# The Race for 'World Class' Education: Improvement or Folly?

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**Abstract: Motivated by neoliberal economic priorities and under global education governance, students' test scores are the preferred evidence of education quality. Chasing 'world class' education quality, a southern Australian education department is seeking to improve 'falling standards' with their policy text:** *Toward 2028: Department for Education Strategic Plan*. **Significantly, the strategy includes 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 have improved. Examining whether these approaches will improve the state's learning outcomes, or are folly, critical policy sociology is employed, specifically policy analysis using Bacchi's:** *What's the problem represented to be?* **approach. The department for education's 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 global discourses and calls for a shift away from what is a source of global inequities rather than the solution.**

**Keywords: Equity, World Class, School Improvement, Global Testing, Datafication, Teacher Professionalism, Policy Analysis**

## 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, 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 (2013, 264) 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'. 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 a great number of policy-making processes in recent times (Ross 2021). Webb, Sellar and Gulson (2020, 293), argue that education is a field of policy that is 'always attempting to "reform" or "improve" itself'. 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 and Hogan 2019, 1).

Situated as an example inside these dominant narratives, one southern Australian state adopted an 'overly simplified, decontextualised and one-size-fits-all' (Lewis and Hogan 2019, 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 their plan: *Toward 2028: Department for Education Strategic Plan* (Department for Education 2018a; 2018c). 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 Department for Education (DfE) 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, 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, vi). Employing Bacchi's approach, 'the problem' represented is positioned as unsatisfactory schools' performances on national and international assessments. The plan, devised by the DfE, 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.

## 2. Literature Review

Over time, subordination of equity to economic priorities has been accompanied by an ambition for internationally comparable 'data' and an amplified focus on measurement in the Organisation Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) educational work (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 'seeks to constitute the globe as a commensurate space of measurement of performance of students' (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 99). Efficiency seeking, as increased test scores, simultaneously reduces educational outcomes focussed on equity endeavours and standardises education provision with a pernicious focus on basic skills. Concentration on data points is a foundation for the 'policy by numbers approach that … has become globally dominant over the past two decades' (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 157), and sits behind the downplaying of broad historic and political contexts; marginalisation, discrimination, oppression and other global social injustices. Equity holds a prominent position on international education agendas (Lingard, Sellar, and Savage 2014; Francis, Mills, and Lupton 2017; Ziegler et al. 2021). Equity aspirations necessitate that 'differences in students' outcomes [be] unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which students

have no control' (OECD 2018, 13). Despite this desire, there is widespread recognition of the gaps between equity aspirations and reality (Ziegler et al. 2021), accompanied by 'political consensus that social inequalities in educational outcomes need to be addressed' (Francis, Mills, and Lupton 2017, 421).

Notwithstanding internationally recognised widening equity gaps, test-based accountability is seen as 'the most important tool in the management of education systems and the promotion of school improvement' (Verger and Parcerisa 2018, 244). PISA's international comparative measures of quality and equity have been embraced by the majority of OECD countries (Breakspear 2012). OECD education policies fuel high expectations of 'accountability' solutions (Verger and Parcerisa 2018), despite the narrowness of measures involved. Measurement driven educational policy discourse has shifted the purposes of education (Reid 2010) and uses accountability measures to advocate for 'high-stakes standardised testing [to] drive up standards, and enhance the quality of a nation's human capital and thus their international economic competitiveness' (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 540). The OECD bolsters this global economic imperative, requiring all countries to participate in international, large-scale assessments to measure their educational effectiveness (Sellar and Lingard 2018; Addey et al. 2017), reinforcing top-down accountability expectations and processes (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013; Verger, Parcerisa, and Fontdevila 2019). Accountability processes dominate education policy domains (Holloway, Sørensen, and Verger 2017), despite prevalent challenges to the unproblematised assumption of test-based accountability effectiveness (Reid 2020; Verger, Parcerisa, and Fontdevila 2019) and the cost to humanism and equity.

'Crisis' and 'falling standards' also dominate global education policy discourse, steering the expectation that 'modes of accountability will drive up student performance and thus enhance the global economic competitiveness of nations' (Lingard 2013, 122). In Australia, this crisis of falling standards, measured by global and national tests, is widely documented, as asserted in one recent Commonwealth commissioned report:

> 'Since 2000, Australian student outcomes have declined in key areas such as reading, science and mathematics. This has occurred in every socio-economic quartile and in all school sectors (government, Catholic and independent). The extent of the decline is widespread and equivalent to a generation of Australian school children falling short of their full learning potential' (Gonski et al. 2018, viii–ix).

The focus on falling standards feeds into neoliberal productivity agendas, treating 'the problem of student achievement as an issue of significant concern with ramifications for school productivity' (Skourdoumbis 2018, 603) and economic futures. Here, policymakers and educators are focussed on symptoms of the perceived problem rather than deeper interrogation of the current situation and substantive action to address global equity gaps.

Globally, 90% of countries are experiencing declining living standards according to the latest human development report which measures countries' health, education, and standard of living (United Nations Development Programme 2022). Concern about equity gaps is widespread and there has been an impetus towards equity, leveraging 'public policy as an instrument to ensure greater participation in education in an attempt to reduce levels of social stratification' (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 135). In Australia,

responsibility for addressing equity gaps is located with state and national education ministers. This group has met to decide policy, under various designations, currently as the Education Ministers Meeting, and previously as the Australian Education Council and the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). Some education decisions are taken by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the highest level of national governance, made up of state and territory premiers and the prime minister. These policy makers aspire for prosperity through 'an equitable and inclusive school system' (Council of Australian Governments 2018, 2). A history of the work of these groups is detailed in the discussion that follows.

While addressing inequity is the aspiration, the 2022 Poverty in Australia report identifies more than 3.3m Australians live in poverty, that is one in eight citizens (Davidson, Bradbury, and Wong 2022). Poverty is increasing and inequity rising, and Australia's progress against international measures falls short. One example of headway against the Global Goals for Sustainable Development (SDG) illustrates these shortcomings. Negotiated in 2015, OECD countries' progress is reported against the seventeen SDGs. Specific to education, is SDG 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030' (Montoya 2019, 2). Against the SDG 4 progress indicator 4.1.1(c): 'proportion of children achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading at the end of lower secondary', 80-90% of Australian children achieve this goal (Montoya 2019, 8). That 10-20% of secondary students in Australia are not minimally proficient readers is disquieting.

The equity decline and adoption of global education policy solutions are reflected in Australian adoption of schooling policy that reflects links between education and expectations of its role in future economic prosperity.

## 3. Methodology

Critical policy sociology (CPS) is central to this paper. CPS does not take institutions and social power relations for granted (Ozga 2019), problematises (Bacchi 2009; 2015; Savage et al. 2021) and seeks to interrogate perspectives (Ozga 2019). CPS policy analysis attends to coherence and contingency, encouraging 'acknowledge [ment of] the scale and scope of incoherence and disarray of current education policy' (Ball 2021, 3). Furthermore, there is an underpinning view that researcher reflexivity requires 'alertness, determination to judge, evaluate and analyse one's own ideas and those of others, openly and carefully' (Ozga 2019, 7).

Critical discourse analysis supports the aims of CPS by 'problematiz[ing] policy rhetoric, puffery, and other discursive and linguistic features of policy' (Webb 2014, 367). Bacchi contends that 'because every policy constitutes a problematisation, it is fair to say that, in effect, we are governed through problematisations rather than through policies' (2009, 31). The whole conception of 'policy' rests upon a premise that policy 'fixes' things. There is an assumption therefore that 'problems' exist and can be identified, and indeed rectified (Bacchi 2009, 31) and that '[p]olicy makers are the ones who do the fixing' (Bacchi 2009, ix), negating the role of human agency.

Bacchi's (2009) What is the problem represented to be? approach (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, 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, 9).

As an example of policy discourse that is a determining feature of work in schools, the *Toward 2028: Department for Education Strategic Plan* (Department for Education 2018a; 2018c) is this paper's foci. In its pursuit of 'world class' standing, DfE has produced a publicly accessible, 16-page plan. It includes an overview of the 'world class' vision, the chief executive's forward, 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 DfE 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 (Department for Education 2019; 2021b). Throughout the remainder of this paper the policy will be identified as 'the DfE plan', without referencing, to support readability. Where a page reference is required, an abbreviated date and page number will be used. Accompanying the DfE plan is an extensive assemblage of 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 themes were selected, based on rate of recurrence using the online word and phrase frequency counter (Adamovic 2009). These themes were also of interest to this paper's discussion of neoliberal agendas and current global discourses around education. In order

of frequency, the themes are Measurement, Improvement, Support, and Accountability and standards. Examples of the terminology associated with each theme can be seen in Table 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.

Line-by-line analysis identified binaries, categories, key concepts, and modal verbs. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) identify a modal verb's role as carrying the connotation of imperative and obligation in texts. Analysis of the DfE plan found recurrent modal verbs supporting these connotations, including need, will, have to, can, and is to. The final column in Table 1, indicates the percentage of correlations between theme related terms and modal verbs in the DfE plan. Examining policy texts in this way supports the discourse analysis, corroborating the power relations and levels of demand from government in the DfE plan.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Problem Representation

The world class solution or 'kind of change' (Bacchi 2009, xi) promised by the DfE 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' (2018a, 2, emphasis in original). The 'world class' change model relies on data driven improvement planning, evidence-informed practice, and predetermined strategies. World class education aspirations are espoused in an assemblage of Department for Education publicly accessible formats, including websites (2018b; 2018c), the DfE plan (2018a; 2018c), action plans (2021a), annual reports (2019; 2020; 2021b; 2022), and promotional videos (2021d), 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, 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' (2018a, 2), without explicitly clarifying how this was determined. From 2018, DfE'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 and Lingard 2018).

To address falling standards and achieve the shift from 'good to great', the department 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 (2018a, 2). All six levers are purportedly underpinned by the introduction of a new model for school improvement. This

'solution' is expected 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 (2018b; 2018a; 2018c; 2021c).

In 2018, what was described as a new school improvement model was initiated. The first step was a 'system level benchmarking' of every school to 'create an understanding of their performance and subsequent support needs' (2018a, 11). An example of the 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' (2018c, 4). This action echoed global education policy reliance on measurement. By applying a 'data responsive formula' DfE 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 the DfE 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 and Mackey-Smith 2022). DfE describes this as 'putting the right foundations in place' (2018a, 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.

### 4.2 Underpinning Pre-Suppositions and Assumptions

Bacchi (2009, 34) argues that 'among the many competing constructions of a "problem" that are possible, governments play a privileged role because their understandings "stick"'. Concomitantly, government versions of 'problems' become embedded in dominant discourses, or 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1988) 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 the DfE 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. The DfE 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 DfE plan. Elaborated throughout the document as improved 'standards' that will take the education system 'from the bottom of good to great' (2018a, 2) the DfE 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 Table 1). An example from the DfE 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' (2018a, 5).

Initially, statements like this perform an aspirational role, alluding to improved education for all students as DfE addresses the falling standards crisis. Within the strategic plan nonetheless, DfE 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.

Table 1: Frequency data

| 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 (Griffiths 2009; Eacott 2022). 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 Table 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, 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, 604). The DfE 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 and Mackey-Smith 2022, 927).

The frequency count identified the presage that falling standards are realised in 'measurement' (116 references, see Table 1) and demonstrate that 'improvement' (74 references, see Table 1) is not occurring because students are not exhibiting 'growth'. Bacchi (2009, 9) encourages analysis of 'categories' that play a central role in governing. Improvement/planning and measurement are two such categories, embedded throughout the DfE plan and illustrative of the proposed policy solutions.

System-wide school improvement planning is fundamental to the DfE plan. 'Improvement' is prominent in statements like, 'ambitious goal for learning improvement' (2018c, 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 DfE Annual Report outcomes: 'Every school and preschool has an improvement plan that focuses on improving outcomes for every child and student' (2018c, 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. Additional staff were employed to champion plan development and support '…preschool and school improvement cycles through external school reviews and partnership roundtables' (2018a, 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 the DfE plan. As is common in policy texts, measurement plays a central role in determining policy effectiveness and progress. Table 1, shows that references to measure/measurement and related ideas are prolific. Explicit in the DfE plan is an insistence that progress, as the system moves from good to great, is measurable. The DfE plan includes statements such as: 'We have measured the standard of education on a universal scale that compares school systems across the world' (2018a, 2) and, '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' (2018c, 12). How these metrics are to be used is not clear. Reference to PISA and NAPLAN in other sections of the DfE 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.

**5. Discussion**

**5.1 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, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 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' socio-economic background or geographic isolation' (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 1999, 230).

Following a review of the Adelaide Declaration, MCEETYA published their Melbourne Declaration on educational goals for young Australians (2008, 7). 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, 7, emphasis added). Sub goals included promoting world-class curriculum and assessment, a staunch commitment to addressing socio-economic 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, 13, emphasis added), 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 (NRSA). With the binding of funding to achieving outcomes, came a shift in power relations and greater 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, 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 (the Act)' (Council of Australian Governments 2018, 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, 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, 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 the DfE 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, DfE employed McKinsey consultants from 2017 (Department for Education 2019), and adopted their 'schooling in crisis' (Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber 2010) messages and the 'proposed solution to the crisis with their school improvement consultancy 'gospel' of change' (Bills and Howard 2022, 7). The DfE plan 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, Chijioke, and Barber 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 and Mackey-Smith 2022, 934–35). 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 and Mackey-Smith 2022, 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.

**5.2 The Unproblematic in The Problem Representation**

While the DfE 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 DfE'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, 37) highlight the lack of empirical reality in numbers and the way data 'are deeply implicated in constructing the very phenomena they seek to measure'. The DfE plan assumes standardised assessments represent empirical reality and are valid. Seen as 'the single source of truth' (2018a, 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 (2018a, 1). One Australia-wide key measure of success is the percentage of students reaching national minimum standards (NMS) on NAPLAN. NMS are important to policy makers, but they are set very low. Goss and Sonnermann's (2016, 23) 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'. 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 and 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 and 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 and Mackey-Smith 2022). Context is largely assumed irrelevant (Gable and Lingard 2016). Cornelius and Mackey-Smith's research (2022, 931) identified an apparent 'blindness to context' 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, 157).

Undifferentiated labelling of outcome trends is part of the narrative around school failure (Sellar and Lingard 2018) and falling standards. The assemblage of DfE policy texts unproblematically lists excellence measures involved in being world-class (2018b; 2018b; 2018a; 2018c; 2021a). 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 (South Australian Certificate of Education or SACE) as well as Progressive Assessment Tests (PAT) in reading and mathematics (Australian Council for Educational Research 2022). The chief executive's Forward claims students are demonstrating 'year on year' progress in these assessments (2018c, 1). 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 and Hogan 2019, 2). The CEO's claim of improvement in 2018, in the first year of implementation of the 10-year strategic plan (Department for Education 2018b), 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, DfE 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, Ferrer-Esteban, and Parcerisa 2021). The DfE plan and supporting documents have extensive references to development of school improvement plans leading to improvement. DfE annual reports celebrate all schools' and preschools' plan development (2020; 2021b; 2022), and the department's website states: 'There was a 100% delivery of school improvement plans to education directors' (Department for Education 2020). 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' (2018a, 11) and 'educators now have access to an improvement dashboard as a single source of truth for school-level measures of improvement' (2018a, 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 DfE improvement expectations promote evidence-informed and evidence-based teaching practices. An example of this in the DfE plan is: '… introduced a model for school improvement which focuses on data, evidence-informed planning and teaching practice' (2018a, 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, 1). The DfE plan extends 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' (Department for Education 2021b, 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 and Mackey-Smith 2022).

**5.3 Effects of The Problem Representation**

As systems address falling standards, Henig (2013, x) identifies a common international rush toward datafication of accountability processes and a push to enshrine them 'in legislation and bureaucratic processes'.  This urgency preceded evidence that datafication positively impacts on teaching and the profession. As previously described, the DfE 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 and 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 and 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, Sellar, and Lewis 2017, 1), but in reality, they separate accountability for education from informed judgement of teachers as professionals (Henig 2013; Lewis and 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 et al. 2022). For more than two decades, public debates about teacher quality have been prominent in international media. Policies, like the DfE plan, position teachers 'as lacking in skills and as needing external assistance' (Thomas 2011, 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 in the DfE plan; to 'fix these problems and become a world class system' (Cornelius and Cornelius-Bell 2022, 66). Lingard, Martino and Rezai-Rashu (2013, 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 theme related terms were linked to a modal verb (See Table 1 for the percentage of modal verb linkage to each theme).  A DfE 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' (2018a, 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 the DfE plan's emphasis on development of resources by experts (26 references) and the focus of expertise as external to schools (43 references). Sahlberg (2016, 134) 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'. 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 2021) 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.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Replacing This Problem Representation

In closing, WPRB provides a way to consider how the problem representations could be otherwise. Policies aim to 'fix' things. The DfE 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' DfE endorsement of global education discourses, overlooking context, embracing datafication, and conflating improvement with improvement planning. This acceptance of global discourses sits in contradiction of national education policies that position equity as a primary driver, alongside excellence (Council of Australian Governments 2019). The DfE 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' (2018a, 12, emphasis added). That this is the only reference to a matter of international concern, reflects the way DfE'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 DfE schools, is repositioning teachers' and schools' agency with a focus on the values of democracy and equality (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 75). 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 and Waterson 2022; Twining 2022). Prior to the 2018 launch of world class ambitions, it was customary for DfE schools' improvement planning processes to involve 'staff, student and community consultation [which] led to the creation of ... collectively owned improvement plan[s]' (Cornelius and Cornelius-Bell 2022, 68). Schools' compliance with the DfE 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 et al. 2017), the DfE plan relies on a limited set of datafied assessments. The narrowness of this specific data reliance is seen in actions like: 'Developed an improvement dashboard as a single source of truth for school level measures of improvement' (2018a, 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, 545) 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'.

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, Baroutsis, and Sellar 2021). DfE 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 DfE 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 and Glenn 2013, 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.

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