

Improving educational outcomes: Why don't remote schools in Australia measure up?

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The link between one's postcode and probable school 'success' is well recognised. For those in remote Australian schools, it is an indicator that the further one lives from the metropolis, the less likely they are to be successful. Improved educational outcomes are desirable for students in remote communities to broaden their future life choices. This paper considers what neo-conservative policies around 'improvement' and 'success'—largely formed and mandated in metropolitan centres of education governance—mean for students living in remote locations. Using an example of leading a remote Australian school, we consider if educational success for students in remote schools can be readily evidenced through standardised testing alone. We also consider what this means for teachers, teaching in a remote site. This article draws primarily on the experiences of a school leader conducting an autoethnography, following their three-year tenure as a leader in a remote school. Through applied qualitative inquiry, drawing in particular on reflexive self-study, the paper explores one remote school's response to calls from governments for 'improvement'.

Introduction

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

Understanding the unique socio-historical becoming and geographies of remote contexts is integral to understanding sustained improvement, or lack of it, in remote schools (Guenther, 2013; Guenther & Ober, 2017; Halsey, 2018). For this reason, we felt it important to provide an extended rendering of the NAS context. After sketching the

national policy landscape, which in our view contributes to the problem for remote schools; a ‘picture’ of the NAS context is provided. Following these, excerpts of data are cited to illustrate the practical and contextual incongruities of balancing the competing forces of local need and policy, before conclusions are offered.

Increasing standardisation

Across the Western world, and unmistakably prominent in Australia, is a national focus on data and measurement that underpins increasingly standardised approaches to education (Biesta, 2015; Connell, 2013; Holloway & Brass, 2018). Following international trends, Australian comprehensive schools are under pressure to conform to national standards presented as government priorities. Arguably, the move toward greater standardisation has its genesis in the *National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) testing of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Verger et al., 2019). After decades of state-managed literacy and numeracy testing, in 2008 the federally backed NAPLAN was introduced to track student achievement against national minimum standards. NAPLAN is in fact, a national primary data-source, and today it is used to compare students’ performance between schools (ACARA, 2017b). In comparing Indigenous and remote students’ performance against national outcomes, scant attention is paid to the context from which the data is obtained (Gable & Lingard, 2016; Heffernan, 2018; Keddie, 2013; Macqueen et al., 2019; Vass, 2012). NAPLAN data acts to reinforce the education gap, and “persistent ‘othering’ of remote students and their families in terms of disadvantage, deficit and failure” (Guenther, 2013, p. 157). Since the introduction of *MySchool* (ACARA, 2017a), a government website that displays NAPLAN data from every Australian school, media reporting has ubiquitously made comparisons between schools (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Redden & Low, 2012), despite initial government assurances that NAPLAN would not lead to data being used to compare school ‘quality’ (ACARA, 2017b; Reid, 2010; Rose et al., 2020). The unproblematised use of NAPLAN outcomes has seen growth in deficit educational discourses about poorer and/or geographically remote schools (Stacey, 2022; Vass, 2012).

In parallel to data driven pictures of deficit painted for remote schools, a discourse of failure around teachers’ practice is now also evident (Thompson, 2014; Vass, 2012). Despite the growing body of scholarship that identifies teachers’ work as more than developing testable skills (Biesta, 2009, 2015; Cranston et al., 2010; MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020), there remains a persistent push towards narrow measures of teachers’ work at all levels (national/state/local) of government (Connell, 2013; Cormack & Comber, 2013; Gable & Lingard, 2016). Further, this narrowing is seemingly aligned with panacea solutions around students’ performance, i.e. if central governance specifies what teachers are to teach, then test scores will improve (Cormack & Comber, 2013; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Lingard, 2013). In 2011, the professional teacher standards (AITSL, 2015) were implemented with a clear premise to standardise teachers’ practice (Adoniou & Gallagher, 2017). The rationale for the standardisation of teachers’ practice, like the rationale for a national assessment in literacy and numeracy for students, largely assumes context is irrelevant to teaching practice (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016; Gable & Lingard, 2016;

Keddie, 2013; Macqueen et al., 2019). This, we will show, has serious and ubiquitous implications for teachers and teaching in schools disadvantaged by their postcode.

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

These tensions are playing out globally; school leaders are increasingly compelled by district and state managers to encourage teachers to comply with narrowly constructed improvement expectations (Biesta, 2009, 2015; Connell, 2013; Hall & McGinity, 2015; Joseph, 2019). In many Australian states, school improvement policies and standardised planning formats are used to ensure compliance with expected improvement priorities. While the expectations vary, state to state there is increasing pressure to comply with a narrow set of curricula and practices. For the state where NAS is situated, the improvement agenda was designed by external consultants and staff in metropolitan-central offices, to improve test scores (Department for Education, 2020a). Despite widely acknowledged effects of policy on practice, narrow definitions of educational success were operationalised to shape how improvement work can be talked about and undertaken in schools (Holloway & Brass, 2018; Joseph, 2019; Lewis & Hogan, 2019).

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

In the state in which NAS is situated, a mandate for school leaders today is directed to supporting the state government’s vision for a ‘world class education’ and delivering at

least one year of growth annually for every student (Department for Education, 2020b). '[P]olicy makers and policy making tends to assume 'best possible' environments' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 6) for implementation and make the same demand for outcomes from all schools. This means treating remote schools as essentially *the same* as their metropolitan counterparts. For NAS this ignores its ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) status, which is significantly low compared to other schools in the state. ICSEA is a numeric scale representing a level of educational advantage, accounting for student, community, and school factors. On *MySchool*, an ICSEA score of 1000 is average (ACARA, 2017a). 'Top' performing schools in high socio-economic areas of the metropolis have an ICSEA score up to 1190. NAS has an ICSEA score of 780; very few schools sit below this.

Northern Area School (NAS) context

Context is an 'active' force and is not just a backdrop against which schools have to operate. Context initiates and activates policy processes and choices which are continuously constructed and developed, both from within and without, in relation to policy imperatives and expectations (Ball et al., 2012, p. 24).

Context is integral to shaping 'what works and what does not' in an education setting. The reality is that no single contextualising factor is determinant of all others. It is a fact of social life that multiple contexts act simultaneously on what we do and what is possible to do at any one time (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Contexts act interdependently as multi-layered complexities. As previously stated, the authors felt it necessary to our argument to 'set the scene' around NAS and the children and community it serves. We do this, to provide a picture of how far from the metropolis the school is, and of those whom it serves.

The community of NAS is the traditional home to three Indigenous groups, the Antikirinya, Matutjatjara and Yankunytjatjara; however, Northern Area School also accommodates students from other Indigenous language groups, including Arabunna, Adnyamathanha, Dieri and Wirangu. Alongside the First Nation families, many in the community identify with their European heritage; forty-nine cultures are said to be represented, and some people identify as being of mixed heritage. Recent arrivals include families of Indian, Sri Lankan and Pakistani descent. Students speak approximately twenty languages (Indigenous, Asian, European, and English). Cultural and linguistic diversity is a feature of NAS.

NAS is 900 kilometres from any significant metropolis and the closest university. The community is uniquely shaped by its remoteness, arid landscape, and history of continuous Indigenous occupation by intersecting language groups, and relatively recent history of mining and migration. The small town sits on the edge of the Great Victoria Desert, Australia's largest. Living in this arid setting is a small tightknit community made up of approximately 2,800 culturally diverse residents. It is this community NAS serves.

NAS is a comprehensive preschool to Year 12 school, with approximately 270 students enrolled. The school is situated near the economic and social heart of the small town, just metres from the main street. Deceptively, NAS mirrors the physical features of many Australian public schools. It is a sprawling, low-lying ensemble of buildings with the administration buildings and gymnasium constructed of red brick and a well-maintained 25-metre swimming pool at the front. Behind these, there is a variety of demountable classrooms and recreational areas that have sprung up, over time, to meet the needs of the school.

NAS's low ICSEA score of 780 is underscored by 1% of students being in the highest socio-educational quartile and 80% in the lowest, based on 'parental education levels and employment types, geographic location and the Indigenous status of its students' (ACARA, 2017). The high percentage of families in the lowest quartile (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) point to why a large proportion of NAS students experience high levels of social dissidence related to the imprints of poverty, i.e., domestic unrest, trauma and extreme disadvantage. Further to this, for some Indigenous families a high degree of transience impacts schooling. Travel between remote communities, such as the hometown of NAS and the towns in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands and other regional centres occurs in response to family and cultural drivers. Transience contributes to rates of school absenteeism and academic capacities. A NAS school leader commented (Research participant - see research methods next), "I had a kid [sic] in my [class] who I saw once or twice for the entire year. His older brother was in Year 8 and still didn't know how to write his own name" (Leader 1 interview).

Due to the transient nature of life, students can be seen to struggle to identify with the project of 'schooling'. As children age this disengagement can be compounded by familial, cultural and ceremonial expectations, and in the face of 'Western' understandings and expectations about success, the disconnect makes academic achievement hard to envisage and relate to; therefore, attain. NAS is also impacted by the tendency "to send 'bright' [Indigenous and non-Indigenous] students to city schools" (Leader interview 2). This means that there is a dearth of role-models for students and no clear picture of what *success* looks/sounds/feels like in this context to envision educational success for themselves.

Following, we use autoethnographic approaches supported by interpretive research methods (i.e. interviews and document collection) to shape how we represent the tensions in leading one remote school undergoing 'improvement' measured by NAPLAN. We tease out how the rationalities of policy interact with the realities of teachers' and students' lives. In so doing, we aim to uncover some of the shortcomings in current education policy that aims to improve educational outcomes.

Research methods

Selected data is presented here from the NAS principal's doctoral study which employed interpretive methods in support of an autoethnography. The NAS principal/researcher (known as Head or Head teacher in other settings) documented site happenings pertaining

to day-to-day leadership of the school over three years. The researcher has an interest in curriculum justice for students and agency for teachers in a remote school that was navigating 'improvement' mandates from state level directors and managers. The study utilised qualitative inquiry methods, drawing on the leader's reflexive self-study—using accepted ethnographic field work practices, i.e. journaling, field notes and audio diary. Interviews were conducted with five other school leaders after their employment at the school, for reasons of ethics and possible conflicts in power relations between leaders.

To maintain anonymity, leader interviewees' comments are denoted by the numerals one to five. A regional based leader, with responsibilities across the state's remote areas, including NAS, was also interviewed. This interview is allocated the numeral six. Documents and interview transcripts were examined using discourse analysis, for the purpose of interrogating individual and group motivations, power structures and how 'normalcy' is constructed. The research was conducted with ethics approval from Flinders University (SBREC Approval 7996). The authors here, reproduce selected excerpts of the data to provide insights into some disparities between government approaches to 'improvement' through standardisation, and the experiences of those working in remote contexts.

Tales from the field

To present a picture of the happenings at NAS, necessarily requires presenting the perspectives of the school leader and those who agreed to participate in the study and the 'tales' they recounted. No doubt other insights could be brought to bear, and we acknowledge this article represents a microcosm of life at NAS. Our aim is to do justice to this representation. Further, while it is well documented that remotely living Indigenous students are particularly impacted by 'gaps' in educational outcomes (Gonski et al., 2018; Guenther, 2013; National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2020) we understand this phenomenon belongs in varying degrees to *all* remotely living children. Leader 1 said at interview, "you've got kind of an isolated community and they don't see many of the opportunities that kids [*sic*] in [capital city] see".

It is important to begin with an acknowledgement of the hard work and dedication of NAS staff. They supported student achievement and wellbeing every day. Most, as early career teachers, were honing their craft while also learning the context and coming to terms with complex student needs. A significant distance away from their family and support networks, and challenged by the context, many teachers struggled with the demands at NAS. Community poverty, family violence and trauma impacted the lives of many students, and there were frequent incidents of challenging, and disruptive student behaviour. Student disengagement and distrust of authority were prevalent in every classroom. Even more experienced teachers found maintaining quality relationships, differentiation and reflexivity in their practice demanding. Rates of staff turnover were high. Leader 1 described the change-over of primary staff from her first to second year in leadership: "... like we had one [group of] staff for one year, and the next year all but one of the primary staff were new to the school."

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

Measuring ‘success’

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

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

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

For example, several teachers regularly announced that ‘next week is NAPLAN’ to provide those students who might struggle with the tests an opportunity to absent themselves (Leader 1 interview data). Historically, some students with poorer academic capacities acted out as testing drew near and avoided attending. These behaviours reflect what Wiliam (2005, p. 34) described as ‘challenge avoidance’, resulting from students’ low skill and confidence levels, and the preference to be “thought lazy [rather] than stupid”. Claxton (2013) describes how student stress, based on a perception gap between task demand and personal resources, can result in a range of student behaviours seen as inappropriate. In response, teachers described quiet, off-the-record conversations with parents about the challenges their child faced with upcoming test participation (Field notes). The outcome of attendance discouragement was lower attendance on NAPLAN

days, compounding the usual non-attendance factors, and producing unreliable school-wide literacy and numeracy data.

In response to state government directives that NAPLAN attendance and participation be improved, NAS staff were tasked with having as many students as possible sit the test. At interview, Leader 2 described the pressure experienced whilst acting in the role of principal:

The work around NAPLAN was underway and the pressure to have everyone in [school] to do the NAPLAN was enormous. Whereas in the past, it was, you know, you need your kids who are here regularly to be in NAPLAN, that shifted to you need every single one of your students to be doing NAPLAN and you as a principal need to be operating NAPLAN, managing it, running it, analysing it.

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

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

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

'Barry'(pseudonym), a ten-year-old, Aboriginal student, learned to read after 18 months of daily one-to-one reading coaching and wellbeing support. As his confidence grew, success grew success and results followed. From non-reader to proudly parading around

the school with novels under both arms, Barry was celebrated by the school community and regularly called to the office for the congratulations of visitors from state office and the education director (Field notes, after a discussion with Leader 3).

Learning to read was undoubtedly a life changing skill for Barry. Teachers explored his case for insights into what could be replicated. This exploration made it clear that each child at NAS must be seen as more than the sum of their data. Key to Barry's success, alongside targeted instruction, positive teacher relationships, Indigenous support officers and attention to relevance in the learning, were narratives of strength connected to aspiration and future choices (Comber, 2016; Stacey, 2022; Vass, 2012). Individual success stories, such as Barry's, are not captured in whole school or NAPLAN data. NAPLAN cannot capture the positive life changes for Barry; the hope and potential role modelling created for other students as they watched his joy in having success. Given the focus on NAPLAN results, as the only reliable measure of success, staff felt individuals' achievements and intangible contributions were silenced behind averages and targets (Leader 3 interview).

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

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

The tension between those who practise teaching day-to-day and what is seen to be valued by those who govern, could be described by Gonzales and Firestone's (2013) 'educational tug-of-war'. This is evident in team members' expressions of understanding the low value of such analysis and their 'want' to be seen in a favourable light by the director. The leadership team also expressed concern about the impact of receiving lower results on students' wellbeing (Leader 2, 3, 4 and 5 interviews).

Leader 3 worked with the NAS Aboriginal support team and identified that 106 of the 135 Indigenous students regularly attending school were actively experiencing grief and loss, trauma and/or health challenges. As a result, NAS staff committed to using *trauma aware* approaches in the school. Young people's wellbeing needs are well documented with the

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2018) identifying six areas impacting wellbeing, including learning, participation and a positive sense of identity and culture.

At interview, Leader 4 said,

... we should be trying to ensure that if NAPLAN results are our measure, if we're going to see better results, then we need more kids [*sic*] having a go at it. For more kids [*sic*] to have a go, then we need more to be more resilient or be able to have that determination to push through when things are difficult.

Community consultation, prior to the 'new' improvement processes (see next section), also supported the decision to focus on wellbeing and trauma aware approaches. The needs of the student body and new staff underpinned the decision. On the question of continuing the focus on wellbeing when the 'new' improvement processes were launched, Leader 4 said, "... it has this really direct correlation to the data collection. We can't collect data if we don't have kids [*sic*] who are willing to give us the data". Another consequence for student-teacher relationships was articulated:

As the system moves more and more toward improving NAPLAN results it's potentially at the expense of relationships because we've got teachers telling their students that they have to do this thing, that students know is really, really difficult. There's so many with low literacy skills and NAPLAN is well outside of their comfort zone, but they're told that have to do it because it's important to the department. Students start to go, 'What? Do you care more about the department or do you care more about me?' That's something that's worrying me. The teacher-student relationship is really important. ... As we're forced to do things with our students that we're not comfortable with, and that the students aren't comfortable with and aren't ready for it, that's where a breakdown in relationship really occurs. (Leader 4 interview)

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

'New' improvement processes

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

I sat with hundreds of colleagues, all government school principals from across [the state], in a huge auditorium, to hear the Minister for Education and Chief Executive's annual

addresses. We were regaled with the positive outcomes of some of the new government's initiatives, a litany of issues still to be addressed and a promise of improvement to come. Both spoke of a new approach to improvement, as if the audience, many with decades of leadership experience, had never considered that improvement might be a good idea and [that we] weren't constantly working to improve schools' processes, student experience and learning outcomes (Field notes).

Predictably, narratives included falling literacy and numeracy levels, as evidenced by national testing regimes and international assessment rankings, appalling data for Indigenous student outcomes and the need to 'fix' these problems and become a 'world class system' (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a).

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

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

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

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

There was expressed a widespread understanding that students hid complex needs behind defensive/face-saving responses to challenging tasks and high expectations (Leader 4 interview). In an interview, Leader 4 explained why teachers used 'low level tasks and were reluctant to increase intellectual demand. He said,

Quite regularly, students chose exit strategies, like flipping a table or shouting abusively, to avoid a task that they predicted they won't be able to complete. This is probably fear of being seen as incompetent. That seems to drive much of the difficult classroom behaviour. (Leader 4 interview)

Widespread teacher reluctance to risk challenging learning tasks at NAS looked like a reliance on worksheets and tasks that ancillary staff could support students to complete, and the viewing of *YouTube* clips on the current learning topic (Field notes). The new improvement processes mandated standardised 'High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS)' (Department for Education, 2020b). It was clear that these required practices would test NAS teachers' responses to contextual complexity and probable ensuing student behaviours.

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

In addition to the new central 'support' staff, compliance expectations were also enforced by an increased number of regional directors. Their roles pivoted to tightly focus on each school's improvement planning (Department for Education, 2020b). Templates were provided to ensure compliant improvement plans were written. Astutely, Leader 2 recognised the tensions between developing a plan and acting to improve outcomes: "We're one of the most disadvantaged schools in the state. Let's fix it. No worries. We're on board. ... It's not going to come through simply writing improvement plans, that's for sure" (Leader 2 interview).

A central review team assessed and provided feedback on schools' plans and outcomes. The NAS context was poorly understood by reviewers not familiar with the school and community. Following is an excerpt from Leader 4's interview, talking about the mismatch in understanding between the school staff and the reviewing team:

Yeah, as a leadership team, we presented a lot of data that spoke to what we knew about our kids [*sic*]... addressing that and what additional support we identified that we needed to close the gaps. I think there's not a system in the department that allows for our context, our complexity. Our situation needs to be taken into account. In the current set up with the Department of Education it's all outcome based. It's around getting the literacy and numeracy outcomes, but it's not about supporting our kids to access the learning (Leader 4 interview).

What Leader 4 meant by this is, that there were well documented contextual and wellbeing issues that impacted on students' ability to attend school and access learning experiences. Staff spoke about 'a kind of outsider blindness' to cultural and wellbeing needs of students (Leader 2 interview). Schools were explicitly told that the new improvement processes left no space for wellbeing goals. In fact, there was active discouragement of attention on wellbeing from the director and regional and state office staff (Leader 2, 4 and 6

interviews). One literacy coach declared, “Wellbeing isn’t in the guidebooks” (Field notes), referring to the improvement guides provided for all schools to use (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b).

Central office and regional support staff regularly visited NAS to provide professional learning and support to classroom teachers’ implementation of the new improvement practices (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b). Teachers were encouraged to identify what should be taught, based on the previous year’s NAPLAN outcomes. In response to the heightened expectations and external pressure, extensive revision sessions were held in the weeks and months prior to NAPLAN week. This occurred despite teachers and leaders tacit understandings that these ‘improvements’ were not advantaging every student (Angelo, 2013; Macqueen et al., 2019; Mayes & Howell, 2018; Wiliam, 2005).

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

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

Abandoning an opportunity to involve an Indigenous Elder in the classroom was one of many compromises made prior to the annual NAPLAN week. This brief staffroom exchange demonstrates what staff forego, in the process of negotiating curriculum choices in the hope of lifting NAPLAN results. Leader 6 reflected that many teachers recognised that a lot of effort was going into revision of concepts well beyond most students’ capacity. Teachers acquiesced to the pressure from outside officers to improve test results, abandoning previously successful practices and pedagogies, “to ‘drill’ the test content they expected students to face” (Leaders 6 interview).

To embed the new improvement processes, state office recommended teachers at NAS engage in professional learning, peer observations, strategy coaching, data analysis and collaborative feedback sessions – and they complied. While all teachers and leaders participated, many teachers found the improvement expectations overwhelming and struggled to make connections between their students’ needs and the outcomes expected, especially those utilising ‘undemanding pedagogies’ to cope with challenging behaviour (Leader 6 interview).

The external consultants spoke of ‘failure’ and labelled the teachers’ struggles in the classroom as ‘resistance’. Teachers, however, spoke of difficulties with classroom

management. They said that as classroom learning moved to whole class explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy skills; student engagement declined and behaviour issues increased (Field notes). Some leaders, and teachers, were concerned that prescribed practices were insufficient; for example, saying

... we've got our local Indigenous cultures, ... an oral culture, storytelling culture and strong commitment here. They're having decisions made about them [students] in ways that aren't inclusive. How to be inclusive isn't in the guidebook" (Leader 3 interview).

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

Conclusion

While these tensions are replicated in other localities, this paper offers a perspective from a principal/ researcher, reflecting as faithfully as possible the concerns of leaders and teachers in one remote Australian school, as they navigate improvement expectations that are measured against standardised metrics. The authors have outlined the impact of single measures of 'success' and metrocentric improvement initiatives. The web of imposed expectations created by national assessments, comparisons with other schools, teaching standards, mandated curriculum and predetermined improvement priorities has been problematised. A range of 'tales from the (very remote) field' were recounted to demonstrate that the issues facing remote schools are not straight forward and cannot be addressed with universal solutions. We suggest, ways forward include attention to context and student wellbeing, broader and individualised measures of success and more recognition that young learners are not the sum of their data. They, and their teachers, are individuals with diverse lived socio-cultural experiences that require more community-connected and inclusive experiences than current standardised approaches offer.

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