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Problematizing “World Class” public education policy in South Australia: Insights for education policy makers

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Abstract

This policy-interested South Australian public education case study problematizes how the Chief Executive (CE) and members of the Education Department’s Senior Executive Group (SEG) understood system and school improvement from 2018 to 2022. We applied Carol Bacchi’s, “What’s the Problem Represented to be?” (WPR) policy analysis framework to unearth the policy assumptions underlying the Department’s overarching policy ensemble called “World Class,” initiated across South Australia’s public primary and secondary schools. WPR reveals heightened centralised technologies of command and control directed at teacher and leader work to achieve McKinsey defined World Class status by 2028.

We find school improvement policy solutions were engineered through “managerially enforced complexity reduction” techniques within the paradigm of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). These techniques impacted policy prescriptions, performance management technologies, school improvement plans, curriculum materials for schools, and promoted NAPLAN as the ultimate measure of the good school, the good teacher, and the good principal. NAPLAN is the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy used in Australia and takes the form of an annual standardised assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

Most concerningly, we find the policy logics of World Class worked to incentivise inequality across public schools through diminishing the purposes of public education and the professionalism of educators. We conclude arguing for the democratisation of existing departmental structures within iterative inquiry-based approaches to policy formation and practice to better attend to public education purposes.

Keywords: *Critical policy analysis; managerially enforced complexity reduction; public schooling purposes; new public management; teacher and leader performativity; school inclusion/exclusion*

Introduction

This paper interrogates the policy assumptions underlying South Australia’s (SA) pre-eminent public education policy initiative called “World Class,” initiated by the Department for Education across public primary and secondary schools in 2018. We applied Baachi’s (2009) Foucault

inspired, “What’s the Problem Represented to be?” (WPR) policy analysis framework to a range of publicly available and freedom of information (FOI) accessed World Class policy documents, seeking policy insights into:

What is the problem of system and school improvement represented to be within the Department’s McKinsey inspired World Class policy agenda?

Positioning ourselves

We come to this research as researchers and educators in the university sector after a long history of teaching and school leadership, working with disadvantaged schools and the disenfranchised students within those schools. We taught at a time when the authority to develop structures and curriculum to support student learning was devolved to schools with an emphasis on equity and the individual child (Reid, 2011; Collins and Yates, 2009). This informed and shaped our teaching and our research. For us, there was always space for new ideas to support those students disenfranchised with schooling. We established programs and led schools drawing on “equity and a concern for the individual child.” We have witnessed the acceptance of New Public Management (NPM) policy discourse within the education sector over two decades, leading to the erosion of trust and a diminution of equity as the central tenant of policy. Alongside the erosion of trust in schools came a centralising of policy and authority by the Chief Executive and Central Office of the Department for Education (for simplicity we refer to this throughout the paper as the Department). We moved from the school sector to positions in the University and kept our concern for equity and social justice for the disenfranchised student. In turning to Bacchi, we wanted to understand how under NPM the erosion of trust in teachers, schools and equity as a global phenomenon was being enacted in South Australia.

Background

We situate our WPR analysis of SA’s World Class policy ensemble within the workings of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), a neoliberal inspired school improvement approach that has taken hold of policy and practice in education jurisdictions across the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). GERM first appeared in 2006 in international educational change literature (Sahlberg, 2006), with its genesis in neoliberalism (Sahlberg, 2016), where markets are understood as the best way to organise economic activity based upon “competition, economic efficiency and choice” (Larner, 2000, p. 5; Connell, 2013). In the name of competition, “educational institutions must make themselves auditable” (Connell, 2009, p. 218) with an increased focus on “quality assurance as the means of verification of the standards being purchased” (Morley, 2003, p. 10). This emphasises rankings, pressure to provide “world class” teaching and forced aspirations for “excellence” (Burke, Stevenson & Whelan 2015, p. 31). This paper contributes to the field of social inclusion and equity policy in education by interrogating

GERM and its associated education policies through applying a discourse-as-policy framework (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014) to reveal the assumptions and silences that contribute to unequal outcomes.

GERM is inextricably linked with the expansion of PISA, which acts as an international league table attracting governments, education bureaucracies and capitalist education think tanks to view it as the ultimate measure of the quality of a country's education system. An unbridled GERM-PISA relationship has ensued, presenting to many education systems as the common-sense guiding approach to school improvement and measurement of that improvement. According to Cordero et al. (2018), GERM system take-up across the OECD has been driven by nation-state fears of becoming economic, technological, and social transformation laggards. This fear was propagated by research claiming a causal link between the quality of an education system (measured by GERM determined measures) and a nation's competitive future. Interest in this claim continued with the statistical application of three large-scale standardised international assessments, namely PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS by Hannushek and Woessmann (2007, 2010, 2015), who claimed their formulaic statistical work could accurately predict a country's future economic competitiveness. PISA has tested 15-year-old students in maths, science, and reading performance every three years since 2000. TIMMS has assessed the mathematics and science achievements of fourth and eighth-grade students every four years since 1995, whereas PIRLS focuses on the reading literacy achievement of fourth-grade students, surveyed every five years since 2001 (Cordero et al., 2018, p. 879).

The multi-national consultancy firm, McKinsey and Company (from here on referred to as McKinsey) saw profit in adapting their work into a marketable "Universal Scale" (an example of the McKinsey Universal Scale constructed for the Department is provided in Figure 1), a comparative overview of an education system's performance extracted from national (NAPLAN peculiar to the SA version) and international standardised tests (PISA, TIMMS & PIRLS), distilling a country or system's educational performance down to a number. A SA Education Department Director in the Policy Directorate, indicated the Universal Scale:

... compares school systems across the world using the results of national and international assessments (McKinsey & Company, 2010, p. 117). In 2017, the achievement level of South Australian public education students was sitting at the bottom-end of "good" on the scale's continuum of poor, fair, good, great and excellent. (Meeres, 2021, p. 2)

The McKinsey Universal Scale draws the reader's attention to a manufactured way of thinking, highlighting in the case of SA public education the need for schools to accelerate across a combination of McKinsey determined measures to attain McKinsey's number (530) to achieve World Class status. Under World Class, the Department wanted their system to join current contenders, Canada,

Finland, and Estonia at the top by 2028. This goal inspired the Department’s ten-year Strategic Plan, titled “Towards 2028” (Government of South Australia, 2018, p.1), highlighting when the Department wanted to achieve World Class status.

WPR methodology

Our professional interest in choosing WPR for this case study was to problematise how the Department understood school and system improvement, and based on the analysis, propose more “public education centric” school improvement policy. The analysis examines how these specific policy documents perpetuate cycles of schooling inequality and exclusion for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. To this end, the paper applies Bacchi’s WPR framework to a comprehensive set of McKinsey inspired Department policy artefacts. Bacchi’s (2009) approach features six questions that are woven through this paper rather than answered separately.

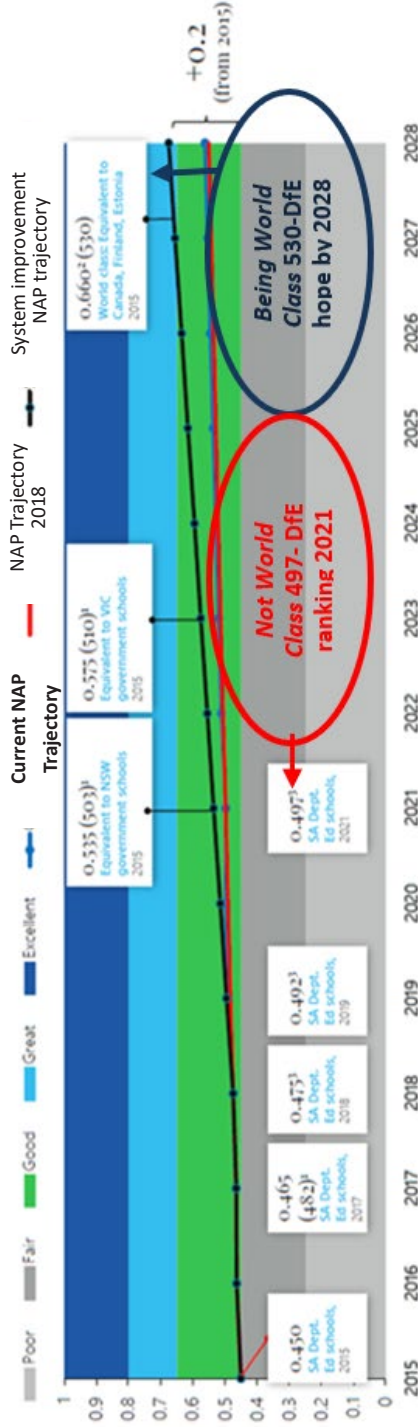
- Q1: What is the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?*
- Q2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions (conceptual logics) underlie this representation of the “problem” (problem representation)?*
- Q3: How has this representation of the “problem” come about?*
- Q4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the “problem” be conceptualised differently?*
- Q5: What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the “problem”?*
- Q6: How and where has this representation of the “problem” been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?*

The WPR framework originated from Foucault’s study of problematisations where he considered the practices involved in governing, understood broadly as practices that “contain institutionally legitimated claims to truth” (Rabinow & Rose, 2003, p. 20). According to Bacchi, “The WPR approach rests on a basic premise—that what we say we want to do about something indicates what we think needs to change and hence how we constitute the problem” (2009, p. 4).

WPR is based on two central propositions, namely the need to study the way policies construct problems and the premise that problematisations are central to the practice of government—to governing (Bacchi, 2009, ixiii) and therefore worthy of analysis. Our policy interested case study is a form of policy discourse analysis configured by both Ball (2015) and Bacchi (2009) “to recognise the non-innocence of how problems get framed within policy proposals, how the frames will affect what can be thought about and how this affects possibilities

System performance – NAPLAN 2021

but to become the nation's best we still need to accelerate at a greater rate



¹The Universal Scale was created by McKinsey & Company, based on the methodology of Hanushei & Woessmum, to allow comparisons between school systems. Schorre based on NAPLAN results in 2017 only, mapped back to the Universal Sclie via the latest PISA< TIMSS and PIRLSS results;

²In the Universal Scale in 2015, Canada scored 533, Finland scored 533, and Estroini scored 534

³2018-2019 NAPLAN data for all SA government schools, online and paper, results as at 216/08/2021, No NAPLAN 2020

Figure 1. Extracted from FOI Departmental Statistics and Modelling, 2021, p.6 [Red and blue circles with text added by authors to support reader understanding].

for action” (p. 50). This “non-innocence” brought into play the need for policy genealogy and discourse analysis (Gale, 2001). To this end, we conducted document analysis of publicly available and FOI accessed departmental policy documents. For ease of reading, we have used Bacchi’s questions to construct a narrative that uncovers how the problem of system/school improvement was represented within the Department’s McKinsey inspired World Class policy agenda.

One of the limitations of policy analysis of this sort is that there is never a straight line between policy and implementation, and so it is in this case, noting that individual principals and schools can resist or adapt policy to suit local circumstances and continue to do what they think is best for their students and community (Bills et. al., 2022). Despite this limitation, what we see through the document analysis is that increased bureaucratic accountability described by one member of senior executive as: “a clear line of sight into classrooms” sought to stifle not only dissent but also discussion of alternatives. Through the mechanism of surveillance and accountability, principals and schools were brought into line with new policies. In addition, principals were held to account to the central office through an increased number of Education Directors (EDs) whose role was to report to central office about individual schools and standardised school performance.

WPR policy artefacts

The WPR questions are applied to three publicly available documents, the Department’s Strategic Plan, titled “Towards 2028” (Government of South Australia, 2018), the McKinsey and Company “Improving Schools: Reflections from education leaders in South Australia” report (2021) and an Education Department authorised ANZSOG (Australian and New Zealand School of Government) Research Insights paper titled, “A model for strategic policy development and capability in education” (Meeres, 2021). These documents are considered alongside three FOI accessed Department policy documents, with the document titles, dates of release and page numbers as follows:

1. “Copy of the current departmental statistics and modelling used to identify the shift towards becoming a world class education system by 2028” provided by the Education Department’s FOI section on 24th February 2022 [9 pages].
2. “McKinsey & Company, Towards world class education, SEG Offsite, SA DFE, Workshop Doc., May 2019” provided by the Education Department’s FOI section on 3rd March 2022 [46 pages], and,
3. “Copy of all periodic updates provided to the Chief Executive regarding the implementation of the McKinsey & Company school improvement program and the ‘Towards 2028’ strategic plan” provided by the Education Department’s FOI section on 8th March 2022 [329 pages].

To enhance paper flow, FOI documents referred to and/or FOI quotes and diagrams presented are cited as: 1. “FOI Departmental Statistics and Modelling”; 2. “FOI Workshop Documents” and 3. “FOI Chief Executive Updates” with the relevant page number provided where necessary.

WPR document analysis

According to Labuschagne (2003), document analysis yields data from excerpts, quotations, or entire passages that can be organised into major themes, categories, and case examples. We began our analysis by reading the policy documents broadly, discussing key themes that emerged from these readings, and then coded gathered data into thematic “chunks”. We investigated the solutions proposed by the policy, and “worked backwards” to read off the implied problem from within the proposal (Bacchi 2009, p. 48). Next, we developed sub-themes from our codes, distilling these into a smaller number of overall themes. In an iterative fashion, we scrutinised and compared data with data to organise ideas and pinpoint concepts that seemed to cluster together. In subsequent discussion, we considered the extent to which the representations identified pervaded the policy texts, leading to removal of findings of secondary importance. We then questioned the extent to which each of the policy solutions translated into concrete policy actions for take up by schools.

The genesis of McKinsey and Company’s “World Class Education”

In 2007 and 2010, McKinsey made a global footprint in the international education market when it published two “Good to Great” educational system improvement reports, namely “From Good to Great” (2007) and “How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better” (2010). The research was headed up by one of Tony Blair’s “backroom boys” (Wilby in the Guardian, June 14, 2011) Michael Barber, alongside Mona Mourshed, CEO of Generation, who both worked for McKinsey. They asked, “Why is it that some school systems consistently perform better and improve faster than others?” (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 1). Through studying 25 of the world’s school systems, including ten of the top system performers in the OECD’s PISA group, they provided GERM-centric contributions which paid homage to high performing PISA countries, linking quantitative data insights with qualitative data garnered from interviews with high level education system policy stakeholders. From this, they identified the key characteristics of high performing and rapidly improving school systems, compiling practice and policy commonalities into a marketable “road map” for any PISA-McKinsey entranced country to follow. It is important to note that these reports have met with scholarly critique regarding methodological shortfalls (Coffield, 2012; Raffe and Semple, 2011). Our reading of these reports indicates how well-versed and entrepreneurially savvy McKinsey is in NPM terminology and its market pull. They understand that NPM dominates the sense-making apparatus of OECD education policymakers and system leaders. In other words, McKinsey discourse—constituting a neo-liberal logic—has high absorptive capacity inside NPM-infused education systems. Since 2000, McKinsey has successfully leveraged many consultancy

contracts with OECD education systems (O’Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016; McDonald, 2014; Coffield, 2012; Raffe & Semple, 2011).

If world class is the solution, what is the problem?

The first question that WPR asks is a reflection on the simple proposition: if this is the answer what was the problem? In adopting the McKinsey Road map to World Class as the solution it was clear the Department saw the “problem” as too many competing educator voices and agendas with principal leadership holding back the centre’s ability to accelerate change. For the Department, these competing agendas lacked clarity and the solution therefore was to centralise information and use that to drive change.

To this end, the Department’s CE Mr Rick Persse contracted McKinsey, (Government of South Australia, 2017, p. 1), to steer the SA education system towards World Class status in ten years. For the Department, McKinsey had defined the problem and offered the solution. Under The Advertiser August 31, 2018, headline: “SA Education Department wants to match the world’s best,” journalist Tim Williams reported, “McKinsey has a universal scale for comparing whole education systems” and that SA’s public system fell within its “good range, albeit at the lower end of that range.” Department CE Persse stated in that same article, “Our ambition is to be a great system, a world class system within ten years.” From then on Department executives and directors advocated for “the McKinsey Roadmap to World Class” (see Figure 2), embedded in their “Towards 2028” Strategic Plan, which along with a marketing campaign came with a complementary road map offering an augmented reality experience and the additional bonus of allowing stakeholders to assemble their own World Class cube (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The McKinsey Roadmap to World Class. Accessed 1st May, 2023. <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/world-class>

The timeline for PISA and TIMSS did not offer the data needed to complete the plan in a timely manner, so the Department used the federally administered National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) as a proxy for the international tests. Under World Class, NAPLAN became the high stakes measure of the quality of the SA public education system. For the Department, a “quality education system” became a McKinsey quality assured system, with quality measured by the system’s positioning on McKinsey’s Universal Scale. A McKinsey quality assurance discourse featured in the declared aspirations and goals presented in the Towards 2028 Strategic Plan. For example, the McKinsey discourse in the Strategic Plan is highlighted in bold italics below (also see Appendix A for further analysis of Problem Representation):

We have a plan to take the state-wide 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*. To get there *we need to raise the learning outcomes* of every child and student, in every preschool and school. (Government of South Australia, Department for Education Strategic Plan, 2018, p. 3)

The espoused McKinsey plan meant the Department needed to find ways to accelerate system/school improvement as measured on their Universal Scale. However, the aspiration to become “the nation’s best” was not going to be without its challenges. It necessitated overtaking consistently higher NAPLAN, and socio-economically better off, Australian states and territories. SA’s World Class aspiration also meant joining the McKinsey determined World Class leaders (Canada, Estonia and Finland) to win top spot by 2028. To this end, the Department needed to lift its improvement trajectory by point-2 standard deviations (see Figure 1) over a ten-year period. This meant their World Class agenda required radical interventions driven centrally, effectively “governing by numbers” (Ball, 2018).

These interventions were described by the Department as a process of school “differentiation,” which entailed “ranking” schools from 1 (effectively the low NAPLAN performers) to 5 (the high NAPLAN performers). Low NAPLAN performers could now expect greater centralised control (called “support”) over their improvement strategy compared to the NAPLAN “highfliers.” Therefore, under the World Class “differentiation” approach, disadvantaged schools which were likely to be the poor performers (Smith et. al., 2019) were to be placed under greater bureaucratic scrutiny. Principals and schools that were used to responding to local needs and circumstances found they were now required to comply with central dictates with professional trust withdrawn (Bills & Howard, 2021).

What was the foundation on which the solution was built?

But this is the beauty of a world-class aspiration. We look each other in the eye and say, “Is that going to be a world-class appointment? Is that going to be a world-class website? Is that going to be a world-class workforce strategy? Is that going to

be a world-class professional-learning academy?” (McKinsey quoting Rick Persse, Department Chief Executive, 2021, p. 5)

The second stage of WPR asks to examine the underpinning assumptions that led to the construction of the problem and where that came from. The presumption that underpinned the Department’s representation of the problem was a belief that the solution to excellence could be bought. A belief in the education system in the marketplace was a central pillar of GERM and was adopted wholesale by the Department. Centralising and controlling the message was seen as ensuring policy success (see Appendix B for further analysis of assumptions of Department leaders’ statements).

All trust was placed in the McKinsey designed Universal Scale as a true measure of system quality, as per the quotation at the start of this section (FOI Chief Executive Updates, 2021). In pursuing the McKinsey Road Map the Department took more control over educators’ work, positioning themselves as the custodians of the “single source of truth” (McKinsey quoting Persse, 2021) using a centrally produced “School Improvement Dashboard”, generated annually for every school by the Department’s Business Intelligence Unit (BIU) containing student wellbeing data, staff engagement and culture data, parent survey perceptions data, student attendance data, NAPLAN and SACE completion data (FOI Workshop Documents, 2021). The Department’s CE claimed the dashboard to be “the single source of truth” and therefore the only data to be used by schools in planning their school improvement priorities. Under World Class, the Department invested in the production of non-contextual “scripted curriculum materials” for teachers (p.22) and determined each school’s “main improvement priorities” (p.91), revealing an erosion of trust in the professional judgement of teachers and leaders. The documents were to be backed up with “intensive staff and leadership support” to “enforce minimum standards” (p.93).

The Department led interventions for schools were managed according to a school’s ranking, through the conduit of the Department to their EDs, the principals’ line managers. Low NAPLAN performers (invariably disadvantaged schools) were identified for more command and control (“support”) from the centre with departmental risk mitigation presenting as a key component assumption. In other words, poor school performers needed to be centrally managed because they could not be trusted to manage themselves.

Complexity reduction of policy requirements worked as an underlying assumption pertaining to World Class, positioned by then Executive Director Anne Millard as “immersing people in the conversation, so they hear exactly the same things, ... from a whole bunch of directions—one on one” (quoted in McKinsey, 2021, p.4). The World Class communication strategy took hold, using consistently repeated and simplified communications to school principals. The Department positioned World Class as a way of helping educators to do their work less encumbered with the complexities of school improvement decision making, “complexity reduction.” This could now be managed through centralised directives in combination with a school’s departmentally orchestrated Improvement Dashboard. This meant

putting the “improvement model at the centre” (McKinsey quoting Millard, 2021, p.4) of these conversations with principals, positioning the Department as the knowledge holders and principals as the knowledge receivers/followers.

The messaging was carried and amplified by a “50 percent increase in a middle layer of Education Directors” (McKinsey quoting Persse, 2021, p.1), who as the line managers of tenured principals, had the power to determine their career trajectories. Tenure promoted principal compliance to ED requests. In Foucauldian speak, the EDs and the “single source of truth” (McKinsey quoting Persse, 2021) School Improvement Dashboards were World Class initiated technologies of control, working as Departmental “panopticons” (Hope, 2022), omnipresent, influencing and managing principal behaviour in alignment with the system’s valued knowledge.

The World Class agenda came at the end of a two-decade standards-infused transformation of the South Australian public education from a once high professional trust system in principal and teacher judgement. The process of centralisation had its beginning at the turn of the century with a silencing of principal autonomy (Thomson, 2010) to the central authority in the name of serving the system. Two subsequent decades of reform led to intensification of principals’ work into more managerial low-level tasks devolved to the school with policy leadership centralised (Dolan, 2020). Eventually, the residual school space to act with autonomy was closed in the name of creating a high performing system. Having declared that schooling was in crisis, the solution was simple; education was too important to be left to educators to respond to local needs and needed the hard cold efficiency and effectiveness of business acumen. In relying on a “single source of truth” with “a laser sharp focus,” the Department ignored the children and young people that it was purportedly serving. Inequity and how it worked in schools was silenced.

Impact upon the purposes of public education

Measuring collective schooling quality to a single number marginalises the social and democratic purposes of schooling, the importance of play-based learning for early years children and the contribution of the Liberal-Arts for developing the capabilities of creative and critical thinking for a richer democracy and a more productive and cohesive society (Zhao, 2017; Biesta, 2015). This abstract measurement approach also meant schools most challenged by serving communities of disadvantage were poorly served by their bureaucracy because:

Such data-driven accountability systems, even when they attempt to factor in socio-economic background, have the side-effect of obscuring the real lives of students. Datafication reduces the complex disadvantages experienced by diverse young people to a single monochrome, or in a parody of intersectionality, create spurious entities. (Wrigley, 2018, p. 270)

Impact upon educators

Taken together, the arrival of World Class “turbo-charged” NPM quality control and measurement processes (Diefenbach, 2009) promoting superiority of bureaucratic knowledge over the knowledge of leaders and teachers. This concurs with critical scholarship into the influence of the GERM paradigm across the OECD with overly simplistic education policy change recommendations highlighted. These concerns are summarised by Komatu and Rappleye (2017) as:

...being too willing to convert complexity into “best practice” (Auld and Morris 2016), for narrowing the conception of the aims of education (Morris 2016), for opening the door for edu-business (Ball 2009; Lingard and Sellar 2014), for detracting attention from other policy possibilities (Edwards and Loucel 2016), for leading to standardisation that destroys delicate onto-cultural ecologies (Gorur, 2016), and for being reductionist in its overall understanding of education (too many to mention). (p. 172-173)

Impact on young people

Unfortunately, compliance to World Class forced principals to place their efforts into improving narrow standardised test scores taking them away from needed innovative learning approaches that can engage more of their students in education (Teese, 2006). After four years of World Class, South Australia was suffering through an educational crisis. On the basis of the Department’s own preferred standardised measures for their Universal Scale, World Class saw PIRLS go backwards and the PISA equity gap widen (Hillman et. al., 2023; OECD, 2023). The 2021 PIRLS data showed SA’s mean score and distribution in Year 4 reading performance was below every state and territory in Australia except the Northern Territory. A widening gap in student achievement presents, marked by increased absenteeism from schools, large numbers of young people disengaging, lower retention, and a collapse in the rate of young people gaining HSC certification after 12 years of school (Bills & Howard, 2023). The Department failed to learn from the work of the recently “passed” New Zealand activist scholar Martin Thrupp, on “the standards and the damage done” (2014, p. 15) evoked from his leadership of the extensive RAINS project. Thrupp and colleagues enabled NZ to avert the damaging hold of the standards movement.

Discussion

We summarise our WPR analysis of World Class in Figure 3. Here we highlight how the Department trusted in a very clear McKinsey inspired “roadmap” to improvement, a form of complexity reduction (Biesta, 2010), that handed more power over schools to central office. Under World Class, the Department became the custodians of “the single source of truth”,

positioned as having the needed knowledge to address the less than satisfactory McKinsey-measured trajectory of the SA public education system improvement in 2018 (FOI Chief Executive Updates, 2021).

Biesta (2010) indicated that reducing the number of available options for action of the components within an education system is called complexity reduction. Our WPR analysis indicates the Department’s World Class agenda was “managerially enforced” complexity reduction, which modified principal behaviours through the technology of differentiated accountability (school ranking) coupled with increased ED performance management of principals. In other words, it restricted the leadership options available to principals. Reducing complexity to simplicity in World Class involved the dissolution of the public education system in the sense defined by Ashby (2004/1962) into a set of loose individual

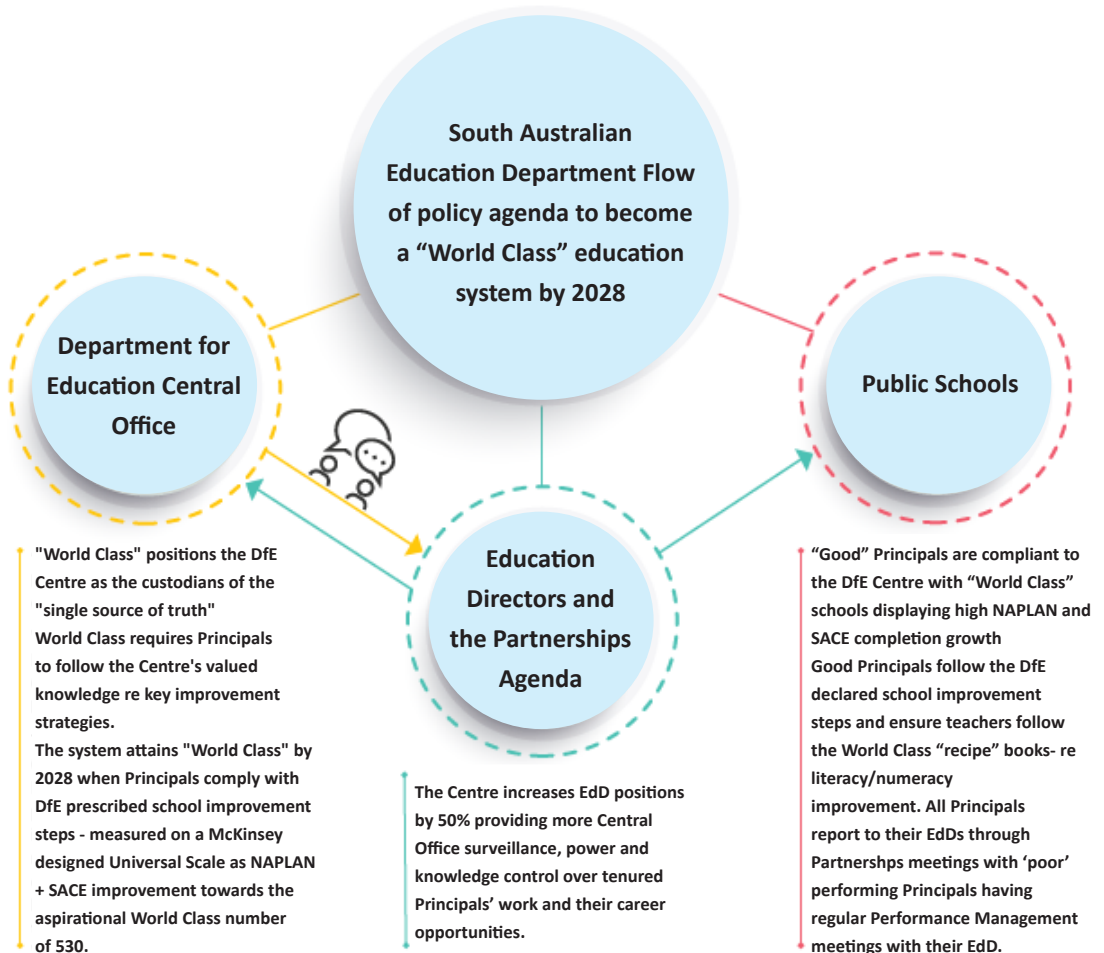


Figure 3. World Class System Framework

components whose behaviours were no longer seen as contingent upon one another. This is of course an abstraction from what constitutes life in schools leaving us with a system ignoring the complexity and beautiful uncertainty of education.

Conclusion

In taking up Bacchi’s invitation to imagine alternative possibilities to the proposed World Class solution we propose a more socially just and nuanced systemic approach to school improvement, which we call Beyond World Class (see Figure 4) to promote equity and inclusion (Eacott, 2022; Lingard et. al. 2014).

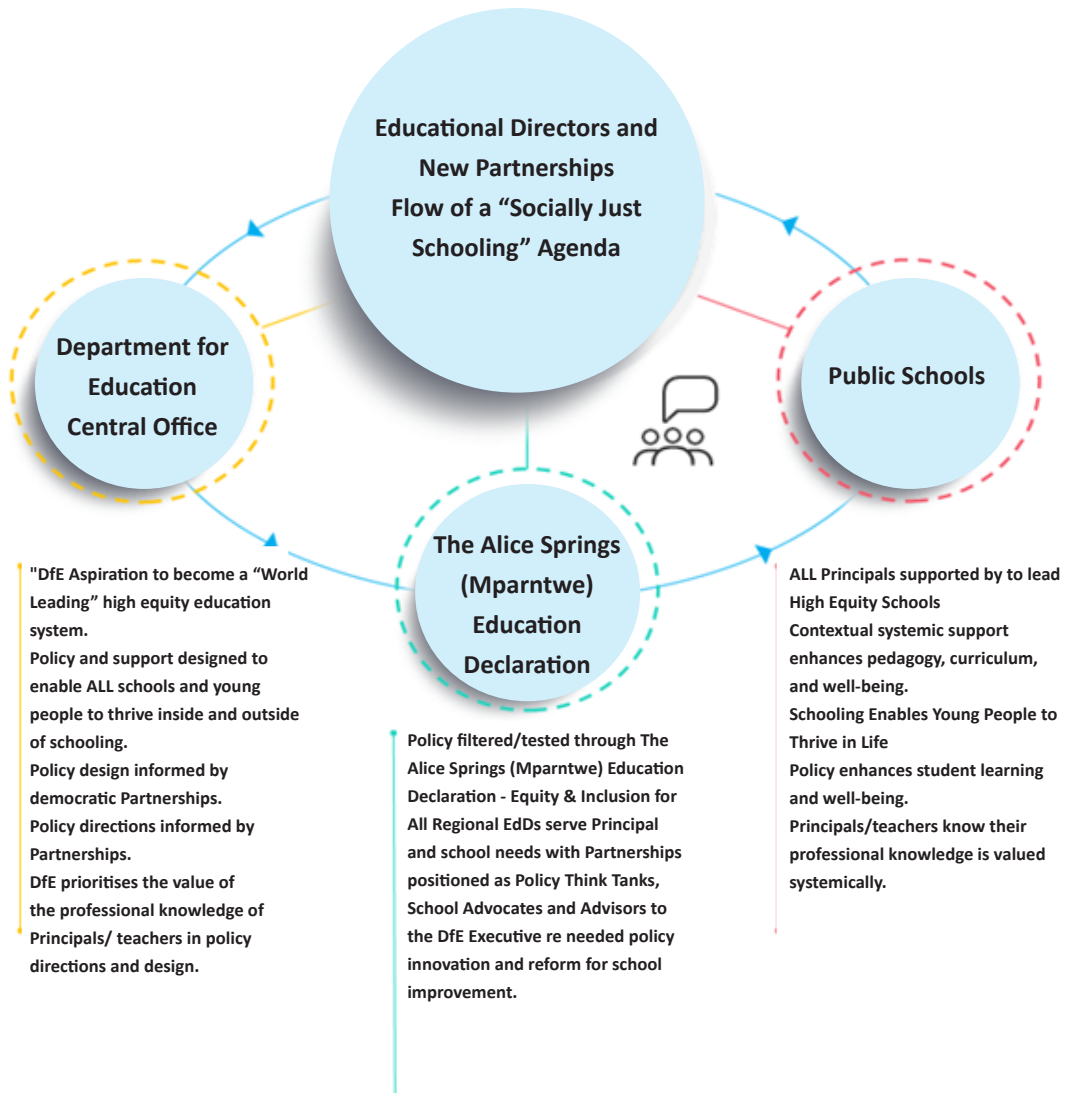


Figure 4. “Beyond World Class” System/School Improvement Framework

We advocate for more democratic approaches to policy making, school leadership, teaching and learning and student agency, in alignment with the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019) and the Public Education Statement (2017). We propose an education system that embraces complexity and uncertainty, and in so doing, better able to serve the needs of all young people. Mindful of the many interpretations about social justice in schooling, our stance and proposed public education system improvement framework is well expressed by Connell (1993) who said:

If the school system is dealing unjustly with some of its pupils, they are not the only ones to suffer. The quality of education for all the others is degraded ... The issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is about. (p. 15)

In South Australia, a Beyond World Class systemic approach presents as urgent given that the gap between the educational outcomes of students from high and low SES backgrounds is widening (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2014). We learn from our problematisation of the top-down policy approach of World Class, in calling for more professional trust by the Department in their educators. We argue their valuable knowledge needs to be used in determining policy evaluation, needs, directions, and design. Marshalling Reid (2020, p. 278), we advocate for a system-wide school improvement approach:

... constructed upon an iterative dynamic between the various layers of the system... central office will involve responding to the implications of what is emerging from inquiry and research in relation to these priorities.

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Appendix A

Problem Representations in World Class

CE/SEG quotes with bold italics emphasis added by authors in McKinsey (2021) followed by WPR author analysis]

- We could point to *NAPLAN data*, which showed that *South Australia was losing touch with the national average at a worrying rate*. (Rick Persse, Department Chief Executive, 2021, p. 1)
Authors: A NAPLAN centric lens over performance.
- We began with a data-analysis phase, which supported our hypothesis that *we had a very patchy system*. In addition, systemwide interventions largely hadn’t differentiated enough between schools to bring about effective change. (Rick Persse, Department Chief Executive, 2021, p. 2)
Authors: “Patchy” due to being a low equity public schooling system.
- Our data analysis showed that we had *a lot of schools that were coasting*—not going backward but not going forward either. (Rick Persse, Department Chief Executive, 2021, p. 1)
Authors: “Coasting” derived from flatlining NAPLAN data.
- Before we started, we were *going backwards in 12 of 16 domains* (referring to NAPLAN), compared to the Australian average. (Rick Persse, Department Chief Executive, 2021, p.6)
Authors: A system obsessed with national NAPLAN rank.
- But *to become the Nation’s best, we need to accelerate at a greater rate* (Department for Education, FOI Departmental Statistics and Modelling, 2021, p.6)
Authors: “Accelerating” means NAPLAN and PISA improvement nationally.
- Often it was a *case of schools having too many priorities and lacking focus*. (Rick Persse, Department Chief Executive, 2021, p. 3)
Authors: Drives “centre” led school policy/process simplification within an increased compliance regime.
- *Faced with this under-performance challenge*, in 2018 ... (Peter Meeres, Department Director Governmental Relations and Policy, 2021, p.4)
Authors: The system was underperforming and saw the roadmap to World Class as the answer.
- *We have a plan to take the state-wide 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. To get there we need to raise the learning outcomes of every child and student, in every preschool and school. (Government of South Australia, Department for Education Strategic Plan, 2020, p.3)
Authors: Since the 2018 World Class policy and practice agenda, SA public school attendance, retention and SACE completion rates have fallen compared to national data trends across these domains.

Appendix B

World Class Problem Assumptions/Presuppositions

[CE/SEG quotes in McKinsey (2021) with bold italics emphasis added by authors followed by WPR author analysis]

- *We were supported by the state government* and were able to pitch them our system-improvement story, which *lined up with their ambition to have the best education system in Australia*. (Rick Persse, Department Chief Executive, 2021, p. 2)

Presenting Assumption: World Class comes with political authority/sign off, so schools do not need to question it, but rather trust that the Department through McKinsey has the roadmap to becoming World Class by 2028.

- *A critical pivot we made was to reset the performance conversations we were having with schools and put the improvement model at the center*. (Anne Millard, Department Executive Director Partnerships, 2021, p. 4)

Presenting Assumption: Ongoing performance conversations (EDs with tenured Principals) are generated by a World Class improvement mantra that sees school improvement largely measured through the lens of NAPLAN.

- *We are immersing people in the conversation, so they hear exactly the same things ... from a whole bunch of directions—one on one*. (Anne Millard, Department Executive Director Partnerships, 2021, p. 4)

Presenting Assumption: Enforced complexity reduction/simplification of the policy/practice messages lifts principal compliance to the World Class school improvement truth claims espoused by the Department.

- But the big capability *we developed was implementation at scale—meaning consistency of application across all our schools*. (Ben Temperley, Department Executive Director System Performance, 2021, p. 5)

Presenting Assumption: Amplification of World Class truth shores up principal compliance to the ‘Centre’.

- *The goal of the 10-year strategy (World Class) is to lift achievement levels from the bottom-end of “good” to “great.”* (Peter Meeres, Department Director Governmental Relations and Policy, 2021, p.5)

Presenting Assumption: Unfettered Departmental trust in the McKinsey Company and their road map to World Class success is driven by NAPLAN centric performance concerns, written as ... doing well, but can do better.

- *... each school was plotted on a maturity model; however, we never published the results, because we didn’t want a league table kind of conversation*. (Rick Persse, Department CE, 2021, p. 3)

Presenting Assumption: *A good school is a good NAPLAN performing school. Departmental ranking enables EDs (who represent the Centre) to up performance management messaging to NAPLAN “poor performing” principals.*

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