

Reclaiming relationality in education policy: Towards a more authentic relational pedagogy

ACCEPTED VERSION

This paper critically examines articulations of relationality present in education policy texts that shape particular discursive representations of relationality between students, teachers and curriculum. The policy texts of Australian state and territory education departments are considered as a set of discursive statements to illustrate how concepts such as relationality are deployed in policy as floating signifiers. Without deep contextualisation, concepts like relationality are instead potentially co-opted and corrupted. We contend that through its uptake, relationality has become a handy catch-all in educational policy discourses, while remaining a sliding signifier, free from a more productive affective potentiality. Instead, we argue that relationality should be centred in education policymaking as part of a commitment to recentre teaching and learning at the heart of schooling through a more authentic, dialogic relational pedagogy.

Keywords: relationality, relationships, relational pedagogy, education policy, schooling

Introduction

It has become a truism that teaching is a relational act. Educational slogans and carefully word-smithed policy texts include phrases about the importance of relationships in education, and that how students and teachers engage with each other is critical to the formulation of effective schooling. However, there is a performative tension between how relationality is discursively framed through neoliberal policy texts and how it then becomes expressed in teachers' practices (Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Starkey, 2019). As Lingard (2007) noted, 'there are different logics of practice in policy

production at the systemic level, which can be starkly juxtaposed with the logics of practice within classrooms’ (p. 262). In this paper, we demonstrate how the ‘relational’ can potentially become corrupted through its superficial treatment in the policy texts of various Australian Departments of Education.

While there are multiple, complex ways of being ‘in relation’ as part of the educational relationship, we take as a foundation the definition provided by Lusted (1986), in which pedagogy can be understood relationally as the transformation of understanding, knowledge and ‘consciousness that takes place in the interaction of three agencies—the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they produce together’ (p. 3). Similarly, Biesta (2009) argued that the concept of education always implies a relationship formed between ‘someone educating someone else’ (p. 39). Additionally, we draw upon the work of Bingham and Sidorkin (2004), to start from the following set of relational propositions: relations are formed through shared practices and encounters, which are complex and in a constant state of becoming; pedagogy is a deliberate act of forming and nurturing relations; and that relational pedagogy always occurs in the moment of the encounter—the interface—between teacher, learner and knowledge.

We have previously considered the importance of relationality to education policymaking and practice (Hickey et al., 2021), its democratic ethos (Hickey et al., 2022) and the use of informality in the pedagogical encounter (Hickey & Riddle, 2021). Here, we attempt to better understand the discursive formation of relationality in education policy texts, within the broader policy logics of neoliberalism and ‘quality’ that have permeated through educational discourses over the past decade or more. In this paper, we seek to recentre relationality as a core pedagogic impulse that sits at the centre of teaching and learning, while recognising that it has become co-opted (dare we say, corrupted) by policy discourses that seek to utilise its affective power in marketing

a form of education that appeals to the relational, rather than providing any meaningful relational engagement between students, teachers and curriculum. In becoming a catchphrase in educational policy discourses, relational approaches to teaching and learning remain free from contextual and practical relevance.

Through the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Council of Australian Governments, 2019), Australian state and territory education ministers committed their jurisdictions to the promotion of excellence and equity through education. Among other strategies, these goals of excellence and equity would be achieved by ‘providing varied, challenging, and stimulating learning experiences and opportunities that enable all learners to explore and build on their individual abilities, interests, and experiences’ (Council of Australian Governments, 2019, p. 5). However, the problem of teacher quality has become central to much education debate, in which the notion of teacher quality works as a proxy for education quality (Barnes & Cross, 2021). While debates regarding what constitutes teacher quality and attendant policy frameworks are highly politicised and contested (Cochrane-Smith et al., 2013), what remains unchallenged is that teaching is central to student engagement and success.

Lingard (2007) argued that the post-Keynesian era has witnessed a withdrawal of the state from social justice policies alongside a shift towards neoliberal, globalised policy frameworks that have encouraged the growth of educational inequality, exclusion and disadvantage. Further, educational equity and social justice discourses are often marginalised in favour of the logics of transnational economic ‘flows’ (Liasidou & Symeou, 2018), which prioritise neoliberalised discourses of competition, choice and individual responsibility, measured by reductive metrics of educational performance and outcomes as the basis of effective education and schooling (Biesta, 2009).

Additionally, the reframing of equity discourses as quality (Mockler, 2014) has worked

to negate the consideration of complex interplays between social, economic, geographic and cultural factors of educational dis/advantage. As a result, formulations of successful educational outcomes for Australian school students result in high-equity and high-quality education goals outlined in the *Mparntwe Declaration* (Council of Australian Governments, 2019) functioning as an outcome of ‘quality teaching’, in which ‘highly skilled teachers and educators have the ability to transform the lives of young people and inspire and nurture their personal and academic development’ (p. 11). As such, there is a clear need to consider the role of teaching in the project of addressing widespread educational inequity through schooling and to better understand how relational approaches to pedagogy can work to open up, rather than close down, possibilities for a schooling that is more accessible and meaningful for all young people.

Relational pedagogy

The concept of relational pedagogy (e.g., Aspelin, 2021; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Hinsdale, 2016; Ljungblad, 2021; Hickey & Riddle, 2021) draws on a relational ontology, in which learning is not understood as a product of individual cognition, but rather exists in the ‘flux of individuals relating to their world, driven by relational processes and their unfolding logic’ (Stetsenko, 2008, p. 477). In contrast to the narrowing of educational outcomes offered by neoliberalised policymaking, relational pedagogy seeks to centre an ethics of care (Noddings, 2005) within a critical and creative approach to pedagogy (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Hinsdale (2016) claimed that relational pedagogy can be understood as a:

Response by contemporary philosophers of education to ongoing efforts at school reform based on a constraining view of education that revolves around methods, curricula, and high-stakes testing. Instead, relational theorists invite us to place the human relationship between teacher and student at the center of educational

exchanges and to deeply question both the nature of that relationship and what the relationship might mean to teaching and learning. (p. 2)

Importantly, the sociocultural–spatiotemporal–material imbrication of teacher, learner, curriculum and learning environment come into relation in the moment of the pedagogical encounter, which is deeply contextualised and imbued with ‘immediacy’ (Hickey & Riddle, 2021). The microworld of the classroom is a messy entanglement of verbal and non-verbal signs that continuously flow between students and teachers (Aspelin, 2006). It is within this messy entanglement of bodies, minds and knowledge where relational pedagogy has value, because it starts from the ontological position of intersubjective collectivity, which places relationships at the centre of a commitment to pluralism and diversity (Ljungblad, 2021). Drawing on Buber’s relational philosophy, Aspelin (2021) claimed that a genuine pedagogical relationship requires mutuality and inclusion, through which the teacher ‘enables the student to stand in relationship with the world; that is, to be present “in between”’ (p. 591).

In their manifesto of relational pedagogy, Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) argued that relationships are primary and exist through the shared practices of being together in educational contexts. Importantly, a relational pedagogy does not place the teacher at the apex of the educational encounter, but forms a non-hierarchical relationship between student, teacher and curriculum. Ljungblad (2021) argued that relational pedagogy requires an ontological commitment to ‘(1) subjectivity being based on plurality and (2) human subjectivity being intersubjectively constituted. In line with this theoretical foundation, face-to-face interaction between teachers and students is the point of departure for understanding educational relationships’ (p. 864).

Our recent empirical work (e.g., Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Hickey et al., 2021, 2022) has sought to develop nuanced accounts of relational pedagogy, which move

from decontextualised and globalised statements of supportive classroom relationships to more specific modalities of teaching and learning, in which relationality is a key affective element. The moment of the pedagogical encounter between teacher, learner and curriculum is vital in this formulation. Rather than a focus being on the individual (teacher or student) or the collective (the classroom), it shifts to the relationships between them, in the *interface*—that is, the shared space between teachers and students and learning and classrooms and knowledge and school and life. We agree with Aspelin (2022), who argued that ‘an ordinary lesson is built up by a huge number of actions and interactions, an astonishing myriad of events. The network of relationships is immensely multifaceted’ (p. 11). Similarly, Magill and Salinas (2019) suggested that there is a dialectical negotiation of the relations of social production that occur within classrooms in which teachers and students engage in critical dialogue, reflection and action together.

The failings of contemporary educational policy discourses

The treatment of relationality in Australian departmental educational policy texts remains largely superficial, in the sense that relationality is reduced to a simple formation of teacher–student encounters, without contextualisation nor consideration of how these relationships are formed and what they produce. Further, such relational policy discourses generally assume that teacher–student relationships are innately valuable, nurturing and imply a set of positive interactions. However, ‘relations are not necessarily good; human relationality is not an ethical value. Domination is as relational as love’ (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 7). Relationality is neither inherently positive nor negative in its outcomes, which is why greater care is required when invoking relationality in educational policy texts. The deeply contextualised enactments of teaching and learning through situated and embodied pedagogical encounters give rise

to a more nuanced accounting of the relational. Otherwise, relationality risks becoming an empty, sliding signifier, which is devoid of contextual meaning but reads nicely as a truism in policy texts.

Instead, we argue that recognition of the situatedness of relational pedagogy affirms the affective potentiality of the pedagogical encounter, through which the ‘normalized interrelations and interactions’ (Massumi, 2015, p. 8) of the classroom become interrupted, and space opens up for something different to happen. As such, the pedagogical moment becomes one of affective irruption rather than a transference of static knowledge from teacher to learner. The affective potentiality of relational pedagogy involves anticipation, being open to difference and existing in the present, and of mediating the discourses, material and sociocultural practices of classrooms. As Massumi (2015) argued, the potential of relationality is in the dynamic process of ‘operations that are directly *relational* in nature. ... They are produced by the relation, and spin off from it’ (p. 88). Therefore, the affective potentiality of relational pedagogy ‘places affect in the space of relation: between an affecting and a being affected. It focuses on the middle, directly on what happens *between*’ (Massumi, 2015, p. 91).

Framing policy logics through educational policy texts

Policy texts are collective social products that are situated and dynamic, rather than lifeless and formless objects (Prior, 2003). We contend that it is important to understand the context, audience and purpose of education policy statements. Additionally, it is important to consider the ‘mobilities of policies, people and places, and the various discursive and material flows these make possible’ (Gulson et al., 2017, p. 235).

Approaching policy-as-discourse (Bacchi, 2000) is useful because it provides a heuristic vantage to the particular sociocultural, temporal and institutional practices of educational policymaking. Importantly, doing so can enable an exploration of the

contexts and consequences of policy texts (Taylor, 1997). As Ball et al. (2012) argued, policy is not simply produced through texts, but also ‘discursive processes that are complexly configured, contextually mediated and institutionally rendered’ (p. 3). These discursive processes include how texts are also formed through their gaps and silences, the ways in which they become enacted in particular places by particular people at particular times, and the social practices that surround texts.

When we examined current schooling policy texts from Australian education departments, we were interested in how representations of relationality featured in the formation of policy logics and the framing of policy problems in education, by drawing on discourse approaches to policy analysis (e.g., Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 1993; Cochrane-Smith et al., 2013; Taylor, 1997). For example, critical discourse analysis has been widely used to examine the discursive and social effects of education policy texts through the interplay of language, power and culture (e.g., Berkovich & Benoliel, 2020; Liasidou, 2011; Taylor, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, we have deployed a sociocultural analysis of the policy statements made by various Australian state and territory education departments. In so doing, we sought to examine the ways in which language shapes social identities, power relations and knowledge systems (Fairclough, 2010) within education policy discourses. Importantly, we sought to understand how policy statements function as ‘discursive maneuvers with the aim to achieve *power through ideas* by constructing a mental image of the existing “problem” in education that necessitates addressing it’ (Berkovich & Benoliel, 2020, p. 507). Rather than responding to already existing problems, policy statements create and shape the policy problems they seek to address (Bacchi, 2000).

Policy logics as performed through policy statements have ideational power—power *through* ideas; power *over* ideas; and power *in* ideas—through which policy

actors attempt to influence discourse and practice by shaping normativity, conformity and delimiting the scope of ideas made possible through the policy process (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). This is important in education contexts because policy plays a central role in the creation and maintenance of hegemonic discourses through the technologisation of institutional discursive practices, which can be observed in the ‘imbrication of speaking and writing in the exercise, reproduction and negotiation of power relations, and in ideological processes and ideological struggle’ (Fairclough, 2010, p. 129). However, such power relations are always unequal and in a state of negotiation (Liasidou, 2011), which can be expressed through the production of policy statements such as those examined in this paper.

Anderson and Holloway (2020) examined how discourse analyses of education policy can be messy, dynamic and take divergent and sometimes contradictory methodological and epistemological positions, yet still provide useful accounts of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of education policy. To ensure a methodological coherence, we approached our discursive policy analysis through the *logics of critical explanation* (Howarth, 2010; Glynos & Howarth, 2007), commencing with the problematisation of a policy, practice or regime—in this case, the articulations of relationality in contemporary Australian education policy texts. Then, we retroductively examined the policy texts from several Australian state and territory education departments to consider the flows of social, cultural and political logics regarding relationality. Howarth (2010) argued that logics of critical explanation provide a means to ethico–political critique and normative evaluation as a critical policy analytic approach. For our analysis, we wanted to examine how references to relationality in education policy texts have worked to shape particular discursive representations of relationality and whether

the affective potentiality that arises through relational pedagogical approaches (Hickey & Riddle, 2021) were present in such formulations of relationality.

Undertaking discursive policy analysis

The first stage of this project involved accessing official government departmental websites from New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Northern Territory, Tasmania, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia. Simple single-word and boolean search queries were run on Google and the departmental website search engines, using the terms ‘relational’, ‘relationships’, ‘relationality’ ‘pedagogy’, ‘teaching’, ‘students’ and ‘classroom’. Over 100 policy texts were found to contain references to relationality. However, more than half of the policy texts dealt directly with *Respectful Relationships Education*, which is a national school-based program that seeks to address gender inequality and the development of respectful, equal and non-violent relationships (e.g., Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate, 2022). While respectful relationships policies are worthy of empirical attention, for the purpose of the analysis presented here, these texts were excluded from the final set of examined policy texts due to their curriculum focus.

We were left with 38 policy texts from the various Australian state and territory Departments of Education that explicitly addressed relationality in the context of school-based teaching and learning. Each of these texts contained articulations of relationality that met the remit of direct reference to the concept, through the use of phrases containing ‘relation’, ‘relational’ and ‘relationship’, or through indirect references to a relational sensibility, such as ‘student engagement’, ‘classroom environment’, ‘belonging’ and ‘wellbeing’.

It is important to note that only publicly available texts were accessed for this analysis. Many education departments and curriculum authorities have password-

protected intranets and member-only areas, which may provide more detailed policy and procedural information for teachers and schools. Further, these texts were ‘live’ on the departmental websites at the time of analysis in May 2022, and given the iterative nature of education policy development and renewal, we acknowledge that many of these policy texts will be superseded in the near future.

We utilised a discursive analytic framework that drew on the logics of *critical explanation* (Howarth, 2010; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). The logics of critical explanation attempt to understand the ontological presuppositions that render practices intelligible through a ‘*materialist* ontology, which is predicated upon a relational conception of reality and the radical contingency of social relations and identities’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 102). As such, there was a hermeneutical dilemma in simply reducing policy texts to their constituent words, devoid of social and material context. As such, our analysis sought to define how normative conceptions of the social, cultural and political logics of policy texts function as material–discursive objects. To this end, we considered how the key relational signifiers within the policy texts were framed, paying particular attention to the invocations of ‘being-in-relation’ (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004) and conceptualisations of how teachers, students, physical and social environments, and curriculum come into relation function as normative categories within these documents.

As with all discursive formations, there is a contingency, instability and incompleteness to the policy articulations shared in this paper. Through ‘the concept and practice of *articulation*’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 165), it is possible to lay out the markers of relational territory in policy texts, which form a set of discursive prompts for policy enactment in classroom settings by teachers and students (Ball et al., 2012). Such articulations of discourse can work to illuminate the in-betweenness of

relationality, along with its affective potential (Massumi, 2015). Crucial to our selection of policy texts—and the instances of relationality they contained—were the insights that these documents provided for formatting an idealised sense of the concept. At work in these articulations of relationality were invocations of the concept, which in turn inflected the policy documentation and concomitant conceptions of education and schooling. The critical explanation (Howarth, 2010) at work here sought to uncover how these normative conceptions of relationality informed the idea of schooling and the performative roles of teachers and students. That correspondence between the analysed documents was evident is notable because it indicates that conceptualisations of relationality carry concordance in contemporary policy designations.

Representations of relationality in education policy texts

What follows are a series of illustrative extracts taken from the contemporary education policy texts of the eight Australian states and territories. These are not intended to be exhaustive accounts of the conceptual framing of ‘relationality’ in policymaking, although they provide an illustrative sense of how relationality is deployed in education policy texts. We note that policy usage of relationality is always transactional and in the service of another outcome, such as increased student wellbeing, academic achievement or engagement.

We frame the analyses below in these contextualised terms, and following the tenets of critical explanation, demonstrate how ‘articulations’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 165) of the concept of relationality (and its derivations) frame wider concerns. Such things as student attainment and progression, engagement and behaviour management, and positive inter-personal encounters within the classroom and school settings were framed as indicative outcomes of relationality, with the discursive formation of relationships implying the constitutive function that relationality

maintained in terms of these larger ideals. Several policy texts across the state and territory education jurisdictions demonstrated similar concerns on these terms, so we have elected to present a representative selection here for the sake of brevity.

Setting expectations for attainment and progression

To commence our analysis, we highlight how a desire to ‘guide and support students towards meeting expectations’ in terms of predetermined academic and behavioural objectives encourages New South Wales school teachers to:

Create a positive classroom environment characterised by supportive, collaborative relationships and frequent student–teacher classroom interactions. For example, positive interactions can be facilitated by encouraging students to offer insightful or interesting observations on the work of their peers. (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 6)

Here, the relational is framed as an *interaction*, which serves a function of facilitating a transactional outcome of *meeting expectations*. However, it is left to the teacher to assume whose expectations (i.e., the teacher’s) and which expectations (i.e., students’ academic performance), and that clarity regarding how such expectations might come to be framed in context of the day-to-day encounters of the school remains vague.

Nonetheless, the supportive, collaborative relationships mentioned in this policy text are geared towards the enactment of a productive set of academic outcomes that derive from the creation of a positive classroom environment, which will ensure student attainment and progression. We contend that the co-option of relationality on these terms towards a ‘what works’ formulation of the pedagogical encounter is reductive at best, corruptive at worst. As an example, in the same document, a case study was shared that claimed:

Student–teacher relationships are also prioritised as a means to foster high expectations. All teachers make an effort to get to know the students and demonstrate that they care about their students. This can be as simple as knowing who a student’s siblings are or asking questions about what they did on the weekend. (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 9)

We agree that teachers possessing an understanding about the lives and experiences of the young people with whom they share the classroom is an important part of forming relationships. It is well understood that teachers can significantly affect the lives of students through how they relate to them (Noddings, 2003). However, there is a long bow being drawn between the fostering of high academic expectations and the act of asking students questions about their weekend activities. For example, teachers are encouraged to ‘look for opportunities to engage positively with students. Take the time to have positive interactions in non-classroom settings such as in the playground, at sport or co-curricular activities’ (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 26). How this translates into student engagement and successful progression remains underdefined and vaguely conceived. In this example, the affective potentiality of relational pedagogy is reduced to the function of a transactional encounter, and through which knowledge of students’ lives and interests outside the classroom supposedly translate into increased academic and behavioural outcomes.

A transactional framing of the relational as a set of deliberate interactions that foster outcomes fits within a more traditional didactic approach to pedagogy and curriculum, in which the teacher assumes control over the physical and social spaces of the classroom to instruct students. This is distinct from a more dialogic relationality, which enables students to develop a meaningful relationship with the teacher and proceed as active participants in the negotiation of the ‘in between’ of the pedagogical encounter (Aspelin, 2021). In framing student–teacher relationships ‘as a means to

foster high expectations' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 9), the affective potential of the relational process is reduced to a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The pluralism and diversity of relationality is stripped away (Ljungblad, 2021) and what is left is a strategy designed to have students meet predetermined expectations of attainment, progression and the negotiation of curriculum.

More promisingly, in a recent report on improving student engagement, the Queensland Department of Education (2020) argued that high-quality alternative education settings should develop 'a strong school culture, with a focus on positive relationships and relational pedagogy' (p. 16). However, relational pedagogy is left undefined beyond the rehearsal of superficial rhetoric about positive and caring relationships, listening to young people and considering their needs. While this is certainly closer to the mark of a more dialogic and participatory form of relational pedagogy (e.g., Aspelin, 2021; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Hickey & Riddle, 2021), relationality in this articulation remains a function of something else: in this case, addressing poor student wellbeing and disengagement. As Ljungblad (2021) argued, a relational pedagogy brings the learner into relationship with their learning, which requires that students have equal status in relation to the teacher and the curriculum, so that the plurality of subjectivity can be intersubjectively constituted in the process of developing those relationships (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Further, the Queensland Department of Education (2020) report addresses the re-engagement of marginalised and disenfranchised young people who find themselves segregated from mainstream schools and placed into alternative contexts, such as flexi schools and second-chance schools. For many of these young people, such experiences offer an impoverished

curriculum, which is at odds with the stated aims of reengaging young people in meaningful education (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Moffatt & Riddle, 2021).

Managing student behaviour and engagement

In an effort to ensure student engagement, the New South Wales Student Behaviour Strategy casts relationality within a behaviour management frame, through which positive relationships work as a bulwark against poor student behaviour. As the strategy makes clear, this is achieved by ‘balancing proactive prevention-focused, relationship-based and restorative practices with appropriate behaviour management practices’ (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021, p. 9). Here, relationality implies an overlay of behavioural psychology, wherein students’ behaviour is managed and contained within the classroom setting through such relational ‘techniques’. Such use of relationships becomes a protective barrier against poor student behaviour, although with the caveat that the cultivation of relationships should be undertaken alongside ‘appropriate behaviour management practices’, which are not further explicated in this policy text.

Taking into account Buber’s relational ontology of communion, in which an effective pedagogy involves the move towards ‘genuine, interhuman encounters’, it becomes clear that ‘teaching in terms of relational bonding is an end in itself’ (Aspelin, 2021, p. 595). However, this stands in marked contrast to the discursive framing of the selection of education policy texts considered to this point, and within which relationality is placed in the service of other ends, which sit apart from the communal socialising effects of the pedagogical relationship (Biesta, 2009). Such framing is evident in the aims of the New South Wales Student Behaviour Strategy, which ‘seeks for students, schools and our community to be empowered to champion and drive a culture of positive behaviour support to achieve positive outcomes for all students’

(New South Wales Department of Education, 2021, p. 24). It is positive behaviour, and not the relationship in and of itself, that represents the goal of this strategy.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training (2020) advised that motivating and engaging students occurs when ‘teachers build quality relationships that enhance student engagement, self-confidence and growth as a learner’ (p. 12). Again, emphasis is placed on the behaviourist capacities of relationality, although this time with the assurance of quality relationships providing an ‘enhancing’ effect on ‘student engagement, self-confidence and growth’. Words such as ‘supportive’, ‘inclusive’, ‘motivate’ and ‘empower’ appear multiple times throughout the 28-page policy text, although the focus of the discourse remains on teachers and their practice. Although students represent the point of focus for the effects of this modality of relationality, it is via teachers that these effects will be realised. The five domains of Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate are all framed by actions undertaken by teachers. For example, Action 2.4: ‘Teachers maintain an energised and focused learning environment’ (Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2020, p. 13) assumes a relationship to students and their learning, although the focus is clearly on teachers. The complexities of relational acts that take place within the microworld of the classroom (Aspelin, 2006)—including learning and socialisation—are reduced to the simplistic formulation of an ‘energised and focused learning environment’.

On a similar note, the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2022) argued that strong teacher–student relationships result in decreased risk-taking behaviour and disengagement, while also generating ‘collective efficacy’, which correlates with higher academic performance. Specifically, the framework claims that ‘effective schools ensure that every child has a secure, positive and ongoing relationship with at least one staff member, and recognise

that negative relationships can make students less happy about coming to school or participating in class’ (Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2022, p. 21). Further, the framework recommends that teachers utilise ‘high impact engagement strategies’, including empathy, unconditional positive regard, relationship building, predictability and explicit behavioural expectations (Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2022, p. 16). The articulations of relationality within this policy text reflect the sentiment of neoliberal educational policymaking, which seeks to reduce teaching to a transactional encounter within a market-based logic (Liasidou & Symeou, 2018; Starkey, 2019).

Optimising learning through positive inter-personal encounters

The New South Wales Department of Education (2017) School Excellence Framework considers schools to be excelling when ‘positive, respectful relationships are evident and widespread among students and staff and promote student wellbeing to ensure optimum conditions for student learning across the whole school’ (p. 3). Again, the function of relationality is to ensure ‘optimum conditions’ for learning, which we contend acts as a proxy for academic outcomes—as measured on standardised literacy and numeracy tests, alongside senior schooling external examination results, retention and completion rates. The emphasis of relationality is to develop the correct conditions for learning outcomes, while the affective potentiality of a relational pedagogy is ignored in service of a set of learning optimisation tools, much like the Victorian Framework for Improving Student Outcomes. Although relationality is acknowledged as a foundation of education, the issue is that it is positioned as a phenomenon developed and managed by teachers (Aspelin, 2022), rather than as a dynamic state of affective sociality (Hickey & Riddle, 2021). Placed in a position of primacy is the effective teaching of mandated curriculum, measured and accounted for in particular

ways that reinforce the power imbalance between teachers and students (Hinsdale, 2016), which closes down opportunities for a more authentic and dialogic relationality.

In its youth engagement strategy, the Queensland Department of Education (2021) explicitly argued for the development of ‘a strong school culture, with a focus on positive relationships and relational pedagogy’ (p. 8). However, no elaboration of what constitute positive relationships nor relational pedagogy is offered. Also invoking the notion of strength, the principles of the Tasmanian Department of Education’s (2020) pedagogical framework were argued to be ‘founded on strong, positive and supportive relationships’ (p. 7). Relationality provides the bedrock for ensuring that teaching and learning can take place. As with the policy texts examined above, relationality is consistently framed as being in the service of other functions, providing a means to an end, rather than an end in itself (Aspelin, 2021). Such framing limits the possibilities of relationality, rendering it as superficial and transactional, in the service of increased student engagement and the management of student behaviour.

Similarly, the Northern Territory Department of Education (2022) articulated relationships as one of the four foundations of engagement, drawing links between student engagement, motivation and achievement. The Australian Capital Territory’s Education Directorate’s (2017) Engaging Schools Framework also claimed that engaging schools ‘systematically cultivate good relationships between students and teachers, and clearly state and reinforce their expectations of these relationships’ (np). In these student engagement strategies, the purpose of relationality is to ensure that students become more engaged, more motivated, more successful, and so on. Again, the treatment of relationality is limited to its purpose in producing a desired educational or behavioural outcome. What is left unacknowledged is the messiness and

unpredictability of classrooms as sites of social life, which consist ‘of a swarm of more or less contradictory processes’ (Aspelin, 2006, p. 242).

The Western Australian School Curriculum and Standards Authority (2022) outlined guiding principles for teaching and learning, which include the right to learn in a ‘friendly’ and ‘cooperative’ environment, although there are no specific references to relational pedagogy in the documentation publicly available on the Authority’s website nor the main Western Australian Department of Education (2022) website. Clearly, these exhortations to develop friendly, supportive classroom environments fall well short of the demands for relational ontologies of pluralism and difference (Ljungblad, 2021).

Finally, although teachers in South Australia have been encouraged to ‘develop democratic relationships’ with their students as a ‘fundamental condition for learning’ (South Australian Department for Education, 2021), suggested activities included class agreements, changing seating arrangements and having students ‘share responsibility for notice boards, diaries, storyboards and timetables’ (p. 29). This reductive notion of democratic relationships is largely at odds with the agentic ethos of democratic modes of relationality (Hickey et al., 2022); not least, because students roleplaying democratic encounters rather than having the opportunity to engage meaningfully in democratic practices does not equate to an authentically relational pedagogy.

Towards a more ‘authentic’ relationality in policy and practice

From our analysis of the treatment of relationality in education policy texts from Australian state and territory education departments, it was evident that relationality has been deployed as a catch-all for building supportive classroom environments to encourage high expectations of students in terms of their behavioural and academic outcomes. In some instances, these articulations were explicitly linked to departmental

performance metrics such as attendance, retention and completion rates, or to performance on standardised literacy and numeracy tests and senior secondary external examinations and reporting. However, the discursive assertion of relationality in these policy documents remains superficial and free of important contextual markers, relying instead on the suggestion of innately valuable capacities. An important omission in these articulations of relationality was how these specific enactments of policy *should* be understood within the discursive and material contexts and structural dynamics of schools (Ball et al., 2012). Further, while policy texts such as those described above work to establish the discursive contours of the policy landscape (Liasidou, 2011), they are certainly not the only interpretations and enactments of relationality within classrooms and between individuals and groups of teachers and students.

In the policy texts we have examined in this paper, relationality was consistently reduced to transactions in service of increased student engagement and attainment or classroom behaviour management. Relationality worked in terms of supporting improved outcomes in schools, according to prescribed departmental performance indicators, while concomitantly providing a convenient measure for student behaviour and outcomes. Departmental education policy texts treat relationality as an empty, sliding signifier in this sense, which relegate the affective encounters between students, teachers and curriculum to a series of transactional inputs in service of specific, predetermined schooling outputs. These texts play an important role in producing ideational power in educational discourses; that is, by reducing relationality to a simplistic equation of improved teacher–student relationships, improved educational outcomes are assumed. However, we question how this removal of the possibility for irruption and disjuncture in relational encounters might play out in practice. As our research has illustrated (e.g., Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Hickey et al., 2021, 2022),

relationality in practice is much more complicated than the conceptualisations implied in these policy texts might suggest.

We contend that it has become a common feature of educational policy discourses to refer to student–teacher engagements as being relational, but without careful attention being paid to the nuances and particularities of how those relationships are formed, it remains difficult to determine what results emerge from such relationships. The argument that *more* relationality is better does not appear to have a firm empirical basis, given the slipperiness of the concept (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004) and its use as a catch-all in education policy texts. A more critical appraisal of relationality is required, which takes the decontextualised, empty signification of usage of the concept and provides it with *deep* contextualisation and an accounting of its application in the moment of the pedagogical encounter. We agree with Aspelin (2021) that the ultimate meaning of teaching can be understood in terms of relational bonding, through the immanence of a ‘forum for genuine, interhuman encounters’ (p. 595). This framing of relationality as necessarily emergent and contingent to the moment necessitates the contextualisation of any conceptualisation of relationality.

Similarly, Magill and Salinas (2019) argued that teachers need to be critically aware of the complex and temporal nature of relationality, so that they can engage in a praxis of relationality with students in meaningful and contextually relevant ways. An authentic relational pedagogy requires teachers to centre ‘*relation* in all its forms, including *relation* between teacher and society, pedagogy, curricular and student, as well as the *relation* between student and society, pedagogy, curriculum, and teacher’ (Magill & Salinas, 2019, p. 22). Evidently, the framing of relationality presented in the selection of education policy texts examined here emphasises a superficiality of student–teacher encounters, neglecting the affective, plural and intersubjective

dimensions of a more authentic relationality. This is important to recognise, given the constitutive nature of policy texts in the creation and shaping of policy problems (Bacchi, 2000). When the discursive framing of these policy texts remain superficial, it raises important questions about the ways in which they might be enacted in classroom contexts (Ball et al., 2012).

Reducing the affective potentiality of relationality to a simplistic formation of student–teacher relationships removes the possibility for recentring the pedagogical encounter at the heart of education in school classrooms. The participatory ethics of relationality brings young people, curriculum and teachers together in new ways of being-in-relation, which can potentially disrupt the taken-for-granted power flows and discourses of schooling, in ways that could be more democratic, inclusive and equitable for all young people. However, when policy articulations of relationality do not move beyond static concepts of supportive relationships, they foreclose the affective potentiality of relational pedagogy to invite something new and different in the moment of the pedagogical encounter.

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