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What counts as learning? Competing discourses and the production of learners in Australian schooling policy

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ABSTRACT

Simplistic assumptions about learning as neutral and universal fail to reflect how policy constructs what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose learning matters. This study examines Australian education policy through a Foucauldian archaeological approach, tracing how multiple discourses construct learning and learner subjectivities in competing ways. Analysing policy and practice documents, we trace five discursive patterns: learning, economic investment, policy, civics and diversity, intersecting within the educational system, each embedding different epistemological assumptions. Drawing on Pinar's curriculum theory, our analysis suggests these competing constructions do not just obscure learning but show that learning in schools was always already entangled with questions of identity, power and whose ways of knowing are valued. Students are positioned through multiple subject positions: the legally participating, assessed, diverse, learning and industry-ready student, fragmenting their experiences in ways that fail to recognise them as whole, autobiographical beings. The crowding of policy discourses makes it difficult for teachers to approach students as learners given these competing constructions. While focused on Australia, this study highlights dynamics relevant to education systems worldwide navigating tensions between standardisation, equity and competing visions of educational purpose.

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The educational policy landscape in Australia is both complex and crowded – a condition that reflects broader global trends in education reform over the past three decades. Education policies are not just produced by governments, rather, they are 'jointly agreed to by the many policy actors involved in their creation' (Brown & Warner, 2021, p. 319), rewritten as they move from original documents to being enacted in schools (Ball et al., 2011; Lingard, 2021). This layered transformation creates an environment where competing discourses collide, conditioning not only how teachers approach their practice but also what forms of learning become possible, and for whom, in classrooms worldwide. Australia provides an illuminating case of these global dynamics, as its federated education system both adopts international policy trends and amplifies the resulting discursive

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complexity through multiple jurisdictional translations (Bentley & Savage, 2017; Lingard, 2010; Savage, 2016).

The proliferation of competing policy demands on schools is not unique to Australia but reflects what Sahlberg (2016) has termed the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM); an assemblage of policies emphasising standardisation, accountability and data-driven decision-making that has spread across OECD countries since the 1990s. Simultaneously, schools in many nations face intensifying expectations to address social inequities and respond to rapidly changing economic demands (Ball, 2016a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2011; Verger et al., 2016). These parallel policy directions reflect the contested nature of contemporary education policy globally (Ball, 2012), where competing rationalisations and reform agendas converge, creating a fragmented discursive environment for learning.

In this fragmented environment, students are expected to engage in formal schooling with the normative assumption of learning, and to develop the capacities that they will need to continue learning throughout their lives (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Indeed, this is an expectation that students themselves hold (Graham et al., 2015). However, both learning and curriculum are fundamentally contested terms (Biesta, 2013, Papastephanou, 2020; Pinar, 2019), embedded within social, political and cultural contexts that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose ways of knowing are valued. As Pinar (2011) argues in his conceptualisation of currere, learning cannot be separated from the lived, autobiographical experiences of the students themselves. Learning is always already entangled with questions of identity, power and the cultural politics of whose knowledge matters (Pinar, 1995). From this perspective, curriculum theorists have long recognised that education is neither neutral nor universal, rather it reinforces particular visions of what schools are for and what types of students they serve (Green et al., 2021; Pinar, 1995).

Australian curriculum scholars have articulated how schooling operates from multiple, often competing purposes: preparing workers, forming citizens and facilitating self-development. As Green (2018) argues, the central curriculum question: 'what knowledge is of most worth?' (p. 4) remains unanswered in Australian policy. Brennan (2011) describes this as a 'political-educational tangle' (p. 259), where the overcrowding of required content, disconnection between content and assessment and lack of infrastructure create an environment where fundamental questions about educational purpose are overshadowed by technical implementation concerns. These tensions point to deeper epistemological and political friction about what kinds of learning count. Further, these tensions echo across national contexts as governments worldwide grapple with similar questions about education's role in increasingly diverse and economically uncertain societies (Apple, 2013; Ball, 2016a).

Schools are simultaneously expected to address societal challenges while facilitating student learning. They are tasked with producing citizens who not only learn the curriculum but also have their socioeconomic status improved (Carusi & Niwa, 2020), their diversity recognised (Chown, 2019) and their wellbeing monitored (Brown & L'Estrange, 2023; Stokes & Brunzell, 2024). When the industry requires workers with particular certifications, this too becomes schools' responsibility (Firth, 2020). Such expectations reflect a series of social discourses about the role of schooling in

Australia, which are given shape through formal policy (Green et al., 2021). Critically, these cannot be dismissed as distractions from some essential form of learning; rather, they highlight the political and contested nature of what learning means and whose learning is prioritised (Biesta, 2009; Pinar, 2011).

The Australian case is particularly interesting for international audiences because its federated system creates a policy environment where global trends are filtered through multiple jurisdictions (Savage & O'Connor, 2019), making visible the amplifying effects of policy mobility and borrowing (Peck & Theodore, 2015). When OECD frameworks, international assessment regimes like PISA, and globally-circulating policy scripts encounter Australia's constitutional architecture – where states retain primary responsibility for education, while the Commonwealth government exercises influence through funding and national policy initiatives – the resulting policy landscape becomes exceptionally unwieldy (Lingard, 2010; Savage, 2016; Savage & O'Connor, 2019). This jurisdictional complexity multiplies tensions already present in education systems worldwide, making Australia an important case for understanding how competing global policy discourses converge and conflict in national contexts.

These discourses also affect how we come to think about the actors within schools. School professionals, for example, are positioned within discourses of accountability and standardisation, a global phenomenon documented across North America, Europe and Asia (Apple, 2013; Ball, 2003; Sahlberg, 2023; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). Teachers and principals are expected to be individually responsible for the education of students, made accountable via centralised policy mechanisms that reflect international trends toward governing through data and performance management (Gorur, 2016; Ozga, 2009). Teachers are offered and expected to engage in a range of pedagogical practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Lingard et al., 2003) and different educational tools (Grimaldi & Ball, 2021). In Australia, teachers' work is given shape and form by policies and practices such as the national curriculum, set out by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), (2025a), a national assessment program and professional standards for educators, produced by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2010a, 2010b). These institutional arrangements mirror standardisation initiatives in countries such as England, the United States and New Zealand (Ball, 2003, 2012; Ozga, 2009; Sellar & Lingard, 2013).

Just as teachers are subject to different discursive positions, so too does discourse influence how they think about learning, and ultimately, the possibilities available to learners in classrooms. Pinar's (2019) notion of curriculum as 'complicated conversation' (p. vii) suggests that what happens in classrooms is never just the transmission of neutral knowledge, rather a complex negotiation of competing understandings about whose knowledge counts, what forms of learning are legitimate and which student subjectivities are recognised and valued. This complexity of teachers' discursive positioning creates a fragmented professional landscape where educators must continually negotiate competing priorities and competing visions of what learning itself means for differently positioned students. Given internationally documented teacher stress and burnout (Carroll et al., 2022; McKay et al., 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020), this discursive overload may also fragment pedagogical coherence, as teachers attempt to reconcile contradictory expectations around assessment, curriculum delivery and educational outcomes (Bradbury, 2012; Polesel et al., 2014).

This paper addresses the absence of critical conversation about what learning is, whose learning matters and learning towards what ends in contemporary Australian educational policy. Multiple policy discourses construct learning and learners in contradictory ways, fragmenting student subjectivities, embedding competing epistemological assumptions and positioning teachers as technical implementers rather than critical professionals. Further, this incoherence is more than just a coordination problem, rather it masks basic questions about whose knowledge counts and whose ways of knowing are valued, allowing structural inequities to continue unexamined while appearing to address them through practices like learning accommodations and lesson differentiation. While focused on Australia, the dynamics identified have relevance for understanding similar policy tensions in education systems worldwide, particularly those influenced by OECD frameworks and global standardisation movements.

In this article, we take a step back from a focus on learning through the practices of teachers, to look at how students first become objects of policy discourse and the implications for learning. This research aims to map discourses in Australian schooling policy, to determine how these discourses construct both learning and the positioning of learners in classroom practice. As such, our research question focused on the production of knowledge about learning in Australian schooling: How are learners and learning produced in Australian education policy and practice documents?

We make two core arguments. First, learning, understood as always embedded in relations of power, identity and cultural politics, occupies a contested position within educational policy discourse. The convergence of multiple policy discourses does not just obscure learning but highlights fundamental tensions about what learning means, for whom and toward what ends. Second, crowding of multiple discourses makes it difficult for teachers to understand how to approach students as learners, given competing constructions of student subjectivity and competing epistemological commitments about what counts as legitimate learning in the first place. Through the Australian case presented here, we illuminate how these tensions shape the possibilities for learning in contemporary schooling.

Utilising a Foucauldian archaeology

We used Foucault's archaeological approach to excavate Australian educational policy to examine the present-day discursive patterns that give the system shape and condition possibilities for practice and learning. This builds upon scholarship that has productively applied archaeological methods to educational policy analysis (Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 2013; Graham, 2011), demonstrating how policy texts can be understood as productive discursive systems that constitute particular objects of knowledge and subject positions. Where previous archaeological studies have focused on specific policy domains such as inclusion (Allan, 1996), teacher professionalism (Bourke et al., 2013) or online educational tools (Grimaldi & Ball, 2021), we extend this by mapping multiple, intersecting discourses across the Australian policy landscape to explore how learners themselves are constituted as objects and subjects of educational discourse.

The Australian education system is not a discrete structure but a complex set of agreements between governments. Under constitutional arrangements, state and territory governments are responsible for providing school education. Within jurisdictions,

governments establish and manage government schools and register non-government schools. While the Commonwealth Government does not directly operate schools, it is a significant funder and provides macro-level national policy. This macro-policy translates into multiple education policies across several jurisdictions (Education & Employment References Committee, 2023), shaping how education departments, school leadership, teachers and even students and families come to think about the role of learners in the classroom.

Foucault's archaeological approach to discursive analysis focuses on the ways in which statements are grouped, regrouped and redefined to shape discursive formations – systems of thought and practice that are locally and historically situated (Foucault & Sheridan, 1972). These discursive formations then give way to both objects and subjects of knowledge. Objects of knowledge are constituted through discursive practice, through repeated claims of knowledge. The knowing subject is similarly produced by discursive formations and power relations, not as a free, autonomous agent (Foucault, 1991). Following Foucault (1972), we understand these discursive formations as operating within epistemic configurations – historically specific systems that determine what can be known, how knowledge is organised and what forms of classification and ordering are possible within a given period. In contemporary Australian education policy, competing epistemic assumptions coexist; the archaeological method allows us to trace how these different epistemic themes produce contradictory constructions of learners and learning within the same policy landscape.

Specifically, we drew on surfaces of emergence (examining the Australian educational system through policy documents and government reviews) and grids of specification (examining how students are categorised into different subject-positions in practice documents). Examining the surfaces of emergence looks beyond the surface of the Australian education system to determine the discourses forming its construction. A discourse is defined not only through discursive formations. For each,

> we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes

(Foucault, 1972, p. 28). Discourse is formed through sets of interrelated statements, and it is these interactions that are important to understand the discourse in action.

Foucault and Sheridan (1972) shows discursive formations are governed by rules of formation that determine which statements can legitimately appear, who is authorised to make them and what concepts and theoretical frameworks structure their appearance. We examine not only what is said about learners and learning in Australian policy but also what remains unsaid, which voices are authorised to speak and which conceptual frameworks govern the production of statements about education. Inquiry questions included: 'What are the conceptual themes throughout all documents in this system?', 'Is there alignment in these themes throughout education jurisdictions?', 'Where are there dis/continuities in these themes? Where are there convergences and divergences?' and 'How is knowledge about learning in schools being represented?'

The grids of specification determined the various ways in which students are categorised and the spaces they occupy in the Australian education system through professional practice in schools. These grids enable the analysis of

categories and relations through which objects and subjects of knowledge are 'divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another' (Foucault & Sheridan, 1972, p. 47). Foucault (1972) showed classification systems are never neutral but reflect particular epistemic commitments about how knowledge should be ordered and what distinctions matter. Australian education policy classifies students via multiple, competing systems: by academic performance, by diversity markers, by economic status and by future economic utility. Each classification system reflects different epistemic assumptions about what counts in education and produces different subject positions for students to inhabit. We analysed discursive statements via questions: 'How does professional practice create different types of students in schools?', 'How do the identified discourses narrow possibilities for students within the education system?', 'What actions shape students as subjects of professional practice?' and finally, 'How are students constructed in practice?'

Foucault argued against prescribed processes for applying his archaeological approach, thus the first author determined a process for analysing Australian schooling policy documents. The first author used five steps to interrogate the primary data sources:

(1) Looking for statements that are the same (continuities)
(2) Grouping these statements based on their common relation to a particular object
(3) Identifying themes and discourses from these relations
(4) Uncovering discontinuities, disruptions and dislocations
(5) Linking between analyses

As statement groups were identified, we discussed them, questioning the contours and arguments of the identified discursive practices and subject-positions. The first author then re-read documents to test the fit of the identified discursive practices against the data, continually refining the groups and grids of specification.

This analysis drew on Australian educational policies, reviews and documentation relating to learners in *p*-12 schooling (see Table 1). We use 'Australian education policy' to represent policy documents, whether national or state-specific, that inform educational practice in government schools in Australia. These were grouped into two categories by accessibility by those directly involved in schooling: policy-level documents and practice-level documents. Policy-level documents are broadly produced by Commonwealth government departments, such as the Department of Education and include legislation. Practice-level documents are produced as the enactment of policy for direct use in schools or by the public, through a translation into practice by government authorities such as ACARA and AITSL. All data sources are openly accessible and were downloaded from the relevant authorities' websites. While not exhaustive, the dataset represents a robust cross-section of the policies, programs and practices that constitute education in Australia. We included Victorian practice-level documents as an example of how these policy positions are applied to a state educational jurisdiction.

Table 1. Data sources.

Types of data source	Example used
Policy-level documents	• Australian Education Act 2013 • National Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) School Education Strategy • Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration 2019 • National School Reform Agreement 2018–2023 • National Report on Schooling in Australia 2020 • Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia 2020 • Review of Funding for Schooling final report (Gonski report) • Review of the National Architecture for Schooling in Australia 2019
Practice-level documents	• ACARA Strategic Plan 2022–2025 • ACARA Australian Curriculum Overview for Parents • ACARA Australian Curriculum Monitoring Report 2019 • ACARA STEM Connections Report • ACARA The Shape of the Australian Curriculum v.4 • National Assessment Program Information Brochure for Parents and Carers • National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) National Report 2022 • AITSL Australian Professional Standards for Teachers 2010 • AITSL Australian Professional Standards for Principals and the Leadership Profiles 2019 • AITSL Assessment Criteria for Graduate Teacher Standards 1.4 & 2.4 • AITSL Improving Practice Through Feedback • AITSL High Quality Professional Learning Summary Findings Report 2017 • Review into Vocational and Applied Learning Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling Final Report (Firth review, Victoria) • Australian Curriculum v.9 Website • Victorian Curriculum Website • Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority Curriculum Map • Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

Mapping the Australian education system: tracing structural relationships and discursive productions

Students are first understood by their positioning within the Australian educational architecture and by how the relationships between different parts of the system may affect their schooling experiences. Thus, examining the system requires first mapping the educational jurisdictions, sites of practice, directions of decision making and information flows.

This structural mapping is not publicly available. Documents such as the Review of the National Architecture for Schooling in Australia (Webbe, Simone & Australia, 2019) provided guidance. The Government also provides an overview of its education system through public websites such as Study Australia and the Australian Department of Education website. However, the larger picture, including how decision making flows to the individual learner in the classroom, is missing from this public picture.

The Australian Education Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013) is the overarching policy document, informed by the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). Both the Act and the Declaration inform the National School Reform Agreement (Commonwealth of Australia). These documents provide direction to ACARA, responsible for developing and implementing the Australian Curriculum (AC) (ACARA, 2025a), and AITSL, which guides teachers through the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (AITSL, 2010b). Primary and secondary schools implement the AC, which is then monitored through the

National Report on Schooling in Australia (ACARA, 2024b) and the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia (ACARA, 2025c).

Together, these form the published face of the system for the public and those involved professionally in education in Australia. Here, the student as subject is produced and reproduced at different levels of governance.

Reading policy discourse: tracing how learning and learners are constructed

Examining policy-level documents, we identified which discourses currently exist, how they intersect, where they overlap and the presence of any discontinuities. We traced five discursive patterns, each with its own discursive formations and statements that signify their presence in the Australian education system. We read these as a learning discourse, economic investment discourse, policy discourse, civics discourse and diversity discourse. The following sections describe how each discourse takes shape through policy texts and where each is continuous or discontinuous with one another.

Constructing learning: knowledge, skills and academic achievement

Through our reading of policy texts, a learning discourse can be traced through discursive formations such as those surrounding practices of functional literacy and numeracy ability (ACARA, 2024a), the discipline standards of the AC (ACARA, 2025a), in addition to one of the focus areas of the APST (AITSL, 2010b). Specific discursive statements that recur include excellence, aspiration, capacities such as critical and creative thinking, disciplined knowledge and skills, motivation for learning and talent.

A focus on learning is stronger at a practice level and is given authority by public servants and officials. Within the learning discourse, some representations focus on the student as an achiever of academic growth; for example, teachers 'structure teaching programs using research and collegial advice about how students learn' (AITSL, 2010b, p. 10) and principals 'create a positive culture . . . that promotes enthusiastic, independent learners, committed to lifelong learning' (AITSL, 2010a, p. 14). Within the AC, literacy 'enables students to . . . engage with learning the Australian Curriculum' (ACARA, 2024a). Other narratives in these documents take a psycho-social stance and represent the student as motivated and adaptive. Students are described as lifelong learners who 'develop their ability and motivation to learn' and 'are responsive and adaptive to new ways of thinking and learning' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021, p. 5).

Constructing economic value: students as investment and currency

Through our analysis, an economic investment discourse can be traced through discursive formations such as those that contribute to the economy, for example, transitions to employment, through resourcing for schools and pathways to post-secondary education. Recurring discursive statements include transitions, pathways, employment readiness, lifelong learning, financial resourcing and enterprising skills. This discourse is located almost exclusively at a policy level and appears to be separated from representations of students in practice-level documents. Within these documents, the student takes on two

main representations: firstly, as an investment and secondly, as a unit of measure or currency.

In the Australian Education Act, for example, part-time students are 'to be counted as a fraction of a student representing the fraction of the full-time study load that the student undertakes at the school' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013, p. 25). Students are identified as an amount of funding: 'The SRS funding amount for a year for a primary student is – for 2014–$9,271' (p. 37). In the Review of Funding for Schooling (Gonski, 2012), the investment discourse is taken further: 'funding for schooling must not be seen simply as a financial matter. Rather, it is about investing to strengthen and secure Australia's future. Investment and high expectations must go hand in hand' (p. xiii). Further, the National School Reform Agreement contains a strong discourse in which students, through schooling, are represented as an economic investment for the nation. For example, 'Australia's future stability and economic prosperity is reliant on an equitable and inclusive school system' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 3).

Constructing accountability: measurement, performance and policy information

A policy discourse can be traced through discursive formations that provide information for policy decision making, such as measurements, identifiers, performance indicators and evaluations. It can also be seen through the political face of the education system, such as increasing public confidence in education and providing educational choices to families. Discursive statements that recur include transparency, performance, profiling, attendance, retention, participation and engagement.

In the National Report on Schooling in Australia (ACARA, 2024b), key performance measures are used to account for student presence in schooling. Attendance is measured as 'the number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students in Years 1–10 in Semester 1 as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days attended in Semester 1' (p. 75). Further, in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021), policy development is linked to Australia's educational vision, stating, for example, that 'good data will provide information about the educational experience and outcomes including pathways into further education and employment. This will be used to inform policy development and implementation' (p. 18). Further, results from national standardised school assessments are used as policy and practice-level data, for example, 'data files with results for individual students, schools, jurisdictions and the nation are also available for use by jurisdictions, non-government school sectors and schools' (ACARA, 2022, p. iv).

Constructing difference: equity, inclusion and diverse student identities

A discourse of diversity, equity and inclusion represents another surface of the Australian education system, read in both policy and practice-level documents. This diverse discourse can be traced through discursive formations such as those that cater to diversity in gender, ethnic background, socioeconomic status and learning disabilities. Further, this discourse is evident through the avoidance of discrimination towards students and the maintenance of equity. Discursive statements that recur include equity, diversity and

inclusion, which are strengthened by solutions such as intervention strategies, personalised or flexible learning and targeted support.

In the APST (AITSL, 2010b), for example, teachers are expected to 'develop teaching activities that incorporate differentiated strategies to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities' and 'Design and implement teaching activities that support the participation and learning of students with disability' (p. 11). The Australian Curriculum's main webpage for Student Diversity states the 'School students come from different social, cultural, community and family backgrounds. They also have a wide range of physical, cognitive, sensory and social-emotional abilities. Each student brings unique experiences, strengths and ideas to school' (ACARA, 2025b). In addition, 'Teachers are required to provide learning opportunities and choices for students with disability on the same basis as those offered to students without disability' through a range of curriculum and pedagogical measures.

Constructing citizenship: democratic participation and social cohesion

Through our reading, a civics discourse can be traced through discursive formations such as those surrounding democratic principles, citizenship, social cohesion, ethical participation and collaborative partnerships. This discourse is somewhat unique in that it seeks to represent students as active citizens who are social, participatory beings. Discursive statements that recur in this discourse include democracy, rights and responsibilities, morals and ethics, values, contribution, collaboration and communication.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021) provides evidence of a discourse of civic participation through statements about students as 'active and informed citizens who are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life' (p. 8) and 'have an understanding of Australia's system of government, its histories, religions and culture' (p. 8). Further, the Australian Curriculum cross-curriculum priorities have a strong civics narrative; for example, giving students 'the tools and language to engage with and better understand their world' (ACARA, 2025a).

Tracing student subject positions: how professional practices construct types of students

In the context of professional practice, discourses within the education system construct subjects akin to ecological niches, focused on specific areas. After identifying the discrete discourses already described, we turned our attention to understand how students are recruited as subjects within professional practices of teachers and principals by examining the subject positions available to students in practice-level documentation.

The impact of professionals, particularly teachers, on the construction of student subject positions is significant. Indeed, AITSL states that 'the greatest resource in Australian schools is our teachers. They account for the vast majority of expenditure in school education and have the greatest impact on student learning, far outweighing the impact of any other education program or policy' (AITSL, 2010b, p. 2). Thus, our analysis here focused on program-level texts produced by ACARA and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), and practice-level texts from AITSL. These

documents form a coherent framework for professional practice in Australian schools, with the Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework (Department of Education and Training, n.d.) providing an example of state-level context.

Using Foucault's grids of specification, we examined how students are categorised and the spaces they then occupy within the Australian education system. Through our analysis, we traced five student subject positions: the legally participating student, the assessed and reported student, the diverse student, the learning student and the industry-ready student.

The legally participating student

The legally participating student can be read as constructed when attendance is tracked, retention rates are collated, mandatory reporting of disclosures of abuse or self-harm is required and wellbeing and safety are monitored. This subject position is linked to citizenship and accountability discourses. These discourses focus on the student as an enrolled attendee in schooling, as a student engaged in their education and as a safe individual with rights to education and protection by the state. This type of student is constructed by government and public servants as authorities and formed as a subject through attendance measures, engagement in schooling, safety monitoring and mandatory reporting.

In the Australian Education Act (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013), for example, there are two key performance measures for school attendance in Australia. The first is student attendance rate, which is defined as

> a percentage representing the total number of full-time equivalent days the students attended the school to receive primary education or secondary education, divided by the number of full-time equivalent days the students at the school could have received primary education or secondary education (p. 1).

The second is the school attendance level, which is defined as 'the proportion of full-time students in Years 1–10 whose attendance rate in Semester 1 is equal to or greater than 90%' (ACARA, 2024b).

AITSL represents the student as a participant in a safe and inclusive school climate, where standards of behaviour and attendance are set (AITSL, 2010a) and teachers 'share a significant responsibility' for the development of the legally participating student (AITSL, 2010b). Standard Four of the APST demands that teachers 'create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments' for students and Standard Seven focuses on ethical, legal and administrative requirements of teachers, including mandatory reporting of student disclosures and reporting to parents.

The assessed and reported student

The assessed and reported student is constructed through the accountability discourse, economic investment discourse and learning discourse by the government and public servants as authorities, but is enacted in schools by professionals such as teachers and principals. In addition, a range of professional practices of teachers and principals help to

form this student type: particular standards within the APST, data for parents from the MySchool website, the National Assessment Program (NAP), the influence of global education agendas and the calculation of certification rank in senior secondary years. In Victorian educational architecture, assessment is considered an 'essential ingredient of planning for and promoting new learning and development' (VCAA, 2016, p. 13). The APST claims teachers should be used to 'interpret and use student assessment data to diagnose barriers to learning and to challenge students to improve their performance' (AITSL, 2010b, p. 5) and to check how a student is progressing against national standards and over time. Teachers are expected to 'report clearly, accurately and respectfully to students and parents/carers about student achievement, making use of accurate and reliable records' (p. 19).

The diverse student

The diverse student can be traced as a subject position when the categorisation of students via their diversity grouping takes place as part of regular schooling actions. These include the diagnosis of a student's disability and the identification of a student's cultural background, gender and first language. Practices include enabling the student's voice and agency within their school, access to the AC cross-curriculum priorities, the development of individual education plans, personalising learning and differentiation of classroom teaching. This categorisation via diversity markers appears clearly in documents provided by ACARA and AITSL. Principals have 'the responsibility to work with members of the school community to ensure all students in all communities . . . have the right to an education' and 'this same right extends to students at risk and those of differing needs and abilities' (AITSL, 2010a, p. 7).

The learning student

The learning student can be read as constructed from the learning and citizenship discourses, where there is a focus on essential literacy and numeracy skills, the teaching of subject disciplines and general capabilities via the AC, the provision of professional guidelines for teachers via the APST and a focus on high-quality professional learning for teachers to improve their students' learning outcomes. Public servants and officials form the student as learner via the learning discourse; however, government departments also contribute to this through the citizenship discourse when learning and education are considered civic acts. It is important to note that the learning student is rarely discussed at a policy level. Rather, this subject position appears more prominently through the development of practice-level documentation.

AITSL shapes the student as a learner through practices particular to the role of the principal, such as 'leading teaching and learning' (AITSL, 2010a, p. 11) and 'developing a culture of effective teaching, for leading, designing and managing the quality of teaching and learning and for students' achievement in all aspects of their development' (p. 14). Teachers are expected to 'know the content and how to teach it' and 'plan for and implement effective teaching and learning' (AITSL, 2010b). The learning student forms the subject of a significant proportion of professional development undertaken by

teachers. 'Professional learning activities tend to be focused on student learning and teaching' and 'content and subject knowledge or assessment' (AITSL, 2017, p. 5).

The industry-ready student

Constructed through an economic investment discourse and citizenship discourse, the Australian education system promotes future pathways, career direction, transitions beyond schooling and employment readiness, through which the industry-ready student can be traced. This subject position produces individuals who are well-equipped for employment and industry participation, are transitioning between school and future pathways, being informed by career education, participating in vocational training or school-based employment and becoming lifelong learners.

Career education, though separate from the AC, is a growing aspect of education in Australia and contributes significantly to the production of the industry-ready student. Further, the Australian Government's Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) priority also produces this subject position. ACARA directly frames STEM education as a contribution to 'a diverse and capable STEM workforce pipeline' (ACARA, 2016, p. 4). Focuses on post-school transitions to further study and employment also contributes to policy aims of lifelong learning through continual certification and thus play a role in the social aims of the nation. Victoria's review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schooling (Firth, 2020), for example, claims that 'education needs to offer a range of high-quality pathways so that as many students as possible have appropriate options and can successfully transition to further education after school' (p. 8).

What does this mean for learning in schools?

The aim of this research was to map discourses in Australian schooling policy, to determine how these discourses construct learning and the positioning of learners in schooling practice. We return here to the arguments presented earlier, considering both their implications for the Australian context and their relevance for understanding global trends in educational policy.

The first argument is that learning understood as fundamentally shaped by relations of power, identity and context, occupies an unstable and contested position within educational policy discourse. Schooling is ostensibly about learning; however, that how learning is constructed varies significantly across policy documents, reflecting competing epistemological commitments about what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose ways of knowing are valued. Pinar's (2011, 2019) conception of curriculum as autobiography reminds us that learning cannot be abstracted from the lived experiences of students themselves; their raced, classed, gendered and otherwise culturally situated identities shape what learning means and how it is experienced. As such, the presence of multiple intersecting discourses in policy crowds out discussion of what learning might best benefit a diverse range of students, highlighting that learning was never neutral.

For instance, economic investment and accountability discourses converge to emphasise performance statistics and measurability of outcomes, reflecting current global

educational influences documented in numerous OECD countries (Ball, 2016a; Sahlberg, 2023; Verger et al., 2016), while economic investment and diversity discourses overlap in processes such as equity-based funding, a tension evident in funding formulae across England, New Zealand and Canada as well as Australia (Gonski, 2012; Gorard & Smith, 2010; Singh & Taylor, 2007; Wylie, 2007). Convergences between learning and diversity discourses are shaped by processes such as personalised learning and differentiated pedagogies to address diverse student needs, while the intersection of civics and learning discourses promote lifelong learning and social cohesion, reflecting broader educational and societal goals evident in European education policy frameworks (Biesta, 2009; European Commission, n.d.).

These intersections entangle learning with other policy priorities while simultaneously drawing attention to different constructions of what learning should be and whose learning matters. The challenge is not just that schools, teachers or students are juggling multiple discourses but that these discourses represent fundamentally different assumptions about the purpose of education and in turn conceptualisations of the learner (Biesta, 2009; Brennan, 2011; Green et al., 2021; Pinar, 2019). The focus on learning is not decentralised by these other discourses; rather, the question of what learning counts becomes increasingly difficult to answer in a policy landscape that simultaneously constructs students as economic assets, diverse individuals requiring accommodations, developing citizens and knowledge constructors, a pattern documented in policy analysis across numerous national contexts (Apple, 2013; Ball, 2016a).

Despite a significant body of research on educational policy discourse internationally, the intersection with learning has rarely been a focus in Australian studies. By understanding how policy constructs learning in multiple, often contradictory ways, educational research can broaden to conceptualise these tensions as productive sites, rather than assuming policy is neutral with respect to learning. For example, topics such as schools as sites of nationally standardised assessment processes (Lingard et al., 2014; Polesel et al., 2014) or the fast-paced translation of borrowed policies across national contexts (Lingard, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2015; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) can be conceptualised as tensions between intersecting discourses and competing visions of learner subjectivity. The Australian case demonstrates how policy mobility amplifies these tensions, such that when globally circulating policy scripts encounter local contexts they multiply rather than simplify contradictions about what learning means and whose learning is valued.

The analysis in this study thus provides a different vantage point to existing fields of literature that focus solely on policy, separating claims from their implications for learning, the work of school professionals and those focused solely on the level of classroom practice. This study contributes by taking a step back from that classroom level to examine how learning is constructed within the policy sphere as a whole, and whose forms of learning, knowing, and being are valued or marginalised in the process. The Australian case, with its complicated jurisdictional arrangements, makes more visible tensions that exist in centrally governed education systems, which offer insights relevant to understanding policy dynamics internationally.

The second argument advanced earlier is that the crowding of multiple discourses makes it difficult for teachers to approach students as learners, given competing constructions of student subjectivity. In this research, we trace how Australian educational

policy discourses construct multiple student subject positions, of which a position of learner is only one. These positions often overlap and offer students particular identities to which the system responds, while other possible identities remain unavailable or unrecognised. Pinar's (2011, 2019) work reminds us that students always bring their whole, autobiographical selves into educational spaces; they cannot be neatly separated into learner versus diverse student versus future worker. Yet policy discourses attempt to apply this kind of fragmentation, constructing the student as simultaneously an object of cognitive development, a bearer of diversity requiring accommodation, a future economic asset and a citizen-in-formation. Each of these constructions carries different epistemological assumptions about what matters in education and presumes different relationships between teachers and students. Again, this fragmentation of student subjectivity is not unique to Australia but reflects broader patterns in how contemporary education reform movements construct students across OECD nations (Ball, 2016b; Lingard et al., 2012).

If learning were understood as inseparable from students' lived, situated experiences, as Pinar's currere suggests it must be, we might expect policy to construct student subjectivities differently. Yet what we might call the curious learner, which could be a student whose learning is understood through research-based psychosocial approaches to enhance self-efficacy and learning effectiveness, or what Pinar might describe as 'a spiritually enhancing subjective engagement with academic knowledge' (2011, p. xiii), does not appear at a policy level. This absence suggests that policy constructs learning in abstracted ways that fail to account for how students actually experience education, which is a pattern that resonates with findings from policy analysis in North America and Europe (Apple, 2013; Biesta, 2013).

The range of these student subject positions suggests that students may navigate the system by adopting different positions at different moments, influencing their experiences at school. Like the discourses from which they stem, these subject positions intersect, leading to a complex construction of the student. Further, these competing constructions ultimately narrow the scope of which aspects of student existence are recognised within the policy framing of their school experiences. The question here is not whether learning is displaced by a turn of attention to diversity, wellbeing, citizenship or workforce preparation, as if these exist separately from learning, but rather how policy constructs learning in ways that may include or exclude particular students depending on how closely their lived experiences align with policy assumptions about a normalised learner (Pinar, 2011). For example, when policy separately constructs the learning student and the diverse student, it presumes that diversity is something added onto an otherwise universal learning process, rather than recognising that all learning is always already situated within particular cultural, linguistic and lived contexts. This fragmentation reflects what Pinar (2019) describes as the failure to understand curriculum as autobiographical, as inseparable from who students are and the worlds they inhabit.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the absence of critical conversation about what learning is, whose learning matters and learning toward what ends in contemporary education policy, particularly in Australia. By mapping the competing discourses that construct

both learning and learners across the Australian policy landscape, we have traced how multiple, contradictory constructions of student subjectivity and epistemological commitments operate simultaneously without examination of their underlying assumptions about knowledge, power and educational purpose. Our reading of these policy texts suggests that the challenges facing education systems internationally cannot be understood as implementation problems or coordination failures, but rather as symptoms of fundamental, unresolved tensions about whose ways of knowing are valued and what education is meant to accomplish. The fragmentation of student subjectivities across policy discourses; the learner, the diverse student, the future worker, the citizen, the subject of reporting, can be read as policy's failure to recognise students as whole, autobiographical beings whose identities, knowledges and ways of knowing are inseparable from their learning.

While this study focused on Australian education policy, our analysis suggests these dynamics have broader international relevance. Australia's federated education system, where global policy trends are filtered through multiple jurisdictions while accountability pressures intensify, provides an illuminating case for understanding how competing discourses converge in education systems worldwide. The patterns we have traced, the construction of learning in multiple incompatible ways, the fragmentation of student subjectivities, the positioning of teachers as technical implementers navigating competing demands, align with findings from policy analysis across North America, Europe and other OECD contexts (Apple, 2013; Ball, 2016a; Sahlberg, 2016). The Australian case, with its particularly visible policy crowding and jurisdictional complications, may make these tensions more apparent, but the underlying dynamics reflect broader patterns in how contemporary education reform movements construct learning and learners internationally.

The contribution of this work is not to resolve these tensions. Indeed, as Pinar (2019) reminds us, curriculum is a 'complicated conversation' (p. 4) that resists simple resolution. However, we offer here a tracing of how policy discourse constructs learning in particular ways and to open space for critical engagement with these constructions. Through our analysis of how policy texts construct learning in multiple, often competing ways, we seek to enable the difficult conversations that education systems require more broadly, about whose knowledge counts, which students are positioned as normal learners and which as requiring accommodation, and thus what purposes education serves in reproducing or resolving existing social inequities. These conversations cannot be solved through technical solutions or better policy coordination, rather they demand ongoing critical reflection from educators, researchers and policymakers about the epistemological commitments embedded within the constructions of learning itself.

Disclosure statement

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