been thoroughly interrogated (Hardy & Boyle, 2011; Redden & Low, 2012).

Having identified participants views about the need for broader measures of success that reflected the context and students' circumstances, this section next considers their thoughts about the validity of relying on NAPLAN data. Collette's concerns that most DSAS students 'weren't at a level where NAPLAN information actually was useful' (8.1-04) were echoed by Malcolm in his interview:

| Malcolm 2020 | 8.2-11 | *We knew already that kids were behind in [DSAS] // but we were sort of forced to put them through this meat grinder of a NAPLAN experience // test prep / practice tests and stuff / when you already know that they're not going to achieve because they're not at the level needed to even do the test // but that's the data that DE are wanting to see //* |
| | 8.2-12 | *And / I think that it's really sad that that teachers' knowledge / and that personalised understanding of where all of these students are actually at / is not valued // … why put students through pointless NAPLAN tests when you can already share where they're at? //* |

Building on his earlier commentary on the loss of teacher autonomy since DE introduced new improvement mandates, Malcolm communicated his belief that teachers already knew what students would achieve on NAPLAN. Malcolm elaborated the futility of so many students being put through a 'meat grinder' experience when teachers knew that they were below national minimum standards. Hence, DE's quest for the right data using NAPLAN, provides a picture that, for the most vulnerable learners, is incomplete and unhelpful.

School leaders also explained how the primacy of NAPLAN data was enforced. This was apparent in the previous descriptions of external review processes (Section 7.3.4). Emily described the prioritisation of department data over school data by visiting reviewers. Central data banks held NAPLAN and other prescribed standardised test results. The data in these banks were given

precedence over 'the assessment that's going on in classrooms' during external reviews (7.3-33). Emily also stated that no attention was placed 'on letting teachers decide what's relevant and meaningful for their kids' (7.3-33), undermining teachers' professional knowledge and eroding their efficacy.

DE's central and district staff's deliberate prioritisation of NAPLAN data as a measure improvement was also raised in Tamara's and Malcolm's interviews:

Tamara 2022	8.2-13	*So / now there is this constant top down / department push that NAPLAN is the trusted assessment //*

Tamara described a swing towards NAPLAN as the 'trusted assessment', becoming the valued achievement measure, determining what DE wants all children to learn and at what level (Interview data).

Similarly, in 2022, Malcolm recounted this conversation:

Malcolm 2022	8.2-14	*At a recent conversation with the ED / the focus was that NAPLAN is THE (strong verbal emphasis) test / that PAT data is not even particularly reliable and running record data is not reliable // so the only data that seems to be important is NAPLAN //*

Tamara and Malcolm confirmed NAPLAN as the department's trusted data source and primary measure of school success. The trust placed on NAPLAN data disguised the narrowness of the measure; the inadequacy of the data when students were not at a level to undertake the tests; and the importance of checking progress more frequently than a biennial test allows. Students' individual personal circumstances and context were discounted as excuse making, overlooking the relevance of human factors in learning, when clearly this cannot be the case. DE staff also undermined teachers' professional knowledge and devalued their ongoing formative assessment of their learners' progress.

Kelly offered her private consultant perspective on DE's new directions:

Kelly 2022	8.2-15	*And as I say to principals / we've gone from improving / to proving // and so you're all busy proving / proving I've done the work / proving that I've done the compliance / proving that I've looked at my data / but they're (DE) not improving overall // and the data has not improved //*
	8.2-16	*And I think that's the difference // I think it's gone to a politically driven compliance model / rather than a continuous educational improvement headset // that's just an outside looking in view //*

The insight that school leaders were required to prove, rather than improve, is instructive. Through these words, Kelly condensed the changes she saw, as an outsider, into a key phrase, effectively capturing the shift that came about with DE's new improvement aspirations. Globally, proving compliance is a facet of the accountability processes that dominate many current education policy domains (Holloway et al., 2017). This, and the next chapter, examine the structural and power relations leaders in this research identified as they attempted to prove their compliance. The next section recounts central DE staff's requirement that schools 'fix' the data.

8.2.2. Imperative to fix the data

In the previous section, leaders indicated that the top-down demand to achieve world class improvement had become focused on NAPLAN. Mark explained how, by 2020, outcomes were preeminent and that raising test scores became a priority over supporting students to learn (Interview data).

Emily's interview responses were consistent with this reading. Elaborating her previous reflections that the SIP focus became how to boost data (8.2-05), she added that in 2021 and 2022:

Emily 2022	8.2-17	*now we're getting a bit more of a // well / what's your data saying? push // and it's not where you think it is / and so they're cracking down //*
	8.2-18	*for leaders / it has become more about fixing the data / not quality practice / or student learning / or teacher learning // it's the pressure from above to fix the data //*

Emily understood that central and district officers required school staff to attend to their standardised data, especially NAPLAN. This led to school leaders experiencing pressure to 'fix' their data rather than attend to quality teaching practice. This is a concern, because extensive research, such as Hickey et al.'s (2022) findings point out that quality pedagogy and assessment improve student learning outcomes, not attention on data points. It is also interesting to consider the meanings of the word 'fix'. It can be interpreted as rectifying or rigging (Cambridge University, 2022). While one might expect that DE's intentions were that staff rectify their NAPLAN results, Lewis and Holloway's (2019) research suggests that under pressure to improve results, teachers can resort to gaming accountability expectations.

NAPLAN outcomes are reported in achievement bands, low to high. Band results are recorded for every participating student and summarised at school level. Tamara spoke about how summarised band results were managed on spreadsheets from 2020:

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Tamara 2022	8.2-19	*Numbers look great on a spreadsheet // but if you were to put actual / anecdotal teacher observations and everything onto a spreadsheet / it would probably look very different to your numbers and stats about what band they're achieving at / the upper band / lower band / whatever //*
	8.2-20	*but it doesn't reflect // sort of really what's happening at ground level // It's like its more about the NAPLAN bands than kids //*

Tamara indicated the significant gap between NAPLAN data, recorded as bands on spreadsheets, and what teachers learn about their students in classrooms. As previously noted, student learning is more complex than what a number from a biennial assessment can capture. Tamara posited that where a student is positioned on an achievement band, based on a one-off assessment, garnered more import than the breadth of knowledge teachers held about that student as a unique learner and human. Data about students' personal circumstances and wellbeing needs were not considered. Spreadsheets of NAPLAN band data were drawn on by central and district staff to assess school progress and target action areas for improved data (Field notes, 2019)

Actions DE required to improve the data were raised in many interviews and my field notes. First, central and district staff ran professional learning sessions to support the implementation of prescribed improvement practices and insisted on targeted teaching and revision sessions for current students, based on the previous year's NAPLAN data (Field notes, 2019). Collette (Section 6.5) described teachers feeling compelled to drill test content and added:

Collette 2020	8.2-21	*… / to get good results / even if kids couldn't do it // for weeks / if not months / before NAPLAN / teachers thought of little else / than getting results /// there was a lot of pressure //*

Collette reflected that many teachers recognised that a lot of effort was going into revision for NAPLAN tests because they felt pressured to improve results. She previously noted that NAPLAN concepts were well beyond many students' current ability (8.1-04), and repeated that judgement here. Tamara also addressed practice tests:

Tamara 2022	8.2-22	*Students do practice tests prior to the NAPLAN / quite often / they practice multiple times // and students were also practicing their narratives / and / whatever content / that was expected in the NAPLAN // they were like practice, practice, practice //*

Teachers acquiesced to the pressure from outside officers to undertake repeated practice tests to improve test results, abandoning previously successful practices and pedagogies. This pressure on teachers to improve the school's NAPLAN data and 'get good results' links to the discussion about

employment precarity discussed in Section 7.3.6 and sheds light on teachers' thinking of little else than their results (8.2-21).

Having considered ways that teachers responded to expectations that NAPLAN data be improved, Malcolm's concerns about fixing the data signalled an additional understanding:

Malcolm 2022	8.2-23	*The fact that teacher insights / professional judgement / that that's not valued data is really concerning // because the system is moving more and more toward improving NAPLAN results as its focus //*

Here, Malcolm identified a parallel shift away from valuing teacher professional judgement. DE's focus on standardised tests, as true measures, influenced departmental and then school staff to concentrate on fixing the data. This had consequences. While potentially unintended, the effects included: the dominance of NAPLAN in determining student learning and teacher practice; NAPLAN band data given precedence over rich individual data; teaching to the test; and simplifying school and student contexts and challenges into numbers on a spreadsheet. Malcolm added the negative impact on trusting teacher judgement. Having established the genesis of 'fixing the data', the reliability of NAPLAN data as the basis for this focus is explored next.

8.2.3. Data reliability

This section aims to elucidate participants' stated apprehensions about the rise of NAPLAN as *the* trusted measure of school success. Concerns about the quality of NAPLAN data collected in DSAS's remote context are recounted. Three contextually situated examples outline why NAPLAN's trustworthiness as reliable data may be called into question: attendance implications, unsound comparisons, and student mobility.

Interviewees spoke to the impact of who attends and NAPLAN results (Section 6.4). As a reminder, a summary is offered here. When DE policy prioritises improved results, teachers 'curate' attendance, meaning that they include and exclude students based on their perceived ability to successfully undertake NAPLAN (Field notes, 2017). This activity also supports teachers' ambitions for permanent teaching positions (Section 7.3.5). On the other hand, under pressure from federal authorities to increase NAPLAN participation rates from 2017 to 2019, DE policy explicitly required that all students undertake NAPLAN. The ED visited DSAS, prior to the 2017 NAPLAN assessment week, to ensure clarity about the expectation that all students undertake NAPLAN (Field notes, 2017). In 2017, after the first 'everyone participates' NAPLAN, a secondary teacher described how five of her Year 9 students required support to write their names on their NAPLAN test and then

left the rest blank while they looked at the pictures (Field notes, 2017). Similarly, Collette challenged the requirement for everyone to participate when she declared that the 'majority of the kids weren't at a level where NAPLAN information actually was useful' (8.1-04). Staff described being caught between their professional understanding of student capacity and broader departmental expectations.

Attendance makes a difference to the data collected. The diversity of DSAS students' learning dispositions and outcomes was recounted in the case study context (Section 5.4). A significant number of DSAS students lacked the academic skills required to undertake NAPLAN. The fact that five students in one year level group were unable to do more than put their name on their NAPLAN paper indicates the futility of requiring *all* students to participate and consequences for the school's overall results. Blank tests would do little to demonstrate school improvement or to indicate how those students were progressing (Section 6.4).

Julian described how an attempt to explain the impact of 'blank tests' in the data set was received by the new principal in 2020:

Julian 2021	8.2-24	*There's / there's always a story behind the data /// in 2020 / NAPLAN came up in a leadership meeting / we were trying to give the back story // you'd remember / the ED told us that every kid had to do the NAPLAN / that was in 2017 and 2018 // But [new principal] / he just wasn't interested in hearing that back story // He just kept saying / all the test results are bad / so / the back story was just ignored //*

In parallel with the move away from considering students' unique identities and contexts, schools' stories and responses to policy shifts were also devalued. Julian's recount of changing attendance policy expectations, and the impact on DSAS's overall NAPLAN results, was not heeded.

Malcolm corroborated the impacts of policy shifts around DSAS students' NAPLAN participation:

Malcolm 2020	8.2-25	*We weren't surprised when the overall NAPLAN results dropped / who comes to school and who does it / makes a difference //*

The insight that who participates matters would appear self-evident. Malcolm demonstrated a lack of surprise that having more students struggling with academic learning sitting the test, produced a drop in overall results.

The following interview excerpt reflects Tamara's thoughts on the effects of managing school attendance around NAPLAN, in 2021 and 2022:

Tamara 2022   8.2-26   *not everybody's encouraged to come to school // Do they send a bus out looking for students to come now? // not really / in NAPLAN week? / Especially not then /*

8.2-27   *so / results are unreliable I think / because actually those students who aren't coming to school now / and aren't sitting NAPLAN tests / they aren't the most capable // and then well its interesting because NAPLAN is still not showing great results / even with just the most capable kids sitting the tests /*

Again, the local enactment of policy shifted. Less active insistence on attendance, especially during NAPLAN week, returned the school to the pre-2017 tendency to 'curate' who takes NAPLAN tests. Responses to policy positions may be explicit, as portrayed by Mark and Julian in the early study period, or more indirectly enacted as Tamara depicted here.

This fluctuation in school NAPLAN attendance processes has not been described to disparage the school or staff. Indeed, one must acknowledge that teachers desperate for NAPLAN results that support their goal of permanence with the department (Section 5.5) and aspirant leaders faced with promotion precarity (Section 7.3.6) are ensnared in a betwixt-and-between (Turner, 1987) or no-win situation. Subjected to power-over by those with positional power, staff make choices to accommodate the expectations placed on them. In schools similar to DSAS, the concurrent demands to improve NAPLAN attendance and school results align awkwardly and potentially irreconcilably.

Emily introduced the second example of how NAPLAN data could potentially be unreliable:

Emily 2022   8.2-28   *And // when we're looking at NAPLAN data / to see how the school is going / the LET had us looking at year threes from this year compared to year threes from last year // they're not looking at year threes in 2020 with year fives in 2022 / the same kids // so they're not looking at the data attached to a cohort / they just want to see the year level data / year to year //*

NAPLAN is undertaken by Year 3, 5, 7, and 9 students each year. Emily expressed concern about the practice of comparing a year level's NAPLAN data to that of students in the previous year's cohort. Recognising that different cohorts of students have different characteristics and skills, she saw more value in tracking students as individuals or against their own cohort's results two years prior. Emily recommended looking for progress made by individuals across biennial NAPLAN assessments. Her contention, that the annual comparison of year levels was incorrect, was discounted. Data decontextualisation was observed in both the shift from putting a face on the data to attending to school/system data and the discounting of schools' back stories. The practice

of assuming different cohorts of students can be meaningfully compared is another form of blindness to context (Field notes, 2018).

Jasmin, raised a third contextual issue that impacts the reliability of NAPLAN data:

| Jasmin 2022 | 8.2-29 | *There is lots of transience at DSAS // for the families that come and go / we have plans for each time they come back to us // and for some it turns into regular absences // that compounds their learning problems //* |
| | 8.2-30 | *also / we have immigrant groups come in / and with them we sometimes have patches of this amazing data / and then those kids go and the data drops again //* |

Desert Sunshine's demographic profile varied and factors including transience and immigration impact on who is at school when NAPLAN occurs. School cohorts vary with these influences. Jasmin suggested that the characteristics of the school population may be quite different from year to year. Support for this perspective can be found in research, such as the work of Prout Quicke and Biddle (2017) who identified how the lack of a robust empirical and theoretical framework to explain school (non-)attendance obstructed effective policy design. Failure to account for the underpinning structural incompatibilities (Bonnor et al., 2021) is yet another form of contextual blindness that casts a third source of potential doubt over the veracity of NAPLAN data.

Julian, Malcolm, Tamara, Emily, and Jasmin drew attention to attendance practices, cohort variations, and transience and immigration, as three factors related to the reliability of NAPLAN data in this remote context. These doubts about reliability were not considered when NAPLAN was promoted as the right data and true measure of school effectiveness and improvement.

8.2.4. Views about the likelihood of success

Having established that DE's determination to be world class could be based on flawed NAPLAN data comparisons, this section canvasses Jasmin, Tamara, and Julian's views about the likelihood of DSAS successfully achieving the expected outcomes.

Jasmin revealed the most optimistic outlook:

| Jasmin 2022 | 8.2-31 | *I guess the proof of the pudding / in the long run will be with the data // NAPLAN results will tell us //* |
| | 8.2-32 | *we think we are seeing a significant improvement // but the thing that makes it difficult is the number of student absences //* |

> 8.2-33   *we have many structures in place to support kids learning // but / some days / we'll have teachers sitting in empty classrooms / and that's really disheartening // and I don't believe that [DSAS] is alone with this problem / and it has definitely impacted on achievement //*

> 8.2-34   *so it is kind of the longer term / for our NAPLAN data to show the improvement the department wants // but we are starting to see some slight increases and improvements in reading //*

Jasmin revealed a longer view in her confidence in the data, the 'proof of the pudding', and in NAPLAN results ultimately showing the school's improvements. She attributed achievement gaps to the impact of low student attendance and indicated that the school has put interventions in place to support students with irregular attendance. That teachers sit in empty classrooms suggests that the strategies in place may not address complex issues around attendance (Dillon, 2019; Whitau et al., 2022). Jasmin's assertion that attendance is not solely a DSAS matter is well corroborated (Dillon, 2019; Guenther et al., 2022). Low attendance rates were common in DSAS. The DSAS attendance data presented in the case context (Section 5.4), revealed the school's low starting attendance levels and further drops since 2019.

Tamara also expressed her view about the likelihood of success, also speaking about the proof being in the pudding:

> Tamara 2022   8.2-35   *I'm not sure which way this world class push will go / it's going / but / the proof will be in the pudding // I mean / we keep being told / we're not there yet / we're not there yet / we're not there yet // we are being told that we're not there yet by lots of people / all the department people tell us we're not / So // the data obviously isn't reflecting / dramatic changes in the children's learning / the shifts the department wants /*

Tamara presented a less optimistic outlook, noting that five years into holding world class ambitions, DSAS was 'not there yet'. This perspective is supported by *MySchool* (ACARA, 2023) data. Acknowledging the significant shortcomings of NAPLAN data, the researcher used DE's 'trusted' measure, NAPLAN, to investigate what DSAS's *MySchool* data may add to Jasmin and Tamara's input. The *MySchool* (ACARA, 2023) site offers the option to see schools' NAPLAN results in relation to 'like' schools and state averages. DSAS's results are below or comparable to those of schools with a similar socio-educational background (ACARA, 2023). Comparison to state averages tell a different story as evidenced in the example in Figure 8.2-1.

Figure 8.2-1 DSAS Year 7 NAPLAN Reading results 2014-2022 – plotted against state averages (ACARA, 2023)

In this figure, the grey line with boxes represents the state average results. The blue line with diamond points represents DSAS's average Year 7 Reading results. The pink diamond represents below average and the red diamond represents well below average results.

This figure, based on 2022 Year 7 Reading results, was selected as representative of the Year 3, 5, 7, and 9 students assessed in literacy (Four tests: writing, spelling, grammar, and reading) and numeracy (ACARA, 2023). Improvement of students' reading skills had been a focus at DSAS from 2017. The Year 7 group was also enrolled at DSAS during the first five years of DE's improvement strategy. Examining Figure 8.2-1, DSAS's average Year 7 Reading results fall 'below average' and 'well below average' against the state average. The 2022 grey diamond represents 'data not yet available', but visual inspection suggests a 'well below average' label will be assigned against 2022. Across all NAPLAN assessment areas, DSAS fell well short of state averages.

The 2023 NAPLAN results were reported separately, as testing was brought forward from May to March. Table 8.2-2 provides an overview of DSAS's 2023 results, also against state averages.

Table 8.2-2 Summary of DSAS 2023 NAPLAN results – compared to state averages (ACARA, 2024)

2023					
Compare to ⚪ Students with similar background 🔴 All Australian students					
	Reading	**Writing**	**Spelling**	**Grammar**	**Numeracy**
Year 3	370	388	346	350	357
Year 5	455	424	433	430	448
Year 7	489	420	502	464	463
Year 9	528	502	524	507	491

In Table 8.2-2, results marked in grey indicate too few test participants to provide reliable comparisons. Like Figure 8.2-1, results marked in pink are 'below state average' and red are 'well below state average'.

Two readings of this data are offered. The first is the observation that in Figure 8.2-1, state results have been reasonably consistent across the eight years shown. For a state aspiring to be great by 2028, an upward trend will be required. This is not apparent here. The second reading is that while DSAS data is variable year-to-year, it was generally well below state averages. Tamara's comment that the principal and visiting experts tell the staff that 'they are not there yet' (8.2-35) appears to be supported by *MySchool* data.

Next, I consider this data against DE's (2020a) expectations in the *Standard of Educational Achievement*. All Year 7 students are expected to achieve NAPLAN Band 6 (out of 8 Bands), or above, on all tests. For 2021, the *MySchool* website scores state-wide Year 7 students' average reading as Band 6 and DSAS's Year 7 students on Band 5 (ACARA, 2023). This means that DSAS's Year 7 students were one band below SEA in 2021 and two bands below SEA in 2022, reinforcing Tamara's description of DSAS staff's receipt of 'not being there yet' messaging (8.2-35). Progress towards, or ahead of, a school average of Band 6 had not occurred. This data suggests that while state average scores sit on the target band, DE (2020a) is falling short of its ambition for 'All children and young people [to] progress and achieve at or above their year appropriate level' (p. 7).

One might also read the year-to-year variation in DSAS's *MySchool* graphs as corroboration of Emily's view that applying prior year students' results to the planning for the current cohort is invalid (8.2-28). The DSAS NAPLAN data indicates that there is significant annual variation across

all year levels and all five NAPLAN assessments (ACARA, 2023), confirming Emily's view that cohort variations are substantial.

Returning to Tamara's commentary:

Tamara 2022	8.2-36	*And like I said before / well / the majority of the students that are attending or at school are like my children / they would come to school anyway / and they would receive instruction / anyway*
	8.2-37	*And so the ones that you do want to get // the ones that really need to be at school / to make significant leaps in learning just aren't attending // and probably that's not being reflected in those stats / in NAPLAN //*

Less directly than Jasmin, Tamara identified attendance as a factor in the shortfall of learning outcomes. She noted that children who were more socio-educationally advantaged, like her own, regularly came to school and received daily instruction. Table 5.4-1 shows a 40% decline in DSAS students' attendance from 2018 to 2022. It is not possible to analyse this decline in relation to socioeconomic status but, in 2022, First Nations students attended 32% and other students 71% on average. DSAS's NAPLAN participation in 2022 was 67% (ACARA, 2023). This data provides some support for Tamara's viewpoint that students most needing a dramatic lift in their learning outcomes were less likely to be attending school and participating in NAPLAN. That those most in need of a quality education are not attending suggests there are equity implications underpinning DE's aspirations.

Tamara also noted that, while Desert Sunshine's more socio-educationally advantaged students continued to attend school regularly, the school's NAPLAN results were not reflecting a clear upward trend. This view is upheld by the *MySchool* data (ACARA, 2023). In seeking to understand why this could be the case, it is timely to remind readers of DSAS's socioeconomic complexity as introduced to readers in the case study context. Teaching in this context brings challenges, with enormous variation in learner skills and aspirations, as evidenced in the disparity in learning readiness in a Year 8 class (Section 6.5). All school leaders interviewed were clear that the multifaceted disadvantage in communities such as Desert Sunshine meant that the starting point was low, that classroom conditions were impacted by community dilemmas, and many students had experienced trauma.

Julian contributed to understanding classroom complexity:

Julian 2021	8.2-38	*my idea is that everything had to be massively differentiated / students' skills were / at all levels // how can the department make any meaning out of the [DSAS's] NAPLAN results where the test is at a supposed level? // and so many of our kids weren't anywhere close? / couldn't even start? //*
	8.2-39	*I think it's more important to measure effort and growth / for each kid // I think that they are the things that I care about more than having kids meeting some standardised level // certainly more relevant in [DSAS] that's for sure //*

Measuring growth was a foundational principle prior to 2018. In settings like that of DSAS, tailored learning programs with attention to student engagement were considered best practice. Julian pointed to the difficulties inherent in making meaning out of NAPLAN results for diverse year groups. He signalled that average results hold little meaning. Others supported this assertion, for example, teachers recounted that blank tests were submitted when NAPLAN participation was mandated. Tamara related that from 2021 to 2022 efforts to have students at school for NAPLAN were patchy, and that most students completing NAPLAN would be in a higher socioeconomic bracket, similar to her own children (8.2-36). Even with this accidental or deliberate curation of attendance, DSAS's results are stubbornly holding below and well-below state average (ACARA, 2023). There appears to be solid support for Jasmin, Tamara, and Julian's contestation of DE's ability to draw meaning from DSAS's NAPLAN results, without paying attention to individual students' needs and progress and listening to the school's story.

Next this chapter turns to the ways teachers used and were impacted by NAPLAN data.

8.2.5. Teacher data access and use

For educational improvement to occur teachers must participate in improvement processes (Frostenson, 2015; Hardy & Melville, 2019). This is acknowledged in DE's Strategic Plan (2019b), 'Our teachers will be supported with the best curriculum resources, high-quality professional development, access to better student data, and the support they need in their classroom' (p. 6). Access to 'better' data has many dimensions. Thus far, reliance on standardised assessments, the imperative to fix data, and questions raised about data reliability have been interrogated. Having also canvassed NAPLAN's potential for providing a reliable measure of improvement progress, this section will explore Jasmin, Tamara, and Malcolm's perspectives on teachers' data use.

The school leaders interviewed consistently viewed the impact of DE's data processes in the classroom somewhat unenthusiastically. Jasmin offered the most affirmative view, describing DSAS staff engagement with data from 2020 to 2022:

Jasmin 2022	8.2-40	*Twice a term at staff meeting / [the principal] lets us have a look at the improvement plan // our targets // and he tells us how we are tracking towards them / the targets are fairly straightforward // so we can see if we have improved //*
	8.2-41	*I think it would be fair to say / most of the teachers know that the data exists / and they do use it / they have that extra time to use it // so / yes / I think it is informing teachers' practice / and enabling them to reflect on their practice //*

Jasmin spoke about the principal 'letting' staff look at the SIP and 'telling' staff how the school was tracking against 'fairly straightforward' targets, at two staff meetings a term. That the principal lets and tells staff, speaks to a power relationship, and suggests plan ownership and improvement data analysis may not have been situated with the teachers who were to enact the SIP in their classrooms. Jasmin also describes the targets as straightforward. One might mistrust the efficacy and reach of straightforward targets in a complex remote environment.

Jasmin referred to teachers having extra time. In her earlier commentary, she explained that teaching staff were provided with an additional lesson of non-contact each day, meaning that they were out of their classrooms for two of the six daily lessons. The intention to give it their best shot, through providing additional non-contact each day, relied on school funding for supplementary staff as DE schools are funded for primary teachers to have one non-contact lesson each day. This supplementary time was allocated to support teachers in undertaking improvement related work: data analysis, planning literacy and numeracy lessons, and working with experts. One reading of Jasmin's commentary suggests that the connection between most teachers 'knowing the data is there' and believing that data is influencing teacher practice could be tenuous.

Tamara conveyed another perspective in relation to the same period:

Tamara 2022	8.2-42	*Once the data is collected / the teachers don't really see it / it just goes up to / I guess to school management / then to the department and whatever / and into spreadsheets //*
	8.2-43	*we have sort of crunched some numbers in a staff meeting // but no individual student numbers / it's all just a group collective number / like this is where this year level is at // then we looked at this is what we're working toward [referencing SIP targets] // then we red light green light or yellow light / based on where we think they might possibly be sitting //*

> 8.2-44   *it's all with leadership direction / and with no consultation with teachers // there's' no 'where do we think we're taking the children next?' / or 'where do you think this is going?' / teachers are just told what to do next //*

Tamara described a pathway for the school's data to the department that does not include teachers. NAPLAN data was made accessible through the *Leaders' data dashboard.* From the dashboard, school leaders can print out data detail and summary sheets. Tamara's mention of 'crunching some numbers in a staff meeting' probably referred to cohort summary printouts. These printouts were evaluated with traffic light symbols to track school progress against SIP targets. Assigning a number to a year level is inherently contestable because of the enormous variation in students' skill levels. Tamara's statement (8.2-44) also refers to leadership direction. Her statement, 'and with no consultation with teachers', suggests ownership of the improvement plan and the data collected was situated away from teachers. Implications of this will be further considered in Chapter Nine.

Malcolm also expressed a view about data use as compliance processes intensified:

> Malcolm 2022   8.2-45   *Teachers have lost so much autonomy over data now // their classroom data is irrelevant / in the new story //*
>
> 8.2-46   *And / it's really worrying because it means that you can try and do things that you feel are right / for your students / but if they're not meeting NAPLAN standards / where they need to be / you're done / no more deviations / no other data / so teachers have no choice now //*

Malcolm speaks about the loss of teacher autonomy in relation to data. With their classroom records seen as irrelevant, teachers are expected to access purportedly trusted data, such as NAPLAN, as a measure of progress. While DE has provided leaders with data dashboards to make this data easier to access, reliance on an assessment undertaken biennially contradicts vast research on the importance of regular, during teaching, formative assessment in shaping classroom programs and student intervention processes (Wiliam et al., 2004). Participants suggested that NAPLAN, rather than teacher data, was the only trusted measure of improvement (Section 8.2.1). He also described narrowing of teacher classroom practices through the expectation that they discontinue initiatives that cannot be shown to improve NAPLAN data.

As Jasmin, Tamara, and Malcolm reflected on the enactment of DE's aspirations, they depicted low levels of teacher agency and autonomy in relation to data use. They raised issues associated with how teachers were consulted and in relation to what data was accessed. Teachers'

professionalism was discounted as their judgement and the well documented benefits of ongoing, classroom, formative assessments were displaced (Holloway & Brass, 2018) by summary sheets of compliance data as measures of improvement. Concomitantly, those interviewed voiced apprehensions about the reliability of this data and pinpointed processes intended to fix the data in support of DE's ambitions. The department's intention to rely on the 'right' or 'better' data has been contested.

8.3.   DISCUSSION

DE accountability systems were accelerated as the new policy was enacted. This discussion elaborates four themes, identified as the department sought to measure improvement: valued prior practices, trusted measures, fixing the data, and the implications of relying on decontextualised data.

Improvement processes, including standardised testing, collecting and analysing data, and external reviews, were in place before the department launched its intentions to be world class by 2028. These earlier processes, such as data analysis that valued students' uniqueness and humanity, were underpinned by collaborative analysis and decision making. Teachers were recognised as skilled and competent, and for knowing their students best. Amanda and Collette talked about DE work and 'actual' work, recognising that not all department initiatives were an innate fit for the DSAS context, but labouring to comply with requirements. This is not to say that there was a utopian view of the situation prior to 2018. Datafication was well underway. Mark spoke of 'drowning in data' (Interview data) but Collette, Emily, and Malcolm also recognised staff autonomy in choosing what they would attend to and what was 'right' in the DSAS context. Critical debate was encouraged. The school leaders' interviews reflected their sense of ownership of the earlier shared direction, their commitment, and a commonly held belief that progress was being made when attention was on individuals rather than standardised assessment data.

Responding to political calls for improved NAPLAN and global data comparisons (Gorur et al., 2019), there was a shift away from the analysis of individual student data to a focus on departmental data. The imperative to achieve better results and address falling standards had consequences. Datafication intensified. The state's educators were increasingly subjected to test-based accountability (Jarke & Breiter, 2019) and reliance on 'trusted measures' became the norm (Gorur, 2020). Kelly summarised this change as leaders being asked to 'prove, rather than improve' (8.2-15). Central to DE's expectations of proving was the positioning of NAPLAN as a true

and reliable measure that provided the right data as best evidence of improvement. As Malcolm (8.2-10) explained, it *was* all about NAPLAN, even though extensive literature critiques such large-scale standardised assessments. NAPLAN is widely considered a high stakes assessment (Gurr et al., 2022; Lingard & Sellar, 2013) that impacts negatively by limiting and reducing education in disadvantaged and remote schools (Cormack & Comber, 2013; Lingard et al., 2014).

Centrally-held standardised assessment data was repositioned, from being one source of information, to the only evidence against which schools were to be held to account. DE made this central data accessible to leaders through a data dashboard. Emily, Mark, and Malcolm reported the increasing reliance on data dashboards for evidence of their schools' improvement and demands that they account for outcomes. Renshaw et al. (2013) have signalled reservations about reliance on online data warehousing tools and dashboards because, while they provide tools for comparison, they silence context, socioeconomic status, family background, and other factors that 'may explain the comparative performance of schools' (p. 12).

Correspondingly, the demand for schools to improve their data necessitated improved student performances on NAPLAN. Emily described the consequence as schools being obligated to fix their data (8.2-18). Pressure on schools and the requirement that they fix their data is a recognised global education reform phenomenon (Heffernan, 2016). Leaders felt under pressure to fix their data rather than attend to quality teaching practice. The demand for teachers to account for learning outcomes was enacted as pressure to teach to the test (Lingard, 2013; Thompson & Cook, 2014) and can lead to schools and teachers gaming accountability expectations (Lewis & Holloway, 2019). Despite understanding that many students were not yet capable of undertaking NAPLAN, teachers felt pressure to prepare students to put their best efforts into the tests.

Participants identified the impacts of NAPLAN and high stakes testing more generally on teachers and students. Thompson and Harbaugh (2013) undertook an extensive survey on the impacts of NAPLAN testing and found that many teachers spend time instructing their students on the upcoming NAPLAN testing, meaning less time was spent on other curriculum areas. Anderson and Cohen (2015) identified pressure on leaders to lead to the test and Riddle et al. (2021) raised alerts about the negative effects on student engagement.

Two major themes emerged in relation to the reliance on NAPLAN as the right data: trustworthiness and absence of attention to context. First, on trustworthiness, participants

contended that attendance, policy, cohort variations, and population variations impacted the reliability and comparability of data collected.

School attendance was identified as conceivably unsettling data reliability. As discussed in the case study context (Section 5.4), DSAS students' attendance was lower than in metropolitan settings. Structural impacts influence who is at school and who can engage with requisite learning to effectively participate in assessments like NAPLAN. In seeking to understand school absenteeism, particularly in mobile populations, Prout Quicke and Biddle (2017) reported:

> … absenteeism amongst marginalised and/or highly mobile populations, may be most usefully conceived of as a manifestation of structural incompatibilities between formal schooling systems and the life projects and circumstances of these school-aged children and their families. (p. 57)

In addition to attendance, official and localised variations in policy expectations related to NAPLAN participation, were also seen as having potential to compound fluctuations in results and influence data comparability. Whether all students, or only capable students, undertake NAPLAN, will change the results. Collette, Malcolm, Mark, and Tamara described the gap between many DSAS students' current capacity and the skills required to undertake a NAPLAN test. When the policy mandate was that all students must participate in NAPLAN, incomplete and blank tests were inevitable, diminishing school and cohort scores.

School leaders reported other potential causes of data irregularities. Tamara and Emily questioned annual comparisons of student results that ignored cohort variation. Jasmin queried the impact of student population variations due to migration and transience in Desert Sunshine. Tamara further challenged NAPLAN's effectiveness as a measure of improvement, referring to DE staff's assertions that DSAS 'is not there yet' (8.2-35), saying, 'well its interesting because NAPLAN is still not showing great results, even with the most capable kids sitting the tests' (8.2-27). That DSAS's results continue to be below and well below state averages highlights complexities currently overlooked.

The second reliance on NAPLAN theme arose from how context was considered. Progressively, local contextual knowledge was devalued and, in some cases, discounted as excuse making (6.5-03). Accounts of overlooked student-centred data and unheeded contextual information backed leaders' contentions that students' life experiences, skills, and prior academic progress were considered irrelevant. Teacher attention on individuals' learning progress, their dispositions, and their intervention requirements was overlooked and undervalued. Educators' knowledge of

students' circumstances, starting points, and wellbeing needs were displaced by central data sets accessed on a data dashboard and interpreted on spreadsheets of cohort data. Central and district staff espoused the expectation that all students achieve or exceed DE's (2020a) *Standard of Educational Achievement* (SEA), irrespective of their circumstances. Calls for broader measures of success were disregarded, and NAPLAN was considered the only reliable data point, regardless of context and backstories.

8.4.   CONCLUSION

DE's measurement of their improvement initiatives' effectiveness prioritised results over accommodating school and student needs. Overall, there was a trend toward simplification through data. Participants described a shift away from their ability to make choices and consider what data was required to track students' progress and assess next steps. The department determined that the 'right' data was standardised assessments, such as NAPLAN.

That NAPLAN was seen as a 'trusted' assessment, in all situations, underpins many of the simplifications participants identified. Two examples were prioritisation of biennial testing over targeted school data and classroom assessments and NAPLAN cohort band information replacing the complex picture of individual students' context, learning, and progress. The department's insistence on full NAPLAN attendance oversimplified the multifaceted community, family, socioeconomic, geographic mobility, and cultural barriers to school attendance (Guenther et al., 2015; Whitau et al., 2022).

Having explored DE's improvement planning expectations (Chapter Seven) and their commitment to measure improvement with standardised tests (Chapter Eight), the final *context of practice* data chapter (Chapter Nine) investigates DE's move to standardise practices. It will explicate the propensity for simple and systematised responses to complexity and consider leaders' responses to one-size-fits-all practices introduced to facilitate the envisioned improvement in learning outcomes by 2028.

9. CONTEXT OF PRACTICE - STANDARDISATION

Founded on an expectation that pursuing consistency will further Australia's global competitiveness (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), national education policy mechanisms have vigorously pursued increased uniformity, particularly in curriculum, standards, and testing (Savage, 2016). DE's Strategic Plan and accompanying policy texts adopted this global education policy framing. From 2018, the department mandated improvement planning and standardised measurement to achieve their aspirations. The previous two chapters examined processes and implications related to mandated improvement planning and DE's governance by data as it measured improvement with standardised test data.

This final data chapter probes how improvement policy expectations of standardisation and universality were enacted in the *context of practice.* It traces the prioritisation of literacy and numeracy, the provision of guidebooks and practice guides, and considers how the demand for quick improvement ultimately restricted curriculum, created a reliance on standardised and commercial programs, and specified teaching practices. The power relations employed to convey expectations, the prioritisation of explicit direct literacy and numeracy instruction, the provision of curriculum materials, and the role of experts are considered. DE (2019b) justified their expectations as ambition for a 'particular emphasis on curriculum supporting teachers to drive learning and improvement in their classrooms' (p. 5) because 'more tailored support from central to … schools is vital for growth' (p. 11). As with the previous two chapters, an explanation of earlier praxis provides context from the perspective of DSAS leaders.

9.1. PRIOR TO DE'S ASPIRATIONS FOR WORLD CLASS IMPROVEMENT

Before DE's *world class* aspirations, the DSAS staff team were engaged in collaborative development of the School Improvement Plan (SIP), joint work to improve teaching and learning, co-creation of curriculum and pedagogy agreements, and learning from each other to increase student learning engagement. They also made decisions about appropriate data to support their focus on individual students and their strengths and needs (8.1-05). Additional insights into the way DSAS staff engaged with curriculum, pedagogy, and student engagement are explored through Julian and Collette's eyes.

Julian, DSAS teacher and secondary leader, spoke about the period before the launch of DE's new improvement policy, saying 'we actually didn't try to apply a recipe that works' (7.1-09). He elaborated this statement offering by his perspective on the DSAS middle school curriculum work:

| Julian 2021 | 9.1-01 | *So / curriculum wise / it's different now / but when we started with you [researcher as principal] I felt we had a lot of autonomy because / when we set up the middle school team / we negotiated our way around the curriculum / like used it as a guide / we sought content that engaged our kids // we did that as a team / checked stuff out / talked about what worked ///* |
| | 9.1-02 | *In my classroom / if I found something really worked then the kids and myself / we'd run with it // and … when others saw something working well / whether or not it was necessarily strictly in the curriculum / if there was pedagogical quality and the kids were really engaged / then we celebrated it //* |

Julian referenced the middle school team's collaborative curriculum development approach and subsequent celebration and sharing of successful curriculum decisions and effective pedagogical processes. Students provided feedback, requested repetition of processes, and joined in decision making about what worked. Julian expressed his understanding of accountability requirements, while retaining autonomy with his students. Julian's comments cohere with the description of extensive consultation and collaborative approaches taken to improvement planning and development of the *Everybody Reads* plan. In Section 7.1.2, Malcolm, Collette, Emily, and Mark described their sense of shared ownership of the direction and decision-making processes. Here, Julian indicated that this also applied to curriculum and pedagogical practices.

Describing the pre-world class period at DSAS, Collette, the primary leader, stated:

| Collette 2020 | 9.1-03 | *when we were … considering wellbeing and engagement // We had lots of kids // their attendance was really low / and they just they didn't know how to behave in a classroom / how to interact with other kids and / how to be and how to learn at school //* |
| | 9.1-04 | *we cut back suspensions[12] / we knew that they just didn't teach kids anything about how to behave // it was better when we made a shift to teaching kids the skills that others already have // we realised that we needed to enable them to access classroom learning / they weren't able to because they didn't know 'how to' (air quotes used) in a sense /* |

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[12] Suspension is a process of exclusion from school for a designated period, used as a consequence for students' misbehaviour.

Alongside collaborative curriculum development and building teachers' pedagogical repertoires, attention was given to the wellbeing needs and engagement of students. Collette valued the proactive steps taken to support students to participate in learning. Attempts were made to understand every student as a unique individual with skills, needs, and interests. Recognising the complexities of young people's lives, the school moved away from suspending students from school for inappropriate learning behaviours and set about teaching the learning dispositions and skills required to be an effective learner (Field notes, 2017). Mark, Malcolm, Kelly, Julian, and Emily also provided commentary on the importance of wellbeing for learning (Section 7.3.3).

Into this school context, where teachers were considered professionals, participated in making decisions about their work, and reflected and learned together, DE stepped in and compelled leaders and teachers to adopt what international experts determined as best practice.

9.2.   CHANGES AS WORLD CLASS ASPIRATIONS WERE ENACTED

In line with drive for consistency through national education policy mechanisms (Reid, 2020; Savage, 2016), the department required the enactment of simplified processes. How this occurred has been introduced over the last three chapters, as those interviewed questioned trends, such as: relying on straightforward improvement targets; prioritising biennial NAPLAN results over classroom data and formative assessments; and valuing NAPLAN band information over the composite pictures teachers had developed of their unique students.

| Julian 2021 | 9.2-01 | *And now / with world class there's a new recipe // mmm // it's gone backwards again / band aids[13] and guidebooks //* |

In his previous comments (9.1-01/02), Julian talked about staff collaboration, autonomy, and professionalism, as the middle school team negotiated curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Here, Julian signalled that world class aspirations brought a 'recipe', meaning standardised approaches, to achieve the improvement sought.

This chapter probes the standardisation that followed. Additional procedures that altered or intensified as expectations of improvement deepened are investigated, including pressure to conform to 'recipes', one-size-fits-all solutions, and the advice of experts.

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[13] Bandaid is a brand name for a medical sticking plaster.

9.2.1. Conveying expectations

Amanda, Julian, Mark, Malcolm, and Tamara narrated their experience of compliance expectations. The leaders recounted how principal compliance was achieved and the effects of increased oversight on the treatment of local knowledge and expertise.

Informed by The Learning First Group Pty. Ltd. and McKinsey Pacific Rim Inc., the department introduced or strengthened procedures to convey their improvement expectations to schools. The international consultants were contracted by DE (2019a, 2020b, 2021b) at a cost of $1.4 million per annum. As DE's improvement expectations gained momentum, Education Directors (EDs) became agents for ensuring compliance with the practices recommended by the external consultants and a top-down power dynamic prevailed. To increase monitoring of policy the enactment, DE increased the number of EDs from 18 to 30. In parallel with an increase in their numbers, EDs' roles transformed from support and partnership to exercising increased oversight and requiring school leaders to conform with DE's demands.

In addition to further exploring the location of power, this section canvasses strategies EDs required principals and school leaders to implement, including five-week sprints, data conversations, line of sight, monitoring teacher planning, and telling rather than guiding teachers.

Amanda's observations about the site of power and expertise follow:

Amanda 2020	9.2-02	*I've been in this job for 18 years now / visiting remote sites all across the state / and sometimes I just want to weep with some of the stuff I see now // not often is it because people act out of ignorance in their schools // mostly it's because they've got people above them who have got no idea about what they're doing //*
	9.2-03	*but then school staff can't tell those people above them anything / they can't tell them that this is stuff that shouldn't be happening / that these things you make me do / they get in the way of teaching and learning //*

Amanda located DE staff holding positions of power as the source of most ineffective practice she saw in her union role across remote schools. Power was exercised by non-school-based staff, including the ED and other DE personnel, to ensure compliance. Amanda demonstrated little faith in the quality of the advice that remote schools were required to enact. She also recognised the precarity of school staff's positions as an impediment to their ability to resist or contest top-down directives.

Similarly, Julian (DSAS leader) commented on his 2020 to 2021 experiences of power dynamics as expectations were conveyed:

Julian 2021	9.2-04	*I guess I define the way stuff happens now / as more like the top-down in action // we have less say // so / I think less autonomy with the curriculum than we had before the new policy /// before I was accountable for student learning / and able to make choices about the what and how / with the kids too // but not now / not anymore //*

Until 2020, the DSAS middle school team under Mark's leadership established a team-teaching approach using integrated curriculum. Julian undertook a key role in curriculum mapping, ensuring there were connections to the Australian Curriculum, and overseeing the creation of resource banks, based on effective, contextualised, relevant topics, for use by future staff (Field notes, 2018). Like Amanda, Julian recognised the shift to top-down control and loss of teacher autonomy.

Leaders act as gatekeepers for policy expectations (Ball et al., 2012). Guided by international consultancy firms, DE required EDs to ensure that principals opened the gates and complied with all improvement directives. Four examples of new or intensified procedures follow. The two from within the case school, DSAS, are detailed and the two from DSAS leaders in their subsequent regional and remote schools are briefly introduced.

The first improvement procedure, five-week sprints, was a mechanism that school leaders were required to use to ensure teacher compliance with the required approaches:

> *DE's school improvement focus has spawned five-week sprints or data check-ins, narrowing what is valued to a small number of measures and activities that bring about change in short periods. This rise in performativity risks teachers seeing themselves locked schoolwide into being producers of outcomes, rather than teachers of students. (Field notes, 2019)*

Reflecting the urgency to achieve results, all school principals were required to identify one literacy or numeracy practice that every teacher implemented simultaneously and to then monitor the outcomes of the practice over five weeks. This improvement strategy has different names in the literature: tiny shifts (Hattie, 2016), teaching sprints (Breakspear & Jones, 2021), short term data cycles (Hardy, 2021b), and five-week sprints (DE, 2020c). Described as short surges of evidence-informed improvement work (Breakspear & Jones, 2021), sprints were conceived as a routine for continual improvement. Sprints narrow what is valued to a small number of measures and activities, intending to bring about change quickly. Hardy (2021b) identified that while these practices intend to enhance learning outcomes, the influence of accountability-oriented logics and performative applications on such practices detracts from their educative potential.

Five-week sprints were introduced from mid-2019. At DSAS, one teaching strategy was selected at a time from the DE *Building Foundations guidebook*. All teaching staff were compelled to use the strategy. School leaders were required to observe the target strategy in action and report on the outcomes of their sprints at district leader meetings with their ED twice a term. These sprints added significant pressure and workload for both leaders and teachers. While potentially ensuring improvement was 'focused and deep', sprints were problematic for the many graduate teachers struggling to establish relationships and classroom routines and meet the broader demands of their new careers (Field notes, 2019). The singular focus of sprints ignored local expertise and contextual needs.

Mark, the DSAS deputy principal, described the second additional strategy: a modification in focus for performance management:

Mark 2020	9.2-05	*Performance management meetings became about teachers' data // the leaders / we had to grab as much data as possible / off the dashboard / and talk to teachers we line manage about it //*
	9.2-06	*I don't know really / how useful talking about NAPLAN and stuff was / I guess I'd say beginning teachers had more immediate priorities //*
	9.2-07	*we agreed to break the rules / quietly / we looked at the data in team meetings when there was new DE data / that way one-on-one meetings were more about the teacher and the kids / and what support was needed //*

There was a long-standing departmental requirement that all staff meet with their line manager twice a year for performance management. Designed initially to provide support, professional learning, career advice, and professional feedback, these meetings shifted to data conversations from mid-2019. Data conversations were conceived as a process to support the development of teachers' assessment meta-language while making the impacts of teaching and learning more evident and informing ongoing practice (Renshaw et al., 2013). Data conversations held with senior members of staff or colleagues purported to develop a shared understanding and sense of responsibility for academic outcomes (Bishop & Bishop, 2017; Hardy, 2021b). Muller (2018) identified the potential for quantification of performance to distort and detract from effective practice and Daliri-Ngametua et al. (2022) recognised that reductive data-driven logics propel performativity.

The school leaders also identified practical concerns with the requirement to hold data conversations. As an example, Mark found that a data focus for one-on-one meetings was not the best use of time (Field notes, 2019). A major stumbling block was the lack of immediacy in DE's

valued data source, NAPLAN. Students had opportunities to sit NAPLAN biennially, and their results were delivered six months after the testing week. Beginning teachers' priorities were about the pragmatics of their teaching roles: challenging behaviour, difficult parents, and finding resources. Given that outdated NAPLAN data was a low priority in beginning teachers' daily work, an alternative approach to complying with DE's expectation was required. The leadership team decided that the team meetings already dedicated to SIP discussions were an effective time to update awareness of DE data. This meant that when the ED checked that data conversation meetings occurred, the leaders respond positively by recounting the modified process that suited the majority of graduate and early-career teachers at DSAS (Field notes, 2019).

As previously identified, for Jasmin, Collette, and Emily, data collected about specific skills was central to their work with teachers and support staff. This data was discussed one-on-one and in teaching and year level team meetings at least weekly (Field notes, 2019). Having the advantage of immediate implications for programming of teaching and support programs, teachers were eager to engage in discussion about implications, approaches to addressing learning gaps, and follow-up action. The ED did not value these conversations because such data was no longer deemed the 'right' data.

Emily and Malcolm described two other activities they were required to undertake in their subsequent schools. While outside the case school, they offer additional examples of compliance mechanisms. Emily described line-of-sight framing of the requirement that school leaders are compliant with DE requirements. She said, 'There's this phrase at the moment, "the line of sight". They mean from the department to the classroom' (Interview data). The call for line-of-sight was initiated by external consultants. EDs were required to ensure principal compliance. Principals were required to maintain line-of-sight surveillance over their staff to embed the required teaching practices and comply with departmental expectations.

The fourth compliance activity was described by Malcolm.

Malcolm 2022	9.2-08	*Now leaders have to see teachers' programs // all teachers have to pass in their programs /they give them to leaders who are expected to monitor them for compliance / with SIP actions and departmental approved activities // like 'is it in the guidebooks?' / and 'is every teacher doing what the [central office literacy team] is telling us to do?' //*

Malcolm described the additional expectation that school leaders see teachers' programs, referring to their written planning for teaching and assessment in their classrooms. To ensure

school leaders took responsibility for teachers' enactment of SIP agreements in their classrooms, checking teachers' programs became an additional surveillance responsibility for principals. As with the previous three examples, this too illustrated DE's demands for more oversight of their improvement expectations and a lack of trust in local expertise and decision-making.

The final contribution for this section comes from Tamara, DSAS's early years leader. She spoke about DSAS staff's experience of DE messaging from 2020 to 2022:

| Tamara 2022 | 9.2-09 | *So currently / with our site / … everything is controlled // and we all discuss it / privately I mean / the staff / it is always an ongoing discussion amongst ourselves / about how we see that things get done and whatever // it's that / the control factor is / is really quite intense //* |
| | 9.2-10 | *and one comment that is always talked about among the staff is we are constantly **told** (verbal emphasis) / we are not asked // and that in turn / is / it's creating a problem / because you're sort of disempowering your staff / and basically / trying to just create these sort of / robotic zombies that just / trudge through and do the things they're told to do / and say whatever they are being told to say //* |

Tamara described the lived experience of top-down pressure through the principal as control and as intense. A key element of this control, discussed among DSAS staff, was that they felt they were 'told' rather than asked. Tamara described a link between being told and the disempowerment of teachers, who are expected to be 'robotic zombies' doing and saying what is required by those above. Holloway's (2021b) research confirms that such performative agendas are well established where neoliberal informed policy solutions shape ambitions for excellence. Tamara's reference to 'robotic zombies', signals an alarming and, one might anticipate, potentially unintended outcome of DE holding high expectations. The pressure applied on principals, to enact these aspirations was experienced as intense control by those interviewed.

In addition to finding local knowledge and expertise was devalued while prescribed improvement practices were monitored by EDs, participants described having lost agency and demanded greater autonomy to respond to context and make decisions. How this played out is explored in the next three sections of this chapter.

9.2.2. Prioritising literacy and numeracy instruction

Responding to the political demand for quick results, district and central staff frequently repeated the mantra that if world class improvement was to be achieved, the work would be 'focused and deep' (Cornelius & Cornelius-Bell, 2022, p. 66). The resources and practices that accompanied DE's focused and deep mantra are surveyed through the voices of Kelly, Julian, and Tamara.

To briefly explain how the research data was sorted for this and Section 9.2.3, I begin by acknowledging the intertwined nature of curriculum and pedagogy. While there is overlap, this section predominantly focuses on curriculum and the following section on teaching practices.

This section's focus on curriculum begins with Kelly, and her commentary on her consultancy experiences with schools after the introduction of the world class initiatives:

Kelly 2022	9.2-11	*So when they (DE) were six months into the world class push / and they were like / what do we do now about school improvement? // they were impatient // they didn't recognise that improvement is long / slow work // so they started pushing programs //*

Staying the course was potentially a casualty of political pressure to obtain quick results. Kelly was clear that improvement takes time. Political motivations (Bacchi, 2012) were a factor in the decision to change allegiances to commercially available programs. Kelly described this as seeing 'everyone doing the same program' (Interview data). Amanda also described the increasing use of pre-packaged, commercial programs (Interview data), seeing these products as counterproductive to the real work of schools.

The transition from autonomy over one's teaching to using commercially produced programs to support whole class, explicit instruction (Hogan & Lingard, 2019) is considered next. Many of the leaders spoke about the literacy and numeracy guidebooks[14] published in September 2018. Julian provided background in relation to these resources from 2020:

Julian 2021	9.2-12	*Before (the 2018 policy launch) / we could choose / we could try things out with the kids / we'd see what worked / what kids thought helped them learn // we responded to our context and kids' needs /*
	9.2-13	*But then the guidebooks came out // I don't really have a particular issue with the guidebooks as like a set of strategies //*
	9.2-14	*but as soon as you go from / oh / here's something to help you teach better / try it / talk as a team about it / make decisions about it / to the way it is now / read this and do it / and don't do anything else // that's / well / that was ignoring our context and our kids interests and needs //*
	9.2-15	*So / I think the guidebooks / their intended strategies are a good idea / but /// it became like we had to live and breathe the guidebooks / it was all about them and they were all we could do //*

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[14] Not available publicly, these documents are restricted to DE staff – released in 2018.

Julian revisited his discontent about losing agency in relation to adopting, adapting, and reviewing curriculum. He acknowledged the guidebooks as helpful resources but their elevation to prescribed teaching content denied the need to contextualise when designing learning experiences. Julian also reemphasised the significance of working *with* his students to make decisions about teaching approaches. Staff autonomy was reduced under pressure to allocate significant parts of the school day to the strategies in the *Building Foundations literacy and numeracy guidebooks*, to the exclusion of all else.

Tamara spoke about 'protected times' for the teaching of literacy and numeracy:

Tamara 2022	9.2-16	*There's / now / now there's a big push for everything / look /now everything is just strictly controlled //*
	9.2-17	*There are protected times / there are no disruptions during those times // there are no phone calls to classrooms / etc / etc / unless it's an emergency of course // kids aren't even supposed to go to the toilet or get a drink //*

Tamara and other leaders described the increased control over uninterrupted literacy and numeracy instruction time. While there is merit in the protection of time for the core business of teaching literacy and numeracy, Tamara describes infringements of children's rights as one extreme to which protected time was taken. The curriculum content teachers delivered was clarified in the following extract.

Tamara 2022	9.2-18	*… classroom teachers are delivering literacy and numeracy instruction from commercial programs / whole class explicit teaching / direct instruction //*
	9.2-19	*this push is like / is also treating the teachers who are doing / science / HASS (Humanities and social sciences) / and things / like deliverers too / so they have to get their planning off the shelf / the department website // and so they just follow the pre-scripted plans that are on there //*

Tamara highlighted how demands on teachers positioned them as deliverers of pre-determined content: literacy and numeracy delivered via explicit teaching and pre-packaged lesson plans for other learning areas. While commercial programs may appear to have value when teacher workload is in the spotlight, they reduce teacher engagement in the crafting of teaching and 'can threaten children's engagement in learning and undermine the value of professional teaching staff' (Ruscoe et al., 2023, p. n.p).

DE began providing lesson plans and teaching units for all learning areas from 2020:

> *New curriculum resources, created by [study state] teachers for [study state] teachers, will help to raise achievement across the board. They outline what is to be taught, the sequence in which it is best taught and the intended learning outcomes. (2019b, p. 5)*

That the plans were adapted by teachers from the study state, for teachers from the study state, may be read as an attempt to contextualise the teaching units. However, the variations within every Australian state make such concessions irrelevant. The difference between urban and remote students' interests, experiences, and prior knowledge are marked. Curriculum coaches were appointed to every district to support the delivery of the prepared lessons, and teachers were expected to teach them (Interview data: Amanda).

Tamara's interview provided additional information about DSAS's enactment of policy expectations regarding compliance with the guidebooks and protected time:

Tamara 2022	9.2-20	*And so the idea behind that is / is /teachers should be teaching / delivering really / delivering the required content / in literacy and numeracy protected time ///*
	9.2-21	*so the idea is that if any student misbehaves / then leadership come in and deal with the behaviour // its uninterrupted time / without any disruptions to the students' learning and the teacher teaching //*
	9.2-22	*there isn't always support for where kids are at / and like a ton of kids just get sent home / because they've been disruptive / misbehaviour doesn't fit within the model /*
	9.2-23	*and so / I don't believe it's a workable model at ground level in reality / the kids that are sent home all the time / are the ones that need to be taught / they can't do the stuff /*
	9.2-24	*if they can't do it / and they're instructed in how to do the literacy and numeracy skills as a whole class mostly / probably they still can't do it / so they act up or after a few tries they just don't turn up to school / they won't turn up to do what they can't do // they feel that they're not at that level / so they don't come to school / so that is why attendance is so low //*
	9.2-25	*So / the whole class instruction model / it puts everybody into one box / and keeps them there // that just doesn't work //*

Protected time, then, was primary teachers delivering whole class, explicit instruction for 100 minutes of literacy and the same of numeracy, every day. Julian described similar restrictions on secondary students' programs, with 50% of double subject lessons allocated to explicit literacy instruction (Interview data).

Student misbehaviour has many origins (Lodi et al., 2021; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Tamara directed attention to students' inability to engage with the level of learning occurring in the whole class context as one cause of misbehaviour. How the school leaders responded to interruptions of

protected times, in particular, her statement, 'like a ton of kids just get sent home', speaks to Malcolm's identification of the need to understand students' face-saving responses to challenging tasks and their tendency to choose exit strategies rather than being seen as incompetent (6.5-01). Tamara identified the students sent home as the ones most in need of learning support because they lacked the skills to engage in whole class instruction. Tamara also indicated that the whole class, one-size-fits-all model provided insufficient support to learners struggling with the level of academic instruction in their classrooms and that placement in 'one box' was not appropriate for all. She noted that the most vulnerable learners 'act up or after a few tries … just don't turn up at school'.

Given DSAS's high proportion of early career teachers, addressing the wide learning range in classrooms was a demanding expectation, but prior to DE's new improvement initiatives, it was a priority. The school employed more than 20 school support officers, most as curriculum support ancillary staff, to assist teachers across all year levels to differentiate learning for students. The school's secondary section was restructured to place two teachers in each class, one to provide general instruction and the other to provide individual and small group support and intervention (Field notes, 2018). Tamara described a different scenario by 2022, 'there isn't always support' (9.2-22), signalling that the whole class programs were prioritised over the previous more tailored approaches.

For the leaders who participated in this research, inclusion was a closely held principle. The Desert Sunshine community was diverse, and equity demanded that, despite the obvious challenges, all students should have access to education at the only school in the area (Field notes, 2018). Emily and Collette valued the professional learning provided by the district office prior to 2018. It had a focus on differentiating instruction to accommodate all learning levels and cultural inclusion (Interview data).

By 2022, Tamara described what was happening as an unworkable model on the ground, in the reality of DSAS (9.2-23). Students could access schooling only by conforming to a teaching model based on whole class instruction, whether they were at a level to participate or not. Leaders removed students from classrooms if their behaviour interrupted teaching. Tamara related her concerns that students unable to accomplish learning tasks might act up or try a few times before electing to be absent from school. It may have been an unintended outcome of protected teaching time, but Tamara attributes the schools' poor attendance to these exclusionary teaching and

behaviour management practices (9.2-23). Earlier, Jasmin spoke about her disappointment that teachers sat in empty classrooms (8.2-33), perhaps further evidence of students turning their backs on an education not meeting their academic, social, emotional, and cultural needs (Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017).

9.2.3. Permitted teaching practices

Having considered implications that arose from DE's resources and focussed and deep improvement approaches, this section considers Kelly, Julian, Emily, Tamara, and Jasmin's input related to teachers' praxis. As DE struggled to demonstrate improvement to match its aspirations, decisions were made not only about what was to be taught, but also how. The previous section canvassed some implications of stipulating what was to be taught. How teachers were to teach is explored next, as central and district staff compelled focused and deep explicit literacy and numeracy instruction and moved toward one-size-fits-all solutions.

Kelly's perspective from her private literacy consultancy role was:

Kelly 2022	9.2-26	*It is back to / like one-size-fits-all / It's not 'Oh, this kid needs more stretch comprehension' / 'This kid needs …' / 'this kid….' / now it's like no / sorry you're in Grade Two and you choose from these books / and do this worksheet from this program //*

Kelly observed schools' compliance with demands for one-size-fits-all programs and worksheets based on the child's year level rather than their skills and needs. Emily previously referred to this shift, and that teachers saw increasing limitations on their teaching as a result (7.3-07).

Julian described his experience of restrictions on his teaching praxis in his secondary classes in 2020:

Julian 2021	9.2-27	*Even in the one-hour secondary level literacy lesson / it was tightly controlled // we were told to start off with five minutes of this / 10 minutes of that activity / and so on //*
	9.2-28	*it was straight from the department and their world class education plans / department people kept reinforcing that we must do it //*
	9.2-29	*we were just doing very strictly scripted stuff // there was no reference to trauma informed practices // there was nothing about knowing the [First Nations] culture // … none of what we did before //*

Julian positioned 'department people' as the source of tightly controlled lesson formats, scripted practices, and content exclusions. That teachers *had* to comply echoes the experiences of leaders (Section 9.2.1). Julian was also clear about what was no longer allowed, no trauma-informed

practices, culturally relevant content, and none of what had previously been collaboratively and professionally decided. Julian valued approaches from before DE's policy agenda changed. These approaches were willingly adopted by the secondary teachers, including enacting the notion that every teacher is a teacher of literacy, across the curriculum (Field notes, 2019).

Emily spoke about work with a central office literacy coach at her current remote school:

Emily 2022	9.2-30	*our primary teachers / at the moment / are working with a literacy coach / to look at the required literacy teaching block / and all the different parts of it // and / to be fair / some of the stuff is great //*

Similar to Kelly and Julian, Emily acknowledged quality aspects in the coaching her staff received from the central team.

Emily 2022	9.2-31	*but where teachers are being pushed to basic / whole class instruction stuff / instead of the more complex / tailored approaches teachers were using before / it's not great //*
	9.2-32	*teachers are given scripts / like this is where you do // the sound / this is when you do blending // this is when you're doing your words to read and your words to write / and all of that kind of stuff //*
	9.2-33	*there is a lot of frustration from teachers who are experienced / they say / 'I do all of that in my way, do I now have to change that and go to a more basic format?' //*
	9.2-34	*They want to continue in the way that works for their children / and allows them to differentiate for the different individuals in their class // they aren't happy to be told they have to move to a structure / that really only allows them to have / sometimes to have two different groups // it has become a whole class model / that is just sit and look at the whiteboard / and read the words off it //*

Emily contested the replacement of effective, complex, tailored, and flexible literacy teaching approaches with basic, whole class instruction, seeing them as 'not great'. Emily's view of scripted practices was echoed by Tamara (9.2-19), Amanda (Interview data), and Julian (9.2-29). Teachers expressed frustration at having to put aside their literacy approaches to comply with one-size-fits-all requirements. The experienced teacher Emily references, one who wanted to continue to differentiate for the unique individuals in her class, rather than follow an obligatory whole class model presented from the whiteboard, brings to life the demands placed on teachers.

Emily 2022	9.2-35	*I think / there, there is a movement to take away teacher decision making and make everything more uniform / and to focus on the whole class // one DE literacy person told me that DE wants / if you go from a year three class at [southern suburbs school] or [Western suburbs school] / to a year three class at [current remote school] or somewhere like [DSAS] / you should be doing the exact same thing // even though*

> *the contexts are completely different / and the students are completely different //*

Emily provided an insight into the central literacy team's ambitions to standardise teaching approaches across the state. She was told by a DE literacy coach, that when walking into any classroom across the state, teachers should be seen doing the 'exact same thing', further illustrating the contextual blindness described in previous chapters.

Teachers experienced difficulties in making the data collected useful in their classrooms. Tamara described how they were impeded by tightly managed one-size-fits-all methodologies from 2020 to 2022 (Interview data):

Tamara 2022	9.2-36	*the teachers can't use the data that they've collected / they have their set 100 minutes of literacy and numeracy / the time is all taken up / and so you can't practice or go back over stuff in those lessons / there is no time to respond to the data //*

Tamara provided an understanding of the challenges teachers faced meeting the expectation that they make collected data useful in their teaching. She had previously explained that teachers are told what to do (8.2-44). As seen in this chapter, 'what to do' was a tightly packed 100-minute lesson of teacher directed, whole class instruction in literacy and numeracy.

Teachers responding to the phonics knowledge gaps identified in children's responses to a DE required test were unable to deviate from the imposed literacy and numeracy programs. Tamara suggested that there was no capacity to revise, revisit, or consolidate learning outside of the programs they were required to teach.

Reflecting on the impact of DE expectations, Jasmin said:

Jasmin 2022	9.2-37	*So sometimes I think that / in order to fit the model of teachers we are training them to be / that maybe it can impact on them /// Perhaps / teachers are faced with a lot in order to fit the model // and I think that can be the source of some stress //*

Jasmin referred to the 'model of teachers we are training them to be'. This alludes to the expectation that an ideal teacher can be created and measured and has some resonance with Tamara's 'robotic zombies' reference (9.2-10). Holloway et al. (2017) found that as 'good instruction' became defined and assessed against measurable outcomes, 'more complex and contested issues' were minimised (p. 5).

Given the constraints on teachers' professionalism, creativity, and agency outlined so far in this study, one might not be surprised that top-down pressure creates stress. Tamara's 'robotic zombies' reference (9.2-10), and Jasmin's use of 'training them to be' could be read as very different experiences to the collaborative, consultative, shared problem ownership, and teacher-initiated school improvement features that school leaders described prior to DE's new improvement directives (Section 7.1.2).

9.2.4. Role of experts

Considering the question of how teachers were 'trained' to fit the required DE model brings this study to what leaders had to say about the role and impact of external experts. DE's (2019b) intentions were that, 'Experts in curriculum … will work directly with leaders, teachers, students and schools' (p. 12). This section interrogates the support of 'experts'.

In the move away from trusting school staff to improve student learning outcomes, DE relied on external experts to shape, support, and monitor improvement progress. DE's (2019a, 2020b, 2021b) key sources of external expertise have been previously introduced: Learning First Group Pty. Ltd. and McKinsey Pacific Rim Inc. They worked with the EDs, instructing them on practices to be used with all leaders in their districts, such as monitoring teaching programs, and five-week sprints (Section 9.2.1). DE (2019b) also appointed a centrally-based literacy team, with coaches and curriculum writers to produce lesson plans, and additional district-based curriculum leaders to support teachers to use these plans. Jasmin referred to a visit from the district officer whose job it was to 'get the improvement plans right' (7.3-09), one of many references to prioritisation of external expertise over local knowledge.

DE relied on the provision of external expertise in their quest for improvement. Kelly, Malcolm, Jasmin, and Tamara provided insights into the ED's role, the case context, messaging, and explanations of experts' roles in DSAS. Kelly spoke of ED's altered roles.

Kelly 2022	9.2-38	*Central office is making a big feature of not giving [education] directors and school leaders that same imprimatur for the work now // they rely on international expertise instead //*

Kelly contrasted the role her improvement team and the EDs had taken with the current externally-driven improvement structure. While DE Director of Improvement, Kelly and her team used the expertise of leaders in the field and a robust consultative process. Multiple readings can be seen in DE's replacement of the previous collaboratively developed and ubiquitous framework,

with global international expertise. One reading was the political pressure for quick results.
Another could be related to annual politically challenging NAPLAN media cover. A third is that
change was motivated by a lack of trust in teachers and leaders. Kelly suggested that EDs also
experienced modifications in their decision making and opportunities for agency as improvement
action became more about events (7.1-06), compliance, and external expertise.

Malcolm harked back to DSAS's context:

Malcolm 2020	9.2-39	*I think that for a school like [DSAS] / we're in a particularly difficult position // locally to be able to have their finger on the pulse of what's happening here /*
	9.2-40	*let alone in our district education office / 600 kilometres away / and central office almost 900 kilometres away // and that's where our support people come from as well // they're working in a very corporatised environment / with a metropolitan focus / and they do outreach to schools //*

The remoteness, complexity, and uniqueness of DSAS provided its staff, those living and working
in the community, with challenges (Field notes, 2019). DE's external support staff were a
significant distance, in kilometres and understanding, from DSAS.

External experts, such as review teams that spent less than a day in Desert Sunshine had
substantial influence over improvement priorities (Section 7.3.4), despite being unlikely to
appreciate contextual challenges. In Section 7.2, it was argued that DE's reliance on outside
expertise resulted DSAS's starting point being disregarded and the expectation that students reach
predetermined achievement standards irrespective of their circumstances (8.2-04). While
discounting context, external experts accused staff of making excuses (6.5-03), silenced the staff's
explanations with statements such as 'it's just the data point that matters' (8.2-05), and generally
failed to acknowledge human factors or recognise that metro-centric practice holds little
relevance in Desert Sunshine.

Malcolm spoke about the power of outside experts at his regional school after DSAS:

Malcolm 2022	9.2-41	*I worry about the increasing power held by the outside experts // there are very clear 'right thing to do' messages / from our ED / his team / and the [central literacy support team] //*
	9.2-42	*we know / that students are being left behind with the programmatic structured approaches they expect us to use // everything is largely whole class explicit instruction / how can those struggling kids be supported in a whole class one-size-fits-all approach? //*
	9.2-43	*then the ED gives us accolades / and lots of pats on the back / because NAPLAN data is up // we don't know how that can be /*

> *unless the kids left behind aren't dragging the results down as much now they're not coming to school //*

The ED's praise for complying with the 'right thing to do' messages and improving NAPLAN scores ignored matters that Malcolm saw as fundamental. Corresponding with views expressed by Tamara, Emily, and Mark in previous sections, Malcolm expressed concern about students left behind by the programmatic structured approaches.

Participants saw attendance as a barometer of their school's success. Like Tamara at DSAS (9.2-24), Malcolm saw a pattern of non-attendance when students struggled with the one-size-fits-all approaches. Unlike Tamara's reporting of DSAS's NAPLAN results, it appears that these absences may have positively impacted Malcolm's current school's results. Malcolm and Tamara both explained how whole class direct instruction improvement practices widened equity gaps.

Turning now to DSAS, post COVID, Jasmin and Tamara offered somewhat different perspectives on the impact of experts on staff and outcomes. Jasmin said:

Jasmin 2022	9.2-44	*Now we're over the worst of COVID / all the experts are invited // they come in and provide training on specifically literacy and some numeracy / and lots on explicit direct instruction //*

Jasmin was generally positive about the access to and impact of external experts at DSAS, describing results as good (Interview data). She provided the names of seven regular visiting external experts who came every school term. There were three from universities, and one consultant for the phonics program in use, one for the writing program, and one for explicit direct instruction. District office and central literacy team experts also all visited at least once each term to support highly scripted explicit direct instruction (Interview data).

Jasmin 2022	9.2-45	*[current DSAS principal] said that the expectation is that the teachers use their additional NIT time for the preparation and planning // and that they'd be provided with support from the experts // and then we had to see improvement in student learning outcomes //*
	9.2-46	*just a few weeks ago / a teacher had a meltdown / because the idea that she had experts here to support her so often / and giving up her planning time / and being expected to demonstrate the things she was expected to do / in her classroom / freaked her out //*

Given that seven external experts plus district and central staff were visiting regularly, classroom teachers were potentially being observed and coached almost weekly. Staff were provided with an additional lesson of non-contact time each day to support literacy and numeracy improvement,

including time with visiting experts. Jasmin described how, despite this additional time, at least one teacher found the demands overwhelming.

| Jasmin 2022 | 9.2-47 | *I sometimes think that we've removed every bit of wriggle room for teachers // they have to teach like they are learning to // they have to do it exactly like all our experts tell them to do it //* |
| | 9.2-48 | *then I go around to each of the classes / and make sure that there is consistency in the approach / and in the use of the materials / I can see the results / they're good //* |

Jasmin described the lived experience of DE's policy construction for the teachers in DSAS. She acknowledged that the lack of 'wriggle room' and strict focus as teachers learnt to use scripted whole class explicit direct instruction, exactly as the experts told them to do it, could be disempowering.

Jasmin also made regular classrooms visits to ensure consistency in approach and materials use. These materials were likely those associated with the commercial literacy program in use. Surveillance of teachers' literacy or numeracy practices occurred weekly. Nevertheless, Jasmin described the outcomes of the number of classroom visits in positive terms.

Tamara spoke about the role of the same group of external experts in DSAS post-COVID:

Tamara 2022	9.2-49	*We have / all these external experts that come in / and mentor the staff on explicit direct instruction / and how literacy and numeracy should look / etc / etc / it seems like every week //*
	9.2-50	*Then the experts give instructions to the site leaders / and they put the requirements into an action plan / and the plan is handed to staff that really / they just have to do what they are told //*
	9.2-51	*The ground level / classroom understanding is ignored / there is absolutely no consultation on this with the teaching staff / on checking how this will work with your cohort of children / no asking what they think / no checking how it can be broken down // there is absolutely no consultation //*
	9.2-52	*And so / there is discontent / not that they'd say so to [principal's name] / amongst the staff / that they just think they're not really being treated like teachers // they're just glorified technicians // It's creating a lot of tension //*

Tamara added to the picture of 'all these external experts that come in' to DSAS to mentor in literacy, numeracy, and explicit direct instruction. She signaled that experts' advice was provided to the leadership team who put it into an action plan for staff to do, discounting classroom teachers' understandings about their students, and without consultation. Teachers expressed discontent away from their principal's hearing (9.2-09). Tamara described the tensions and

teachers' thinking that they were being treated as 'glorified technicians' (9.2-52), not consulted in any part of the action planning and enactment.

Malcolm, Jasmin, and Tamara indicated that district, central, tertiary, and private consultants were held in high esteem by EDs, and that they made decisions about teachers' work in consultation with leaders only. Teachers were provided with action plans and expected to implement scripted, whole-class, time managed, explicit direct instruction like 'glorified technicians' (9.2-52) with no 'wriggle room' (9.2-47). The picture painted here may not have been DE's intent, but it evokes increased oversight, discounting of local expertise, power and control, heightened performativity, and loss of teacher professionalism.

9.2.5. Impacts on teacher professionalism

The interview data exposed wide-ranging impacts on teachers, related to intended and unintended consequences of the standardisation of practices accompanying DE's improvement ambitions. As previously discussed, teacher professionalism was constrained by accountability measures, loss of ownership of and input into improvement planning (Section 7.3.2), and having experts determine what and how they should teach (Sections 9.2.2 and 9.2.3). Other factors raised include reliance on standardised test data over their classroom assessments and skilled judgement (Section 8.2.1), and the demotion of their unique knowledge about students (Section 8.2.3). Emily identified the reduction in choices teachers faced: 'as the direction from the Department changed, I think that there has become less choice, less teacher control' (Interview data).

This study has identified many examples of teachers' lost autonomy and damage to their professionalism. Wellbeing leader Malcolm, and remote school union liaison Amanda, added their perspectives.

| Malcolm 2022 | 9.2-53 | *And I think that's where teacher autonomy / the loss of autonomy is really coming through // that the relationships our teachers have with our students / aren't valued // and I think that's just getting worse // year by year there has been more push for NAPLAN data / tighter control over what can be taught and how / more limited SIP outcomes to pursue // [DE] asks more of our teachers / but treats them as less //* |

The loss of teacher autonomy was precisely summarised as Malcolm bemoaned the devaluing of teacher-student relationships and increased control over teachers' work. Gavin et al.'s (2021) teacher workload research is one of many studies that back Malcolm's belief that teachers are

asked to do more. As their workload increased and their professional autonomy was infringed, it was little surprise they felt treated as 'less'. Deficit discourses around teacher quality were also rife in the media and politics (Stacey, 2019; Thomas, 2011).

Amanda observed:

Amanda 2020	9.2-54	*One thing that's come out of that whole conservative slide / that increasing reliance on programs / scripted practices / telling teachers what to do /*
	9.2-55	*Is that everything is dumped on teachers // because it's always the teachers' fault /*
	9.2-56	*the education system is more than teachers of course / but in the media / and politicians / all say it's the teachers // and it's affected everything negatively//*

In identifying 'that whole conservative slide' Amanda encapsulated a key aspect of this study's exploration. Expecting all schools to focus on the same improvement priorities regardless of context, to rely on one standardised assessment as the true measure, and to teach whole class, one-size-fits-all programs regardless of their students' requirements was a conservative realignment for schools.

Against this conservative backdrop, schools and teachers were positioned as responsible for fixing the falling standards crisis. Mockler (2022) noted that in two decades of media commentary on teachers and their work, the trend has been to undermine teacher professionalism and hold teachers responsible, shaping the conditions and contexts in which teachers work. Amanda reported these trends as having 'affected everything negatively'.

9.3.   DISCUSSION

To address the crisis of falling standards, DE's Strategic Plan (2019b) outlined steps to achieve 'great' status on the global stage over ten years: 'Our strategic plan will help us to accelerate achievement from good to great and beyond' (p. ii). There is strong public appeal in assertions and simplifications (Clarke, 2012) such as the department's 'great by 2028' claims. Building on earlier chapters' discussions that questioned simplified improvement planning, narrow goals, and standardised measures of improvement, this chapter explored experiences of standardisation and universality, a common route to further entrench global education discourses (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). This final case study discussion considers participants' experiences in the face of decontextualised universality. It highlights major themes, including increased oversight and

accountability, curriculum restrictions, input from experts, teacher professionalism impacts, and equity concerns. It also returns to Kelly's assertion that school staff were required to prove, rather than improve (8.2-15) and considers the implications.

The reliability and validity of neoliberal accountability systems have been challenged throughout this study. This chapter described how DE utilised an increased number of EDs to ensure that schools complied with policy directions. EDs' roles moved away from supporting school leaders to exercising oversight of curriculum, pedagogy, and enactment of advice from external experts. These strategies add to those described in the previous three chapters to ensure compliant SIPs with narrow improvement goals and reliance on standardised assessments as trusted measures.

The value of increased scrutiny of educational professionals has been contested (Holloway et al., 2017; Salton et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the department required its EDs to reinforce political and policy authority measures (Connell, 2013; Keddie et al., 2011). Complying, EDs compelled school leaders to be line-of-sight conduits for DE's expectations. School leaders were also expected to check teaching programs for evidence of departmentally approved teaching content and the required standardised approaches, establish five-week improvement sprints, and engage staff in data conversations (Section 9.2.1) to prove their unwavering focus on improvement. To further entrench the obligation to prove compliance, EDs monitored school leaders' observance of these practices through school visits and by requiring leader activity reports at district meetings.

As initially signalled with the narrowing of SIP goals, literacy and numeracy instruction was prioritised above other curriculum areas, wellbeing initiatives, and cultural inclusion. Participants described protected time for literacy and numeracy that 'was instead of everything else, like absolutely everything else' (Interview data: Julian). The language of 'narrowing' and 'focusing' has been on the Australian education political agenda for more than a decade. Lingard (2010) highlighted the political rhetoric that claimed 'a narrowed focus on literacy and numeracy' was required for improved performance (p. 131). The rhetoric of narrowing and focusing became ubiquitous and was not contestable (Cormack & Comber, 2013). Hardy (2021a) and Powell et al. (2017) also link national literacy and numeracy assessment and the dominance of these curriculum areas in politics and education policy development.

School leaders spoke to the reductive curriculum effects of the 'focused and deep' mantra. Under increased oversight, literacy and numeracy instruction predominated and only approved teaching strategies could be employed, such as those mandated in guidebooks and stipulated by central

literacy coaches and commercial programs. The propensity across Western schooling systems to regard schools as essentially the same led to a growing reliance on one-size-fits-all solutions (Lingard et al., 2017). Tamara described how 'intense control' (9.2-09) and 'being told' (Section 9.2.10) rather than consulted, produced 'robotic zombies' (9.2-10). As the imperative to enact *world class* aspirations intensified, there was increased focus on one-size-fits-all programs and worksheets (7.3-07, 9.2-35, and 9.2-42), decontextualised learning (9.2-25 and 9.2-65), and whole class explicit instruction (9.2-20, 9.2-31, and 9.2-42). A central officer explained to Emily that every classroom across the state, no matter their context, would teach 'exactly the same things' (9.2-47). Standardisation of teaching practice was a prevailing theme across participant data.

Imposing and controlling this standardisation of practice were external experts: district and central staff, academics, commercial program consultants, and contracted global education consultants. These experts' perspectives were highly regarded (9.2-43) and their views took precedence over teacher professional insights and knowledge of their sites and students. Experts made decisions about teachers' work in consultation with school leaders. Teachers were provided with action plans and were expected to implement scripted, whole-class, time managed, explicit direct instruction with 'no wriggle room' (9.2-47). While some quality practices were introduced by DE coaches (9.2-30 and 9.2-44), the participants described the strategies external experts promoted as the 'right thing to do' (9.2-41), as decontextualised practices (9.2-25, 9.2-42, and 9.2-65) that removed teachers' ability to differentiate for learner variations (9.2-34) and recast them as 'glorified technicians' (9.2-52). DE persisted with prescribed lessons, even though a Queensland study, showed that their development relied on an 'inflexible "universal fit" approach already proven ineffective' and was 'most likely to make NAPLAN scores worse, not better' (Kennedy et al., 2011, p. 15).

This picture of teachers' work may not have been what DE intended but, in demanding improvement and requiring proof (8.2-15), local expertise was discounted, performativity heightened, and teacher professionalism lost. Anderson and Cohen (2015) found that a 'narrow, "what works" conception of teaching … diminishes professional judgment' (p. 2). Braun and Maguire (2020) concluded that teachers faced with contradictory policy and practice values experienced 'a form of doing without believing' (p. 433).

Disturbingly, standardisation was also identified as a significant factor in equity concerns raised by Tamara (9.2-24) and Malcolm (9.2-43). Both broached concerns about falling student attendance

related to programmatic, one-size-fits-all approaches. Tamara explained how disciplinary practices marginalised students unable to participate in classroom learning. Misbehaviour was met with removal from the classroom, yet 'the kids that are out are the ones that need to be taught, they can't do the stuff' (9.2-23). Tamara and Malcolm raised doubt about how whole class instruction, or 'everybody into one box' (9.2-25), could support the many students challenged by academic learning. Malcolm's concerns were related to his current school, where the ED bestowed accolades for improved NAPLAN results (9.2-43). One might reasonably hope that excluding the learners most in need of access was an unintended consequence of *world class* aspirations, especially as equity and excellence have been national goals for Australian education for decades (Australian Education Council, 1989; Council of Australian Governments, 2019; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, 2008).

9.4.   CONCLUSION

This chapter exposed intended and unintended ramifications of DE's response to political pressure for quick results. Prior to this, participants valued their ability to collaboratively develop culturally and contextually relevant curriculum and attend to students' learning needs beyond literacy and numeracy. This capacity was diminished by the department's attempts to address falling standards, insisting on immediate improvement through standardised approaches.

DE utilised additional staff to exert power and ensure compliance with policy. The data showed a heavy reliance on focussed literacy and numeracy approaches, programmatic responses, and 'solutions' provided by external experts. Interviewees reported the impact of top-down power relations, amplified external accountability, and decontextualised curriculum on teachers' work and professionalism. They also identified concerns about student engagement and attendance combined with equity concerns for the most vulnerable learners, those most unlikely to attend school.

Having considered the data related to standardisation, the case study *context of practice* concludes here. A brief recount of the five chapters ensues.

Chapter Five introduced the case school which was situated in a very remote, complex, isolated, low socioeconomic community. The following four chapters explored the data collected across twelve interviews, field notes, observations, and document collection.

Chapter Six provided an overview of DE's global education policy influenced plans for 'improvement' and 'success' based on five school leaders' responses to these plans. It introduced themes such as the falling standards crisis, 'new' approaches to improvement, measuring success, and the growing tendency to overlook context as a valid influence on DSAS student's outcomes. The data challenged assumptions of sameness between metropolitan and remote schools and flagged themes that would recur in subsequent chapters.

Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine drilled down into the three topics identified consistently across the policy analysis and participant data – the obligation to improve, how improvement was measured, and how standardised practices were expected to provide quick results.

DE's world class aspirant improvement planning was the primary focus of Chapter Seven. In contrast to prior improvement practices, DE's latest improvement planning expectations featured mandatory planning templates, explicit literacy and numeracy goals, and tight timelines that constrained consultation and collaboration.

Chapter Eight considered the impacts and outcomes of DE's reliance on data and commitment to measure improvement with standardised tests. Prior student data collection processes encouraged teachers to identify the 'right' data for their students' learning needs, and to 'put a face' on the data by considering the complex picture of each student's context, learning, and progress. How this changed was explored.

This final data chapter explored the propensity for simple, standardised, decontextualised, one-size-fits-all solutions introduced by external consultants and enforced through accountability and compliance measures.

The thesis findings are explicated in Chapter Ten, and themes from across the policy trajectory research: policy analysis and case study are summarised.

10. FINDINGS

In 2018, the state education department (DE) announced its improvement aspiration - to be great by 2028. Their vision was to:

> Provide world class education that achieves growth for every child and student in every preschool and school. (2019b, p. ii) [15]

This study examined DE's improvement policy texts and their enactment using policy trajectory research. The research included a *What's the problem represented to be?* (Bacchi, 2009, 2012) critical discourse analysis and a case study in a very remote school. The case study investigated how DE's improvement vision was enacted by school staff. It explored the experiences, positioning, and reflections of a group of leaders in a time of policy flux that had consequences for their work, and for those whom their work impacted. This chapter explicates themes that emerged across the policy analysis and case study: improvement planning, falling standards discourses, compliance and accountability, reliance on measurement, the focus on literacy and numeracy, impacts on staff, and context.

These themes emerged as teachers navigated the tensions of enacting the determining formation, DE's improvement policy. Ball (1993) describes this navigation as 'changing relationship between constraint and agency' (p. 14). Before investigating the study's findings, it is timely to recap what participants had to say about prior improvement approaches to establish a baseline for the changing relationship that occurred.

Increased standardisation was not new. It was underway through structures such as the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2016a), teaching standards (AITSL, 2015), national literacy and numeracy testing (NAPLAN), and publicly accessible school data on the *MySchool* website (ACARA, 2017b). Six of the seven DSAS research participants' entire careers had been governed by these determining structures. As DSAS teachers and then leaders, they were active team members, making decisions, reflecting, and learning together while remaining mindful of government priorities and policy expectations. To varying degrees, all acknowledged the importance of consultation, collaboration, broad ownership, and shared decision making as their school planned for improvement. In addition to the high value placed on teaching reading and wellbeing for

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[15] This chapter continues the reduced referencing of DE's Strategic Plan, to date and page, to support ease of reading. All DE strategic plan extracts are formatted as block quotes.

learning, they identified the importance of contextually relevant learning, innovation, and culturally appropriate pedagogies. The leaders' input demonstrated their commitment to understanding students as more than the 'sum' of their test results, or what staff referred to as putting a face on the data to consider students' strengths and learning needs to design learning. The leaders also had views about the right data. While DE valued standardised measures, such as NAPLAN, the leaders saw value in data that informed teaching practice and they adapted DE data collection requirements to meet their students' learning needs. They also recognised that DSAS had specific challenges, with a staff turnover of 40 to 50% annually and a high number of graduate teachers. DE demands were part of the complex environment in which they had honed their craft as teachers and committed to stay as leaders, to help make a difference for and with the community.

It was into this context that DE launched the new improvement directives in September 2018. The key policy problem was the requirement for school improvement due to falling standards. Seven themes related to this central topic emerged from the discourse analysis and case study enactment data. They are detailed in the sections that follow, beginning with improvement planning.

10.1.   IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

The policy analysis reasoned that DE saw itself as not being a great education system. Hence, substantive and visible change was needed. Accordingly, DE (2018c) positioned their approaches to improvement planning as the centre piece of their new improvement aspirations. Reflecting the significance of these expectations, DE's Strategic Plan made 74 references to 'improve', 'improving', and 'improvement' (Figure 4.3-1). 59% of these improvement references were connected to modal verbs, signifying conative imperative and the importance that improvement held for the department.

Given that for decades schools had produced improvement plans – published on their school website and endorsed by their governing council – the department went one step further. DE's objectives were accompanied by mandatory School Improvement Plan (SIP) templates, with focus areas and targets shaped according to schools' allocated improvement level. DE's improvement roadmap anticipated schools' full compliance with the template in the statement:

> *Every school and preschool has an improvement plan that focuses on improving outcomes for every child and student. (2018c, p. 3)*

Producing compliant SIPs ignored extensive research that questioned the efficacy of improvement plans and silenced the fact of long-standing school improvement planning.

Nevertheless, SIP requirements featured in DE's Strategic Plan, an example being:

> *We introduced a model for school improvement which focuses on data, evidence informed planning and teaching practice. (2019b, p. 4)*

Successive DE annual reports (2019a, 2020b, 2021b) celebrated schools' compliance with the mandated SIPs, and the department's (2020b) website stated: 'There was a 100% delivery of school improvement plans to education directors'. DSAS was one of the 100% producing a compliant improvement plan on the mandated template, but not without leaders expressing concerns.

The policy analysis highlighted DE's presumption that their new model for school improvement would make the anticipated good to great shift possible. Responsibility for improvement shifted from government to schools and teachers. This deflection was observable in DE's Strategic Plan (2019b) which identified individual schools' improvement planning as responsible for fixing falling standards (p. 11). An example was:

> *Quality leaders **will** lead change, provide clear direction, foster great culture, and **will** be accountable for educational performance. (2019b, p. 7 emphasis added)*

This statement positions school leaders as responsible. Throughout the policy, leaders, teachers, and schools were responsibilised for reform. Data from the case study leaders identified tensions that arose as they attempted to shoulder this responsibility, including dealing with compliance processes, a shift in plan ownership, discounting of context, and an inability to attend to student wellbeing. Each of these is discussed.

Previous plans, developed through extensive consultation, were discounted with expectations of compliance with the mandated planning formats. The leaders cited well-documented individual student and group successes when they defended practices and outcomes from the previous 2018 SIP. Having already produced a priority improvement plan (PIP) and a SIP in 18 months, there was discontent about a third improvement plan and only five weeks to produce it. When the ED first met with the leadership team to ensure the SIP was compliant with the mandated template leaders felt their concerns were not heard (Section 7.3).

Demands for compliance morphed into valuing the SIP over all else. Leaders described how the SIP had become the driver for all school activity. They noted that nothing else was valued or discussed

(Section 7.3). Kelly – previous director of improvement and now a consultant – contended that DE's new improvement practices demanded that leaders prove, rather than improve (8.2-15). This notion was instructive in considering how DE expectations increased performativity.

The perception of high value being placed on the SIP and 'proving' compliance was supported by the policy analysis findings. The analysis identified that, in examining sentences holding the category 'improvement' and its implied intentions, there were 24 incidents of conflation between achieving improvement and schools producing a SIP (Section 4.3). This conflation was not specifically expressed by the school leaders, but their experience of outside DE staff's myopic attention, and of nothing else mattering, is consistent with conflation between planning and the results of planning. Producing an approved plan loomed large in the leaders' eyes, becoming an achievement in its own right (Section 7.3.1).

In addition to leaders' concerns about compliance and the high value placed on the SIP, they also noted a related shift in plan ownership. Leaders spoke about the ED and the district team meeting exclusively with the principal to review the school's plan from 2020 to 2022. They also spoke to the role of short time frames in restricting the level of consultation and shared decision making in plan development. These actions meant that responsibility for and ownership of the SIP sat with external staff and school principals. This is despite DE acknowledging teachers' central role in enacting improvement, as evident in policy statements, such as their ambition for a:

> *… particular emphasis on curriculum supporting teachers to drive learning and improvement in their classrooms. (2019b, p. 5)*

Given teachers' central role in delivering the strategies outlined in the SIP, the significant engagement differences between leaders and teachers and inadequate processes to engage staff in the plan were concerning. Improvement planning was one step removed from teachers and their classrooms.

Leaders identified other matters related to the prescribed improvement planning requirements. Consistently, they identified the priority placed on literacy and numeracy, and the requirement to use NAPLAN data to track SIP impact and success. Over time, NAPLAN became the only 'acceptable' evidence of literacy and numeracy improvement (Section 8.2). When a narrower improvement focus within these learning areas was determined by the ED or literacy coaches, schools were required to comply. The leaders identified inconsistencies and variations in teachers' interpretations of goals and indicated that the distance between the SIP and classroom was

problematic (Section 7.3). Reliance on measurement and the narrow and deep focus are explored in subsequent sections, but first the falling standards deemed responsible for the failure to be world class is discussed.

10.2.   FALLING STANDARDS

In times of increased global comparison and competition, narratives around falling standards are pervasive because government renderings of 'problems' become embedded in dominant discourses as regimes of truth (Foucault, 1988b). For all leaders in the study, this discourse was familiar: 'a litany of issues still to be addressed' (Section 6.5). DE's (2019b) world-class education ranking expectations were based on their view that department schools' outcomes were 'sitting at the bottom of good' (p. 2).

> *This strategic plan outlines why we have set unapologetically high expectations for every child and students' growth and achievement, and how we plan to raise the standard of [state name's] public education system from good to great. (2019b, p. 1)*

Setting unapologetically high standards proved problematic in the case school. Leaders contended that funding, support, and approaches to closing the gap between the remote DSAS outcomes and DE's (2020) *Standard of Educational Achievement* were inadequate. The expectation that DSAS produce even higher results and become *world class* was criticised, and the school's complex, remote, disadvantaged community cited as a key element in the tension (Section 7.2). Leaders' views were consistent with international research findings about the importance of socioeconomic status and geography in determining educational outcomes (Section 2.4.6).

The data revealed gaps in staff conceptions about what constituted 'world class' status. The leaders consistently expressed agreement with the demand to improve (Section 7.1.2). However, they were unclear about what underpinned DE's new improvement rhetoric, what measures would determine success, and how their school's unique context would be accommodated (Section 7.2). DE's Strategic Plan and supporting documentation provided no explicit clarification about what 'world class' status meant. The policy text analysis considered binaries of key terms related to DE's ambitions. The use of the terms like 'growth' and 'great' implied that DE outcomes were not great and every child was not growing. The plan claimed that there was:

> *… a long way to go, but by remaining steadfast in our ambition, and focused on our key levers for improvement we will deliver world-class education. (2019b, p. 5)*

Despite imprecise ambitions, compliance and accountability measures were brought to bear in service of these 'steadfast' ambitions.

10.3. COMPLIANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Tensions related to accountability measures and high expectations were referenced across the case study. Leaders described competing demands. On one hand, DE demanded compliance with policy and on the other, leaders and teachers valued local initiatives to address their remote students' specific needs. Accountability processes and increased oversight from department staff in positions of power, placed intense pressure on staff to turn away from local resourcefulness and adhere to a raft of prescribed improvement procedures.

The experience of being pressured to comply with heightened expectations was raised in most interviews. A common topic was compliance processes associated with developing SIPs. Leaders described the pressure to use improvement plan templates and focus on literacy and numeracy goals. They described how visits from central office, district, and external review teams, held more sway in determining improvement priorities than local consultation, and contextual knowledge (Section 7.3.4). As policy gatekeepers, leaders explained the tensions they experienced, between compliance with directions from those with positional power, and responsibility to their staff, students, and community.

Leaders also recounted how local knowledge and expertise were discounted as compliance demands ratcheted up (Ball, 2003). They described the demand for improved results and the shift from prioritising contextually relevant data to expectations of improved NAPLAN results that reflected improvement efficacy. As will be elaborated in the next section, this transformed into reliance on NAPLAN as a single measure.

Leaders also spoke about their inability to speak back to power, particularly in relation to job precarity (Section 7.3). By 2022, many additional accountability measures were imposed on schools, because the expected improvements were not evident. Leaders described five-week sprints, data conversations, keeping the line-of-sight, and monitoring teachers' classroom programming, as measures that added to their workload and increased accountability for enacting DE policy and ensuring teacher compliance with directions.

The policy text analysis identified that accountability was prominent in DE's Strategic Plan. The plan made 50 references to 'reform' and 'improvement', including the terms 'accountability',

'quality', 'world class standards', 'excellence', and 'global reputation' (Figure 4.3-1). DE identified *Accountability and Support* as one of six key improvement levers. The goal of this lever was expressed as:

> *A balance of support, accountability and shared responsibility to improve the performance of our public education system. (2019b, p. 11)*

Accountability intensified and became unyielding and was not seen by participants as in 'balance' with support and shared responsibility. In this accountability culture, particular measures of success were valued.

10.4.   RELIANCE ON MEASUREMENT

NAPLAN, introduced in 2008, had become the primary national data source for education policymakers as they followed global trends and placed their faith in numbers and measures. Ensuring NAPLAN's primacy, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to strengthening test-based educational accountability, and demanded public reporting using data that was 'accessible, timely, consistent and comparable' (2019, p. 12).

DE's Strategic Plan approaches were coherent with COAG's measurement commitments, for example:

> *We will measure our success in delivering a world-class Public Education system, using a number of metrics based on academic achievement. (2019b, p. 12)*

The department used standardised test data to assess the state's education achievements against its aspirations, to assess its schools for their improvement needs, and to determine student learning requirements. The policy analysis recognised that, while DE relied on measurement, the measures themselves were neither elaborated nor transparent (Section 4.2.2). Grounded in the widely held view that test-based accountability advances schools' outcomes (Lingard, 2013), the department outlined how it would measure the success of every student:

> *We have high expectations of all of our students. We will track the progress of all students against the standard of educational achievement at all levels. (2019b, p. 12)*

The plan presented a resolute and focused intention to create world class improvement, measured by standardised tests. The plan held 116 references to measurement, and concepts related to measures (Figure 4.3-1), reinforcing their intention. 74.1% of these references were linked to modal verbs, such as 'will measure' and 'will track', conveying clear messages about their

determined focus on measurement to track success. Leaders conveyed how standardised test results became the accountability focus of the central literacy team and the district office staff.

Participants identified significant tensions related to DE's system data and potential shortcomings of test-based accountability as they enacted policy requirements with what they considered unreliable data. Their responses are considered in relation to COAG's four data criteria — accessibility, timeliness, consistency, and comparability.

First – accessibility. DE aimed to increase data accessibility by providing school leaders with a desktop data visualisation tool. The data dashboard contained data of interest to the department. The plan stated:

> *We are putting better data in the hands of our leaders with [data dashboard name] to help them make more informed decisions to improve learning for students. (2019b, p. 5)*

DE's 'better' data was the same data DSAS leaders identified as potentially inconsistent and not comparable. Placing decontextualised data back into school leaders' hands so that they could track improvement was recorded as a major achievement on the way to achieving DE's aims. DE's confidence in their data is reflected in the following:

> *Developed an improvement dashboard as a single source of truth for school level measures of improvement. (2019b, p. 11)*

The case study leaders described their experiences of widespread unsophisticated adoption of measures of improvement and uncritical expectations that standardised test data was a 'source of truth'. Leaders detailed how dashboard data was being used by 2022. Accounts included staff meetings where printouts of NAPLAN data, summarised as cohort band level achievements, were used to track DSAS's improvement with red, yellow, and green flags. These processes overlooked the fact that student learning is more complex than what can be captured by a biennial assessment of their ability on a spreadsheet.

Placing decontextualised standardised test results into a digital repository increased the accessibility of NAPLAN and other departmental data sources. However, leaders described how accessing the dashboard data garnered more import than the breadth of knowledge teachers held about their students as unique learners and humans and how ongoing, regular, formative and summative assessments in classrooms were discounted (Section 8.2).

DE also considered the dashboard data a reliable assessment of school and teacher effectiveness, and it held significant import during education director (ED) visits and external school reviews.

Publication of NAPLAN results on the *MySchool* website and in schools' annual reports provided increased community access and directed attention to this measure of school success. Leaders described the import of DE planning requirements (Section 10.1) and demonstrating NAPLAN improvement for their own career aspirations (Section 7.3.5). These acts of performativity can also be seen as evidence of proving, rather than improving.

The department asserted that NAPLAN provided the best and right data. As accountability increased, leaders depicted NAPLAN as the only trusted measure of improvement and progress. Compliance pressure further increased NAPLAN's perceived status from 2020. Leaders described meetings with the ED to ensure their improvement plans had explicit NAPLAN targets and how improvement plans and data were the only foci of conversations with EDs. This pressure from EDs increased and became demands that schools aim for high standards and 'get data up' (Section 7.3). Case study data also revealed how the relationship with the ED and others outside the school became more about fixing the data and teaching to the test than quality practice, student learning or teacher learning (Section 8.2).

COAG's second data criteria, timeliness, was not explicitly addressed in DE's Strategic Plan. However, the plan claimed that results were encouraging, one year into the plan:

> *Early results are encouraging. Our students' results in phonics, PAT, NAPLAN, and [senior secondary] continue to improve year on year. (2019b, p. 1)*

Claiming year on year improvement was considered in the policy analysis. Phonics screening occurs annually at Year 1 level. NAPLAN occurs biennially for Year 3, 5, 7, and 9 students. Senior secondary results are for students finishing school after Year 12. Participants met progress claims based on these disparate assessments, one year into the plan, with some misgivings.

Leaders raised an additional timeliness related issue. They described compliance strategies: five-week sprints, data conversations, keeping the line-of-sight, and collecting teacher programs. Leaders explained how graduate teachers, faced with complex community issues and remoteness, had higher priorities than the school's improvement plan and DE's compliance demands. The leaders supported early career teachers, for example by using 'workarounds' for data conversations. They agreed to break the rules quietly and discuss standardised test data as a group at a staff meeting. Their contention was that NAPLAN did not have a direct impact on daily classroom programming and students' learning intervention needs, and they realised that beginning teachers had more immediate priorities (Section 9.2). This example illustrates how the

remote school's time and temporality were at odds with DE's timeframes. Outsiders had little understanding of how DSAS time was constructed, and as with other challenges the school faced, made little attempt to contextualise.

Returning to DE's (2109b) expectation that 'better' data will help schools to make 'more informed decisions to improve learning for students' (p. 5), it was clear from the case study that there was little faith in system data generally, and little belief that it would make a difference for students in complex, remote classrooms. Challenges to the consistency (the third COAG data criteria) and reliability of standardised data — NAPLAN in particular — arose throughout the study. Examples of benchmarking schools, changing policies, attendance, immigration, and local practice are revisited.

DE's resolute and focused intention to use measures as a pathway to achieving their high expectations was flagged in their 2018 achievement listing:

> *Benchmarked, our understanding of how a school is performing and what it needs to do to improve. (2019b, p. 11)*

DE (2019b) described benchmarking as 'putting the right foundations in place'. They aggregated all schools' performance data from standardised tests, applying a 'data responsive formula' to allocate a support level (p. 4). DSAS leaders were unsurprised when DSAS was allocated the lowest improvement level, *Building foundations*. Described in the policy analysis (Section 4.4.1), in effect, test performance aggregated as a single digit determined system-wide evaluation of all schools' performance. This single level assigned schools to their improvement priorities, identified their targets, and prescribed support that outside experts would provide. This process had a predictable outcome and was not a particularly nuanced application of data. Nor was the data at the core of such decision making necessarily sound.

The leaders identified significant gaps between many DSAS students' achievement level and DE's high expectations. External staff tracked student NAPLAN and phonics progress against the *Standard of Educational Achievement* (SEA) and enforced the expectation that every child achieve at least the minimum standards. Leaders recounted how this expectation was held without regard to students' personal circumstances or their context. As NAPLAN became the only valued data set, the DSAS leaders struggled to explain their concerns about potential data inconsistency to EDs and external DE staff. Leaders' apprehensions, based on local contextual challenges, were discounted as excuse making (Section 6.5). Leaders contended that students' life experiences, skills, learning dispositions, intervention requirements, and prior academic progress had become irrelevant. The

information the staff held, about students as individuals, was displaced by dashboard data. Central and district improvement support staff discounted contextual insights. Even extreme family crises were discounted as reasons students may be struggling academically (Section 8.2). That so much importance and trust was placed on DSAS's NAPLAN scores worried leaders. They posited that there was little value in students' decontextualised, aggregated results on biennial NAPLAN tests.

Leaders explained that the DSAS data should be read through a shifting policy lens, essentially there was a 'data back story' (8.2-24) There was unease about how policy shifts, related to prioritising NAPLAN participation or improving NAPLAN outcomes, impacted on results each year and further complicated the reliance on NAPLAN as *the* valued data set. For the three years I was at DSAS, the ED expected all students to participate in NAPLAN, rather than only those capable of successfully undertaking it. This change made data comparisons unsound because, in the years before my arrival, staff had worked to curate attendance to meet expectations of improved outcomes. Who participates matters, and how they participate also impacts the data.

The data back story was also influenced by community-wide demographic variations, due to transience and immigration. Shifting policies and community variations were two complexities cited as reasons to be less confident in identifying NAPLAN as the true measure. This suggests that COAG (2019) may need to reconsider how consistent this data is, as part of their 'accessible, timely, consistent and comparable' criteria (p. 12).

Leaders also raised concerns about NAPLAN's appropriateness to meet COAG's fourth data criteria – that it be 'comparable'. An example was the practice of annual NAPLAN data comparisons. Comparing cohorts to the previous year group was seen to ignore differences in cohorts' characteristics and skills. As NAPLAN is biennial, leaders advocated tracking students as individuals, or cohorts, against results two years prior, for a more valid comparison.

The study also noted that measures of enhanced academic achievement were obscured by the arbitrary nature of minimum standards. In 2023, NAPLAN minimum standards were raised as part of a reporting overhaul that reduced the number of reporting bands from ten to three (Education Ministers, 2023). Significant changes like this make data incomparable across changes. Mismatches between minimum standards on national and international assessments further complicate data comparability. In addition to being variable, Australia's minimum NAPLAN standards are low against international comparisons (Goss & Sonnermann, 2016).

Finally, while the case study leaders were required to prove their compliance with DE measurement expectations, they also felt an imperative to respond to their context and to see students as individuals rather than as data. Leaders raised potential points of contention over the data DE relied upon. How standardised improvement planning and required measures led to decontextualised universal curriculum and restricted pedagogy follows.

10.5. FOCUSSED AND DEEP – LITERACY AND NUMERACY FOCUS

DE's concerns about falling standards led to the prioritisation of literacy and numeracy in improvement planning and in enacting DE's Strategic Plan. Leaders described how DE's improvement support staff often repeated the requirements for focussed and deep change. The *world class roadmap* said:

> *We have an ambitious goal for learning improvement so we remain focused on the areas we know will improve educational outcomes for our children. (2018c, p. 1)*

DE's Plan makes 15 references to literacy or literacy and numeracy. Each is linked to outcomes focussed language such as: strong foundations, raise achievement, and accelerate outcomes; and to support language such as: best resources, tailored guidebooks, and support. An example is:

> *Leaders at every school developed and delivered a plan to accelerate learning outcomes for their students, with a particular focus on Literacy and Numeracy. We started with Literacy and Numeracy because they are proven foundations that allow children to learn across the entire curriculum. (2019b, p. 4)*

DE's Strategic Plan language relies heavily on statements that appear logical and have appeal as key messages (Mockler, 2014). In this statement, it is difficult to disagree with the notion that literacy and numeracy are learning foundations. Case study leaders agreed that a significant focus on literacy and numeracy was appropriate. Most identified that DSAS's pre-world class SIP, *Everybody reads,* had a clear focus on these areas, but felt that explicit instruction and contextualised, relevant, and purposeful learning were in balance. Leaders explained that when they were required to respond to DE's high expectations, the existing strategies were subsumed by a 'nothing else' *intense focus* on limited goals. This meant that the role of every teacher and every learning area in students' literacy development was negated, and direct explicit literacy instruction was elevated in importance.

DSAS's curriculum offerings narrowed because of the increasingly tight focus on literacy and numeracy. The Arts and physical education were two learning areas sidelined by the expectation that SIP priorities dominate the curriculum. Valued approaches, such as culturally appropriate

practices and wellbeing initiatives, seen as especially appropriate in a complex remote site, were prevented (Section 7.3). That macro-cultural and socioeconomic factors underpinning the wellbeing needs of DSAS students were discounted was of substantial concern.

In addition to identifying problems with the exclusive focus on literacy and numeracy, leaders contested the allocation of a support level determined via the 'data responsive formula' described in the previous section. Support stages were supplemented by guidebooks. Initially the guidebooks were accompanied by the suggestion that their contents were to provide advice and direction.

> *Established Literacy and Numeracy as the foundations for all learning through a tailored suite of evidence-based, differentiated guidebooks. (2019b, p. 6)*

But, by 2020, whole class explicit direct instruction had moved from 'preferred' to being the 'required' approach. Participants attributed the heightened expectations and standardisation to the perceived failure of schools to achieve quick improvement, as Reid (2020) also identified in his scholarship. The two non-DSAS participants acknowledged DE's failure to allow time for improvement to occur. Rather, the department was impatient and presumed that there was one best approach to address the falling standards crisis. Savage (2023) describes this presumption as the 'seductive allure of order that assumes positive outcomes will flow if we can just make sure everyone is doing what is "proven to work"' (p. 29).

Consequently, DE standardised their enactment expectations. Their central and district teams increased oversight and demanded that schools adopt direct explicit instruction approaches. The reductive effects of these 'permitted' inputs narrowed the curriculum and increased the reliance on commercial programs. In response to standardised approaches, 'powerful commercial enterprises position themselves as "educational saviours" to national and state governments' (Cornelius & Mackey-Smith, 2022, p. 927). Consultants and education experts benefit, as do so-called edu-businesses (Hogan, 2016). DSAS staff found that their school was required to contribute to this edu-resource economy.

The school leaders illustrated how the growing reliance on one-size-fits-all solutions was accompanied by increased surveillance, accountability, and control. Additional staff had been appointed to:

> *Support school improvement cycles through external school reviews and partnership roundtables. (2019b, p. 11)*

Momentum around the 'focused and deep' mantra increased. Leaders used language such as: 'intense control' and said that staff were not consulted. This produced 'robotic zombies' complying with directions and delivering pre-determined content in prescribed ways (Section 9.2). Once again, the requirement to prove, rather than improve emerged. Leaders consistently described teachers' loss of autonomy when required to use one-size-fits-all programs and worksheets, decontextualised learning, and whole class explicit instruction (Section 9.2).

The department tied their notion of support to increased compliance. They enacted their ambition to support implementation of specific evidence-based literacy and numeracy approaches believing:

> … more tailored support from central to … schools is vital for growth. (2019b, p. 11)

Much of the information that leaders received about DE's requirements came from central support officers. One literacy coach shared the expectation that every classroom across the state, no matter their context, teach 'exactly the same things' (9.2-35). This approach was based on the child's year level rather than their skills and needs. Discussion of the impacts and implications associated with external support, prescribed improvement planning processes, required measures of success, and standardised 'exactly the same things' across all schools, follows.

10.6.   IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature review pointed to teachers being subjected to and held responsible for school improvement. Teachers were seen as 'frontline workers responsible for engaging students and promoting their learning' (OECD, 2014, p. 32), and were accountable for classroom learning and the outcomes achieved. Expectations accompanying elevated accountability suggested that if teachers worked to the state's recipe, student learning outcomes would improve. Participants contested this reading of contemporary Australian teachers' status. For example, Amanda said, 'Everything is dumped on teachers because it's always the teachers' fault' (9.2-55).

Blame for education policy failings, is readily attributed to teachers and schools. The policy analysis demonstrated how deficit understandings perpetuated the notion that teachers were responsible for falling standards. Yet, Gore, Jaremus, and Miller's (2022) systematic literature review found that teacher practices explain between only one and 14% of variation in student learning outcomes. The balance relates to contextual and family considerations. Although these

research findings are frequently replicated, managerial accountability continued to responsibilise teachers and make them the problem.

Deficit discourses related to teachers' ability to fix the problems bolstered DE's problem representation (Bacchi, 2012). Reflected in the policy analysis is the prioritisation of 'support' for teachers to secure world class status. One example of statements about support is:

> *Our teachers will be supported with the best curriculum resources, high-quality professional development, access to better student data, and the support they need in the classroom. (2019b, p. 6)*

DE's Strategic Plan contains 74 references to providing support to teachers, leaders, and schools (Section 4.3.1). As with many of these statements, a surface reading of the problematisation could suggest that support is a positive direction. Yet, implicit in such references, is the rendering of teachers as incapable of teaching for world class outcomes. Teachers were already supported by a national curriculum with a bank of resources, access to professional learning, student data, and assistance in their classrooms.

Leaders expressed concerns about the improvement resources on offer. The Strategic Plan detailed intentions to:

> *Create a warehouse of high impact, learning materials and curriculum resources for every teacher. (2019b, p. 10)*

The warehouse of materials was made available as a bank of lesson plans:

> *New curriculum resources, created by [state] teachers for [state] teachers, will help to raise achievement across-the-board. They outline what is to be taught, the sequence in which it is best taught and the intended learning outcomes. (2019b, p. 5)*

That these lesson plans were written by local state teachers was a partial concession to context. However, this strategy ignored Queensland research showing that the development of prescribed lesson plans relied on an 'inflexible "universal fit" approach already proven ineffective' (Kennedy et al., 2011, p. 15). Providing lesson plans outlining the content, sequence, and required outcomes overlooked the fact that every student has variable needs and their own funds of knowledge. Lesson plans cannot replace well designed learning experiences matched to students and context that are designed by classroom teachers who know their students well. Nevertheless, DSAS teachers were required to use the DE lesson plans.

Strategies to provide teachers with support ultimately cast teachers as technicians who needed to improve their skills. In enactment, the department's ambitions fell short. As the support became

increasingly prescriptive, DSAS leaders described teachers as unwilling 'robotic zombies' (Section 9.2), delivering literacy and numeracy instruction from commercial programs and using whole class explicit teaching and direct instruction. Teachers were required to replace previous tailored and differentiated learning design with basic, whole class instruction. Effective and experienced teachers expressed frustration about the requirement to stop differentiating for the diverse, individual students in their classrooms, and to join their colleagues in proving their compliance, rather than improving learning quality.

The leaders also expressed concerns about how formative assessment data was perceived in the drive to:

> Provide student learning progress data for every teacher to better support teaching and learning in every classroom. (2019b, p. 11)

Leaders described prevalent discounting of classroom assessment data and teachers' understandings about their students' progress. The leaders contested attempts to replace the ongoing formative assessments that informed teachers' curriculum choices and learning adaptations within lessons, with esteemed biennial NAPLAN data. Leaders were clear that teachers lost autonomy over data and that their classroom data was seen as irrelevant in the new improvement push. Leaders described how NAPLAN band information was valued as evidence of student learning and improvement progress over the composite pictures teachers developed of their unique students (Section 8.2).

The focused and deep literacy and numeracy emphasis, requisite teaching approaches, and discounting of teachers' assessment practices, were supported by outside experts, district and central staff and private consultants. The Strategic Plan stated:

> Local Education teams were expanded across the state to support excellence in teaching and learning in every preschool and school. (2019b, p. 4)

In reality, the additional staff were employed to ensure compliance rather than to support excellence. The number of EDs was increased by 50%, so that each director had fewer schools to monitor and support. When discussing the shift in SIP ownership away from teachers, leaders introduced the district officer appointed to get SIPs right (Section 7.3). One officer was appointed to every district. Another new district officer was employed to enforce the use of DE's (2019b) best curriculum resources (p. 6). With their employment, the lesson plans changed from being an option to a requirement. In addition to concerns already canvassed in relation to compliance, leaders identified the discontent of experienced staff. Previously valued as mentors for the many

early career teachers appointed remotely, they were disempowered by the compliance expectations (Section 9.2). It became clear that 'frontline workers' (OECD, 2014, p. 32) were managed, directed, 'supported' to comply with practices they found antithetical, and were excluded from decision making about areas central to their work.

In addition to the doubts DSAS staff held about the required approaches, many teachers experienced increased difficulties with student behaviour. Leaders described teachers' struggles with classroom management when learning focused on whole class explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy skills. Behaviour issues increased and student engagement declined. Classroom learning was described as 'sit down and do' (Section 9.2.3). Teachers found that many students struggled with the extended concentration required during whole class explicit instruction (Section 7.3). Toward the end of the research period, leaders described school responses to misbehaviour as exclusionary. Students were sent home due to disruptive behaviour (Section 9.2), despite leaders' belief that whole class instruction failed to meet the needs of these students who required additional support to access the curriculum. In effect, students were punished for their low academic skills or inability to engage with curriculum at their year level.

Teachers and leaders expressed fears for their careers if they challenged the changing directions. Leaders spoke about the constraint they employed to maintain their future aspirations for the principalship (Section 7.3.5). It was clear that the case study leaders saw much to resist in the imposed changes. How DE's failure to listen to DSAS's context compounded the problems ensues.

10.7. CONTEXTUAL BLINDNESS

DE's Strategic Plan was largely silent on the need to accommodate context to achieve their ambitions. Extensive research points to the importance of accommodating context in school improvement, for example, Gunther and Fuqua (2024) identify the importance of connection to place and contextualised teaching and learning approaches in quality education. But the very remote school in this study was treated as though it was any school, as essentially all schools were treated the same. To an extent, the Strategic Plan did acknowledge that schools had different starting points:

> *Every school … has a different starting point, and needs tailored support to achieve their improvement goals. We started by gaining a shared understanding of how a school is performing, what it needs to do to improve and the targeted support it needs. (2019b, p. 4)*

As argued in previous sections, the process of developing a 'shared understanding' involved applying a 'data responsive formula' to allocate a level of support. This did little to accommodate the very remote case study school's starting point and complexity. Context was not a consideration in the application of the data responsive formula. DSAS became a *Building foundations* school. This level of support was allocated to most very remote, remote, regional, and low socioeconomic schools, regardless of their contexts and local challenges. So, while DE's Strategic Plan acknowledged different starting points, the leaders were charged with enacting policy more suited to the urban centre for whom the policy was written. Consistent with the simplification intrinsic to economic rationalist approaches, complex issues and contexts were discounted by policy writers and those appointed to ensure compliance.

Despite the impossibility of separating schools from their contexts, context was largely assumed irrelevant (Gable & Lingard, 2016). This contextual blindness arose throughout the case study. Leaders described their attempts to speak to context once DE's new policy agenda was enacted. They contended that DE did not allow for DSAS's context and complexity, and that their attempts to explain were discounted or interpreted as excuse making (Section 6.5). Leaders consistently expressed their belief that outsiders thought DSAS's context was irrelevant.

The DSAS leaders described prior curriculum innovations designed to accommodate the school's complexity and respond to context. These practices were prevented once standardised literacy and numeracy practices were required. The provision of prescribed curriculum content and use of commercial programs denied the need to contextualise when designing learning experiences (Section 9.2). Teachers' loss of ability to differentiate for learner diversity resulted in reduced contextual reflexivity.

Context was also disregarded in relation to data. Leaders expressed a range of concerns about the discounting of context. For example, leaders contended that comparisons between different cohorts of students, could not be meaningful, and was a form of blindness to context. The discounting of students' lived experience when expecting all students, no matter what, to reach the required standard (Section 8.2) was further illustration of overlooking context. Decontextualised data replaced 'putting a face on the data' and appreciating individuals for their strengths and learning support needs. Teachers were required to attend to school/system data based on standardised test results. DSAS's historic responses to state and local policy

requirements, or the 'back story', was discounted when leaders attempted to explore variations in NAPLAN data (Section 8.2).

The case study leaders were frequently wedged between policy adjustments and the school context. Their stories highlighted feelings of being 'betwixt-and-between' (Turner, 1987), caught between their personal understanding of the *local* and broader departmental expectations. My contention that context – multi-layered and complex – is fundamental to determining what works and what does not in an education setting is supported by the work of other researchers (e.g. Guenther, 2013; Halsey, 2018a). Sustaining the under-consideration of context, was a prevailing assumption about the sameness of metropolitan and remote schools (Lingard, 2020; Roberts & Green, 2013).

10.8. CONCLUSION

This chapter has explicated seven themes from across the policy trajectory research. After reacquainting the reader with prior improvement practices, the seven sections elucidated policymakers intentions and the problematisations that underscored the DE's Strategic Plan (2019b) and summarised the case study enactment data related to each. New approaches to improvement planning were the cornerstone of DE's aspirations. These approaches were based on falling standards discourses and the responsibilisation of teachers for improvement outcomes. To ensure the enactment of their ambitions, DE increased compliance and accountability processes and relied on standardised test outcomes as measures of school effectiveness, teacher quality, and student learning needs. Failure to secure quick results led to the introduction of 'focussed and deep' literacy and numeracy instruction, with prescribed whole class, explicit instruction prioritised and expected to facilitate success. The impacts and implications of the department's expectations and enactment were canvassed. Finally, the overall contextual blindness in the improvement practices, treatment of all schools as the same, and metro-centricity were explored.

Next, I remind the reader of global and Australian policy aspirations for equity and excellence. It is to this framing that the conclusion chapter returns as it summarises my research and its contributions to knowledge.

11. CONCLUSION

As an educator with over 40 years of experience centred in democratic, agentive, and socially just pedagogy and leadership, I enthusiastically applied for and won a leadership role in a very remote Australian school. In 2017, I became the principal of Desert Sunshine Area School (alias, DSAS), and found myself in a unique position to deeply consider school improvement processes. Further, on leaving the school – and with power relations with the other school leaders no longer a factor – I continued to draw on my leadership team colleagues to understand DE's continuous improvement trajectory.

In an Australian education policy context that aspires for equity and excellence, I explored how a new improvement policy effected a very remote school. Schools and education systems have continually engaged in change processes to improve outcomes (Cuban, 1990). In 2018, DSAS's overarching governing body, the education department (DE) (2019b) announced its 10-year ambition to progress up the global scale from 'good to great' and become 'world class' by 2028.

This final chapter first summarises the background to the research problem and recaps the research questions, methodology and thesis structure. Contributions to the field of knowledge are offered and framed in relation to school improvement and equity and excellence discourses. Finally, the chapter suggests future research opportunities considering new state and federal policy directions scheduled for 2024 and 2025.

11.1. RESEARCH FOCUS, APPROACH, AND QUESTIONS

Achieving excellence and addressing equity gaps are twin priorities of Australian education policy: *The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education declaration* (Council of Australian Governments, 2019). This study considered how DE's new improvement policy shaped the way that equity and excellence priorities could be enacted in a remote school.

 Educational researchers, such as Reid (2020), support claims that progress towards equity is, at best, slow. Ranked by the OECD (2018) as the fourth most 'segregated' nation, Australia's education system is characterised by substantial disparity in educational attainment, with students' socioeconomic status being a major factor. In addition to socioeconomic background, location is a significant predictor of educational outcomes, tying remoteness to reduced achievement (Halsey, 2018a; Roberts et al., 2022a).

To understand how aspirations for equity and excellence were achieved in a remote school where students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are overrepresented, a policy trajectory research approach was employed. Three contextual frames formed the policy trajectory research: the *context of influence*, the *context of policy text production* and the *context of practice* (Ball, 1993; Bowe et al., 1992). The first, the *context of influence,* identified neoliberal capitalism and global education policy impacts on policy framing. Prominent in this context are discourses of 'crisis' and 'falling standards' which buttressed ambitions for excellence, or in DE's terms, world class education. Secondly, in the *context of policy text production*, Bacchi's (2009, 2012) *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPRB) critical discourse analysis approach was applied to DE's Strategic Plan (2019b). Thirdly, in the *context of practice*, a case study was situated in a very remote school (DSAS) to explore enactment of the department's new improvement policy agenda. Isolation and socioeconomic factors intersect to make DSAS a uniquely appropriate site for exploring changing policy, and the outcomes and implications for educators and vulnerable students. In summary, understanding how enacting DE's determining improvement policy structures impacted the lived experiences of those working and learning, in the case school, framed this research into aspirations for equity and excellence.

To better understand the impact of an Australian state education system's improvement policy aspirations, research questions were framed by the policy trajectory research's three contexts (Bowe et al., 1992):

1. *Context of influence*

- What influenced the state's aspirations for 'world class' improvement?

2. *Context of policy text production*

- Drawing on Bacchi's (1999, 2009) WPRB approach: What is the problem represented to be in the contexts of policy influence and text production? What are the embedded presuppositions? How might policy reductive representations of 'the problem' need to be problematised in terms of effects in complex contexts of practice?

3. *Context of practice*

- How did a very remote school respond to the demand for 'world class' improvement?

    o What practices changed and what were the consequences?

- o What is the impact of the department's (DE) improvement policy on teacher practice and professionalism?

- o What were the implications for equity and excellence in the remote setting?

As with the research questions, the three policy trajectory contexts are evident throughout the thesis structure.

Chapter One introduced my personal connection to this research, its significance, and the thesis argument.

Chapter Two reviewed the literature framing the study and elaborated the *context of influence* through foci including how neoliberal capitalism and global education reform shaped international and Australian ambitions for equity and excellence. The chapter also elaborated contemporary research underpinning the *context of practice*.

Chapter Three introduced the research's interpretivist paradigm, and the policy sociology and case study methodologies. The chapter explained the policy trajectory research, and detailed my research practices, data collection and analysis – foregrounding critical discourse analysis, ethnographic methods, and ethical research practices.

Chapter Four particularised the *context of policy text production* which included Bacchi's (2009, 2012) WPRB approach applied to DE's Strategic Plan. WPRB supported the examination of discursive determining formations and problem representations of the policy text.

Chapters Five to Nine situated and elaborated the *context of practice*.

- Chapter Five introduced the case study context.

- Chapter Six introduced the 2020 case study data focusing on 'improvement' and 'success'.

- Chapter Seven drew on leaders' insights to frame a discussion of the priority given to improvement planning in DE's *world class* ambitions.

- Chapter Eight again drew on leaders' understandings, here the focus was how improvement was tracked and measured.

- Chapter Nine drew on perspectives about how teaching and learning were standardised to facilitate success.

The policy trajectory research findings were described in Chapter Ten, elaborating links between the analysis of DE's policy intentions and the case study findings in relation to enactment.

This final chapter next recaps how the thesis contributes to a field of knowledge. The research questions aimed to develop understanding of the phenomenon of school improvement informed by global policy discourses, in this instance, for a very remote school in which students who could be described as disadvantaged were overrepresented.

11.2.   CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE

This study acknowledges and the builds on the extensive policy work of scholars who have examined the interrelated neoliberal, economic rationalist, and global education policy discourses underpinning improvement aspirations. At a macro level, human capital paradigms and expectation of economic benefit propel global and Australian education directions, impacting policy and its enactment. This study contributes to this field by deeply attending to a unique and singular context. It applied a close lens to meso policy and micro case study levels, foregrounding the experiences of educators and a school more explicitly than is often undertaken in similar studies. Being a school principal with an interest in how macro policy issues impacted the study state and school also provides this study a point of difference.

At the meso level, DE (2019b) espoused ambitions for measurable improvement and 'world class' status because they were concerned that their education system was 'sitting at the bottom of good' (p. 2) and needed to be 'great', yet without explicitly clarifying how either of these categories was determined. The department implemented a change model based on assumptions that data-driven improvement planning, evidence-informed practice, and guidance from external experts would result in world class education in the study state.

The need for improvement was not contested in this study. Rather, the wholesale adoption of prescribed improvement planning processes, reliance on standardised assessments, and adoption of decontextualised, one-size-fits-all, literacy and numeracy instructional practices, was critically examined. The study tracked participants' experiences as they enacted these approaches and exposed tensions in relation to decontextualised practices and lack of differentiation to meet students' learning needs.

The next two sections review understandings generated in relation to how effectively equity and excellence have been achieved in the study state after five years of enacting DE's policy mandates.

11.2.1. Equity

Australia's uppermost policy body prioritised equity as a national education goal (Council of Australian Governments, 2019). Equity is prominent on policy agendas for sound reasons. For example, the 2022 Poverty in Australia report (Davidson et al., 2022) identified that one in eight citizens, more than 3.3m Australians and one million children, live in poverty. Poverty in Australia is significant and must be taken seriously as a factor in educational outcomes. As a recognised 'disadvantaged' school, DSAS was an ideal case study to investigate how seriously equity was pursued.

While equity is a matter of global and national concern, it did not feature in DE's improvement policy ambitions. Despite the economic and social cohesion benefits of closing equity gaps, DE's Strategic Plan and its accompanying documentation made no reference to the gap between equity ambitions and what could be achieved in practice (Section 4.5.1). In identifying this oversight, the policy analysis exposed how DE's problem representation silenced the structural and contextual barriers that stood in the way of potential future success (Section 4.5). This study demonstrated that while the improvement imperative was valid, participants were troubled by inattention to inequities and identified the need for concerted effort to close the significant equity gap (Section 6.5) in their remote school.

The Strategic Plan presaged a trend toward decontextualised simplification. As schools were increasingly treated as all the same, DSAS leaders and teachers reported being accused of making excuses (Section 6.5) when introducing local contextual factors that impacted achievement outcomes. DE staff ensured that schools complied with the expectations including, the production of improvement plans on mandated templates, setting high targets, and using predetermined literacy and numeracy improvement measures. Little support was found for the effectiveness of simple solutions, single measures of success, and metro-centric improvement initiatives in improving outcomes. The study demonstrated how treating all schools as the same amplified equity gaps and discounted the substantial complexity of remote schools.

DE measured its improvement initiatives' effectiveness and prioritised results over accommodating schools' and students' differences. The study demonstrated that NAPLAN, the department's 'valued' measure, provided an incomplete picture of learners, especially vulnerable learners (Section 8.2.3). Three findings provide examples: Firstly, students were no longer situated as individuals with assets, contexts, and varied support needs (Section 8.2.1). Secondly,

spreadsheets of biennial NAPLAN cohort data replaced teachers' knowledge of their students as individuals, and the value of ongoing formative assessment data was discounted (Section 8.2.5). Thirdly, data dashboards silenced context, socioeconomic status, family background, and other factors impacting comparative school performance. The study findings add to policy sociology research that recognises that contextual factors are ignored or distorted within neoliberal discourses (Hattam et al., 2018) and that international large-scale assessments such as PISA, and national assessments such as NAPLAN, are not culturally or ideologically neutral (Dobrescu et al., 2021).

The study also identified the impacts of standardisation on achieving equity. Access to 'world class' schooling required students to conform to a teaching model based on whole class direct explicit instruction (Section 9.2), whether they were at a level to participate or not (Section 9.2.3). Improvement practices based on whole class direct instruction, widened equity gaps as a pattern of non-attendance developed when students struggled with one-size-fits-all approaches (Section 9.2.2). The lack of attention to wellbeing and cultural inclusion increased remote students' disengagement (Section 9.2). The decline in student attendance was potentially evidence of students turning their backs on an education not meeting their academic, social, emotional, and cultural needs (Section 8.2.4).

DE's improvement initiatives gave insufficient attention to equity, with detrimental effects. DE expected that DSAS would enact simple solutions that ignored its own structural and contextual barriers. Despite the incomplete picture created by NAPLAN data, this single improvement measure was valued and mandated. Students were expected to conform to whole class one-size-fits-all literacy and numeracy instruction, whether or not they were at a level to engage. In treating all schools as essentially the same, and bringing a metrocentric focus, the world class policy and its enactment did little to close equity gaps in the remote context.

11.2.2. Excellence

Having outlined the knowledge contribution from contesting the achievement of equity, this section similarly considers how DE's (2018a) improvement policy aspirations 'to be great by 2028' (p. n.p.) and achieve 'world class' education status supported excellence ambitions. For this Australian state, excellence was considered to be synonymous with world class status.

Paralleling global education directions, DE (2018c) identified 'falling standards' as the primary driver for aspiring to be world class. Large-scale international assessments and NAPLAN outcomes

were seen as valid reflections of these falling standards which fell short of being a 'great' education system. Unproblematic in their embrace of world class ambitions was the role of context in these falling standards. As I have expressed elsewhere, this absence of scrutiny into 'how test scores are obtained, what they mean, how context impacts, and what underpins or causes the waning test scores, silence[d] a wide range of important issues' (Cornelius, 2023, p. 135).

Leaders participating in the study described obstacles that arose from the inflated value placed on NAPLAN data. Fundamental to their concerns were demands that they 'fix the data' and 'teach to the test' (Section 8.2.2). Participants described a loss of trust in classroom teachers' data (Section 8.2.5). Competing demands between compliance and school-based data collection were navigated with difficulty (Section 8.2), particularly when spreadsheets of NAPLAN band data now held more value than teachers' deep understanding of students as individuals with complex lives, trauma, and varied learning needs (Section 8.2.5).

In addition to relying on unreliable measures (Section 8.3.2), DE mandated improvement plans templates, with approved literacy and numeracy goals based on NAPLAN, as the cornerstone to achieving world class status. The department assumed that mandating improvement planning practices would lead to excellence (Section 7.3.1). Participants revealed the consequences of enacting this policy expectation. Two examples are offered. First, responsibility for improvement planning shifted from collaborative staff and community labour to school principals and external experts (Section 7.3.2). Secondly, despite being responsibilised for improvement, the teachers required to enact the new policy had few opportunities to engage with improvement planning or to monitor the progress of improvement initiatives (Section 7.3.2).

Consistent across the policy analysis and case study was evidence that the department conflated submitting compliant improvement plans with achievement of improvement (Section 4.3.2). Given that improvement planning was already well established in the study state, and that researchers question the value of improvement plans (Gonzales et al., 2022; Huber & Conway, 2015), it is unsurprising that study participants anticipated that submitting compliant improvement plans would lead to few gains (Section 7.3.1).

Under increasingly tight compliance processes (Section 9.2.1), teachers applying DE's 'simple' solutions viewed themselves as 'glorified technicians' (Section 9.2.4). Performativity demands positioned teachers as deliverers of pre-determined content in pre-determined ways – without

consultation or shared decision making (Section 9.2.3). Expanding reliance on outside experts presaged a move away from trusting the school staff to improve student learning outcomes (Section 9.2.4). DE relied on external expertise to shape, support, and monitor improvement progress. Participants described how external experts consistently overlooked macro cultural and socioeconomic factors in their remote community (Section 9.2.4). Local knowledge and expertise were devalued while prescribed improvement practices were monitored by EDs and external staff. Although teachers were responsibilised for improvement, they were systematically deprofessionalised, provided insufficient time for deep engagement with improvement priorities, expected to comply with one-size-fits-all solutions (Section 9.2.3), and subjected to increasing performativity expectations.

Considering Santoro's (2018, 2019) work on teacher burnout and demoralisation, the ethical gap for the school-based participants was significant. The participants stayed on in DSAS, taking up leadership roles rather than transferring into preferred schools. They expressed aspirations to make improvements for the vulnerable students they came to know and understand. Instead, their work was devalued, their input discounted, and the students were assessed on decontextualised measures and subjected to disengaging, standardised curriculum offerings.

Given current teacher shortages and workload challenges (Stacey, Wilson, et al., 2022), education departments cannot afford to demoralise committed staff. If they intend to improve the education provided to all learners, and especially vulnerable and remote learners, they need to find ways to value and keep teachers and leaders. The study showed that disabling structures, which reduced teacher agency, had reductive effects. DE's Plan did little to address the structural inequities in the provision of remote education.

11.3.   CONCLUSION

I opened this thesis explaining my personal connection to this study. I anticipate that my passion for education and equity/excellence ambitions are apparent. The education department in the study state embarked on an improvement journey, shaped by neoliberal modes of governance, during my final tenure as a school principal, and motivated me to complete this thesis. I believe it is an important story to be told.

This study took a close look at the policy and the site of practice, a very remote school, and as faithfully as possible represented the felt difficulties of those educators who volunteered to

participate in the study. It exposed barriers and tensions in DE's policy and enactment expectations. These expectations demonstrably fell short of reducing equity gaps in the remote school context. It was found that treating all schools alike silenced structural and contextual barriers to education. Producing improvement plans was not necessarily evidence of improvement. Valuing a single measure, NAPLAN, that provides an incomplete picture of the unique individuals in classrooms, failed to assess the needs and develop the strengths of the many remarkable remote learners. Restricting the flexibility of teachers to teach in ways which make sense to them prevented educators from working *with* their students and reduced the use of authentic pedagogies. Increased performativity deprofessionalised educators, intensified workload, and did little to address the equity gap, or meet demands for excellence.

Finally, in the Introduction, I expressed the view that public education was losing its association with service to the common good of a democratic society, and my aim to illustrate that the processes devaluing education are ironically intertwined with current school improvement agendas. While this thesis confirms these positions, I hold hope that the state previously known for its innovation in education can step back from the decontextualised simplification that characterises improvement informed by neoliberal capitalism, to a more balanced and beneficial position whereby all learners can thrive.

11.4. FUTURE RESEARCH

Considering this study was undertaken by a single PhD candidate, there is scope for further research in remote and low socioeconomic schools to better understand how policy frames and shapes improvement imperatives in a variety of contexts.

This study highlighted the perils of policymakers not being in dialogue with those enacting their policies and contextualising their ambitions. For teachers, adverse effects on their professionalism and increased performativity demands, such that they found themselves 'proving rather than improving', were demonstrated in the remote case study (Section 8.2.1). Despite the alarming effects of enacting the study state's aspirations in a very remote school, national and state policy contexts are beginning to shift, opening new opportunities for research.

A change of state government in March 2022 precipitated the development of updated education policy. Biesta et al. (2022) identified the importance of focusing on what different publics consider

to be the purpose of education. Consistent with this view, in 2023 the state Education Minister and department Chief Executive undertook statewide consultation:

> *This strategy is unique – it was created by our community for our community. We started a statewide conversation about the purpose and value of public education with our learners and then used their insights to talk with employers, NGOs, our staff, parents, and community members. (DE, 2023)*

Recognising the importance of balance and dialogue and responding to calls to value teacher expertise if education systems are to achieve equity and excellence (Reid, 2020), the department now has a purpose statement. Four key impact areas: Wellbeing, Equity and excellence, Learner agency, and Effective learners will drive the quest for world class education from 2024 (DE, 2023). As these key areas are brought back into policy, further research could investigate how effectively they address the issues raised in this study.

Policy amendments have also been flagged at federal policy level. In May 2022, Australians voted for a new federal government. This government reviewed the 2021 National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) with the states. Updated directions were finalised on the 19th of December 2023, and are to be enacted in the 2025 national reform agreement (Australian Department of Education, 2023a, 2023b).

Of particular interest are two modifications in the 2025 NSRA. The first is the recognition, of the current equity and inclusion gap. To close these gaps, additional requirements have been placed on states. States are required to attend to student wellbeing because the 'wellbeing of all students is fundamental to successful education outcomes' (Australian Department of Education, 2023b, p. 4). A particular focus is also required on First Nations, regional, rural, and remote students, and those with a disability or educationally disadvantaged background (Australian Department of Education, 2023b). This significant shift in macro policy direction, designed to lift student outcomes and close equity gaps, is designed to have a significant role in shaping how education works in Australia (Roberts, 2023).

The 2025 NSRA also recognises that teachers hold crucial roles and values their professional judgement (Australian Department of Education, 2023b). Thompson's (2021) research signals promise in system innovations that consider teachers in policy development and invites recalculation of the quality of education systems based on 'the extent to which [the system] supports, sustains, and invests in the status of its teachers' (p. 117). The impact of this shift in Australian education policy is another area for future investigation. As this study illustrates,

educators understood their context and their students. Granted a voice in policy enactment, side effects and unintended consequences (Zhao, 2017) can be addressed.

In addition to hearing teachers' voices, policymakers will better understand the challenges and concerns faced if teachers contribute to consultation and evaluation processes (Fogarty et al., 2017). Longmuir et al.'s (2022) report, *Australian Teachers' perceptions of their work in 2022*, consulted 5,500 teachers to garner insights about their working contexts and conditions. Participants were invited to offer their reflections on how to improve policies and practices that impact their work. Negative sentiments were generally dominant, but the strength of teachers' sense of belonging to the profession provides an opportunity to build upon teacher professionalism, through strategies such as professional learning communities (Hardy & Melville, 2019). Studying how remote teachers support and learn from each other will uncover how enhanced collegiate support could benefit our most vulnerable learners and student learning outcomes. This offers another future research pathway.

The changed directions identified in these future policy documents establish fertile ground for investigation of school improvement, informed by new foci. While the Australian governments are expected to continue to rely on established measures and measurement, such as NAPLAN, there is value in qualitative policy trajectory research that interrogates the changed policy state and federal framing, with attention on inclusion and equity and a shift towards treating teachers as professionals. Explicit intentions to close equity gaps are potentially a positive first step.

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APPENDIX 1: MY SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORY

Story 6

Turning Them Around – a story about building student engagement

I'd like to use the example of Jackson – self-proclaimed "Red Room King" – a middle school student very much 'at risk' and his turn around in 2003 to highlight the impact of our literacy initiatives and culture changing processes.

In the past...
Jackson argued with most adults, disrupted classes and was generally pretty good at losing his lunchtime to the riveting activity of sitting cross-legged facing a wall in the "Red Room" (lunchtime Time Out).

Jackson hated school. He hated teachers. He hated almost everything that happened at school.

Today...
Jackson is mostly polite, generally involved in school, a keen volunteer, a leader, and emerging reader!

A Reader?
Well yes...It turns out that Jackson was a great camouflage artist. He generally blended in if he could – copying others, avoiding written tasks, and working hard to 'be cool'. Unfortunately, tasks arrived that he 'knew' he wouldn't be able to avoid, so he'd cleverly create diversions, mouth off or behave in such a way that the ever-reliable 'steps' would be used to get him out of the classroom and away from a learning challenge. The "Red Room King" knew how to be shown the door. He had to sacrifice his lunchtimes, but there was a certain prestige in being known by every other misbehaving student in the school.

Jackson puts his 'turn around' down to two things...

1. Learning to read–the "Rainbow Reading" program has restored his confidence and scaffolded two and a half years reading progress in less than 12 months.
2. Being heard and understood.

Our school invested enormous effort, funds, and time into establishing a broad range of literacy programs to identify and support those not reaching benchmarks.

- Literacy Blocks – levelled texts, purchased new material, resourced guided reading and targeted classroom literacy programs.
- Screening after 12 months at school (Middle Infant Screening Test) and the follow- up Forward Together programs.
- Checking 'sight word progress' and introducing "GO-Reading" – a buddy tutoring program.
- Phonological Awareness testing and follow up support to build on existing Speech support programs.

- "Rainbow Reading" to support primary students identified with low reading comprehension scores.

At the same time, we made some major shifts in our efforts to build a positive supportive school culture.

- We embraced a consistent challenge presented in a range of ways by Randall Clinch, John Joseph, Mark McCrindle, Andrew Fuller, Anne Barkaway, Di Grigg, Ian Lillico, Glenn Capelli, Michael Carr-Greg, the Caines, and Stephanie Pace-Marshall. Punishment doesn't work! Really all it does is influence others to avoid the cause (sometimes!). Students punished often – like Jackson – just become angrier and more disengaged!
- We began to work from the 'assumption of positive intent'. All behaviour is purposeful, and even Jackson had a purpose. He was determined not to be shown up as a non-reader – no matter what!! Keeping face was all important!
- We reworked our Behaviour Management Policy at least four times! Progressively increasing whole school and teacher interventions and programs before using steps and time out.
- We introduced school wide programs like The Virtues Program, Anti-Harassment procedures and a focus week, Grievance Procedures, Friendly Desk (Peer mediation in the yard), Citizenship Focus (in the Middle School), Buddy programs (like GO-Reading) and more.
- We wrote dozens and dozens of 'Behaviour Agreements/Plans' using progressively more and more creative strategies to work with students to engage them in their own change processes.
- We began to learn to listen to kids more effectively!!! We attempted to practise an "I see you and you matter to me" philosophy.
- We introduced a range of Middle Schooling initiatives.
- We undertook Bully Audits to expose students harassing and bullying others. Follow up Behaviour agreements and plans are developed with staff, parents, and student participation.

Why do you think this is a significant change?

Jackson is not a 'one off' success story. There are many! Jackson is one of many Middle School boys with similar stories.

Jackson enjoys his newly found confidence and success – as a reader and a valued citizen of our school.

Jackson's unique skills and innate 'goodness' have emerged at times and been acknowledged. They should appear more often now.

How do you know this has made a difference?

Literacy Data.

40 Primary Students have 'graduated' from Rainbow Reading, having closed 18+ month gaps between reading age and chronological age in 2-3 terms so far this year.

Behaviour Management Data
Comparison of total Time Outs (Classroom & Yard) 2002/03

	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2002	0	7	6	55	121	90	148	280
2003	2	9	9	5	35	62	73	86

Observation

Last week, Jackson was caught riding his bike in the school grounds – AGAIN!!! A rather unhappy relief teacher confronted him about his behaviour. Jackson listened quietly. He nodded when the consequence (bike to stay home again) was announced. He went off to class.

This would seem to be a minor miracle – no 'mouth' behaviour.
In fact the real miracle came two hours later.
"Excuse me Ms Karen", he said, "Can I talk to you about the bike riding this morning?" Can you??
Absolutely – Mr Manners himself!
The short version of the story was that Jackson believed that the school rules only applied on the primary school site. He was caught on the high school site. He thought that the rules needed to be clearer. After some discussion, he was more than happy to sign a contract that explained that he knew the rules and would keep them or leave his bike home for the rest of the year. Seven others signed up too! Those bikes have made their way into the bike racks each morning – around the outside of the school.

Jackson was acknowledged for this use of the virtues: Co-operation and Politeness. He thanked me for listening.

Win-Win!!!

APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH INFORMATION LETTER

Research Title:
LEADING SCHOOLS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CONSERVATIVE TIMES

Researcher:
Karen Cornelius
College of Society, Arts and Education
James Cook University
Ph:

Supervisors:
Dr Kerrie Mackey-Smith (kerrie.mackeysmith@jcu.edu.au)
Ass Professor Peta Salter (peta.salter@jcu.edu.au)
College of Society, Arts and Education
James Cook University

Description of the study:
This PhD study is part of the project entitled '*Leading schools for social justice in conservative times'* This project will investigate school leadership, teacher agency, equity/social justice, and contemporary issues in remote schools. This project is supported by James Cook University, College of Society, Arts and Education.

Purpose of the study:
This project aims to:
- Better understand leadership and new leader experiences in very remote schools.
- Explore equity/social justice in the remote setting.
- Identify what conditions and reflexive capabilities teachers/leaders need to work effectively in remote schools.

What will I be asked to do?
You are invited to participate in an interview that will explore your opinions and ideas about what is required for teacher success in schools.

Participation is entirely voluntary.

Involvement will be a one-off interview face-to-face or over Skype or Zoom (your choice of medium) at a time that suits you. The interview will take up to one hour.

Your responses will be recorded for the researcher's use only (as described in the attached permission sheet). Your identity will be kept confidential.

Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?

Your responses and contact details will be strictly confidential. The data from the study will be used in research publications and reports (including journal articles and a PhD thesis). You will not be identified in any way in these publications.

Any participant is, of course, entirely free to discontinue participation at any time or decline to answer any particular questions. Any identifying information will be removed, and the files stored on a password protected computer that only the researchers, named above, will have access to. Your comments will not be linked directly to you.

Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?
The researcher anticipates no risks from your involvement in this study. If you have any concerns regarding anticipated or actual risks or discomforts, please raise them with the researcher.

How do I agree to participate?
Participation is voluntary.

You may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions and you are free to withdraw from any part of the project at any time without explanation or consequence.

A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate, please read and sign the form and email it back to me at karen.cornelius@my.jcu.edu.au

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and I hope that you will accept my invitation to be involved.

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:
Human Ethics, Research Office
James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811
Phone: (ethics@jcu.edu.au) and quote project number FU 7996 / JCU H8775

APPENDIX 3: RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FORM

| PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Karen Cornelius |
| PROJECT TITLE: Leading schools for social justice in conservative times |
| COLLEGE: College of Sociology, Arts and Education |

I understand the aim of this research study is to understand conditions and enabling factors related to school leadership. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written information sheet to keep.

I understand that my participation will involve a recorded interview and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the information sheet.

I acknowledge that:

- taking part in this study is voluntary and I am aware that I can stop taking part in it at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;

- that any information I give will be kept strictly confidential/anonymous and that no names will be used to identify me with this study without my approval.

(Please tick to indicate consent)

I consent to be interviewed	**Yes**	**No**
I consent for the interview to be audio taped	**Yes**	**No**

Name: *(printed)*	
Signature:	**Date:**

APPENDIX 4: LINKS TO RESEARCHER'S PEER REVIEWED PUBLISHED ARTICLES

The first two are included in this thesis:

Chapter 4:

Title:	*The race for 'World Class' education: Improvement or folly?*
Author/s:	Karen Cornelius
Journal:	International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies
Peer reviewed:	Yes
Status:	Published 2023
Web link:	https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v10i3p124

Chapter 6:

Title:	*Improving educational outcomes: Why don't remote schools measure up?*
Author/s:	Karen Cornelius and Dr Kerrie Mackey-Smith
Journal:	Issues in Educational Research
Peer reviewed:	Yes
Status:	Published 2022
Web link:	http://www.iier.org.au/iier32/cornelius.pdf

Additional peer reviewed journal article, cited in the thesis:

Title:	*Systemic racism, a prime minister, and the remote Australian school system*
Author/s:	Karen Cornelius and Dr Aidan Cornelius-Bell
Journal:	Radical Teacher
Peer reviewed:	Yes
Status:	Published 2022
Web link:	https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2022.935