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Funded, then forgotten: politics, public memory and national school reform

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ABSTRACT

Governments apply education policies and funding compacts to shape school reform. Yet, once agreements are endorsed and ratified, the ongoing commitment to the enactment of agreed education reforms can be ‘forgotten’. In this paper, the Australian National School Reform Agreement is examined as an illustrative example of the ways in which policy promises are articulated by politicians as key policy actors. We draw on Wodak’s discursive analytic framework, alongside Ricoeur’s conceptualisation of the ‘forgetfulness’ of collective public memory to demonstrate how successive politicians have attempted to frame public discourse through official ministerial pronouncements in ways that obscured earlier promises. By focusing on key discourses surrounding funding, achievement and equity, and collaboration, politicians have sought to redefine public accounts of school reform in deliberate ways, in which politics takes priority over policymaking. In doing so, politicians work as key educational policy actors who seek to discursively shape public sentiment and collective memory regarding school reform. Given the increasing emphasis on national school reform in Australia and elsewhere, it is important to ‘remember’ the need to work towards more deliberative mediations of national school reform, in which the purpose and value of policymaking is rendered purposefully in the collective public memory.

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Introduction

In this paper, we borrow Ricoeur’s et al. (2006) conceptualisation of ‘forgetfulness’ to examine the ways in which politicians – as key policy actors – seek to shape public sentiment regarding national school reform. We argue that public ministerial statements regarding school reform agendas function as a ‘middle region’ between policymaking (Ball et al. 2012; Scanlon et al., 2023) and the generation of public sensibilities surrounding schooling and school reform in ways that put political aims above education policymaking. These statements, mediated variously through mainstream news outlets, popular media and ministerial social media channels, function as important interlocutors in

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shaping public understanding of education policy, schooling and school performance. During a period in which much of the mediated commentary on school performance is negative and geared toward partisan political agendas (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2023), we note that interrogating how ministerial statements frame discourses of schooling and school reform represents an important undertaking to understand the role of politicians as key policy actors.

Ricoeur et al. (2006) argued that collective memory arises from social negotiations that authorise the ‘memories we have as members of a group’ (p. 121). Importantly, collective memory comes to be defined by what the collective *knows* and how agreement around what is ‘recognised as being “of the past”’ (Ricoeur et al., 2006, p. 24) gains currency in everyday discourse. Ricoeur et al. (2006) positioned a ‘middle region’ (p. 185) between individual recollection and collective memory, which functions as a malleable space of meaning production. It is within the middle region where the ‘facts’ of individual recollection find negotiation towards shared interpretations of the social order. This shared memory provides the reference for how ‘the logics of coherence presiding over the perception of the world’ (Ricoeur et al., 2006, p. 123) inform what it is that the collective *knows*. As Ricoeur et al. (2006) noted, ‘the duty of memory belongs to a moral problematic’ (p. 92), setting in place that which *should* be remembered as part of the collective consciousness, and equally, that which might be *forgotten* in official accounts of public memory.

This conceptualisation provides a useful heuristic for considering the ‘middle ground’ between policymaking and the formation of public sentiment around school reform. Drawing on Ricoeur’s et al. (2006) conceptualisation of ‘forgetting’ as a useful framing device—one which draws attention to the ‘subjective involvement in . . . the organization of experience’ (Goffman, 1974, pp. 10–11) – we render ministerial pronouncements on education policy as deliberate discursive framings geared towards the generation of popular sensibilities on schooling and school reform. What is discursively mediated, and how the framing of schooling and the idea of ‘reform’ gain mediation, work beyond the politics of *deception* or similar perversions of the truth (Arendt 1969; Gunter & Hughes, 2022), towards more deliberate ‘mediations’ of public perception, in which the purpose and value of policy pronouncements are introduced and socialised into common conception and acceptability.

A crucial component of this process corresponds with the mediation of past policy, in which prior enactments are either recuperated or forgotten as these correspond with the objectives and prerogatives of new policy enactments. This rendering positions policy as an ‘enactment’ wherein policy is inculcated within a larger discursive ‘process, as diversely and repeatedly contested and/or subject to different “interpretations”’ (Ball et al., 2012, pp. 2–3). Here, crucially, the capacity to forget remains possible. Ricoeur et al. (2006) referred to this capacity in terms of the ‘abuse’ of forgetting, in which ‘the theoretical incapacity to recognise the specificity’ (p. 429) of the past renders memory as selective, and forgetting as an affordance in this process. In this situation, policy becomes malleable and capable of being reworked to suit shifting political agendas, with the forgetting of past pronouncements and the reformation of public sensibilities core to this malleability.

We take the Australian National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) as our focus in this paper, and derive an analysis from public pronouncements issued in ‘official’ (Apple,

2014) ministerial statements as examples of this process of amplifying and forgetting elements of schooling policy *as they suit the moment*. We specifically consider official ministerial media releases and how these capture the deliberate framing of the NSRA as a national policy compact for schooling across Australian states and territories (Council of Australian Governments, 2018) to demonstrate the ways in which politicians as key policy actors seek to shape public discourses about schooling and educational reform.

Schooling reform in Australia

The administration of schooling in Australia falls under the jurisdiction of states and territories, while funding is also provisioned at the national level (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023). This federated arrangement of the administration of schooling and educational policy formulation positions the NSRA as a primary national policy mechanism. However, this arrangement of federally mandated policy provisions enacted by states and territories presents challenges in the translation of policy mandates into schooling, especially when federal and state governments represent opposing political agendas (Savage, 2016).

With these tensions in mind, our focus in this paper is with the ways in which federal education ministers have socialised NSRA agendas into mainstream discourse. Taking up Ball (2015b) observation that ‘policy research is often done with a focus on texts, principles and practices, and [that] little attention is given to the formative role of actors in the policy process’ (p. 467), we extend our analysis to consider the function that ministerial media statements have played in framing public perceptions of schooling and school reform. We position these statements as important interlocutors in Ricoeur’s et al. (2006) conceptualisation of the ‘middle region’, whereby public announcements and commentary associated with the NSRA mediate the middle region between policy formations and public perceptions of schooling, in which politicians play a role as key policy actors.

Phase 1 of our study involved the exploration of records from the National Education Ministers’ Meetings (EMM) between 2018–2023 to identify when and how actions were taken at the national level to progress reform initiatives through the NSRA. Chaired by the federal education minister, with membership constituted by each state and territory education minister, the EMM represents the principal ‘forum for national cooperation . . . progressing items of national strategic importance’ (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024, n.p.) in Australian schooling. Our analysis of EMM meetings centred on defining how these meetings: i) framed the idea of schooling and school reform in Australia; ii) identified priorities for reform initiatives; and iii) framed the enactment of these reform initiatives.

After deliberating on EMM outcomes, we turn to consider Phase 2 of the study, which interrogated the ways in which successive federal education ministers have mediated renderings of schooling and school reform in public discourse between 2018 and 2023. During this time, four ministers have held the education ministerial portfolio: Dan Tehan (28 August 2018–22 December 2020), Alan Tudge (22 December 2020–2 December 2021), Stuart Robert (2 December 2021–23 May 2022), and Jason Clare (1 June 2022 – present).

It is notable that the EMM media statements regarding NSRA initiatives worked towards ‘the construction of knowledge, power and identity’ (Luke, 1995, p. 7), which demonstrated deliberate political effect. Positioning the NSRA in this way allowed ministers to not only deploy a ‘discourse that shapes possibilities for thought and action’ (Anderson & Holloway, 2020, p. 200), but to also limit the range of possible interpretations regarding what schooling represents and the focus that reform agendas should take within the collective public memory. We explore this aspect of the role of the EMM to argue that statements regarding the NSRA represented important manifestations of the ‘middle ground’, in which ‘discourse is not neutral but is rather motivated by political interests, power relations, ideologies and rhetorical positioning’ (Anderson & Holloway, 2020, p. 190).

We contend that deliberate and strategically motivated attempts to frame public sentiment were deployed by successive federal ministers between 2018 and 2023. The pronouncements made about the NSRA reinforced prescribed renderings of what was considered by these ministers to constitute *effective* schooling in Australia and how proposed reform agendas should work to uphold Australia’s educational agenda. While previous studies have referred to how politicians ‘package’ policies for media presentation (Franklin, 2004) and how policies are ‘taken up’ by media outlets in wider debates (Gerrard et al., 2017, p. 506), we look instead at the ways in which successive federal ministers have discursively rendered the idea of school reform by reifying specific agendas and *forgetting* others in their public statements regarding NSRA initiatives.

The Australian Government Productivity Commission (2022) has labelled the NSRA a failure. Not only did it not effectively address declining student outcomes but it also failed to clearly establish how schools that did not meet expected benchmarks would meaningfully be supported to improve prospects for students. As an agreement between federal, state and territory governments, the NSRA ostensibly functions as a deliberative partnership. However, the ‘dynamic and contingent interplay between discourse and material practices’ (Ball, 2015c, p. 307) largely results in scant progression of policy agendas given the competing interests and political affiliations apparent in this union.

With the exception of New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania, the other states and territories were governed by the Australian Labor Party during 2018–2023 (with Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022). During the same period and up to the election of a Federal Labor government in May 2022, Australia was governed by the Liberal – National coalition. The political division at federal and state/territory levels is notable in this sense, particularly given that NSRA agendas established at the national level required enactment by each state and territory.

The failure of the NSRA to address declining student outcomes is perhaps not surprising given this context. System-level educational reform (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019; Sahlberg, 2016; Spring, 2018) has generated a global ‘policy epidemic’ (Levin, 1998; Sahlberg, 2012) in recent decades, with the rush towards the ‘apparently unstoppable flood’ of reform ideas ‘permeating and reorienting education systems’ across the world (Ball, 2003, p. 215). This has certainly been the case in Australia, where layers of reform-focused policymaking have continued to expand. As Savage (2016) argued, such a focus has resulted in ‘historically unprecedented attempts to produce greater national consistency in schools, including the development of a national curriculum, standardised national assessments in literacy and numeracy, national standards for teachers and

principals, and a revised national model of school funding’ (p. 833). Yet, this has produced a vexed situation in which competing political interests combine with continuous cycles of policy reform that ultimately fail to generate meaningful change (Müller, 2007). We turn now to consider these tensions and the inherent failings to activate reform in the Australian context via an analysis of EMM outcomes (Phase 1) and federal education ministers’ public statements regarding education reform under the NSRA (Phase 2).

Phase 1: EMM recommendations and outcomes

Phase 1 involved the compilation of a corpus of materials derived from EMM meeting summaries and ancillary documentation associated with EMM statements regarding NSRA initiatives. The purpose in compiling these materials was to determine how the NSRA was conceptualised and understood by education ministers, along with initiatives progressed by state and territories. Noting that Finding 9.2 from the Australian Government Productivity Commission (2022) review of the NSRA found that ‘progress on initiatives [had] been slow’ (p. 92), we were interested to understand how ministers framed NSRA initiatives and generated a ‘middle region’ of collective memory (and forgetting) among this group.

Communication of key decisions and outcomes from the EMM are provided ‘at the discretion of the meeting’ (Department of Education, 2021); primarily through meeting communiqués published on the Australian Government Department of Education website. Public pronouncements from EMM meetings relevant to the NSRA are outlined in Table 1.

There was no explicit reference to the NSRA between December 2020 and December 2022. We acknowledge that COVID-19 was likely a significant factor in this gap. As Woulfin and Spitzer (2023) explained, ‘the pandemic disrupted numerous aspects of educational organisations. . . . There has [since] been a surge of education reform terms related to problems and solutions of pandemic schooling’ (p. 256). This was certainly observable within the EMM notes from 2020, with meetings focused on navigating the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on schools. Likewise, the Productivity Commission acknowledged the impact of COVID19, stating that the ‘education landscape’ (p. 50) had changed markedly as a result of the pandemic.

Phase 2: ministerial media releases and the NSRA

For Phase 2, we sought to determine which communication channels were used by federal education ministers to relay pronouncements of NSRA initiatives, and how these messages were framed against deliberations from the EMM. For this paper, we draw particular attention to the ways in which respective federal ministers defined, constructed and positioned (Foucault, 1972; Luke, 1995) both themselves and NSRA reform agendas within the public’s perception to pursue political, rather than educational aims.

We used Wodak’s (2015) approach to discourse analysis ‘to explore the relationships between discursive practices, events, and texts; and wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes’ (Taylor, 2004, p. 435). Drawing from our analysis of documentation from the EMM, we gauged the pronouncements made by successive federal

Table 1. Summary of references to the NSRA from EMM 2018–2023.

Date of meeting	Mention of NSRA
Dan Tehan	
14 September 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministers provided in-principle support for drafted NSRA
14 December 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress on signing of bilateral agreements • Initiative to be ‘jointly developed’ by all governments • Ministers discussed the central role of teachers and school leaders in implementation of reforms
22 February 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-principle support for scope and focus of National Evidence Institute initiative
28 June 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreement on terms of reference for review of senior secondary pathways review initiative
2 August 2019	n/a
13 September 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration of progress of NSRA initiatives (no detail provided)
12 December 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsement of work for online formative assessment initiative • Commitment to establish National Evidence Institute initiative • Agreement on design criteria and model for unique student identifier initiative
20 March 2020	n/a
27 March 2020	n/a
2 April 2020	n/a
7 April 2020	n/a
12 June 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update on senior secondary pathways review initiative • In-principle agreement to financial investment for National Evidence Institute initiative
4 September 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of National Evidence Institute initiative • Consideration of senior secondary pathways review findings
11 December 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of initial teacher education accreditation initiatives • Agreement to proposed approach for senior secondary pathways review initiative
Alan Tudge	
<i>No meeting notes were published in 2021</i>	
Stuart Robert (acting)	
16 March 2022	n/a
Jason Clare	
12 August 2022	n/a
15 December 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsed path forward for online formative assessment initiative • Agreed model for unique student identifier initiative • Discussion to extend NSRA for additional 12 months
10 February 2023	n/a
27 February 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsed terms of reference for review to inform next NSRA (no discussion of current initiatives)
6 July 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future NSRA (no discussion of current initiatives)
5 October 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future NSRA (no discussion of current initiatives)
21 November 2023	n/a
11 December 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future NSRA (no discussion of current initiatives)

ministers in terms of their intent to mediate public perception via deliberate framing of specific agendas, actions and policy agendas. We also sought to explore how respective education ministers positioned themselves and the governments they represented. As Weaver (1986) argued, ‘incentives to avoid blame lead politicians to adopt a distinctive set of political strategies, including agenda limitation, scapegoating, “passing the buck” and defection . . . that are different than those they would follow if they were primarily interested in pursuing good policy’ (p. 371).

Official media releases from successive Australian federal education ministers provided the dataset for Phase 2. From the commencement of the NSRA in 2018 until 1 July 2022, official ministerial media releases were archived in the Ministers’ Media Centre for the Ministers of the Education, Skills and Employment Portfolio of the Commonwealth Government (<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/>). From 1 July 2022, materials were archived via the Ministers’ Media Centre for the Ministers of the Education Portfolio (<https://ministers.education.gov.au/>). The key phrase ‘school

reform’ was used to retrieve materials relevant to the NSRA and to school reform more broadly. The initial search returned a total of 178 media releases between 2018–2023. After an initial examination of the collected materials, the dataset was reduced to 69 media releases that were directly relevant to the NSRA. These included 22 associated with Minister Tehan, six with Minister Tudge, zero with Minister Robert and 41 with Minister Clare.

Discursive analysis of ministerial statements

Analysis was completed across two cycles of coding. Throughout the first cycle, a holistic coding approach (Saldaña, 2021) was applied, which derived questions from Wodak’s (2015) approach to critical discourse via the following questions:

- (1) How were persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to?
- (2) Which characteristics, qualities and features were attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?
- (3) From which perspectives were these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?

With focus given to the framing of schooling reform under the NSRA and ministerial affiliation to policy enactments, these questions enabled a focused thematic analysis that identified how policy enactments under the NSRA – the ‘phenomenon’ of policy activated through policy ‘objects’ – worked in tandem with political agendas of ministers (as ‘persons’). By applying this derivative of Wodak’s (2015) approach, we were able to focus not only on the linguistic elements evident ‘within’ the media statements but also the broader context within which these pronouncements were made. In taking this approach, we were able to link pronouncements to the broader social and political landscape, thus contextualising announcements and enactments of NSRA policy within the context of forgetting and collective public memory (Ricoeur et al., 2006). Analysis of the collated materials revealed three substantive discursive themes pursued by the politicians as key policy actors—*school funding*, *achievement and equity*, and *collaboration*. We now turn to consider how these themes emerged within ministerial pronouncements to frame public sentiment around school funding and mediate the ‘forgetting’ of specific policy promises associated with the NSRA.

School funding

There are two key elements of the NSRA: one element commits the federal, state and territory governments to specific funding targets throughout the life of the NSRA, while the other commits all parties to progressing specific initiatives to support reform priorities. Disproportionate attention was given to funding amounts compared to the actual reform initiatives. These were especially prominent during Minister Tehan’s term, with headlines such as ‘School funding for New South Wales secured’ (Tehan, 2018a), ‘Record funding and better outcomes for WA students’ (Tehan, 2018c) and ‘Record funding and better outcomes for NT students’ (Tehan, 2018b) inculcating funding as a proxy for *action* and the progression of initiatives. Further, this usage of funding as

a signifier for action implied that the federal government had contributed ‘their part’ for school reform; with the implication being that state and territories had not. The following statements provide notable examples:

The federal government is doing *its part* by delivering record funding of \$307.7 billion to all schools which means more teachers, more assistance and better facilities. Through our National School Reform Agreement we are ensuring the states and territories implement improvements that will deliver better outcomes for our children. (Tehan, 2019a, emphasis added)

The *states and territories will need to live up to their side of the bargain also*, but with record funding to all schools, our focus is now on how to use the money not how much schools should get or the distribution between the sectors. (Tudge, 2021a, emphasis added)

The choice of wording within these examples is strategic. While on face value the claims appear to highlight the support provided to schools by the federal government, there is a clear implication that there is insufficient support provided by states and territories. Strategically overlooking the requirement of the federal government to provide funding to support schools, ministers have presented the funding of schools as a commitment to deliver *more* teachers, *more* assistance and *better* facilities despite the funding agreement having no commitment to this growth. Thus, the federal government is positioned as being altruistic, while the state and territory governments are positioned as lacking in their support for schools. The discourse of funding is strategically linked to the distribution of responsibility and blame for shortfalls in the enactment of initiatives, which is further reinforced by the repetitious use of the phrase ‘record funding’ in reference to the funding agreement:

Record money flowing into schools won’t improve one student’s education if that money is not invested wisely. That is why school funding goes hand-in-hand with education reforms’. (Tehan, 2019b)

These repetitive claims work to reinforce the collective public sentiment that the federal government is commitment to schools, with the connotation that it is *in excess* of what would otherwise be expected. It also strategically belies the contentious and politicised debate over school funding (e.g. Forsey et al., 2017; Hogan et al., 2017; Kenway, 2013; Perry, 2024; Teese & Polesel, 2013), which continues to ‘dominate the Australian school lexicon’ (Thompson et al., 2019, p. 896).

Much of the contention comes from the distributed nature of schooling provision, and where perceived responsibility rests in the provision of reform. In the statements above, the states and territories were clearly implicated as sites of inaction, with the federal government inversely positioned as a ‘noble’ benefactor in its provision of funding. This distinction is notable in that it set the tone for successive federal ministers. The ‘passing’ of responsibility to states and territories established a functional binary distinction that mitigated federal responsibility for reform enactment and limited negative press surrounding federal culpability for reform failure. Arguably more problematic is the implicating of teachers and school leaders within these statements.

There are always going to be children who fall behind at school, but our job is to make sure that they don’t stay behind, or they don’t fall further back. We’re going to help them catch up. *And that’s work that teachers do*, that’s work that parents do, but it’s also work that we

can do here in this agreement to *make sure that we're funding the things that work*. And that will be the focus of this expert panel that we'll establish and announce in the next few weeks. (Clare, 2023e, emphasis added)

Here, reform agendas are used to also hold teachers to account (Ball, 2015a; Gerrard & Farrell, 2013; Wrigley et al., 2012). In much the same way that the rendering of state and territory responsibility is framed, this positioning of teachers as the locus of reform *failure* mitigates federal responsibility. Again, the federal government is positioned as a benefactor, but one beholden to the enactment of initiatives at the classroom level.

We contend that federal ministerial reference to funding throughout the NSRA was conscious and strategically motivated to generate particular discursive forms of collective memory and public forgetting, rather than addressing legitimate concerns about inequitable school funding and its role in national school reform. By focusing on the financial contributions of the federal government while strategically avoiding reference to the progression of commitments under the NSRA, successive ministers drew equivalences between committed funding and reform success while also positioning states and territories, and individual schools and teachers as points of reform failure. What this rendering of the reform landscape obscures are the various priorities that the federal government failed to progress. The positioning of the federal government as the provider of 'record funding' simultaneously placed blame on state and territory education departments, teachers and schools to focus public sentiment on this single aspect of the reform process.

It was with this formulation of the 'middle region' of public sentiment that jurisdictional responsibilities for the enactment of NSRA initiatives and wider responsibility for schooling in Australia were purposefully rendered as being 'forgotten'. We contend that successive federal ministers relied on the public *forgetting* about the Commonwealth's commitments under the NSRA, and in casting this rendering of the landscape of school reform in Australia, utilised public statements to draw attention away from their own culpability for the failure of initiatives.

Achievement and equity

The second theme identified in our analysis centred around achievement and equity. This theme was particularly prominent through Minister Clare's term, although reference to achievement was evident across the period covered by this paper (with Minister Tehan the next most vocal). Illustrative examples of ministerial statements include:

I don't want us to be a country where your chances in life depend on who your mum and dad are, or where you live, or the colour of your skin, but we are at the moment. The report tells us that if you're a kid from a poor family or from the bush or you're Indigenous, then you're three times more likely to fall behind at school. And that problem is getting worse, not better. (Clare, 2023a)

We've got to set targets to reduce the number of children that aren't meeting those literacy and numeracy standards, but in particular those poor kids and those kids in regional Australia. That's the key here. And the report says that if you're a poor kid who goes to a disadvantaged school, it's harder to catch up. (Clare, 2023b)

The language used by the Minister in the above examples demonstrates the approach that was taken to positioning the federal government as being motivated to ensure equitable outcomes for students in priority cohorts. For example, colloquial references to ‘poor families’, kids ‘from the bush’, ‘poor kids’ and ‘mum and dad’ sought to position the minister in a way that was relatable with ‘ordinary’ Australians. While the minister was not the first political leader to attempt to align their image with Australian values (e.g. Dyrenfurth, 2007), it was a strategic move to not only highlight achievement gaps – which alone would risk drawing attention to the failings of the government to address student achievement – but to do so in a way that distanced the government from prior failings to address the issue and positioned them as the solution.

Following the release of the Productivity Commission’s (2022) report into the purpose and function of the NSRA, Minister Clare drew heavily on the achievement gaps evident in Australian schooling, with students ‘from a poor family or from the bush or [who] are an Indigenous Australian[s]’ (Clare, 2023f) providing a particularly figurative focal point for framing pronouncements. The deployment of ‘achievement’ functioned as a recurring concept in media releases and interviews, and were refined by Minister Clare across successive media statements (e.g. Clare, 2023i).

This framing of the achievement theme was notable in terms of the association it drew with high-needs student cohorts. The impression given suggested that students in these cohorts were the *only* students requiring intervention (Hasher et al., 1977). For example:

There’s always going to be children who fall behind at school. It’s our job to help them catch up. If you’re a child from a poor family or from the bush or an Indigenous child, you’re three times more likely to be in that group. And so, as I’ve been talking about the next school agreement, I’ve said we want to make sure that we get all schools to 100 percent of funding. Funding is important, but so is what it’s spent on, what it’s invested in. We want to make sure we’re tying funding to the things that are going to help children *in that group*. (Clare, 2023d, emphasis added)

Use of the achievement gap discourse reinforced ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions surrounding students from underperforming cohorts (Carey, 2014) and assumed links between family economic position and student capacity to learn (Considine & Zappala, 2002; Desimone, 1999; Farooq et al., 2011; Owens, 2018). Additionally, this framing of achievement implied that students *beyond* these priority cohorts are ‘doing just fine’ (Ladson-Billings, 2007, p. 316). Although Minister Clare specifically focused on the results of certain cohorts, the Productivity Commission’s (2022) report made it clear that more than half of underperforming students in Australia were not representative of priority equity cohorts. As Singham (2003) has argued, the placement of achievement issues as a ‘minority problem’ (p. 590) overlooks poor outcomes across the full scale of student cohorts.

While federal education ministers initially referred to the NSRA and subsequent bilateral agreements with states and territories as pathways to improve the performance of *all* students (e.g. Tehan, 2018d), the discourse changed over time to position lower academic outcomes with key cohorts, and to lay blame for these failings on teachers and programs adopted by schools. For example, references to investment in ‘the sorts of things that will make our teachers more effective’ (Clare, 2023c) and ‘helping to make sure that our teacher workforce is more effective’ (Clare, 2023e) implied the suggestion

that teachers were ineffective and that teacher effectiveness could be measured by student results alone (Ball, 2015a; Lewis & Hardy, 2017; Lingard, 2011; Porter, 1995; Wrigley et al., 2012). As Carey (2014) argued, ‘the overly individualised and simplistic language found in achievement gap reform debates, coupled with its inherent meanings, misplaces blame on teachers, students, and schools for broader social and cultural issues’ (p. 443).

Minister Clare’s use of achievement and placement of blame on teachers allowed the diversion of responsibility. This was compounded in his suggestion that the updated NSRA – planned for release in late 2024 and commencement in 2025—should ‘look at how we ensure public funding is delivering on national agreements and that *all school authorities are transparent and accountable* to the community for how funding is invested and measured’ (Clare, 2023f; emphasis added). We contend that Minister Clare’s references around achievement were strategic and utilised as the focus of a ‘middle ground’ that shaped public sentiment, memory and forgetfulness of the original aims of the NSRA. Progression of key reform initiatives by the Commonwealth could have assisted in addressing the learning gaps between the cohorts; as the Productivity Commission’s (2022) report on the NSRA stated, initiatives including the Online Formative Assessment Initiative could have enabled teachers to better assess a student’s knowledge, skills and understanding to track progress over time. Given that the federal government has failed to progress initiatives such as this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the framing of achievement as associable with teacher quality was cast in this way.

Collaboration

The third theme focused on collaboration between federal, state and territory jurisdictions. Throughout Minister Tehan’s media releases, references were made to the development of shared national agendas for education reinforced imagery of education as a collaborative enterprise. For example, Tehan (2018a) claimed that ‘I am very proud that we have made significant progress in delivering reforms to the education system that will benefit every Australian school student. *We* all understand the importance of education and want every child to have the educational opportunities to realise their potential’ (emphasis added). This was subsequently echoed by Minister Tudge and Minister Clare:

This week, I will meet with my state and territory counterparts here in Melbourne at the first Education Ministers Meeting for this year, and the first under the new National Cabinet arrangements. At that meeting, I hope that we can agree on this ambition – and begin to map out the trajectory to reach it. (Tudge, 2021b)

No government can do it on their own. I can provide national leadership. I can help boost the supply of university places and improve initial teacher education. But I don’t run schools. I don’t employ our teachers. State and Territory Governments do most of that. That means if we are serious about tackling this problem we have got to work together. (Clare, 2023e)

By taking this line, successive federal ministers portrayed themselves as virtuously interested in collaboration. Yet, and despite this stated interest to cooperate, our analysis identified two major points of disconnection in the enactment of collaborative reform. First, and echoing the implications apparent within the funding theme, significant

constraints were apparent within the EMM's structure and governance. Given the separate jurisdictions across each state and territory and the bureaucracies attached to each, functionally navigating the different processes applied in each state and territory represents a structural constraint to cooperation. This combines with the different schooling landscape apparent in each state and territory and distinctions across student cohorts. Meaningfully collaborating on initiatives that not only hold shared appeal, but also mutual benefit, represents a challenge. Given that successive federal ministers were keenly aware of these structural differences across each state and territory, we are left to conclude that relaying pronouncements around 'collaboration' and 'cooperation' were largely intended to appeal to public sensibilities.

The second major hurdle to genuine collaboration corresponded with Minister Clare's preliminary announcements regarding the next iteration of the NSRA, due to replace the current agreement in 2025. Despite references to collaboration in Minister Clare's statements, the practical intent of what has been relayed demonstrates the pre-determination of policy directions, and little space for deliberative collaboration. For example, in March 2023, Clare (2023g) announced the appointment of an expert panel to advise education ministers on the key targets and reforms that should be tied to funding in the future NSRA. One such undertaking issued to the expert panel – as a principal advisory panel guiding the enactment of NSRA initiatives – included an evaluation of the benefit and viability of small group tutoring for underperforming students (Clare, 2023j). Yet, and pre-empting the panel's recommendation, Minister Clare announced in advance of the expert panel's report that there was a 'lot of good evidence' supporting the initiative (Clare, 2023h). It might well be the case that small group tutoring assists students, but announcing this initiative in advance of the panel's recommendations mitigates the value of any findings advanced by the expert panel.

We contend that the expert panel was constituted to provide the minister with evidence that an external panel of experts were consulted on matters of national policy development (Hesstvedt & Christensen, 2023). Our position is further confirmed when it is considered that Clare (2023g) announced the membership of a ministerial reference group in May 2023 to function as 'a sounding board and source of advice to the expert panel'. This ministerial reference group featured representatives including teachers, principals, students, parent organisations, education unions, and other education experts and stakeholders – thereby creating an image of representation (Arnesen & Peters, 2018). Noting that the reference group was chaired by the federal minister, we suggest that in effect a 'closed loop' was established whereby the minister chaired a group designed to inform the expert panel that was constituted to advise state and territory ministers. We suggest that such a structure indicates processes that are less about *collaboration* and more about politics and controlling public perceptions of school reform initiatives. This is an important component of the rendering of public memory and forgetfulness in national policy discourse.

While politicians seldom directly intervene with the work of expert panels, it is common for politicians to exert control over the terms of reference and constitution of these advisory groups (Hesstvedt & Christensen, 2023). This control is usually designed to limit the risk of the panel providing recommendations contrary to the preferences of government. We argue, in line with the findings of Hunter and Boswell (2015), that the appointment of the expert panel (and indeed, the subsequent ministerial reference

group) represented a symbolic action by the federal education minister to substantiate and legitimise the government's preferred course of action. The presence of the expert panel and ministerial reference group enabled Minister Clare to 'signal that the government is taking appropriate action to address a problem' (Hunter & Boswell, 2015, p. 11). Yet, by appointing himself as the chair of the reference group constituted to inform the expert panel, Minister Clare ensured that control over the design of the future NSRA could be maintained. Despite giving the *appearance* of collaboration, the process of constituting the expert panel and subsequent ministerial reference group worked to legitimise a political course of action.

Conclusion

Between 2018 and 2023, successive federal education ministers have done little to progress reform initiatives in Australian schooling while being active in shaping public discourses about school reform through strategic framing of issues in collective public memory. Beyond making pronouncements about 'record' funding, the function of the federal government has been largely to shift blame for reform failure to state and territory education departments and teachers, alongside the deliberate forgetting of reform promises and reshaping of collective public memory through their media statements. Successive federal ministers have utilised public pronouncements to forward their political agendas and secure their reputations as *effective* ministers, rather than to pursue educational aims. Similarly, opportunities to interrogate reform targets in the media and alert the Australian public of actions being taken to improve student outcomes have been forfeited, with most reform commitments remaining unmentioned and conveniently *forgotten*.

Rather than use public platforms to build awareness of Australia's progression of schooling reform, public attention has been misdirected. We argue that the ultimate failure of the NSRA is associated with this mediation of public perception and that by being positioned 'out of sight and out of mind', successive federal ministers have successfully sought to shape public sentiment and collective memory of the NSRA. In this sense, past policy is rendered 'forgettable', and in terms of the contradictions it might produce and the challenge it represents to new policy enactments, forgetfulness finds form in the 'destruction of all visible things by time' (Ricoeur et al., 2006, p. 100). The challenge comes in those vestiges that remain. As Ricoeur et al. (2006) highlights 'forgetting [is] something different from what we remember having forgotten' (100), with shifts in policy directions drawing to view the point from which the shift commenced; declaring that which is intended to be forgotten as a necessary point of reference in the shift towards something new.

Throughout this paper, we have used Australia's school reform agenda as an illustration of how successive federal ministers of education have attempted to frame public discourses to 'forget' key policy promises and positively position themselves and their political affiliations in a positive light. Despite comprehensively failing to progress national initiatives within their scope of control, successive federal education ministers have successfully managed to define, construct and position (Foucault, 1972; Luke, 1995) discourses around education and schooling reform to shape public memory 'without risking the costs of real change' (Hess, 1999, p. 11).

We contend that this is an untenable situation. Until reform agendas function in genuine partnership across all levels of education, with genuine collaboration and reform partnerships between federal, state and territory governments, initiatives that enhance schooling in Australia will continue to go unheeded and parties not responsible for reform blamed for inaction. The best way to avoid the ‘forgetting’ of commitments is to be reminded of them often. Shifting the rhetoric to one sharing the actions across *all* stakeholders in the education system can help to ensure that commitments are not forgotten, and work towards the improvement of public confidence in education. It remains to be seen how the new reform agreement will unfold, although it is likely that the discursive formation of public sentiment, collective memory and forgetting will likely continue to be a key strategy used by politicians in their role as key educational policy actors.

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