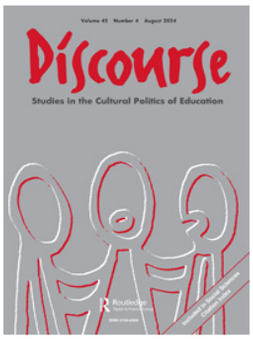

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The *aporia* of education policy: national school reform and the limits of policy enactment

Hannah Orchard, Andrew Hickey and Stewart Riddle

University of Southern Queensland, Springfield Central, Australia

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we deploy the concept of *aporia* to consider the ways in which enactments of policy become 'stuck' as policy *flows* between national and sub-national education systems. We illustrate the overlapping political, governmental and bureaucratic spheres of influence that mediate how national school reform agendas are received and enacted by schooling systems. Our analysis is based on interviews with senior bureaucrats from an Australian non-government sector's national and state peak bodies representing Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Drawing on conceptualisations of aporia as an *impasse* and more deliberatively, Lather's interpretation of aporia as 'moments of possibility', we argue that aporias created by bureaucratic barriers, government timelines, government evaluation processes and the placement of accountability measures over schooling prevents the meaningful enactment of policy within school settings. We argue that there is a need to consider the generative possibilities that exist within this situation of policy aporia, and demarcate where possibilities to move beyond 'stuck' policy might arise.

KEYWORDS

Education policy; *aporia*; school reform; national school reform agreement

Introduction

In this paper, we deploy the concept of *aporia* to consider the ways in which policy enactments become 'stuck' as policy flows between national and sub-national education systems. The concept of aporia derives from the ancient Greek notion of ἀπορία, which was used to describe a sense of puzzlement, doubt, logical contradiction or paradox. Our usage of the concept extends from Derrida's (1993) deployment of *aporia* as an 'impossible' condition, one that precludes passage or movement. Core to Derrida's conceptualisation was the prefiguration of the aporia as an *impasse* – a space of unknowing – a figurative in-between where certainty is relegated. For Derrida (1993), aporia arises in moments of uncertainty, during which rational action no longer provides a cue for understanding or action.

This conceptualisation of aporia as impasse has been taken up and expanded in later accounts, including Burbules' (1997) description of the aporia as a generative prompt

CONTACT Hannah Orchard Hannah.Orchard@unisq.edu.au

toward 'the reconsideration of the familiar from the vantage point of the novel' (p. 38). It is with this *possibility* of the aporia and its urge toward the new and uncharted that we extend Derrida's (1993) rendering. In doing so, we draw from Lather's (2001) account of the aporia, which functions 'as an opportunity for creative sense-making, as a moment of possibility' (Hickey & Smith, 2020, p. 825) to suggest that the aporia is not totalising in its uncertainty, but rather opens possibilities towards new horizons. Here, the aporia 'proceeds as a lacuna, a moment of uncertainty and speculation', but where 'the suspension of a certain viability causes a *search beyond the moment of the impasse*' (Hickey & Smith, 2020, p. 824; emphasis added). The aporia maintains this dual character: first as the site of the impasse and the unknown, but second as a provocation towards possibility and potentiality.

In this paper, we consider how these two sides of aporia – *uncertainty* and *possibility* – might provide useful prompts for considering why educational reform agendas become bogged down – or *stuck* – within the impasse of rhetoric and facile politics. No doubt relevant to other instances of interplay between national bureaucracies and policy enactment, we draw attention to these definitions as a means to consider the implementation of national school reform agendas in Australia. In light of the persistent narrative of decline in Australia's educational markers, and despite constant reform efforts, the passage of policy to enactment occurs within a complex bureaucratic, political and governmental structure, which mediates policy from the federal level through government- and non-government systems, and into schools. These layers of bureaucratic and political overlay affect how education policy translates from formulation to practice, with the inherent shifts and changes that policy enactments take, which invoke an aporia – that is, the moment of both impasse and possibility – between policy formulation, political and systemic intention and practical enactment.

This paper contributes to the literature on educational policy enactment (e.g. Ball, 2015; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Maguire, Braun, & Ball, 2015; Savage, 2020; Singh, Thomas, & Harris 2013), in which we seek to understand the multiple levels at which policy enactment is activated through the study of a national-level policy reform agenda down to the classroom level. Elsewhere (Orchard, Riddle, & Hickey, In print) we have interrogated the ways in national policy actors use memory and forgetfulness (Ricoeur, 2006) as a political strategy and explored how the complex political overlays can impact education policy formation and adoption. Here, we turn our attention to the aporia of policy enactment at the systemic level. In doing so, we focus our analysis on the Australian National School Reform Agreement (NSRA), which specified how education systems should approach the provision of education and the improvement of 'student outcomes across Australian Schools' (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). Since 2018, the NSRA has framed the development and conduct of Australian schooling, yet despite this intent and a flood of related federal educational policy articulations prompted by the NSRA to address challenges around the provision of schooling, issues of access, fairness and equity, meaningful translation into schools and classroom practice have been problematic (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022).

As a timely example of a reform agenda that happened to be nearing the end of its current term at the time this paper was written, the NSRA provides a useful lens to retrospectively examine policy interactions between federal, state and systemic bureaucracies. It is from this perspective that insight into why the seven-year policy agenda failed to enact

positive change might be drawn. This situation also provides a timely opportunity to look ahead, and in drawing on Lather's (1997) interpretation of aporia, to consider the possibilities that *could* emerge as Australia embarks on future national education reform cycles.

The *National Report Card on Schooling* by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) painted a bleak picture of Australian schooling, in which falling student enrolments between 2021 and 2022 (ACARA, 2022b), lower attendance levels, decreased engagement in education, training and work (ACARA, 2023a) and significant and persistent gaps in the achievement of student cohorts (ACARA, 2023b) have defined the state of Australian schooling. Findings from the *Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023a) also referred to thematic challenges in learning outcomes, equity gaps, concerns in student mental health and wellbeing, difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers, gaps and limitations in data, and transparency and accountability. These findings indicate that the current landscape of education and schooling in Australia contrasts with the intentions outlined in the NSRA (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023b), with a demonstrable failure of the NSRA to generate meaningful change at the school level raising questions over the function of national education reform agendas. The shortfalls of the Australian education system have been recognised internationally, with the UNICEF *Report Card on Education* finding Australia amongst the least equitable nations (Chzhen, Rees, Gromada, Cuesta, & Bruckauf, 2018), and with the academic performance of disadvantaged students continuing to decline (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2023).

This ostensible policy failure raises an important question: is there something about the NSRA and its mandate for school reform that has led to this *impasse*, thus creating a problematic aporia between policy and practice? Setting aside the political and bureaucratic environment in which national policy is initially devised and formulated, is there something in the policy translation and enactment at the state and systems level that is holding back the national reform agenda? Indeed, is this aporia truly an *impasse*, or a 'moment of possibility' as Australia approaches its next reform agenda cycle?

In the analysis that follows, we examine the ways in which the NSRA has translated into practice at the level of school systems by considering how systems mediate the national policy translation process. Following a brief description of the Australian schooling context and discussion of key literature examining school reform agendas, the paper turns to an analysis of accounts shared by senior officials from Australian non-government systemic education authorities to examine some of the structural conditions that currently define Australian education policy agendas.

The Australian school reform context

Education in Australia is a 'shared responsibility' between the federal government and individual state and territory governments (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024). The federal government supplements funding to support the non-government school sector, with the states and territories regulating the oversight and accreditation of both public and independent schools. While the federal government determines national reform imperatives and funding to support reform, the operation of schools is ultimately a state and territory responsibility.

This division of responsibility presents as an area of functional difficulty in the implementation of reform initiatives. As Savage (2016) highlighted, states and territories can be put in the difficult position of being held accountable for policy outcomes that are generated at the national level. Sometimes, states and territories have only 'partial influence' (Savage & O'Connor, 2019, p. 823) over the shaping of these policies, yet they are held to account for policies that may require significant time, money and resources to implement.

In such a climate, education reform can become 'inescapably political' (Clarke, 2012, p. 188). Education policy is prone to the differing contingencies and ideologies that guide competing interests (Sullivan, Tippett, Manolev, Baak, & Johnson, 2022, p. 893), and education ministers at federal and state/territory levels can become vulnerable to the relative interests of their constituencies and the often-competing imperatives that inhere to policy agendas. In short, school reform agendas exert effect on the potential for re-election, with this especially fraught in situations of opposing views at the federal and state/territory level (Buti, Turrini, Van den Noord, & Biroli, 2010).

Beyond the ideological and party-political imperatives that the formulation and enactment of policy mandates provoke, the manipulation of education policy for 'localised' effect is also notable. For example, Ball's (2003) accounts of the 'flood' (p. 215) of reform policy over recent years point to the political motivations that often underpin reform agendas. Education policy can be politically *useful* for ministers when it can be controlled and manipulated (Lewis & Hogan, 2019). As Levin (1998) identified, policy enactment depends greatly on the political and social environment at the time, with education policy representing a prime touch-point between politicians and the communities they represent. The ideological tension in education policy has led to mixed messaging to communities on the intent and purpose underpinning policy directives, variations during enactment of policy mandates and abandonment of key aspects of initiatives indicative of the manipulations that have accompanied policy implementation (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Fenech & Wilkins, 2019). We see this as a potentially important site of policy aporia – one that is ideologically motivated and politically influenced through the assertion of differential political affiliations.

The bureaucratic context of Australian education

The Australian education system is distinctive in that it is highly privatised compared with other countries (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024). In 2022, 69.7% of schools were government schools (ACARA, 2022a, p. 2). The remainder were constituted by independent and religiously affiliated schools, with the major presence of this latter group in the Catholic sector (18.4%). Although bound by state/territory jurisdictional mandates regarding curriculum and school operational standards, these schools are nonetheless administered by non-government systems, with many also supported by additional layers of systemic bureaucracy. As a result of the 'interweaving of governments, agencies and policy actors' (Savage, 2016, p. 847), this bureaucratic complexity has at times become a 'convenient whipping post' (Lumby, 2019, p. 6) for policy failures and administrative inertia. However, the relationship between bureaucratic structures and performance is more complex than this simple explanatory would suggest (Smith & Larimer, 2004), with the bureaucratic structure of these systems often *assisting*

rather than stymying policy innovation (Humes, 2022). We suggest that system authorities provide an important point of translation of policy directives within the complex federated milieu of the Australian education sector.

Prominent factors that impact the enactment of policy mandates include the decontextualisation of centralised policy agendas issued at the federal level. We note Lewis and Hogan's (2019) observation, that policy should:

> Be considered and thoughtful, and acknowledge the local cultures, histories and conditions of the places and people in which they are presented as the purported solutions. Instead of being reactive, short-term and politically expedient in outlook, we would instead suggest that policymakers should focus on the long game and thus appreciate the 'slow' policy movements. (p. 14)

Systemic education policy activations can struggle to engage with the complexities faced by individual schools (Wrigley, Lingard, & Thomson, 2012), and may not arrive 'fully formed' and fit for purpose (Ball et al., 2012), which can lead to an 'incoherence and disarray of current education policy and provision' (Ball, 2021, p. 389), in which policy mandates may fail to recognise the contextual realities faced by schools (Hickey et al., 2022). While a flood of policies has been introduced to reform schooling, these have not landed in a vacuum (Darling-Hammond, 2005), but rather layer over previous policy agendas and localised school practice to create a 'constant stream' (Ball, 2021, p. 389) of directives that must be navigated at both the system and school levels. For systems at the state/territory level, this means acting as 'interpreters and translators' (Singh et al., 2013, p. 22) of official policy to mediate policy flowing into schools from national reform agendas. At the school level, the negotiation of policy mandates requires deft interpretation of the policy agenda with (in) the material conditions of the school's context (Hickey et al., 2022; Lumby, 2019).

Methodology

For this paper, we were interested specifically in the ways in which school reform policies are mediated at the system level by bureaucrats responsible for the implementation of policy mandates for their sector within specific Australian states and territories. Forming part of a larger project that has traced the flow and effect of national school reform agendas – from their establishment at the federal level (see Orchard et al., In print) through state and territory bureaucracies and school leadership to impact on teachers in the classroom – we cast our attention towards what is *done* at the system level with policy mandates and their accompanying agendas. Accordingly, the dataset for this paper was sourced from interviews ($n = 5$) conducted with senior members (e.g. Directors or Senior Advisers) of non-government peak bodies for education in Queensland, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Tasmania, and the national peak body. We applied this focus on the non-government sector because we contend that it is with non-government schools that the full complexity of competing forces mediating policy enactments can be made especially visible (Morsy, Gulson, & Clarke, 2014; Sinclair & Brooks, 2022), given that they sit apart from government systems, yet are subject to the same policy mandates. Further, non-government schools contend not only with federal mandates and their associated political agendas, but are prone to additional system forces and orientations. While navigating the impacts of differing political forces between national and state-level governments, the Australian non-government education systems must also contend with additional layers of

bureaucratic complexity. The unique positioning of non-government systems to be affected by and privy to governmental processes, while still being external to them, provides an insightful position to examine the systemic mediation of national reform agendas.

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (#ETH2023-0062). The interviews were recorded and transcribed to enable textual analysis of the captured accounts. A first cycle of coding adopted Wodak's (2015) approach to critical discourse analysis to provide a frame for the analysis and interpretation of the interview material. We adapted Wodak's (2015) approach to ask the following five questions of the interview material:

1. How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?
2. What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?
3. What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?
4. From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?
5. Are the respective utterances articulated overtly; or are they intensified or mitigated?

Following the completion of the initial cycle of coding, a second cycle of analysis was undertaken, during which recurring concepts and phrases were drawn out of the transcripts and collated. This provided an insight into the ways that certain keywords and phrases emerged as conceptual reference points for the participants. This collation of the two cycles of coding allowed for not only the general themes to be drawn out from interviewees, but also the opportunity to explore the impact of these themes on the individuals themselves through the words, tone and descriptions used to paint a picture of policy–practice disconnects and to consider how the aporia was experienced as uncertainty and possibility.

Representing reform policy from the system level: reaching the aporia

A focus in our discussions centred on the role of the state and national peak bodies in how national reform agendas 'flow' into schools. Perspectives from the policy leaders provided an external view of government processes, with a key theme emerging related to a perceived aporia of 'disconnect' between the national government's processes and how the peak body leaders view school sectors enact policy. As one of our participants – a senior representative of a national peak body expressed – 'I see a bit of a disconnect' between policy and practice (Participant 1). The policymaker from Queensland expressed similar sentiment, noting that 'things don't actually filter through into schools in the way that government imagine that they will' (Participant 2). This participant later suggested that 'there's evidence for a really strong missing link' (Participant 2) between the national reform agenda and schools. Dismay over the actor's perceived disconnection between policy mandates and practice provided a prominent theme in the discussions. Although not using the term aporia to describe this situation, we suggest that the participants described what we frame here as an *aporia of disconnection*.

A further intricacy was revealed in our interviews with officials from Tasmania. Citing the (good) intentions that go into the development of policy mandates and the sincerity

inherent within policy development, our participant referred to examples of what they described as 'good' policymaking, while also lamenting that teachers working at the classroom level were most likely unaware of what was being done at the system level. Further, this participant suggested that these policy initiatives likely did not engage with the day-to-day practice of teachers (Participant 3).

Our analysis of this participant's rendering of this situation revealed a sense of the personal conviction that many of the participants held. Our participant indicated that individual teachers take seriously the personal-professional prerogatives that drive their work, but which equally caused professional frustration in context of policy enactments that appear disconnected from the realities of their practice. They spoke of policy development being like 'the same mouse going around and around and around and around and around the whip because that's part of the problem we've gotten in now' (Participant 3). A participant from the Northern Territory expressed similar concerns, describing reform agendas as not only in terms of a misunderstanding of the contexts of schools and communities that the policy was meant to support, but in terms of the perceived processual ineffectiveness embedded in the policy development and enactment process (Participant 5).

Our participants suggested that policy development should ideally engage with those actors it intended to support, and better dialogue, talking, information gathering and discernment generated more contextually relevant and purposeful policy initiatives. The participant from New South Wales suggested that intentions at the national level failed to effectively align at the local (school) level on these grounds:

> You get Commonwealth bureaucrats who would like to be able to have a greater impact on individual student results and school improvement. The reality is the Commonwealth is too far removed from schools to be able to pull all of the right levers in order to do that. (Participant 4)

This theme of disconnection between the federally mandated policy directives and school contexts was prominent across the interviews, with the perceived inability of policy initiatives to meaningfully translate at the school level an especially notable point of consideration. These accounts pointed towards a policy–practice aporia between policy makers and schools as sites of enactment.

Derrida's (1993) descriptions of the aporia as a *non-passage*, as *impermeable*, *uncrossable* and *closed* provide apt conceptual cues for considering our participants' accounts. All participants painted a picture of policy as unable to be effectively enacted in its current design, with this forming an important point of reference for considering the policy disconnect between policy makers and schools. In the accounts relayed by our participants, existing policy agendas appeared to fail to connect with the day-to-day practice of schools, which in turn meant that meaningful change was difficult. Here was an account of an aporia as a void and site of impossibility. Policy took on this character of disconnection insomuch that it failed to translate, and be effective, in any meaningful sense.

The elemental milieu of aporia: the relationality of policy

The interviews also revealed insight into the interconnections across political and bureaucratic structures as perceived by our participants who are outside of, but impacted by, federal and state governmental bureaucracies. For example, the New South Wales

policymaker pointed out that 'any national, truly national, initiative has to run the gauntlet of states and territories' (Participant 4), and in line with themes outlined in the earlier sections of this paper, identified that the negotiation of policy directives from federal mandate to system-level activation represented a largely obstructive, resistant, and at times oppositional process; especially when opposing state political parties did not support Commonwealth initiatives. The participant from Queensland shared a similar view, suggesting that 'the true nature of change will only ever be piecemeal' when there was no bipartisan support for reform (Participant 2).

In terms of the 'bureaucratic machinery' (Humes, 2022) in place between federal agencies and the states and their systems, the participant from New South Wales indicated that one way to improve the situation (and possibly transcend party-political agendas) involved opening meaningful and collaborative lines of communication. They noted that, at present, little collaboration occurred and that incumbent federal agencies 'spend less time … forming relationships to seek to understand the context they're making policy for than previous generations of policymakers' (Participant 4). It was notable across the interviews that the nature of the relationships between federal agencies and state systems emerged as a point of discussion. Yet importantly, the disinterest in forming relationships was held as not only on the side of the federal bureaucracy. As the interviewee from a national peak body shared:

> There's a bit of a mentality that 'this is not your business. We do implementation at a state and territory level'. It's very much, 'you set the national goals and frameworks, but we're the ones that implement it and we're the ones who implement it at our local context and decide what is best for our schools'. And they vary it based on their local context. … 'Just set your national goals and we'll do the implementation and stay out of it'. (Participant 1)

The building of effective relationships between federal agencies and state/territory systems was described by several participants as representing a significant undertaking. On this, we propose that overcoming the disconnections between state and federal agendas and between policy and practice represents a meaningful way to disrupt the policy-practice aporia. In this regard, the initiation of collaborative dialogues that cross political divides and that mediate translations of policy *intent* into policy *practice* function as generative mechanisms. In Lather's (2001) terms, dialogue unhindered by ideological orientation and translational impasse represents a 'fertile site for developing a praxis of stuck places' (p. 477). For example, the participant from the Northern Territory was particularly vocal on this point, noting that it takes 'more than just visits to schools to understand schooling contexts – you need to build relationships with communities and engage with *ongoing dialogue about their challenges and needs* to truly understand the challenges they experience' (Participant 5; emphasis added).

Gerrard and Farrell (2013) recognised the need for effective collaborative partnerships when they described the centrality of inter-jurisdictional relationships as a central component of policy enactment. While a degree of struggle may be expected between the policy makers and those 'doing' policy in schools (Maguire et al., 2015), the shift away from a 'command–obedience relationship' (Lumby, 2019, p. 249) towards one in which all stakeholders are valued and respected is vital if policy directives are to be taken on and enacted meaningfully. This involves opening lines of dialogue and *meaningful* engagement. Policy decrees issued from beyond the perspective of the school risk irrelevance and

decontextualisation. As our participants identified, enactments where policy mandates are 'followed' into practice (and are refined as and where needed within this process) represent a more productive way of ensuring that policy intent meets the demands of policy enactment. By contrast, and from the perspective of the participants' complex roles in mediating national directives into something to be accessed by schools, shone a light on the current disconnect between the national reform agenda and the practices enacted in schools.

Government timelines

The peak bodies' roles in mediating policy for school engagement provided additional insight into the complexity of 'bridging' the gap between government processes and school realities. Another way to understand the disconnect between federal reform initiatives and school enactment was highlighted in interviews that considered the governmental implementation and reporting timelines that were associated with the enactment of policy initiatives. Several interviewees referred to the pressures associated with the implementation of initiatives within target timeframes and associated reporting milestones. As one participant noted, 'it takes a lot of time to see the implementation down at the school level' (Participant 1), a view that was echoed in a similar observation by Participant 2:

> If you think you can run something for one year, start it, complete it, and that you can report on actual identifiable change, that, it's just not an achievable thing. (Participant 2)

The situation surrounding implementation and reporting was perhaps best described by Participant 3, when they noted that 'changing culture, changing habits … that's the longer part of your policy implementation journey'. Participant 4 followed with an important caveat: '[The federal bureaucracy is] looking for quick wins, and we know that in education, there aren't quick wins, there aren't silver bullets, these are slow burn'.

Reference to 'quick wins' and 'silver bullets' indicates the pressures associated with implementing policy directives. As Lewis and Hogan (2019) observed, for policy to be effective, slowing implementation and reporting processes is crucial for the enactment of thoughtful, intentional, and effective policy change. The picture painted by interviewees of yearly reporting, complex and evolving performance indicators and pressure to demonstrate change over short cycles did not produce a climate for affecting meaningful change. While the annual reporting cycles and provision of funding on an annual basis suits governmental budgetary cycles (Savage & O'Connor, 2019), the 'churning of reform' (Hess, 1999, p. 7) that this produces exerts pressure at the system and school level, resulting in the setting of 'small', easily measurable goals rather than larger and more courageous targets.

Government evaluation processes

Towards the end of every reform agreement and on occasion at key junctures throughout, evaluations of policy agendas are undertaken to determine the ultimate 'success' of reform initiatives. For example, in 2022, independent programme assurer McGrathNicols conducted an external review on the Non-Government Reform Support Fund to determine how successfully it had supported sectors to progress initiatives under the NSRA. In 2023, the Australian Government's Productivity Commission finalised its review of

the NSRA, with a focus given on how well the national policy initiatives had been achieved by the federal, state and territory governments. Additionally, the Australian Government Department of Education sponsored the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, submitted to education ministers by an expert panel appointed by Federal Education Minister Jason Clare. This review sought to inform future agreements and to provide ministers with advice on what agreements should contain. These three evaluation reports together formed a picture of the reform agenda and the NSRA's success in supporting change, as well as societal positioning on what future school reform should address.

Yet, and despite these reports and the considerable number of similar evaluations and reviews conducted over recent years, our participants spoke widely about the inadequacy of these evaluation activities. Specifically, participants expressed concern that the evaluations in fact *limited* their ability to enact meaningful and comprehensive reform. As the participant from New South Wales suggested, evaluation processes are mostly ineffectual, and ultimately disorient genuine criticism of policy agendas given that the 'wrong questions' are invariably asked in the first place (Participant 4).

The participant from Queensland spoke in depth about this issue, stating that 'feedback generally seems to always be about the features of programs … rather than [questioning] whether they are being delivered in an efficient and effective way for schools' (Participant 2). The interview participant from Tasmania echoed a similar sentiment, bemoaning the fact that evaluation processes often failed to consider the history of decisions that had been made up to that point. This oversight impacted not only the scope of the reform but also the ability for schooling systems to mobilise reform activities. As they suggested, a holistic evaluation needed to be done to consider what was being asked of schools across the board (Participant 3).

As Maguire et al. (2015) argued, policy enactment 'is a process of social, cultural and emotional construction and interpretation – and not all of these processes are reported or interrogated in outcomes-driven studies of policy implementation' (p. 2). By limiting evaluation activities to questions specific to the architecture of the reform activities themselves, reviews can miss an important opportunity to engage with the effectiveness of reform agendas. Here was a further aporia; one associated with a basic oversight and the lost opportunity that the evaluation processes incurred. As Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) suggested, understanding policy ideas as separate from policy initiatives is a complex process. However, it remains that to have purpose and effect, the review of reform agendas themselves must consider both the overarching intentions that drive policy agendas and the effect they have at the school level.

It is important to note that policy enactment is an 'interactive' process (Ball et al., 2012) in which the enactment is framed by the multitude of institutional, social and political interests and cultures (Gerrard & Farrell, 2013). However, we point out that governmental evaluation processes that frame their evaluation agendas around the architecture of the reform agenda – and not the effects that policy enactments actually have at the school level – are unlikely to produce any meaningful insights; least of all insight into what is *effective* in schools. Again, we propose that this represents an aporia, where, through the blinkering and narrow scoping of review and evaluation mechanisms, insights into what constitutes meaningful policy incursions into schools remain out of reach. At its more perverse end, this aporia generates even further imposition on schools that are

expected to mobilise the findings of review and evaluation initiatives that have little bearing (and relevance) on the practice enacted at the school level. As the participant from New South Wales described, the schooling sector is sometimes left to take the 'mess' (Participant 4) that comes from evaluation initiatives. We contend that this 'mess' could be minimised if the 'impossible condition' produced by the evaluation processes allowed for the provision of holistic feedback – including from schools themselves – to improve the mechanisms of reform.

The placement of accountability/responsibility/authority

The final theme that arose consistently across the participant group articulated the division of roles between the federal, state/territory and local contexts. Notably, this theme is also prominent in the literature, particularly regarding the influence of central bureaucracies in the activation of school autonomy (e.g. Caldwell, 2012; Keddie, 2016) and imposition of accountability mechanisms (e.g. Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Thomson, Lingard, & Wrigley 2012). Our interest in this theme was specifically with the *mentality* of stakeholders towards schooling reform, with this raised by participants from two perspectives – the mentality of policymakers, and the mentality of schools. By virtue of being external to governmental processes, the participants, as mediators between the national government and schools within their system, were uniquely positioned to comment on this dynamic.

The participant from New South Wales indicated that the federal education policy bureaucracy was crossing 'the domain of the profession to the professional; the teacher'. As they argued, 'that's not their role' (Participant 4). This was a shared theme across the participant group. Perceived governmental overreach arose in discussions on the presence of the federal bureaucracy in guiding the 'big architecture' of school reform and the 'minutiae' of school practice (Participant 4), picking up on observations made by Darling-Hammond (2005):

> Part of the task of developing more constructive supports for schools is understanding what the best roles are for government and for local practitioners, parents, and professional associations. We now know some things about what governments are good at and where their intervention is likely to be counterproductive. (p. 372)

Much of the focus on the division of accountability that arose across the interviews invoked the 'standoffish' mentality of schools towards perceived bureaucratic interference and the imposition of decontextualised governmental directives in the day-to-day work of schools.

As the participant from the national peak body described, reform agendas from a national level can often be met on a local level with a feeling of 'hang on a minute, that's not your remit, that's not your business. … Just set your national goals and we'll do the implementation and stay out of it' (Participant 1). A similar view was expressed by the participant from Tasmania, who noted that 'principals rule the school' (Participant 3).

On one level, this sentiment seemed counter to the earlier calls for greater engagement and participation. But on inspection, the issue identified by the participants related not to the potential for engagement and collaboration *per se*, but to the overbearing nature of federal mandates. The problem was not so much one of federal involvement

in processes of policy formation and enactment, but the absence of school participation and subsequent imposition of externally mediated and decontextualised policy directives. This too represented an aporia; illustrating a situation where localised expertise at the school level was relegated 'under the suspension of a certain viability' (Hickey & Smith, 2020, p. 824).

The aporia of national schooling reform

Earlier in this paper we identified the overlapping spheres in the Australian education context. We noted that aporias can arise at the intersections between federal bureaucracies, state/territory government and non-government systems and schools. While looking specifically at the Australian education context, we argue that the globalised policy logics of education reform (Ball, 2012; Lingard, 2013; Sahlberg, 2012) generates similar dynamics across different schooling systems internationally.

Based on elements our participants identified, we propose that aporia associable to 'top-down' policy mandates can emerge from (i) the 'disconnect' that formed between governmental and systemic agencies, (ii) the imposition of top-down policy mandates that remained decontextualised from local-level concerns in schools, (iii) the relegation of deliberative processes of dialogue and engagement between systems and schools, and (iv) the denial of the expertise and capability of schools to determine effective policy agendas.

However, rather than accept Derrida's *impasse* in the aporia, we consider the presence of 'stuck' policy to also represent a 'moment of possibility' (Lather, 2001). As the views of our participants revealed, the problems inherent to the translation of existing policy mandates are recognised; the fact that our participants were able to speak about the frustrations they held and the inconsistencies in the practices they observed at the systemic and school level affirm this reality. It is with this narration of the problem *as it is presented* (Bacchi, 2012) in the experience of our participants (and wider networks of teachers and administrators) that a starting point for reformation is found. Following this recognition and narration of the 'problem' of policy translation, what might then be done to overcome these aporia? Burbules (1997) suggested that to move beyond an aporia:

> A teacher must understand how they got into it; this will require, in part, the teacher taking on the learner's questions, the learner's aporia, as their own. In this context, the roles of teacher and learner blur: aporia becomes a potentially shared state—'What questions do I ask?' is an aporia of learning and teaching. Such an approach involves enduring the state of aporia, not as a brief transitional moment, but as an ongoing condition that generates the questions and problems that moves us to seek new understandings, and that shape the particularly kinds of understandings that each learner creates. (p. 41)

To overcome the aporia we have identified here, we argue, following Burbules (1997) that the establishment of a climate of mutual engagement presents as a crucial first step. At present, crucial elements of the current structure of education policy development and enactment work specifically against this, with localised school expertise largely absent from policy directives. Further, in the current state of Australian education reform, bureaucratic barriers prevent the development of a mutual relationship between states/territories and the federal government. Where Burbules (1997) recommended the seeking of understanding and insight through mutual engagement and questioning, we note that the

current approach to reform is geared towards centralised and decontextualised policy development. The policy mandates exerted from the federal level and the 'standoffishness' of schools towards interference from the federal level represent the result of this impasse; one that positions federally mandated reform as largely irrelevant at the school level.

However, we are reminded by Lather (1997) of the generative capacity of the aporia. We note that there exists an opportunity for some of these barriers to be broken down. Listening to schools and engaging closely with more deliberative approaches to policymaking represent one way of achieving alignment between policy development and practice (Hickey et al., 2022). Doing this will not only support the (re)formation of productive relationships between federal bureaucracies, systems and schools, but also work towards the recognition of schools as being contextually defined institutions, which undertake complex policy enactment and translation work. Developing policy that recognises the individual specificity of schools within the complex interrelationships of systems and national-level reform agendas potentially represents one way of transcending the impasse of the current policy aporia.

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ORCID

Hannah Orchard http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6156-2651
Andrew Hickey http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9862-6444
Stewart Riddle http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1653-1300

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