TEACHER WORKLOAD IN AUSTRALIA: National reports of intensification and its threats to democracy

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Introduction

Education and schooling are core to the evolution and healthy functioning of socio-democratic societies. Achieving positive schooling experiences and outcomes for students depends considerably on ensuring that teachers are well-resourced and supported to complete their important work. This objective, however, can sit in tension with neoliberal policy agendas encouraging, for example, "school choice" or "local autonomy" (i.e., responsibility) in school governance. While schools are often considered sites of learning, our approach in this chapter understands schools as places of both work *and* learning, by examining teachers' working conditions in the context of the de-democratisation of education. The notion of the de-democratisation of education—or injection of neoliberal imperatives in education—has fundamentally transformed teachers' pedagogy and working conditions over the last 40 years. Over this time, education scholars have produced a wealth of literature critiquing neoliberal policy and its manifestations, like market-based reforms and audit cultures, for driving privatisation of schooling, contributing to the residualisation of public education, and entrenching inequity in not only educational, but social, outcomes (Apple et al., 2018; Connell, 2013). Despite the apparent rapidity of changes occurring in schools, there is little empirical evidence looking at how teachers are faring within this changing context.

This chapter synthesises recent large-scale surveys (*N*=48,000) reporting on the contemporary condition of teacher workload across five Australian states. The most prominent finding emerging from these surveys is the documentation of the near-universal intensification of teachers' work (perceived to be driven by the "heavy hand" of compliance reporting and datafication), with a correspondingly reduced time to focus on matters seen as more directly related to classroom teaching. We articulate the complex work activities and workload of teachers, reflecting upon how intensification (that is, working harder and longer) may threaten the democratic purposes of schooling. We argue that system-level monitoring and evaluation of teacher workload is needed to inform policy-making, support good practice, and re-imagine how we value and support teachers' work to challenge de-democratisation. In doing so, we outline a path forward for resisting neoliberal imperatives that have undermined the democratic "social good" function of education and constrained the capacity for teachers to focus on their core work—quality teaching and learning practice. This chapter first provides an overview of neoliberal agendas in education that have reshaped public understandings of the purpose of education and threatened to undermine democratic schooling. We draw attention here to nascent research on the implications of de-democratisation for teachers' work and working conditions. After situating our focus in the context of Australia, we outline the research method adopted in this chapter. Findings are then presented from recent large-scale surveys on teachers' work, followed by discussion of these workload dimensions in relation to democracy in and through schooling. This chapter concludes by outlining implications for policy and practice in terms of responding to, and potentially resisting, neoliberal imperatives seen to be shaping teachers' work.

The neoliberal imaginary, de-democratisation, and teachers' work

This section provides the conceptual framing for understanding the impact of neoliberal imperatives on teachers' work and how work intensification represents a threat to democracy. Teachers' work and workload are core to our understanding of how schools can be *for* democracy; but the restructuring of teachers' work identified in this chapter serves to threaten the socio-democratic purpose of schools. The main purpose of education systems around the globe is arguably to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and values for effective participation in a democratic society. According to Beane and Apple (1995), democracy is a form of political governance involving the consent of the governed and equality of opportunity. It is also characterised by the open flow of ideas; critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies; concern for the welfare of others and "the common good;" and the organisation of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life (Beane & Apple, 1995). Dewey's (1899) work promoted the idea of democratic education as a path to engagement in community and becoming a good citizen. Dewey (1899) viewed schools as a microcosm of society and as places where democratic ideals of equality, freedom, and justice are instilled. As such, a democratic understanding conceptualises schools as places that foster engaged, critical, and supportive members of society.

Our fundamental sense of democratic education and schooling has been problematised by shifting policy agendas that have reoriented the public understanding and purpose of free, democratic, and participatory education. In today's knowledge-based economies and societies, knowledge and skills are key to individual and collective success, with high expectations and demands placed on education systems—and their teachers—to deliver outcomes (Bourgeault et al., 2009). The role and purpose of teachers as educators has been radically transformed in this pursuit for competitiveness, productivity, and economic growth. Teachers are reported to face heightened complexity and demands around student needs and welfare issues and are expected to perform additional tasks, such as facilitating the development of students' social and emotional skills, and working collaboratively to ensure the holistic development of students (OECD, 2019). Policy shifts have also intensified accountability and scrutiny of teachers' practice and, subsequently, increased compliance and administrative requirements, to serve the purpose of schooling reoriented to building human capital to enhance nations' global competitiveness (Fitzgerald et al., 2019a).

The intensification of teachers' work and increased demands on teachers have emerged in an era where the dominant social imaginary of education policy is defined by *neoliberalism* (Rizvi, 2010). Founded in a "discourse of derision" (Ball, 1990), this policy perspective views state education as being "in crisis," with teachers cast as incompetent and responsible for the falling standards in education. To rectify this education "problem," significant attention has been directed towards *what* and *how* teachers teach, and the methods by which to assess student learning (Hartnett & Naish, 1993). The "neoliberalisation" of state education entails a conceptual shift from understanding education as an intrinsically valuable shared resource which the state owes to its citizens, to a consumer product for which the individual must take responsibility. This shifting conceptualisation fundamentally re-shapes what is deemed important, valuable, and necessary in education by policymakers, practitioners, and the community (Ball & Youdell, 2007). Apple et al. (2018) conceptualise how this new neoliberal imaginary has subsequently changed our understanding of democracy, embodied in the contrasting of "thick" and "thin" versions of democracy. They argue that while "thick"

understandings of democracy promote full collective participation of citizens and espouse concepts of the common good and the good citizen, "thin" versions emphasise market-oriented versions of choice, individualism, and education as an economic tool.

Within this context, Apple (1986) argues that teachers are recast from being trusted professionals to workers who must be closely monitored, managed, and made "accountable" through purportedly objective measures. There has also been a push towards "evidence-based" decision-making in schools and an associated emphasis on (usually numeric) data, in line with policy logics of accountability, auditing, and surveillance (Rizvi, 2010). Apple (1986) argues that classroom teachers are thereby constituted as objects of data, facing simultaneous de-skilling and intensification of work. Neoliberal accountability, therefore, places teachers under "a relentless assault on their autonomy when it comes to participating in purported democratic decision-making processes" (Shaker & Heilman, 2008, p. 50). While wary of broad claims of teacher "deskilling," we agree with Apple (1986) that the consequent restructuring of teachers' work is an example of dissolving democracy in schools. Issues of teachers' work and workload are therefore central to the question of how schools can be *for* democracy.

The policy context: Australia and neoliberal education reform

This chapter examines teacher's workload and intensification of work in the empirical setting of Australia. The provision of school education in Australia is the constitutional responsibility of the nation's six states and two territories, meaning that education has historically been a "residual" power of individual states (Cranston et al., 2010). This separation of state and federal responsibility over education policy and funding means there is no one distinct "system" of national education in Australia. Furthermore, states and territories in Australia differ in terms of geographical size and population. The majority of the population is concentrated on the east coast, with the states of Queensland, NSW, and Victoria comprising about 80% of the nation's total of 26 million (ABS, 2020). Western Australia (WA) on the west coast of the continent is geographically the largest state, with South Australia and the Northern Territory located in between WA and the eastern states, and the island state of Tasmania located to south of Victoria. Finally, the Australian Capital Territory is small, located within NSW and home to the nation's capital.

Although responsibility for public education is primarily held at state and territory level, federal intervention in the administration of education has gained pace since the 1970s (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). While democracy is frequently advocated as an important and desirable tenet of social and political relations in Australia (see Connell, 1995), reform of education at a national level has come to reflect reform trends enacted in other major Western capitalist democracies, such as the USA and UK, focused on driving efficiency and effectiveness in education and shifting away from the socio-democratic purposes of education to a purpose defined by economic imperatives. For instance, federal governments in Australia during the early 1970s pursued social democratic reform of education, such as via the Karmel Report (1973), which had a vision of democratising policy and administrative processes to address social needs (Orchard, 1998). Devolutionary, market-inspired policy since the 1990s, however, has been grounded in an ideological shift away from social democratic values towards neoliberal agendas that reframe education as an economic tool underpinning imperatives for enhanced competitiveness in the global economy (Robertson, 2012). Under this neoliberal mode of governance, state and federal governments in Australia have

advocated greater school choice to eliminate supposed inflexibilities and inefficiencies of centralised arrangements, and support parental choice (Campbell & Proctor, 2014).

At the state level, Victoria provides an early example of devolutionary policy. Structural changes to school governance, enhanced marketisation, and changes to industrial relations policies have had the effect of intensifying teachers' work and driving insecurity of work in the profession (Blackmore, 2004). WA followed a similar devolutionary path under the state government's Independent Public Schools program, which intended to bring schools closer to their communities and enhance local decision-making around staffing and budgeting (Fitzgerald & Rainnie, 2012). Fitzgerald and Rainnie (2012) argue that this reform has led to managerialisation of principals' roles, a shifting of risk onto communities and advanced market-based competition. This argument is furthered in Fitzgerald et al. (2018) where the impact of autonomy on local competition, and resulting residualisation of non-IP schools is examined, finding experiences of staff dissatisfaction in both "successful" and marginalised school contexts. In NSW, the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* reforms introduced in 2012 have undermined job security and permanency for teachers by devolving greater hiring responsibilities to local schools and managerialising principals' roles (Gavin & McGrath-Champ, 2017). This reflects a state policy environment in which local school actors are "responsibilised" for the outcomes of schooling (Stacey, 2017). We further note that alongside the introduction of other policies and requirements, there has also been a reported expansion of the working hours and workload of teachers during this time (Fitzgerald et al., 2019a). These findings suggest a need for teachers to increasingly demonstrate and justify their work, connecting with arguments around how recent education reform can shape the subjectivity of teachers and school leaders, as "workers feel themselves accountable" in new, arguably more performative rather than authentic, ways (Ball, 2003).

Meanwhile, at the federal level, the Rudd–Gillard Labor Government's "Education Revolution" of 2007 transformed education nationally across various areas. Projects were led around large-scale infrastructure, enhancing information and communication technology in classrooms, and redesigning the national curriculum. At the same time, the government's *Empowering Local Schools* initiative supported the devolution of responsibilities to a local level to better cater for communities and students. The introduction of assessment and comparison tools, in the form of National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy and the *MySchool* website, supported a renewed national focus on "national standards" and "teacher quality" and assisted parents making decisions in the education market via the online publication of student results (Mockler, 2013). Standardised testing has been reported to encourage "teaching to the test" and reduced scope for autonomy by teachers while increasing accountability (Au, 2011) by responsibilising teachers for student achievement (Torrance, 2017). Competition and choice have also reinforced existing social class inequalities in Australia, shifting the nature of the school contexts within which teachers work and shaping the nature of this work (Stacey, 2020). These reform agendas are not unique to Australia but reflect government reforms that have become commonplace among Western nations (Connell, 2013). We now turn to the methods used in this study to examine teacher workload across Australia.

Method

This chapter reports data from recent AEU1 commissioned state-wide surveys on teachers' work. The authors of this chapter were commissioned by the public sector teacher unions in NSW and WA—the NSW Teachers' Federation and the State School Teachers' Union of WA—to carry out surveys on teachers' work in these states (Fitzgerald et al., 2019b; McGrath-Champ et al., 2018). The respective state teacher unions in Victoria, Tasmania, and Queensland—the Australian Education Union Victorian Branch, the Australian Education Union Tasmanian Branch, and the Queensland Teachers' Union—commissioned similar surveys on teachers' work in these states (Rothman et al., 2017; Rothman et al., 2018; Weldon & Ingvarson, 2016). To our knowledge, similar surveys have not been commissioned or carried out in the states and territories of South Australia, the Northern Territory, or the Australian Capital Territory. As such, the findings reported in this chapter, derived from analysis of these primary and secondary data sources, are not nationally representative and we acknowledge the unique socio-demographic profiles of some states and territories not captured in our findings. Nevertheless, we note that a total of 185,458 teachers in public sector schools across Australia in 2018 (ACARA, 2020), reporting on a total of 48,741 respondents, equates to approximately a quarter of these teachers' voices. While there are variations in wording across the survey instruments and consistency of questions and issues, here we bring together the similarities across the surveys, with an eye to identifying broad trends while maintaining awareness of difference when necessary. Table 9.1 illustrates the year of data collection, response rate, and body that commissioned the teacher workload survey in each site.

The surveys, commissioned by the respective state teacher unions, were administered online to current members of the union, which included classroom teachers and school leaders (e.g., principals, assistant principals, and head teachers). While the surveys were commissioned by the teacher unions, in some cases, they were designed in consultation with university-based academic researchers (NSW, WA) and then delivered online by the union, and in other instances, were designed and delivered online by ACER2 (VIC, QLD, TAS). This chapter draws upon survey items that specifically documented recent changes in teacher workload, including volume, intensity, sources, and effects. The surveys include a variety of closed, Likert-scale questions as well as open-response questions. Where relevant to interpret the findings in an international context, we compare national data extracted from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) against OECD averages. The OECD TALIS is the largest international survey asking teachers and school leaders about their working conditions and learning environments and provides a barometer of the profession every five years. The data reported in this chapter are from results of the 2018 cycle, which provides coverage of 260,000 teachers across 48 countries. Although indicative of broad work patterns, the different method of calculating working hours in the TALIS surveys means that they are not directly comparable to the state-based teacher surveys.

Australian state	Commissioning body	Year of data collection	Respondents (number)	Response rate (%)
New South Wales (NSW)	NSWTF (co-designed by union and researchers and administered by union)	Survey distributed during Term 1 of 2018 over a five-week period to all union members (approx. 54,200)	18,324	33.6% of union's membership
Western Australia (WA)	SSTUWA (co-designed by union and researchers and administered by union)	Survey distributed during Term 4 of 2018 to all union members (approx. 14,000)	1,717	12.3% of union's membership
Victoria (VIC)	Vic branch of AEU (designed and administered by ACER)	Survey distributed during Term 1 of 2016 (casual teachers excluded) (approx. 39,600)	13,454	34% of teachers surveyed
Tasmania (TAS)	AEU Tasmanian Branch (designed and administered by ACER)	Survey distributed during Term 3 of 2017 over a four-week period to all union members (approx. 5050)	3,042	60.2% of union's membership
Queensland (QLD)	QTU (designed and administered by ACER)	Survey distributed during Term 4 of 2018 over a five-week period to most union members (approx. 37,000)	12,204	31% of union's membership

Source: State surveys

Findings

Teachers' work hours

The data from the surveys show a consistent pattern of high work hours being carried out by teachers. Teachers' hours of work were documented as having increased over 2013–2018, and are reported as slightly higher in WA, NSW, and Victoria, compared to Queensland and Tasmania, as evident in Table 9.2. Compared to teacher workload at an international level, data from the OECD TALIS shows that Australian teachers work longer hours than the OECD average— almost 20% more (OECD, 2019). OECD data also shows the average working week for Australian teachers having increased by 2.1 hours since the previous survey on teachers' work was carried out by the OECD (OECD, 2019). These reports on workload are consistent with three "Staff in Australia's Schools" surveys commissioned by the Australian Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations— carried out over 2006, 2010, and 2013—which show that the average total hours worked increased slightly for both primary and secondary teachers over these periods (McKenzie et al., 2014). As will be discussed, this increase in working hours coincides with new policies that have increased accountability and devolved responsibility for student outcomes and school performance to the school level, which has led to a view among teachers of an accelerated working life (Thompson & Cook, 2017).

Table 9.2 Teachers' work hours across five Australian states

	Total average hours per week (Primary, FT)	Total average hours per week (Secondary, FT)	Hours within total undertaking work activities at home or on the weekend
NSW	55	55	11
WA	53	53	10
VIC	52.8	53.2	11.5 hours for primary teachers. 6 hours for secondary
TAS	45.8	46.2	90% of primary teachers work 5 hours. 70% of secondary teachers work 3 hours
QLD	43.9	44.1	Teachers report spending between 1 and 7 hours on a range of tasks 'outside rostered duty time', including weekends, each week

Work activities

In addition to teachers' working hours having increased over the last five years, the complexity and demands of teachers' work are also reported to have increased nation-wide. For instance, data from the NSW survey show approximately 95% of respondents reporting that the complexity of their work had increased over the last five years and that the range of

activities undertaken in their work had increased. In the NSW and WA surveys, over 96% and nearly 90%, respectively, of respondents reported that the volume of collection, analysis, and reporting of data had increased over the last five years. A commonly expressed view was that, as one response to an open-ended survey question articulated, "teachers should be teaching, building rapport with students and planning exciting and engaging lessons and programs, not doing so much admin and data collection," as well as that—in the words of another respondent—attention was being diverted to "spending so much time on assessment and data entry, rather than having time to get to know their students as individuals." In Victoria, teachers indicated that they spent 24% of their time on non-teaching-related activities. These rates of engaging in non-teaching-related tasks are higher than international averages. Interestingly, OECD data shows that administrative data is the main source of stress for Australian teachers (Thomson & Hillman, 2020).

At the same time, the surveys show that teachers are also spending considerable hours outside of required school time (including weekends) undertaking teaching-related activities, such as planning and lesson preparation. Over ninety-nine of primary and secondary teachers responding to the Queensland survey indicated they used time outside their rostered hours to plan and prepare lessons, while 97.9% of primary teachers and 98.5% of secondary teachers used time outside of rostered hours for assessing and reporting. The Victorian survey found that planning and preparation was undertaken by a large majority of respondents during evenings (93%) and weekends (83%). Forty-eight percent spend some time of their weekend on administration.

Workload sources

There is variation in data collected between the surveys on the specific sources contributing to increased teacher workload and work intensification. While respondents were asked to consider sources contributing to workload in the NSW and WA surveys, these questions were not directly asked of teachers in the Queensland, Victorian, and Tasmanian surveys. In these cases, however, potential sources of workload can be inferred from the nature of work activities and workload issues reported and the strategies teachers identify as potentially effective in managing their workload. Across the surveys, there is broad evidence to suggest that increased workload is, at least in part, a result of policy shifts emanating from the introduction of education reform, including new performance frameworks, devolution of responsibilities to schools, and new curricula (with less centralised support to administer curriculum change).

• Respondents to the WA survey indicated the roll out of the Independent Public Schools initiative (which had commenced on a small scale in 2010) had contributed to workload increases. Almost 95% of WA respondents reported that there had been no commensurate increase in centralised support for these transitions. Similarly, low levels of increased support were reported against the implementation of new policies, procedures, new curricula, and processes relating to student behaviour and welfare in WA. This was in addition to a reported increased in administrative tasks and collection, analysis, and reporting of data often resulting from initiatives undertaken at a school level.

- In NSW, respondents reported requirements to undertake a greater range of activities, collect, analyse, and report on an increased amount of data and complete more administrative tasks. In addition, support provided by the state education department to classroom teachers for implementation of new syllabuses was reported as having

decreased 36.7%, and support for implementation of new policies and procedures and implementation of ICT systems and software had decreased by more than one-third. For respondents from Queensland, new curriculum requirements were seen as contributing to teacher workload, with 47.3% of primary and 50.7% of secondary teachers perceiving the "Pedagogical Framework" adopted by their school as increasing workload. Around one-third of teachers in Queensland (35.3% primary; 33.7% secondary) indicated the annual performance review processes added to workload, but only 13% of primary and 8.7% of secondary teachers felt it had improved their teaching.

• In Victoria, the "strategies" identified by teachers also indicate a concern with too many government initiatives and bureaucracy, emphasising a need to protect non-contact time.

• Finally, teachers in Tasmania emphasised the reduced support available to help manage the increased complexities of work, including the lack of support staff, and limited support for challenging student behaviour—a concern also evident in the results of the NSW and WA surveys.

The most prominent finding emerging from these large-scale surveys is the report of teachers' work as having grown in size, and become more complex in nature. We argue that this outcome of apparent intensification of work has primarily been driven by instruments of compliance, datafication, and the decrease in the time that teachers have available to focus on matters perceived as more core to the job of teaching. We note, however, that despite these policy instruments affecting teachers' core work, the survey data reveal that teachers—by and large—are still able to retain their primary focus on matters directly related to working with students in teaching and learning. For example, more than half of teachers responding to the Tasmanian survey felt they taught well, knew their students well, and identified appropriate activities and resources for learning. This view was more moderate among teachers responding to the Victorian survey where just over half reported that they "fairly often" or "very often" felt confident in handling their responsibilities at work (55.9% primary; 56.2% secondary). However, teachers are struggling to preserve this student focus in the face of new work activities that are imposing additional hours, work demands, and personal burdens. For instance, in the Tasmanian survey, 30% of primary and 38% of secondary teachers indicated that their workload, at some stage, had a negative effect on their teaching. The evidence from these surveys, therefore, shows teachers as experiencing an increased and unmanageable workload, defined largely by administration and compliance. This would seem to reflect an environment of responsibilisation (Stacey, 2017; Torrance, 2017), with teachers positioned as responsible for the outcomes of schooling and required to document their work toward such outcomes. These increased accountability requirements seem, in these respondents' experience, to appear at the same time as central services are cut, burdens are shifted to the local level, and support diminishes. This simultaneous, and paradoxical, decentralisation and re-centralisation is emblematic of the neoliberal imaginary which intensifies and funnels teachers' work around administration and compliance, yet reduces structural support (Connell, 2013). Education reforms marked by hierarchical control and compliance eliminate teacher autonomy and undermine the possibility for articulating and critically engaging with diverse voices.

It is clear that teachers highly value tasks that are perceived to be directly related to their teaching and to students' learning. In the NSW survey, respondents were asked to identify

whether particular listed activities were seen as important and necessary, with such work as "planning and preparation of lessons" and "finding opportunities to get to know students as individuals" being reported as valued in this way. This finding was also evident in the results of the WA survey. Conversely, teachers in both states did not identify work related to departmental policies and administration as important and necessary. Respondents also identified tasks, such as developing strategies to meet the learning needs of students, particularly those with special needs, including developing new units of work and/or teaching programs, and planning and implementing school projects and other innovations as needing more time and resources. The surveys also reflected a strong sense that teachers desired more professional respect, time and support for their teaching and facilitation of student learning, and greater valuing of their professional judgement. In a policy climate where teachers and school leaders are responsibilised for school outcomes, it would seem they may also feel they are "blamed" and thus undervalued. This coheres with OECD data indicating that less than half of Australian teachers feel they are valued by society, although notably this is above the OECD average of 26%, suggesting a need to attend to the experiences of teachers and how they are valued across the globe (Thomson & Hillman, 2020).

Conclusion

Through the synthesis of recent large-scale surveys reporting teacher workload across Australia, this chapter has advanced understandings of the ongoing impact of neoliberalism on school processes that directly relate to teacher practice and, therefore, on democratic education in the classroom. The evidence from these surveys points to the need for timely discussion around the nature of the education policy and reform landscape in Australia. While there may be political rhetoric constructed around what certain education reform policies are designed to target (e.g., improved student learning outcomes and enhanced decision-making control by schools), the reality of the working experience of teachers in this political context is very different. Moreover, it is questionable whether student learning outcomes are improving in this context of intensified (neoliberal) reform and overburdening of teacher workload with recent international testing data from the Programme for International Student Assessment, one of the very mechanisms of comparative accountability currently working to reshape teachers' work, ironically showing declining student learning outcomes in Australia. The scenario of marketisation, privatisation, and corporatisation of education has not improved the situation and has arguably led to a further devaluing of democratic education, reigniting Michael Apple's sentiments around "the struggle for democracy in education." Education—and schools as public institutions— are important sites of democratic practice and tradition (Beane & Apple, 1995). However, the narrowing of teachers' work, increasingly away from the practice of teaching and learning and toward compliance-driven agendas, enhances the de-democratisation of education.

Creating space for change and for articulating hopeful alternatives is necessary in order to imagine more democratic and inclusive futures and resist the continuing de-democratisation of education. This chapter contributes a systemic perspective by looking across Australian state systems, arguing that with rapid transformations occurring in education, relevant authorities need to be mindful of ramifications for teachers' workload, and student outcomes. Schools are important places in which the promise and hope of democracy should be fostered in order to support the foundation of schools as fundamentally socio-democratic institutions and advance the social and political relations desired in Australian society. This means rejecting educational reforms that constrain teachers' autonomy and professionalism and, instead, articulating an alternative narrative about the role of teachers in classrooms and

society. As sites of democracy, teachers should have the capacity to critically participate in and shape the policies, programs, and practices that affect them and students (Beane & Apple, 1995).

Notes

1 Acronym for the Australian Education Union. State teacher unions are branches of the national education union—the AEU.

2 Australian Council for Educational Research.

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