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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A democratic curriculum for the challenges of post-truth

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Abstract

Post-truth has been widely applied in the wake of COVID-19, to stipulate causes for growing economic and political inequalities, misinformation in digital spaces and disillusionment with political institutions and notions of common/public good, to name a few. To address these concerns, this article constitutes a series of suggestions for how educators might engage with curricula that are embedded with democratic ideals. The first section will provide a brief survey of how various incarnations of the national curricula in Australia have been used as a vehicle for both envisaging a future in Australia and promoting civic participation as a way of fostering an inclusive society. The forms it developed into during the 1980s to the 2010s, however, usually promoted national priorities over localised concerns, such as the aims of individual teachers, schools and curricula. Over the long term, these tendencies have provided the foundation for a shift in educational discourse from generating social capital under the Whitlam government (Lingard, 2000). More recent discourse by contrast has focused on how digital resources can be effectively used, accountability, minimising teacher demoralisation and burnout, maximising student engagement (Dunning, 2022) and tinged with concerns about how constructive critical thinking can be better encouraged (Paterson & Gavrin, 2022). In this article, the structures which catalysed such changes will be contextualised in relation to how post-truth has emerged as a byword for a range of disruptive factors, such as denial of knowledge expertise (Malpas, 1992; Coper, 2022), and how authorities (in governments and media) have pragmatically lied to subordinates (Tesich, 1992; Keyes, 2004; Consentino, 2020). The second part examines how these same conditions have been recently perpetuated through schools being characterised as key to economic recovery, rather than places to regenerate relationships such as those between community-school or curriculum-teacher-student in response to the disruption which has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, there is a focus on what is being—and could be—done to encourage democratic thinking in an Australian classroom context, as ways of addressing phenomena linked with post-truth by generating cultural and political capital.

Keywords Democracy · Curriculum · Post-Truth · COVID-19

Post-truth has recently been linked with curriculum discussions by showing how political, technological and economic trends influence educational contexts, producing a narrative of declining quality and outcomes (Chinn et al., 2020; Coper, 2022; Gudonis & Jones, 2020; Mackey, 2019; Nally, 2022). In Australia, such discussion has extended to examine the impacts of policy implementation as articulated through a hegemonic-like structure (Wescott, 2022). These arguments are based on policy development taking place by consulting a population in a data-gathering stage. Meanwhile, decisions about future directions of education are centralised in a selected group of curriculum experts and authorities, namely ACARA, AITSL and state-based education regulatory bodies that exist in states and territories. Such observations are borne out in a recent analysis of the consultation from national curriculum revisions compiled by Kubler et al. (2021) that showed the data sets reflected the views of interest groups which were most engaged in public discussions about education, rather than the population as a whole. Seventy-one percent of responses that were submitted by individual teachers, for instance, were sourced from Queensland (ACARA, 2021). Therefore, while curriculum can be considered reflecting the present values that pave the way for desired social progress (Boomer, 1992) and the

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discourse about its development is phrased in democratic terms (see, for instance, Biesta, 2007; Holloway & Hedegaard, 2023), this emphasis glosses over imbalances in the source material that informs decisions about curriculum changes and implementation.

This article is intended as an exploration of how educational discourses have been significantly influenced by such centralised policy approaches, during a period that has at times been labelled as a 'post-truth era' (such as Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Feinstein & Waddington, 2020; Compton et al., 2021). Since its inception with Steve Tesich's op-ed in *The Nation* (1992) and Jeff Malpas' academic article in *Soundings* (1992), this concept has increasingly operated as an umbrella term for factors that work to destabilise notions of truth and cohesion, in economic, ideological, historical and political terms. It has consequently become a diagnosis for symptoms of inequality and epistemological crisis (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020). These characteristics have been reflected in educational policy in Australia.

Over the last two decades in particular, system-wide policy decisions have favoured the autonomy of schools, which has encouraged competition between institutions in terms of education-as-market and school-as-business models. Public messages have emphasised such measures as NAPLAN and performance tables as laying the groundwork for improving academic results. The critiques of this data are in its many misuses, such as their being interpreted as representing a whole student rather than being a snapshot of performance. Additionally, principals have been given increased influence within their schools, which allows them to be more responsive to their local contexts. Current reforms allow them more control over how responsibilities are disseminated and what communications about policy changes will be relayed to staff (Keddie, 2017; Niesche et al., 2021; such as New South Wales' *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (Griffiths et al., 2020; Gavin and Stacey, 2023) and recently implemented *School Success Model* (2023)*;* Victoria's *Learning Community* (Iaria, 2012; Jensen et al., 2013) and *Education State* initiatives; Western Australia's *Independent Public Schools* initiative (Munro et al., 2013; Trimmer, 2013; Gobby & Niesche, 2019)).

In post-truth terms, these circumstances allow principals substantial control over the narratives and counter-narratives that develop about—and within—a school (On how this leadership style works in a variety of contexts, see Forroughi et al., 2019). Consequently, the ability of teachers to decide how to balance curriculum demands, pedagogical choices and instructional approaches is framed by an alignment with—and divergence from—the interpretations of policy discourse that are delivered by school leadership. In tandem with this, consideration is a more broad tendency towards decreasing engagement by Australians with formal consultative processes that inform change-by-consensus initiatives. According to research conducted by the *Australian Electoral Study*, Australians' engagement with democratic processes in particular has depended on both the government ministries being in line with those at an election, its stability, as well as responses to crises being equitably distributed (Cameron et al., 2022; For earlier studies, see Arvanitakis & Marren, 2009; Oliver, 2014). Further, this research noted how significant portions of votes were decided in relation to how candidates were perceived to represent their local concerns—rather than necessarily based on a national interest—the emphasis on developing responsive, localised leadership as part of implementing educational policy can be interpreted as further entrenching hegemonic structures.

In light of these circumstances, the question must be asked: *How might a democratic curriculum work to address challenges connected with post-truth that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic?* To this end, the first section will address how changes in Australian policy have developed from the 1980s onwards, based on:

1. The trajectory of curricula being linked with responses to economic circumstances, beginning with the 1983 recession after the election of the Hawke government (Reid, 2019) and
2. This time period containing conditions that became catalysts for post-truth in subsequent decades (for example, see Tesich, 1992; Malpas, 1992; Keyes, 2004; Gudonis & Jones, 2020).

This concept has accumulated a variety of definitions—from disruptions caused by AI and other forms of digital technology to a substantial rise in misinformation deliberately circulated in public discourse, as well as the absence of shared responsibility in addressing existential threats (Coper, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2018). Recently, it has been used as a byword for how an epistemology of crisis has gradually crept into public discourse over the past four decades (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020). The second part of the article will examine how these features of post-truth have crept into educational discourse. Schools, for instance, have been characterised as key to economic recovery, rather than places to regenerate relationships between community-school or curriculum-teacher-student in response to the disruptions and inequalities that became more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, there will be a focus on what is being—and could be—done to encourage democratic thinking in an Australian classroom context. This section will feature a discussion about how challenges might be addressed by generating cultural and political capital to address the aftershocks of COVID-19 and the epistemological issues persisting associated with post-truth (Keyes,

2004; McIntyre, 2018, Barzilai & Chinn, 2018; Barzilai & Chinn, 2020).

What must a democratic curriculum respond to?

Democracy in Australia has been under more critical scrutiny in recent years (Shiel, 2022; Tormey, 2016): Although existential threats such as the bushfires of 2019 and COVID-19 enhanced localised social cohesion in the short term, this has contrasted with the forms of inequality that have gradually increased, particularly in economic and educational terms (Flanagan et al., 2020; O'Donnell, 2022). Perhaps, the most visible consequences in education have been embodied in continued speculation over the consequences of students' 'learning loss' during 2020–2022 (Merga et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). There have also been concerns expressed about how international testing such as the PISA acts as a barometer, showing the limited effectiveness in current education initiatives to offset the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage (Thomson, 2020). In addition, staffing shortages, discussion about whether ACARA's general capabilities framework adequately future-proofs Australian curricula (Scarino, 2019; Weldon, 2019; cf. Brennan, 2011 for commentary on this concern in previous revisions; for studies of alternative skills and competencies, see Milligan et al., 2020), are coinciding with the use of digital education platforms which are engineered to decrease workload, as well as increase accountability and enhance data retention within schools and systems (Carter & Hunter, 2023; Schmidt, 2021; Stacey et al., 2023). Change appears to be the only constant.

Recent writings infrequently discuss how concerns about Australian education reflect the long-term evolution in how Australian democracy has been practised. There are few mentions, however, about the longevity in ideas from Malcolm Skilbeck's work with the Curriculum Development Centre, to produce *Core Curriculum for Australian Schools: What it is and Why We Need One* (Skilbeck, 1980), which provided a starting point for how subsequent national curricula have been conceived and—to varying extents—implemented. It catalysed debate over what constituted future-focused teaching and learning, the extent to which skills in schools should be oriented towards vocation, employment and industry priorities, division of school-based content into learning areas and the extent to which states' and territories' standards needed to align with one another (Marsh & Harris, 2007). Alan Reid has observed that these considerations began filtering into federal government discussions about education in response to the 1982/1983 recession, with the rationale of facilitating the movement of workers to industries with labour shortages across states and territories. Within this arrangement, each jurisdiction was still able to ensure that their industries still retained their autonomy from one another (2019; also, see Braithwaite, 1992).

Correspondingly, educational reforms—while previously being regarded as separate from economic interests—were an integral part of tangible nation-building efforts by being framed as a pipeline for skilled workers in the future. Improving the nation was subsequently defined in terms of addressing deficits in reducing unemployment figures and youth delinquency, increasing the age of schooling retention to years 11–12, introducing superannuation to address low average national savings. These coincided with encouraging the expansion of the national economy by such initiatives as floating the Australian dollar, prioritising industries such as mining over manufacturing and opening the country up to foreign investment and markets (Johnson, 2020). At a cultural level, establishing a shared understanding of different disciplines in the form of subject areas was argued by successive governments from across the political spectrum as paving the way for a shared understanding of place and a greater foundation for cohesion—rather than division—in an Australia that was becoming more culturally diverse (Gale & Tranter, 2011). These federal-level factors catalysed the neoliberal trajectory of what Leo Bartlett observed as a 'corporate Federalism' (1992, p. 218) in how education began to be described in policy documents as an industry in need of regulation and reform, rather than a discipline responsible for generating, preserving and consolidating knowledge and skills within a society. At the level of discourse, *effective* teaching was at various points conflated with *efficient* teaching and learning (Kennedy, 1992); coherency across regions in terms of education opportunities and curriculum was described as paving the way for social equity (Lingard, 2000); benefits of education that were previously measured in terms of social good were re-conceived as economic goals involving the mobilisation of skilled labour (Lingard, 1991).

Prosperity, progress and the problem of uncomfortable truths

These education-based responses to economic circumstances can, in turn, be interpreted as symptomatic of a broader repositioning in Australia as a response to rapidly evolving global circumstances. By 1986, there were fissures beginning to emerge within the dualistic tensions that held competing global political narratives in place: capitalism against communism; authoritarianism against democracy; pragmatism against integrity and tensions between an ideal citizen being an educated, rational individual (Biesta, 2010) balanced with the possibility that the established order could suddenly collapse, ranging from spiking crime rates in cities such as New York, the Challenger Shuttle explosion, the

exposure of the Iran-Contra affair, to the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl. The Doomsday Clock stood at 3 min to midnight (Editors, 1988). Under a veneer of emphasising the economic prosperity and happiness that everyday Americans were supposedly experiencing, the Reagan administration also glossed over details that may have allowed for potential critiques of the administration, particularly rising debt levels in the mid-1980s that could only be sustained as long as the American economy continued to expand (Weiler & Pearce, 1992). This focus on the economy as the gauge for lifting living standards in tandem with political control was reflected in Paul Keating's tenure as treasurer. Where the difference lay, as the journalist Laura Tingle reflected, in economic policy being reported on accurately in public circles, due to Keating presenting and explaining the statistics in detailed monthly briefings to the press, which journalists critiqued and elaborated upon (Tingle, 2012).

The alignment between these macro-circumstances and how Australian curricula have been co-opted to determine what is considered socially valuable in educational policy, with the facts and opinions of those who must govern (Jasanoff & Simmett, 2017). Further, it demonstrates a function of curriculum as an artefact that guides what should be remembered and forgotten (Sharp & Parkes, 2023). Humanities curricula in particular have operated as conduits for teaching explicitly about democratic values within schools since the 1990s (Innes, 2022). A core challenge faced in developing a more democratic curriculum to address concerns linked with post-truth, therefore, is the frameworks that have been built around the national curriculum link citizenship to socio-economic participation, as well as aligning Australian standards to international macro-trends. Moreover, this situating of curriculum implementation within a broader context demonstrates how its operation as a hegemony (Wescott, 2022) reflects the manner in which knowledge about economic and political circumstances is generated. Just as the Australian curriculum reflects the opinions of individuals and interest groups who are more active in consensus-based, democratic processes, these more visible perspectives in turn form the basis for decisions by educational administrators and policymakers. These circumstances underpin the analysis of policies taken up in the next section, which relates to how they have underpinned the development of post-truth.

How well does a post-truth diagnosis stand up?

This section of the article takes the hegemonic structures in Australian curricula and ACARA as a starting point for developing the case that they have emerged in tandem with post-truth symptoms in public discourse. These have ranged from critiques about the ongoing influence of politics which prioritised image preservation of public figures and interest groups; pragmatic concerns and flagrantly broke public trust (Harsin, 2018; Keyes, 2004; Tesich, 1992); recent damage wrought by the Bolsonaro, Duterte and Trump Presidencies (Consentino, 2020; Coper, 2022) and misinformation campaigns about COVID-19 (Prasad, 2021) and the Voice to Parliament (O'Sullivan, 2023). These public iterations of post-truth have been characterised by downplaying the value of scholarly and professional expertise, which Jeff Malpas described as becoming more neglected in favour of economic or politically pragmatic priorities by business groups, cultural organisations and government (1992). Such pragmatism has been most evident in debates about existential conditions, including discussions about the existence of climate change and greenhouse effects (Chinn et al., 2020; Groves, 2019; Sismodo, 2017; Wright, 1991), as well as Holocaust denial in the form of court cases such as *Irving vs Penguin Books Ltd* (d'Ancona, 2017; Fischer, 2020; McIntyre, 2018). For McIntyre (2018), Gudonis & Jones (2020) and Chinn et al. (2020), such trends mark the beginning of the polarisation of information consumption, which characterised the forms of radical postmodernism that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In this context, access to knowledge was dramatically expanded through more available education and increasing access to the Internet (Peters & Besley, 2019). Such forums were, however, Petri dishes for pseudo-expertise, in the form of explanations of public discourse that utilised an *ex nihilo* method by focusing on the potential causes behind absences in public discourse rather than focusing necessarily on what was visible, present and provable (Malcolm, 2021).

There has also been a shift towards constructing evidence in favour of serving agendas, without necessarily an eye to the architecture of the sources that have underpinned it. In a corrective to misuses of his actor-network theory (2004), Latour indicated that there needed to be an openness to new discoveries changing scientific knowledge. Instead, his notion of knowledge being culturally constructed—and therefore subject to revision in light of new discoveries—was manipulated to support revisions in how events were interpreted that went radically against the grain of scholarly opinion. These ranged from Jean Baudrillard and Michel Valentin's reading of the Twin Towers as collapsing under the weight of capitalism itself (2002), to the fallout from the Stokal Controversy, which challenged the validity of the peer review process by appealing to the vanity of the editors of *Social Text* (Mermin, 2008). Through a post-truth lens, this process of generating interpretations has seemingly fallen into a binary structure, between ideology (which naturalises one perspective as more authoritative than any others) and theory (which works to relativise different perspectives in relation to one another) (Schindler, 2020). It follows that findings of inquiry-based research represent the validity and

limitations of contemporary knowledge—rather than necessarily being conclusive.

These academic developments influence the means by which democratic ethics might be conceptualised as relativistic rather than representing the range of perspectives and groups within a population. Methodologies such as the meta-meta-analysis from works such as John Hattie's *Visible Learning* (2009) and its sequel (2023) have been, as Scott Eacott (2017) and James Ladwig (2018) have pointed out, adopted with a largely uncritical stance in policy circles, with the end point being manifested in New South Wales' What Works Best (2020) and Victoria's *High Impact Teaching Strategies* (2023) documents. Notably, the meta-meta-analysis was constructed with the intention of deciphering the science of education to pave the way for more consistently effective pedagogical and administrative decisions, encouragement for teachers in their practice and for school executive members to engage with research findings. In addition, it hypothetically enables principals to guide, design and plan initiatives around agendas generated by data gathered from the groups of a school community it will impact (Hattie, 2023).

Instead, to a significant extent, such research has been used to plug what some have called a 'critical blind spot' in decision-making around which instructional strategies are most *efficient* (Bergeron, 2017; Eacott, 2017). This approach to educational statistics in Australia reflects a more protracted mobilisation of standardised performance measurements, ranging between the introduction of NAPLAN in conjunction with *MySchool* rankings in 2008 and an expansion of ACER's online Reading, Writing and Maths skills tests that has been taking place since 2016. These developments attest to how ranking metrics factor as part of how policy, pedagogy and curricula have gradually been tweaked with the intent of facilitating a refined performance from teachers and students. Such logic overrides a needs-based philosophy of education that has been advocated by position papers such as *Through Growth to Achievement* (2018), in favour of a more capitalist ethos that designates that student learning should perpetually grow. Under these circumstances, teachers' professional autonomy is boxed into specific practices, rather than necessitating the reflection, engagement with—and responsiveness to—how their teaching areas are changing. The impact of these trends is compounded by the recent uptake in the use of AI, which has been indicated by Farrokhnia et al. (2023, p. 4) to 'serve as a starting point for novice teachers who have less teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge'. In practice, it has been used to automate the learning intensions and lesson plans (cf. Limna et al., 2023). These uncritical approaches, in a similar manner to the reception of Hattie's meta-meta-analysis, perpetuate current biases rather than positioning educators to be agents for change (Thomson & Thomas, 2023). Such factors have contributed to assessment statistics being interpreted in relation to degrees of inequality and deficit-model thinking, contributing to a narrative of decline around education (see, for instance, Chinn et al., 2020; Nally, 2022; Valladares, 2021). In part, this is a reaction to international performance—as will potentially be the case with PISA later in 2023—but is also symptomatic of broader factors that have been a product of post-truth.

Thus, while there has been a trend towards leveraging standardised results to inform current and future directions in educational policy, similar to the data about teachers' feedback on National Curriculum drafts, the ways in which these statistics have been compiled have been significantly overlooked. Lilley (2023, p. 52; also, see Sahlberg & Bower, 2015) has noted for instance that such statistics cannot reflect the work that teachers are doing 'to improve engagement and wellbeing', as they are less easily quantified and cannot feature as a metric on standardised tests. These considerations suggest that while decisions are made by policymakers and the leadership of each school with the intention of improving the achievement and wellbeing of students, they are nevertheless bound by the post-truth symptom of inequality between authorities and the general public, leaders and their followers (Foroughi et al., 2019). The concern may be, as Lilley later explains, on raising the standard of what is considered the 'average teacher' (2023, p. 54), but this standardised approach—to assessment and judging education quality—overlooks the localised contexts that influence the outcomes of each case study which informs the meta-analysis. Additionally, while the trend towards using standardised averages as the baseline—both in the forms of generating tests and interpreting results—is well-intended and designed to moderate the polarisation of perspectives that has been widely diagnosed as symptomatic of post-truth, its impact is limited by the hegemonic structures distancing administrators from classrooms. This conclusion is further evidenced by Jenny Gore's assessment of the *Strong Beginnings* Federal initiative (2023) to address teacher shortages. While many recommendations that are cited in this report are required—ranging from diversification of middle-leadership opportunities to respond to complex situations in schooling environments, teacher training, neuroscience of learning and additional support structures for new teachers between school-system-ITE providers—there is also an emphasis on these measures requiring further changes to make accountability and regulation more readily resourced (Gore, 2023).

Education policy decisions have therefore been informed largely by data that presents an incomplete picture of localised school contexts and, based on the statistics from Kubler et al. (2021) and ACARA (2021) at a national level, is substantially more representative of Queensland than any other area of Australia. Conversely, the substantially

lower participation of New South Wales and Victoria correlated with the most pronounced use of evidence-informed practice and accountability measures, as well as the most substantial rates of improvement when indexed against the degree of socio-economic advantage (Goss and Sonnermann, 2018; For a NSW-focused study, see Miller et al., 2023). While these contextual differences highlight where individual teachers participated most and least proactively in the national curriculum surveys, more research needs to be done about how sample sizes can be gathered so they are more representative of educators from across Australia. The current priorities to 'refine, realign and declutter' the curriculum (Robert, 2022) are a product of standardised processes that enable representative democratic consensus. With the degree of autonomy afforded to schools varying between each state, educational hegemonies are not reflective of such structures in society more broadly.

The stories we tell: hegemonic policy structures and post-truth

The brief sketch of the historic circumstances that have framed the development of Australia's national curriculum reflects how it has been increasingly viewed as a tool for catalysing future—while being reflective of current—forms of social organisation (Brennan, 2011; Marsh & Harris, 2007). Boomer (1992) elaborated on this point, arguing that schools provide the means for educating *all* students about democratic principles, by way of their class and community activities reflecting practices of democracy. Following Foucault (1977), he went on to assert that the effectiveness of curriculum implementation by Australian states in the 1990s should be considered in relation to how the 'micro' operations of power—at the level of the classroom and school—are mediated between the 'materiality' of education environments, with those of the 'body' of knowledge within curricula, which was situated in 'hegemonic' hierarchies (Boomer, 1992, p. 283). That is to say, the way that democratic structures can be built within a class depends on the sense of place, the culture that is developed by all the people present, along with the shared goals they have as a result of constructing a consensus-based perspective. To some extent, external factors such as testing in the form of NAPLAN disrupt the localised nature of classroom cultures, since they are calibrated towards assessing the students' achievement in relation to a nationwide average score.

By extension, to address the macro-concerns raised by the presence of post-truth in public discourse, the classroom must be somewhat compartmentalised from its local environment. This assertion is comparable to Boomer's observation in education, since forms of instruction rarely followed the archetypes of teacher-as-researcher and student-as-scientist (Boomer, 1992). Instead, there was a tendency towards a master-apprentice format where knowledge was passed on to a younger generation and reflective of the experiences of this transfer amongst all bodies that contribute to a school community. These relationships do not have an equivalent in democratic structures that distribute forms of authority and responsibility amongst a population. Bruno Latour's observation—that scientific experiments' results are determined by the shared understandings that come from the network of relationships between scientists, equipment and the immediate environment as well as any factors that influence the scenario which lie outside the contained environment (1993, 2020)—indicates that each classroom can be considered an opportunity for germinating a brand of democracy. The relationship that the participants in the classroom have with democracy in turn must be tailored to address inequalities in knowledge, skills and social capital compared with their peers.

Where COVID-19 and various aspects of post-truth have been so disruptive is in creating ruptures in these relationships which prevailed until quite recently in educational contexts. In the aftermath of the lockdowns that transpired across the world during 2020–2022, Latour elaborated that a 'metaphysics of confinement' levelled many signifiers that divided people, especially those that were publicly visible such as class, ethnicity and technological access (2020, p. 27). How this logic converts to considerations for what a democratic curriculum might look like is firstly considering that experiences of democracy have been framed in economic, globalised terms in Australia (Baildon & Damico, 2019), whereas the discourse driving educational discourse has significantly diversified. These options range between encouraging students to be industry-ready (for example, Polesel, 2008; Strathdee, 2023) as well as receiving instruction geared to improve their academic achievement and personal wellbeing (for example, Seary & Willans, 2020; Spears & Green, 2022).

Thus far, this article has attempted to show how democratic, consensus-building approaches within curriculum development have been used to gather information relating to education, in tandem with—and in contrast to—centralised, hegemonic structures being utilised as part of policy implementation. This latter structure emulates the hierarchies within schools that operate in a more autonomous policy setting, as all responsibilities are ultimately centralised in the role of the executive and—where they are present—a college board. These circumstances are in keeping with more broad circumstances that have designated education as an industry in Australia that can cultivate, then mobilise, individuals' talents and enthusiasms for generating cultural, economic and political capital. One particular consequence has been noted by Reid as a shift in discussions from the Whitlam era's emphasis on education as a driver for social

capital to post-Hawke/Keating where the focus switched to employment pathways and economic opportunities (2019).

Narratives about Australian education in an international setting have emphasised a decline in teaching standards and learning output (for example, Ashton, 2021; Nally, 2022; Schleicher, 2019), with a sub-plot of negative economic and social consequences in the future, especially in terms of an ability to compete with other countries. What has shifted since the need for mass remote education in 2020 is a seemingly exponential trend of teachers leveraging digital tools—ranging from search engines to AI assistants—to allow students independence from human-based instruction. This tendency is laden with the assumption that digital nativity equates to having developed expertise in how to use such technologies. Additionally, Thomson (2021; 2022) has highlighted that there is a clear inequality between scores achieved by students in independent, systemic and public schools, as shown in Table 1.

Such results are symptomatic of the creeping problem of economic inequality in Australia, with studies of school resources and socio-economic advantage of their population closely correlating with student achievement (Sullivan et al., 2013; Perry, 2018; Ainley, McAskill & Thomson, 2022; Neumann, 2022). Flowing from these long-term observations is the emphasis on *efficiency* being conflated with *effectiveness*. Such overlap has resulted in hegemonic relationships being related from a policy to a school-based level, which has to a significant extent resulted in perpetuating inequalities in society more broadly, rather than embodying a progressive view of education (Baildon & Damico, 2019; Luke et al., 2018). These conditions consequently inform teacher judgements about which pedagogical decisions and types of student learning will be most suited to perceived student needs. Thus, teachers are positioned as translators of national narratives that flow through policy discussions and trickle into local contexts. One caveat is that these do not necessarily have an accurate understanding about the purposes that underpin their curriculum, since much of this is filtered through the way it is translated by leadership figures they report to.

A democratic curriculum therefore goes against many of the practices currently in place at educational institutions, but may also provide a starting point by adjusting the narrative to include opportunities for growth *and* limitations and efficiency *and* effectiveness. The next section will elaborate on this point, particularly in relation to how schools have been recently characterised as key to recovering from the impacts of the 2019 bushfires and COVID-19 and educating the future voting public about their responsibilities as individuals, classes and cultures, as well as how to combat other existential threats such as climate change. That being said, there has been limited focus in policy documents and public discourse about how they can be sources for regenerating social capital, especially between community-school and curriculum-teacher-student as foundational relationships for addressing the disruptions associated with post-truth.

Shifting from 'what can I *actually* do?' to 'what is next?'

This section will involve an analysis of how post-truth has entered educational discourse as a result of an epistemology of crisis within democracies (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020), on the basis that the implementation of a democratic curriculum will reflect educators' understandings about democracy. The urgency in addressing this point is attested by recent studies overwhelmingly suggesting that there was significant learning loss that will have longer-term consequences for social cohesion with the advent of COVID-19 (Australian specific: Brown, et al. 2020; Fray et al., 2022; Miller, Fray & Gore, 2023; within global trends: Betthäuser, Bach-Mortensen, Engzell, 2023; Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2023; Merga et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Stracke et al., 2022). These discussions will lead into the final section's coverage about the features required in a democratic curriculum to address cultural and skill-based inequalities caused by phenomena linked with post-truth (Apple, 2018). This is a significant opportunity for schooling approaches to be more inclusive of Indigenous cultures and knowledge (following from Yungaporta and McGinty, 2009; Commonwealth of Australia, 2022).

Literature about how educators can respond to post-truth and challenges posed by COVID-19 within democracies are divided over two key considerations:

Table 1 Mean scores for reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, PISA 2018

	Reading literacy		Mathematical literacy		Scientific literacy	
	Mean	(SE)	Mean	(SE)	Mean	(SE)
Government	487	2.1	477	2.4	489	2.3
Catholic	515	3.5	499	4.4	512	3.6
Independent	536	4.1	524	3.8	536	4.0

Reprinted from, What does PISA tell us about Australia's school sectors? By Thomson, S. (2022) *Teacher: Evidence, insight, action*

1. What type of expertise and organisation might be cultivated by educational institutions to address present inequalities, and
2. How can they operate as a meeting point between government, corporate and community interests in such circumstances (Peters, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Cunningham & Gibson, 2023).

Recent economic and political responses to pandemic-related issues within Australia have been framed within longer-term, globalised trends, with domestic issues being compounded by other existential threats—such as international tensions stemming from the Ukraine-Russia conflict, possession and use of nuclear technology and soft-power tensions between China and the USA. As a result, the present time of writing is usually cast as a semi-filled Molotov cocktail of challenges and opportunities. This context has coincided with an epistemic crisis in many democracies in the form of uncertainty about what forms of expertise might pave the way for possible solutions (Chinn et al., 2020; Dahlgren, 2018; Specian, 2022; Whyte, 2021).

Such circumstances are found in Australia (Black & Walsh, 2019; Gudonis & Jones, 2020; Grafton, 2020; Wescott, 2022) but are reflected more globally: a survey comparing Swedish education with the rest of the OECD noted that there was a 'lack of consensus amongst politicians' about how to address teacher dissatisfaction, the marketisation of education, recognition of the profession's role in building social capital and limited responses to increasing rates of truancy, mood disorders and diagnoses (Henrekson & Wennström, 2022, pp. 5–6; cf. Thomson, 2021). These discourses situate behaviours within a schooling context, but somewhat neglect the various factors that motivate them. This view is cemented in how meta-analyses such as Hattie's are applied to justify initiatives at a local level, without necessarily being based on an understanding about how their findings were determined (Ladwig, 2018).

As such, considering how a democratic curriculum might be formulated requires a conceptual framework such as Latour's actor-network theory (1993), which acknowledges how a variety of networks underpin visible behaviours, rather than regarding these observations in isolation. For instance, there is currently an intensive focus on how classroom practice can be refined in the face of the current teacher shortage in Australia (such as NSW Government, 2023; Louden et al., 2023). These initiatives need to account for how classroom practice can reflect local interpretations of meso-macro-focused education reforms, however, since the two can potentially work to socially engineer a nation and its citizens to be adaptable and/or resilient when similar crises emerge in the future.

A consistency in how democracies respond to crises was noted by Jurgen Habermas near the beginning of what some scholars refer to as a post-truth era (for instance, Henrekson & Wennström, 2022; McIntyre, 2018): In pursuit of 'capitalist modernisation processes as well as trends critical of cultural modernism', there came a 'negation of expertise' and other forms of non-material culture (1983, p. 13; cf. Brooker, 1992). This narrowing of cultural knowledge in favour of its material value was, as he put it, a 'colonisation of the lifeworld by a system' over the long term, thereby segmenting social structures into employee, consumer, citizen and client, separating thought-work from material-work as part of a long-term process that had been taking place since the beginning of the Enlightenment (Baxter, 2002). His concept has enduring relevance for how post-truth phenomena might threaten cohesion within societies, since as part of system structures impinging on the lifeworld, the notion of 'public good' has been fragmented and/or eroded in recent decades (Henrekson & Wennström, 2022). At the level of curriculum, marketisation of education—and accompanying metanarrative of decline fuelled by PISA results—has resulted in knowledge acquisition being graded by high-stakes standardised tests of student achievement (Reynolds et al., 2019; Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020; Appel, 2020; Polesel et al., 2014), its relevance measured in transferability to post-school employment (Lamb et al., 2018; Pilcher & Hurley, 2020; Braukmann-Sajkiewicz & Pashiardis, 2022) and more traditional literacies providing the foundation for the development of increasingly complex problem-solving skills (Cunningham & Gibson, 2023; Milligan, et al., 2020), as well as being industry and future-focused. These conditions have been, as asserted in the first section, designed to closely link active citizenship with economic participation, the proximity of which has been narrowed in times of economic instability such as the 1993 recession, the GFC and the continuing fallout from the pandemic.

Further, in an Australian context, this set of priorities has resulted in students being provided with limited exposure to how, for instance, new social media technologies can strengthen links to the community by both students and teachers, as well as give them input and control over how they shape their own place within larger digital narratives. Such contextual issues are embedded in the Australian HASS and History Curricula through the limited reference to how students' strategic use of skills can help discern which types of change may contribute to a better world (Reynolds et al., 2019). These purposes for education which have emerged independently from one another have resulted in curricula being designed to address economic issues and upholding the political status quo at the time they are written. By extension, such curricula impact the durability of skill sets linked with material work (see especially in relation to vocational curricula in Australia: Polesel, 2010; Polesel & Clarke, 2011). The inequalities

that have emerged are therefore symptomatic of forms of critical literacy, effective organisation and opportunities to generate cultural capital not being as widely visible across society more broadly in Australian democratic responses.

Inequalities in socio-political capital have been diagnosed as post-truth conditions (Chinn et al., 2020; Buffaci, 2021; Henrekson & Wennström, 2022), which more broadly contribute to maintaining dominant, hegemonic structures that regulate the distribution of knowledge (Wescott, 2022). Such factors cultivate a centralised social cohesion which is less stable but has the appearance of rigid control (most visible in authoritarian political structures, see, for examples, Ball, 2017; Consentino, 2020; Foroughi et al., 2019; Fuller, 2020; Harsin, 2020; Tapsell, 2017; Ramirez, 2020). The catalysts for such circumstances appear to range from the denial of knowledge and selective use of facts (Malpas, 1992; Pomerantzev, 2016; McIntyre, 2018; Harari, 2018; Coper, 2022) to political controversies such as Watergate (Baudrillard, 1994; Keyes, 2004; Tesich, 1992) and election interference through disseminating misinformation and hacking (Pomerantzev & Weiss, 2014; Pomerantzev, 2019; Pond, 2020). Correspondingly, these phenomena contribute to destabilising a clear sense of public and shared realities, as a result of the media technologies used to convey them. Combined with this questioning of expertise indicated by Habermas, over the long term the trends that affected socio-political cohesion filtered into educational discourse, and in Australia—as with many countries—during recent years, there has been a succession of crises: bushfires, floods, COVID-19, pressures on health and logistics organisation and the creeping challenges of climate change. Reflecting on how human populations respond to existential threats, Latour characterised them as triangulating between three axes:

- *Local/global concerns* that cast individual, communal and globalising perspectives as mutually exclusive, rather than being able to reach a point of accurate communication and respect-building
- *Traditional/modernity* that rendered change-through-conflict rather than through as a result of reconciliation between opposites
- *Extra-terrestrial/terrestrial concerns*, which could involve present material realities being counterbalanced by hypotheticals and/or projections of the past and future (Latour, 2020)

Taken together with the literature on how Australia has recovered from a pandemic-induced recession by prioritising economic goals, it may be appropriate to supplement Latour's axes with a fourth: the extent to which measures taken are enforced by collective agreement at one end, anarchic means on the other, with democratic debate lying somewhere in the middle. If educational developments have been framed within this epistemology of crisis characteristic of post-truth, then they can also be catalysts for generating social cohesion and collective and individual resilience and generating cultural capital (Jovanoski & Sharlamanov, 2021; Mahony, 2021). In a contemporary context, these may need to be reframed as skills to develop through experience, rather than as products that develop as a result of human behaviour being regulated by the *efficient* organisation of systems. Regional towns such as Mallacoota in Victoria have cultivated a localised direct democracy as part of recovery efforts from bushfires and the pandemic (Lloyd & Hopkins, 2022), which integrated a pre-existing long-term goal of the Mallacoota Energy Group, to develop an independent solar energy grid (Burns et al., 2013). The strategy used in this case study—to (continuously) debate and (re-)establish a communal shared mission, vision, strategy and relationships based on trust—has been highly effective and mapped across to other initiatives, such as the Yarra Energy Foundation in Inner-City Melbourne, or Cobargo and Kangaroo Island's community projects (Rogers, 2023).

To address issues linked with post-truth, schools might integrate relationships with stakeholders based on this community-recovery model, re-construing the institution as a meeting point for cultures and communities. The effectiveness of these localised studies in addressing aspects of post-truth—specifically inequalities within a community, environmental destruction, building trust and combatting misinformation via education in problem-identifying, solutions-oriented thinking—suggests that an *effective* implementation of a democratic curriculum may require the following:

1. The structure for cultivating collective efficacy in communities can be mapped onto classrooms and amongst staff (including leadership figures), to develop classroom cohesion and cultures of thinking (Donohoo & Katz, 2017; Hattie, 2023).
2. The democratic relationships generated in this classroom need to be based on collective agreement, which are made purposeful by each educator to create initial buy-in, before moving to a gradual release of responsibility to develop agency and potential for collective debate and respect.
3. Current models of measuring metacognition and discipline-specific skills through mastery and competency (Navarre Cleary & Breathnach, 2017; Elhussein et al., 2023) need to be oriented towards social enterprise (Bhatt, 2022; Sabet, 2022) rather than 'market models of the learning process' (Roberts, 1996, p. 295). Although much of current scholarship about a democratic curriculum prioritises transferrable skills that enhance community participation (this notion has been part of theoris-

ing about democratic curricula since Dewey, 1916) and employability outside of schools, a mission/vision that enhances cohesion will develop empathy and skills to work as part of a collective, which are both characteristics that underpin these two priorities as well as the ability to self-regulate (Fernandez-Rio et al., 2017).

4. Current trends towards leveraging entrepreneurship principles involve 'see[ing] opportunities that are in high demand … organise resources … [and] discover, evaluate and exploit opportunities by understanding the value proposition of a new idea and identifying a potential market' (Deveci & Seikkula-Leino, 2023, p. 6). These guidelines might embody features (1), (2) and (3) by integrating social enterprise principles to embody a more authentic STEAM approach. This ethos shift acts as a starting point for moving the focus from local to global, to include the personal context as part of a global village, as well as to ensure schools can forge closer connections with their local communities and effectively channel Boomer's (1992) mapping democratic behaviours into class contexts.

How might a democratic curriculum look for Australian schools?

In July of 2023, a series of summits were held in South Australia to discuss what the next stage of Gonski educational funding reforms would look like. In the same vein as the ACARA consultation methods, Kevin Rudd's *Australia 2020* Summit, and the Howard Era's *Discovering Democracy* initiative in schools (1999–2003), a consensus-based, representative model of democratic consultation was conducted. It included students, teachers from across all levels of school hierarchies, academics and ministers and office-based policy staff. Notably, this latter initiative is still regarded as having high-quality curriculum development (Heggart et al., 2018). Its effectiveness at the level of ideas, however, was undermined by three logistical factors:

1. It did not provide professional development for teachers or a body of expert civics teachers to reach sustainability.
2. It had high-quality curriculum development, but inadequate funding for a national programme (Erebus Consulting Partners, 2003).
3. The initiative did not connect with how young people could be active and instead only taught values linked with democracy (Arvanitakis & Marren, 2009; Kennedy, 1997; O'Loughlin, 1997).

These points relate to the fundamental issue of how to engage local stakeholders in a collective process, to sustain a democratic curriculum. While it contained ingredients from Boomer's recommendations such as having 'degrees of explicitness' of how democracy was embedded in everyday Australian life Boomer (1988, p. 169; cf. Wallis (2013, pp. 87–88)), as well as Dewey's notion that student learning would be more *effective* when integrated with a community that existed within and around a school, rather than being disconnected from the world (1916), it demonstrates the need for a degree of cohesion between what is learned in school with the skills that exist in Habermas' conception of a lifeworld (1983). As such, the hegemonic nature of policy implementation works towards ensuring consistency between how individuals engage with democratic curricula across discrete regions. The ethos with which it is implemented at a micro-level, however, needs to reflect the priorities, perspectives and constructive roles which are representative of a local community.

One model for how such an initiative might work in Australia comes from Deep Collaboration (Martin et al., 2020), which takes inequalities caused by race and power as a starting point, before considering as a community what experiences take place as a result of these and before conceptualising which purposeful changes need to eventuate. These steps, combined with an assumption that they need to be reviewed for their progress and validity as they are worked towards, ensure that planning in a democratic curriculum might authentically reflect the process of consensus, with checks on the degrees of support from individuals and groups within a school. The continued engagement acts against the concerns linked with post-truth—such as pragmatic uses of truth, a breakdown in cohesion/increased polarisation within a community and increasing inequalities—by positioning individuals and groups consistently in constructive dialogue with an impetus for contributing to a community's cultural capital.

Where the Deep Collaboration initiative might be elaborated upon is in promoting rigour in knowledge, to adapt to the misinformation challenges posed by post-truth conditions (cf. Lewandowsky et al., 2017, Barzilai et al., 2020). Barzilai and Chinn (2018) recommend five key aspects of epistemic performance which could regulate what (and how) knowledge is integrated into a democratic curriculum which is developed, both at a local or larger scale:

1. 'Cognitive engagement in epistemic performance;
2. Adapting epistemic performance [to diverse situations];
3. [Metacognitively] regulating and understanding epistemic performance;
4. Caring about and enjoying epistemic performance;
5. Participating in epistemic performance together with others' (p. 365).

Significantly, the emphasis on consistency of interaction and value of human-based knowledge would allow a curriculum to be developed that would reflect a shared vision and effort. Importantly, this planning model incorporates an Australian variant of democratic thinking between First Nations and multicultural Australians, which necessitates a reframing of a school in Latourian terms (1993), as a highly complex network of relationships which are influenced by social processes, technologies and the environment (For an elaboration on these complexities, see Cresswell et al., 2010). This style of thinking would allow a local-level implementation of democratic values within a curriculum. It would also allow for learning objectives to be framed within values that are more globalised in outlook and oriented towards generating a style of social cohesion that balances critique of the status quo and social enterprise so as to work towards addressing inequalities.

These considerations go against the grain of what Peter Roberts called 'commodification of education' in terms of how the role of curriculum was to function as a series of 'market models of the learning process', (1996, p. 295, following Giroux, 1993; also, see Green, 2019, for more recent examples across English-speaking countries) paving the way for more authentically implementing a needs-based framework (Sahlberg & Goldfield, 2023; cf. Swain, et al., 2023). This epistemic value on agency about how relationships are formed and the purposes for which they might be acted with (rather than on) reframes democratic thinking that made the recovery efforts cited in section two *effective* in building cultural capital. If a shift to a more democratic epistemology is not made, such market-based relationships will likely be mapped onto how new technologies are used. This will be particularly concerning if AI assistants are used to delegate decision-making, even if it is enacted by students, educators and policymakers with the intention of mistake-proofing any judgement-based work they complete (Schiff, 2022, following Raji et al., 2020). Any new democratic curriculum in Australia therefore needs to builds on previous attempts at democratic curricula this country has produced, by encouraging engagement, application and debate about core ideas and values (as previous curricula have done, see Holt, 2001). It would also require sections to be readjusted to suit address contemporary circumstances. Further, these previous models have contained the application of democratic ideas to within a school context. A recent OECD survey of case studies in Canada, Portugal, Scotland, France and Finland found that curricula which placed students in their communities—such as with charities, businesses and social initiatives—for a protracted period of time meant they applied active citizenship life after school, making tangible impacts on their local community (OECD, 2023). These considerations ensure that the curriculum model itself would be adaptive and encourage communities, educators and learners to be continually engaged to contribute to an ongoing learning journey.

Conclusion

Many of the symptoms of post-truth obfuscate the ability for individuals and groups to make balanced judgements, ranging from a metanarrative of decline, the decoupling of truth from socio-political cohesion, to the issues caused by mal-/mis-/dis-information within forms of media, digital technology and public discourse. The challenges such factors represent indicate a need for democratic curricula to balance the intentions of.

1. Distributing habits of thinking which are social enterprise oriented, with an emphasis on how the role of education is to close the gaps between inequalities in a society rather than catalyse fiscal gain
2. Moderating the emphasis on *efficiency* with the *effectiveness* of learning
3. Retaining the hierarchical structure of a school while encouraging democratic behaviours
4. Valuing the role of individual contributions to a collective and a collective's influence on an individual

Consequently, to be effective in addressing concerns related to post-truth, a democratic curriculum will need to start by a school community positioning itself within the various narratives that exist amongst the interest groups that exist within education: 'public vs private, early childhood vs primary vs secondary, city vs country, indigenous vs non-indigenous, large vs small schools …' (West, 2023, p. 33). These conflicting perspectives illustrate the inequalities and divisions that catalyse other aspects of post-truth, particularly the narrative of decline that subordinates individuals to a hegemony. Such factors underline the need for developing nuanced skills as part of developing leadership skills (for individuals and as part of a group), emotional-social awareness, along with disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) knowledge, to ensure human-based expertise can effectively adapt to the challenges posed by these political factors, as well as emerging technological ones such as generative AI. As such, there must be scope for students, teachers and other groups who feed into a democratic curriculum to have specialised contributions. These measures would prospectively work to safeguard the value of human-based knowledge and collective learning, by focusing on how epistemologically driven has a place in planning, collaboration, delivery and reflection on practice, in order to develop ownership and connections amongst all members of a schooling community. These considerations have a place more specifically in

allowing the way history curricula operate to enable teaching of the subject to be oriented towards enabling participatory citizens, within an ethos of social enterprise.

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Declarations

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