Final Report: Stage 1 Ambassador School Research Centre (ASRC)

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Acronyms

AS	Ambassador Schools
ASRC	Ambassador Schools Research Centre
CSS	Contextually Similar Schools
CSU	Charles Sturt University
CU	Canberra University
NSW	New South Wales
NSW DoE	NSW Department of Education
P&C	Parents and Citizens Association
PIS	Participant Information Statement
PISCF	Participant Information Statement and Consent Form
PL	Professional Learning
SES	Socio-economic status
SLs	School Liaisons
SSM	School Success Model
UNSW	University of New South Wales

Executive Summary

This research identifies the specific practices and conditions that have contributed to the success of 10 Ambassador Schools. The research recognises that effective practices can be found across a range of New South Wales (NSW) government schools. It was framed by a review of the research literature on effective teaching and learning and leadership practices, mindful of the NSW Department of Education's (NSW DoE) existing summary of effective practices, *Work Works Best*. This research sought to build upon what is already known about effective practices to uncover what is distinctive about the ways in which they were implemented in Ambassador Schools to enhance their effectiveness.

A rigorous mixed methods approach involving multiple participant groups (principals, teachers, students, parents), and multiple data collection techniques (interviews, focus groups, surveys, classroom observations, and shadowing) was used. The practices that were identified emerged from the analysis and synthesis of data across participant groups and data types. Multiple perspectives on each practice allowed nuance and specificity in relation to each.

The research participants represented 26 schools, including the 10 Ambassador Schools (AS). The schools were broadly representative of NSW government schools in terms of the distribution of primary and secondary schools and rural and metropolitan schools.

A unique feature and strength of the research was its co-design, bringing together university-based research expertise (the Ambassador Schools Research Centre) and the systemic knowledge of the NSW DoE's Ambassador School Program staff.

The practices and enabling conditions identified warrant testing for effectiveness and scalability in a wider range of contexts. They have the potential to significantly enhance outcomes for students in NSW government schools.

Summary of key practices

Ten teaching and learning practices that have contributed to the success of Ambassador Schools were identified. Although described separately here, they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The success of Ambassador Schools lies not simply on the use of these practices but in their combined, systematic, deliberate, and sustained use across the school and over time. The practices are listed below and described in detail in Chapter 6 of this report.

1. **Data-informed practice:** Data-informed practices were embedded in the cultures of Ambassador Schools. Teachers used their knowledge of students' prior

achievement and needs to provide appropriately challenging work. Strategic planning decisions at the school level were based on the analysis of data generated at system and school levels.

2. **Explicit teaching:** Teachers ensured students were clear about what they were learning in each lesson and how they would know they had achieved that learning. Instruction was clear and engaging, lessons followed predictable patterns, and students received immediate feedback on their efforts.

3. **High expectations:** The expectation that every student could and would achieve was conveyed through appropriately challenging work and systematic encouragement and support for students and their families.

4. **Instructional support and leadership:** In concert with explicit teaching, differentiated instruction was used to ensure that all students were appropriately challenged and supported to learn. School leaders were focused on the school's core business – student learning – and ensured that the school's routines and structures were focused on supporting teaching and learning. Leaders had the necessary curriculum expertise to lead teaching and learning.

5. **Classroom management:** The routines of explicit teaching contributed to orderly classroom environments. There was a relentless focus on maintaining the conditions in which learning could occur. This underpinned proactive behaviour management with teachers moving about the classroom providing guidance and encouragement.

6. **Whole school vision/approaches:** Ambassador School principals had a clear vision based on shared values for their school. Effective practices were instituted consistently and coherently across the school and were understood and supported by staff.

7. **Positive teacher/student relationships:** Interactions between teachers and students, and between principals and students, were consistently positive. Students appeared to enjoy talking with their teachers, and principals orchestrated opportunities to interact with students throughout the day.

8. **Focus on student wellbeing:** Ambassador Schools were proactive and systematic in providing support for students. The strategy and approaches adopted were based on a deep knowledge of students, their circumstances, and their needs.

9. **Teacher and student agency:** Trust and respect underpinned collaborative relationships in Ambassador Schools. Teachers decided how whole school approaches could be applied in their classrooms and subject areas. In the context

of explicit teaching, students had choices about the degree of challenge and the examples with which they engaged.

10. **Growth orientation:** Classrooms were focused on learning rather than competition and performance. Teachers created and sustained environments in which students could challenge themselves and learn from failures and successes.

Enabling conditions

Enabling conditions allowed teachers and school leaders to implement the effective practices. While not practices per se, enabling conditions resulted from deliberate choices and actions on the part of school leaders and teachers. They supported the practices and were reinforced by those practices.

The six enabling conditions identified are listed below and described in detail in Chapter 6 of this report.

1. **Collaborative practices:** Collaboration among teachers was supported by organisational structures and underpinned by professional trust and respect. Collaboration was essential to the effective implementation of whole-school approaches and increased the likelihood that initiatives were understood and adopted with high fidelity across the school, thereby optimising impacts on student learning. Collaboration was a key means by which teachers learnt and developed their practice.

2. **Wellbeing and emotional support:** In Ambassador Schools, student supports were proactive, based on the deep knowledge of their students and their communities, and delivered in an ethos of kindness and care. School environments fostered a sense of belonging, mitigating circumstances that distract from learning.

3. **Growth mindset:** Ambassador Schools were characterised by a belief that everyone – staff and students – can learn. A growth mindset underpinned every practice, from high expectations and explicit teaching to the focus on wellbeing and emotional support.

4. **Professional learning (PL):** Ongoing professional learning was embedded in school cultures, and strategically directed towards areas of student learning needs. The impacts of professional learning were monitored and evaluated, and practices were recalibrated as a result. There was a shared understanding that teaching and learning could always be improved.

5. **Proactive leadership:** School leaders in Ambassador Schools were visible and active in school activities on a daily basis. They were aware of events and

positioned to respond proactively and deliberately to challenges. These school leaders did not wait for problems to happen before responding.

6. **Routines:** Analogous to the routines associated with explicit teaching, routines characterised the organisation of Ambassador Schools. Routines supported consistency and efficient time use in a calm and caring environment focused on learning.

The organisation of the report

The report is presented in 6 chapters as follows:

- **Chapter 1** – *Introduction*: A brief review of relevant research literature focussing on specific classroom and school practices that have been found to be effective for enhancing students' outcomes. The NSW DoE *What Works Best* (2020 update) has been referred to as a source of practices to be included.

- **Chapter 2** – *Methodology*: An overview of the research design and how data of various kinds and from various participants have been triangulated and synthesised to identify specific effective practices.

- **Chapter 3** – Results: *Interviews and focus groups*: Findings from interviews with principals and teachers and student focus groups concerning specific practices that distinguished particular Ambassador Schools (AS) from their matched Contextually Similar Schools (CSS), and that distinguish the set of AS from the set of CSS. Contextual and other factors that appeared to act as enablers of, or barriers to, effective practices were also identified to inform the potential for the transference of specific practices to other schools.

- **Chapter 4** – Results: *Surveys*: Findings from the surveys of principals, teachers, students, and parents concerning specific practices that distinguished the set of Ambassador Schools. Contextual and other factors that appeared to act as enablers of, or barriers to, effective practices were also identified to inform the potential for the transference of specific practices to other schools.

- **Chapter 5** – Results: *Observations*: Findings from the shadowing of principals, teachers, and students and from the classroom observations concerning specific practices that distinguished Ambassador Schools. Contextual and other factors that appeared to act as enablers of, or barriers to, effective practices will also be identified to inform the potential for the transference of specific practices to other schools.

- **Chapter 6** – *Conclusions*: Summary of the effective practices that distinguished Ambassador Schools along with factors that acted as enablers of, or barriers to, the use of effective practices.

1 Introduction

The NSW Department of Education (NSW DoE) established the Ambassador Schools Program in 2021 as part of its School Success Model[1].

The program aimed to identify school practices that were having the greatest impact on student achievement in their unique contexts. Selected evidence-based practices were tested in a range of contexts in which they may be effective to extend them, as appropriate, across NSW public schools to support improved learning outcomes for all students.

Ten Ambassador Schools (AS) were selected as part of this program by the NSW DoE based on high performance compared to similar schools across a range of measures in line with the School Success Model (SSM), such as NAPLAN reading and numeracy targets, expected growth, attendance, and HSC performance.

The University of New South Wales (UNSW), in partnership with the University of Canberra (UC) and Charles Sturt University (CSU) were funded by the NSW DoE to establish the NSW Ambassador Schools Research Centre (ASRC). This research aimed to develop a comprehensive and rigorous research base on the practices that have contributed to the success of Ambassador Schools in their contexts, with a particular focus on regional and metropolitan contexts.

The research adopted a strengths-based approach to identify specific pedagogical and leadership practices that distinguished Ambassador Schools from other schools in similar contexts and were likely contributors to their success.

Background and principles

The research approach used to develop the initial framing of the Ambassador Schools Research Centre (ASRC) program was balanced across university-designed research and practitioner inquiry, reflecting a co-design process that involved close collaboration with the NSW DoE AS Program and included input from the principals of Ambassador Schools.

The responsible NSW DoE team were positioned as co-researchers with unique understandings and insights from their professional work and experience. The Ambassador Schools principals had input into the key constructs that the research would examine and, consequently, the research instruments used to explore these constructs.

[1] https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/school-success-model/school-success-model-explained/ambassador-schools

Literature review

The following sections synthesise the existing Australian and international literature on pedagogical and leadership practices that enhance academic achievement and other positive student outcomes. It begins with a discussion of the importance of context and then critically analyses findings in a range of areas widely reported to support academic achievement and student wellbeing:

1. Curriculum and differentiation
2. Explicit teaching
3. Classroom management practices
4. Assessment processes
5. Leadership practices
6. Collaborative practices
7. Community engagement
8. Practices promoting wellbeing and belonging.

These eight overarching practice areas were selected because each had a substantive evidence base comprising at least ten peer-reviewed sources and, relatedly, they feature as key priority areas in the '*What works best: 2020 update'* report[2] (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020). This report also discusses the evidence supporting these practice areas, analysing their reported impacts and highlighting gaps and limitations of the findings. The sources included in this review were chosen using the following criteria:

1. They discuss and analyse pedagogical and/or leadership practices that directly or indirectly positively impact student outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, improved wellbeing).
2. They were conducted in Australia or other similar national and socioeconomic contexts (e.g., the US, Canada, the UK).

The '*What works best: 2020 update'* report (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020) informed the preliminary search of relevant databases to examine the evidence base for these practices. Then, synonymous terms and other related keywords were used

[2] https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/cese/publications/research-reports/what-works-best-2020-update

to locate sources discussing and evaluating similar practices. The snowball method was also used to identify additional relevant and commonly cited sources.

This literature review predominantly includes peer-reviewed studies with some grey literature comprised of primary and secondary research, qualitative and quantitative data, various sample sizes, and published within a broad timeframe (1965 – 2022) to incorporate a range of formative sources.

A concerted effort was made to include studies conducted in diverse contexts (e.g., regional and urban geographic areas, primary and secondary school settings, and different student cohorts). The research team also sought to analyse how various contextual factors might impact student outcomes and considered how specific practices might be implemented across highly diverse demographic and socioeconomic educational settings such as the NSW government school sector. The review also focused on practices with the potential to be scaled and implemented in various NSW schools. However, the lack of contextual analysis that characterised most reviewed studies made the scalability of practices difficult to assess.

Contextual factors

The impacts of context on student outcomes

Context is a central aspect of any inquiry into the impacts of educational practices (Seddon, 1995). Research that has analysed the influence of contextual factors has considered the circumstances within which a practice is delivered, thereby considering a range of intrinsic and external issues influencing its delivery and impacts on student outcomes (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Seddon, 1995). Context influences a variety of student outcomes in diverse ways. For instance, it is widely acknowledged that the socioeconomic status (SES) of a student is strongly related to their academic outcomes, as measured by standardised assessments (Perry & McConney, 2010). Some studies have shown that the SES of schools significantly impacts student achievement – even more so than a student's individual SES. For example, Perry and McConney (2010) investigated how student SES and school SES is related to mathematics and literacy performance through a descriptive analysis of the Australian PISA 2003 dataset comprising just over 12,500 15-year-old students from 312 high schools. They demonstrated that school SES was consistently associated with academic performance regardless of the individual students' SES.

Smith et al. (2019) used a geographic information system to analyse the spatial dimensions of educational outcomes in the 2016 Grade 5 NAPLAN test results and consistently found that, in all cities across Australia, schools in advantaged suburbs had predominantly high results. Additionally, non-government schools generally performed better than government schools in disadvantaged suburbs, a finding that Smith et al. (2019) suggested might be due to the additional resources private schools possess by

attracting concentrations of higher-income families in disadvantaged areas (Smith et al., 2019). The findings demonstrate the significant influence of local socioeconomic contexts on student achievement.

Several studies have investigated the causes of lower educational achievement in certain geographic settings, such as regional and remote areas of Australia, citing a variety of context-specific challenges and limitations such as high teacher turnover, poverty, and lack of training opportunities for teachers and principals (Smith et al., 2019; Wolgemuth et al., 2014). There is also evidence of achievement gaps based on demographic factors such as gender. For instance, boys tend to underperform on standardised tests and are less likely to complete high school than girls, although these disparities are overshadowed by the effects of ethnicity and social class (Scholes & Nagel, 2012).

Some studies have established positive correlations between intrinsic factors such as students' beliefs, sense of self-efficacy, and academic achievement (Molla, 2021). For example, Smith and Skrbiš (2017) analysed longitudinal data from 2,145 single-aged young Australians across five years in secondary school. They found that educational performance was positively related to meritocratic ideas, such as the belief that hard work results in success. Other studies have established the interrelated impacts of intrinsic and extrinsic factors (e.g., student-teacher relationships and student motivation) on student outcomes (Smith and Skrbiš, 2017).

Lack of contextual analysis in the literature

The educational landscape of NSW is large and highly diverse, with a sizeable proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020). Yet, existing studies evaluating the impacts of specific educational practices mostly only describe the contexts within which they are conducted (e.g., geographic location, school size, the cultural composition of students and socioeconomic backgrounds of students) without performing an analysis of how these contextual factors impact student outcomes.

Some researchers have considered how contextual issues might influence the implementation fidelity of specific practices (for examples, see Birenbaum et al., 2011; Briere et al., 2015; Motoca et al., 2014). Implementation fidelity refers to the extent to which a practice or programme is implemented as intended by the proponent or developer (Carroll et al., 2007). Hargreaves (2012) attributed the success of Singapore's education system to the high degree of fidelity with which initiatives are implemented. Implementation fidelity affects the effectiveness of interventions and hence must be considered when evaluating the impacts of programmes or practices (Carroll, 2017). It is possible for aspects of an intervention to be adapted to better fit the context in which it is being implemented without compromising overall implementation fidelity, provided elements of the intervention considered essential are not affected (Carroll et al., 2007).

Research has seldom explored the vital role and function of context in shaping student performance and wellbeing. Such depictions neglect the diversity of school settings and may result in research recommendations that lack nuance and are ineffective in specific contexts (Seddon, 1995).

There is, therefore, a need to further explore how a variety of contextual factors may affect the delivery and impact of different practices on student outcomes (Smith et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the following literature review sections will unpack the existing evidence on practices that promote student achievement, engagement, and wellbeing.

Curriculum and differentiation

Differentiation of curriculum and instruction

There is widespread support in the literature for differentiation – a teaching approach that modifies curriculum content, instructional methods, resources, and learning activities and routines – to address and cater for a broad variety of learners' needs, readiness levels, interests, and modes of learning (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Differentiation has been positively linked with academic achievement in both primary and secondary school settings when instruction matches students' abilities and thinking preferences during the learning process (Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2006; Sternberg, 1997; Sternberg et al., 1998).

These approaches tie in with Vygotsky's theory, *'zone of proximal development'*, in which he suggests that students learn best when provided tailored support at their current level of development and assisted to incrementally achieve success at higher levels (Shabani et al., 2010). In this framework, course content and instruction are differentiated according to the student's *'zone of proximal development'* to offer them sufficient, but not overwhelming, challenge and complexity in their work, and enable them to successfully adopt and internalise new concepts, skills, and psychological tools (Shabani et al., 2010).

Differentiation approaches recognise the academic diversity of classrooms and seek to maximise learning opportunities for a range of students, including low- and average-level achieving students, students experiencing language barriers, and high-achieving and gifted learners (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Thus, such approaches promote principles of equity and inclusion in curriculum development. Despite the widespread endorsement of differentiation practices, these approaches are not always applied in mainstream classrooms as some teachers are unaware of how to operationalise the approach (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2020).

Differentiating content for bilingual students

Bilingual programs have been shown to be beneficial in improving first-language literacy and other academic outcomes for students from various lingual backgrounds (Helman, 2005). For example, some studies exploring strategies to improve literacy acquisition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have emphasised the need to incorporate Indigenous languages and perspectives into the curriculum to improve student engagement and performance, especially in remote communities (Gutierrez et al., 2021).

Nguyen et al. (2015) found that learning an Aboriginal language at school significantly improved English decoding scores in the second grade. Hickling-Hudson (2014) introduced a series of 20 reading materials comprising of culturally relevant content in four Aboriginal languages and found that using these resources led to an acceleration in literacy and oral language acquisition. Additionally, the sociocultural relevance of these items improved students' interest and engagement with literacy content (Hickling-Hudson, 2014).

The findings from these early literacy interventions, albeit limited, are promising and highlight the potential of such bilingual, culturally relevant initiatives to reduce widespread achievement disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Gutierrez et al., 2021). There is, however, a need for research on effective bilingual approaches used in the secondary school context, especially considering that under a quarter of Indigenous students complete to Year 12 (Gutierrez et al., 2021).

Differentiating content for high-achieving students

Gifted students are endemically under-served in various international contexts, including in Australian schools, with fewer opportunities in mainstream classrooms to engage in activities based on their skills and needs (Fraser-Seeto et al., 2015; Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2020; Henderson & Jarvis, 2016). This results in significant underachievement, with some scholars estimating that 15-40% of gifted students are at risk of performing well below their academic potential (Figg et al., 2012). Because gifted learners learn at a faster pace and more advanced levels than their peers, they require a range of targeted interventions to maximise their learning opportunities, such as acceleration (i.e., learning the curriculum more rapidly), enrichment (e.g., providing additional and more complex content that sparks higher order thinking), independent projects (e.g., student-led tasks, inquiry-based learning), and greater choice (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2020; Henderson & Jarvis, 2016; Rogers, 2007; Yuen et al., 2016). Some studies have found that high-school-age gifted students prefer open-ended, unstructured tasks, whereas gifted primary students learn well through hands-on and experiential learning (Chan, 2001; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Pereira & Gentry, 2013; Samardzija & Peterson, 2015). However, research on the effectiveness and impacts of such tailored interventions is mixed and inconclusive (for

examples, see Morisano et al., 2010; Rubenstein et al., 2012; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2020).

Differentiating content for students with disabilities

Inclusive education, whereby students with disabilities that impact their learning are taught in general classrooms, has been emphasised in Australia since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified by Australia in 1992 (Clarke & Faragher, 2020). In mathematics – the subject area most frequently the focus of research studies on low-attaining students' learning – there has also been a move away from approaches to teaching focussed on everyday skills (Butler et al., 2001) and the reliance on content from earlier years (Louden, 2000). Nevertheless, the inclusion of students with mathematics learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms remains challenging in Australian schools, with streaming according to ability commonplace, and low attainers typically offered impoverished basic skills focussed curricula (Beswick, 2017).

Faragher and Clarke (2020) described an alternative approach whereby students with disabilities are taught curriculum content from the year level corresponding to their age with adjustments. Determining a reasonable or appropriate adjustment is difficult for teachers as it demands knowledge of the learner and their unique strengths and needs, as well as of curriculum and pedagogy. Evidence shows that teachers tend to offer greater adjustment to regular lessons than is required. For example, Faragher et al. (2019) provided examples of a Year 11 student with Down syndrome for whom the provision of a graphics calculator allowed meaningful participation in the lesson she observed and a Year 8 student also with Down syndrome who was able to participate successfully in a lesson without any adjustments despite being judged to be 5 years behind his same age peers.

Based on a review of the international literature, Scherer et al. (2016) concluded that students experiencing difficulty learning mathematics benefit from explicit teaching, heuristics for solving word problems, graphical representations and manipulatives, the careful selection and sequencing of examples, and encouragement to verbalise their strategies. They noted, however, that most studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of explicit or direct instruction have focused on learning basic arithmetic skills. They cited extensive literature pointing to the benefits for all students of investigative pedagogies combined with effective practice. Teaching should allow learners to make connections across ideas rather than dealing with fragments of content (Scherer et al., 2016). For example, young children should learn about whole numbers to 20 as a group rather than focusing on one number at a time (Scherer, 2013).

Explicit teaching

Explicit teaching involves practices employed by teachers to clearly explain learning goals, expectations, methods and success criteria, and build on students' previous understanding of related concepts and skills (Freeman, 2017; Killen, 2016). Studies suggest that explicit teaching can be effective with both small and large classes, with students from various cultural backgrounds, and within both high- and low-resource settings (Killen, 1991; 2016). It is also reported to be beneficial for students with varying abilities, especially low-achievers and students who struggle with locating, organising, and interpreting information, such as those with limited prior knowledge, language barriers, or disabilities (Killen, 1991; 2016). Explicit teaching can be effective across diverse topics and student groups. Examples include studies by Andreassen and Braten (2011) on reading for primary school students, Doabler et al. (2015) on mathematics in kindergarten, and Kroesbergen and Luit (2003), and Powell et al. (2021) on using explicit teaching to teach mathematics to primary and secondary school students with special needs.

Explicit teaching, sometimes referred to as 'explicit instruction', is defined in many ways in the literature. This research project will draw from the five essential components of explicit instruction outlined by Hughes et al. (2017). The first essential component consists of *segmenting complex skills*, where complex tasks are divided into smaller, simpler units. The second is to indicate important features of the content by either *showing* if an action is being taught, or *telling*, i.e., thinking aloud, if a concept is being taught. The third is promoting successful engagement with the help of *prompts that are gradually withdrawn*. An example of this is to provide suggestions or partial solutions to students solving an exercise and provide less and less of them at each exercise iteration. The fourth component is *frequently querying and engaging* with students, which allows the teacher to provide immediate feedback and monitor how much students understand the content. Finally, the fifth component is to create *practice* opportunities, especially if paired with affirmative or corrective feedback.

It should be noted that while some components of explicit teaching are found in other pedagogical approaches, explicit teaching or instruction is distinct from similar-sounding pedagogies such as Direct Instruction and Direct Explicit Instruction (Hughes et al., 2017). For instance, Direct Instruction pedagogy includes scripted lessons – which are absent in Explicit Instruction. Moreover, Direct Explicit Instruction and Direct Instruction include both curricular (what to teach) and instructional (how to teach it) elements. At the same time, Explicit Instruction focuses on instruction characterised by the components suggested by Hughes et al. (2017).

Teacher-directed and inquiry-based learning

Various research studies have suggested that many students gain in-depth knowledge through strongly guided teacher-directed explicit instruction (i.e., the teacher explains and

demonstrates ideas and leads discussion) (Moreno, 2004; Killen, 2016). For example, Morgan et al. (2015) analysed population-based longitudinal data with a sample of 13,393 kindergarten students in the US and found that teacher-directed instruction was significantly related to the achievement of students experiencing difficulty in mathematics (n=2,486), with effect sizes ranging from .05 to .07. However, some researchers have cautioned that teacher-directed explicit teaching approaches may not assist some students in acquiring higher-order thinking skills such as inquiry (Killen, 2016). Inquiry-based approaches, where students are given more autonomy to pursue knowledge, have been found to facilitate critical thinking and problem-solving skills, particularly for gifted and high-achieving students (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2020; Figg et al., 2012). Some evidence suggests that explicit teaching may impact large-scale standardised test results, such as the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) or Australia's National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). For instance, Mourshed et al. (2017) investigated the impacts of teacher-directed and inquiry-based teaching approaches by analysing the 2015 PISA results from five international regions. The study found that scores were generally higher across all five regions when teachers took the lead. In contrast, high levels of inquiry-based teaching without sufficient preliminary teacher-directed instruction resulted in lower scores (Mourshed et al., 2017).

Several specific practices associated with explicit teaching are reported to yield various benefits. For example, Martin and Evans (2018) tested the impacts of *load reduction instruction*, a practice seeking to reduce the cognitive burden on students' working memory in the initial stages of learning by highlighting important information or possible challenges (Killen, 2016). Through surveys with 393 students (Years 9-11) from mathematics classrooms in two independent schools in Sydney, they found that load reduction instruction was associated with higher self-efficacy, persistence, planning, and task management in students (Martin & Evans, 2018). Therefore, there is a need to strike a balance between teacher-directed and inquiry-based approaches to ensure that students are explicitly provided with sufficient foundational knowledge before independently pursuing or applying learning (Freeman, 2017).

Explicit teaching for English-language learners

English-language learners require additional support to fully experience the benefits of explicit teaching approaches. Many studies have found that students learning English as a second language achieve much better outcomes when classroom instruction incorporates language learning and time dedicated to explicitly teaching specific language functions and forms to improve conversational and academic language skills (Freeman, 2017; Shoffner & De Oliveira, 2017). The findings of various studies based in the US and Australia suggest that teachers should identify language demands within their classrooms and tailor instruction accordingly, given that students must first understand the vocabulary and meaning of an instruction before engaging in a functional analysis of its parts (Freeman, 2017; Goldenberg, 2013; Shoffner & De Oliveira, 2017). A US-based randomised control

trial found that teacher-led discussions on prescribed reading material only improved the reading comprehension of students with the highest English proficiency (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2007). In contrast, there were no statistically significant impacts for mid- and low-level English speakers (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2007). These findings suggest that even sound explicit instruction might not benefit students with lower English proficiency if there is no additional language support.

There is strong support in the literature for applying a set of instructional supports or adjustments, sometimes referred to as 'sheltered instruction', to scaffold the learning of students with lower English proficiency (Goldenberg, 2013). These practices include developing content that is familiar and related to students' experiences, offering additional time for discussing key concepts, creating language-related objectives in addition to other learning goals, differentiating instruction based on students' English proficiency, and using demonstrations and multimodal materials such as diagrams and pictures (Goldenberg, 2013; Shoffner & De Oliveira, 2017). Silverman and Hines (2009) tested the impacts of multimedia instructions on vocabulary. They found that students with low English proficiency learned more science-related target words when provided videos as part of their vocabulary instruction than those who did not (Silverman & Hines, 2009). However, beyond these findings, existing research exploring the impacts of some of these practices is yet to show more than a modest effect on student learning and achievement (Goldenberg, 2013; Lee et al., 2005). There is, therefore, a need for further rigorous testing of these practices to understand how and to what extent they might compensate for students' lack of English proficiency at various ages and developmental levels (Goldenberg, 2013).

Classroom management practices

Classroom management refers to the actions taken by teachers to cultivate a safe and productive learning environment to reduce behavioural disruptions and maximise instructional time (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020; Hepburn & Beamish, 2019). It is widely acknowledged that applying effective classroom management results in positive effects on students' socio-emotional outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2016), behaviour (Oliver et al., 2011), and achievement, and engagement (Marzano et al., 2003). Simonsen et al.(2008) suggested a variety of evidence-based classroom management practices through their systematic review of 81 studies, grouped into five empirically supported categories: maximising structure and predictability (e.g., explicitly teaching class rules and routines, organising class layout to suit different activities, etc.), establishing, teaching and reinforcing expectations (e.g., providing pre-corrections, giving feedback on expectations, etc.), actively engaging students in observable ways (e.g., differentiating to suit learner needs, offering high rates of opportunities to respond, etc.), acknowledging appropriate behaviour (e.g., delivering specific and contingent praise, employing class-wide group contingencies, administering token or other reward systems,

etc.), and responding to inappropriate behaviour (e.g., correcting errors, enacting planned ignoring, etc.) (Hepburn et al., 2021).

Low implementation of evidence-based classroom management

There is a strong evidence base for all the practices listed by Simonsen et al. (2008). For example, a variety of studies have demonstrated that providing contingent praise for desired academic and social behaviour increases students' correct responses (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001), productivity (Wolford et al., 2001), language and math performance (Roca & Gross, 1996), attention and compliance (Broden et al., 1970; Wilcox et al., 1988), and positive self-referent statements (Phillips, 1984). Some studies have recommended the targeted application of contingent praise to shape certain students' behaviours in specific areas. For example, Smith and Skrbiš (2017) suggested that teachers praise the efforts of female students in STEM subjects and male students in literacy to counteract the lower achievement and self-confidence widely reported for female and male students in these respective areas.

However, many empirical studies on classroom management have relied on self-reported data from teachers and failed to explore other measures of impact, such as student perspectives. Consequently, this has resulted in what some studies and reports have identified as a discrepancy between the reported and actual implementation of these practices (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019; NSW Ombudsman, 2017). For instance, in a Queensland survey study involving 587 high school teachers with a range of teaching experience, Hepburn et al. (2021) found that the overwhelming majority of these teachers reported possessing relevant knowledge and skills to prevent behaviour issues (94%) and having a good understanding of evidence-based classroom management (86%). However, there were low rates of application of specific evidence-based practices, such as explicitly teaching rules and maintaining at least a 4:1 ratio of positive to corrective feedback (Hepburn et al., 2021). The authors suggested that this discrepancy in findings may relate to social desirability bias impacting the teacher reports or a lack of knowledge of evidence-based practices, concluding that it is, therefore, unsurprising that these practices continue to be implemented inconsistently in Australian schools (Hepburn et al., 2021).

Proactive and reactive practices

Various research studies have found that preventative approaches to classroom management aimed at averting problem behaviour are more effective than reactive practices in responding to problem behaviours after they occur (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019; Hepburn et al., 2021). Preventative practices (e.g., recognising responsible student actions, hinting at positive and negative behaviours) have been shown to decrease rates of disruptive behaviour and enhance academic engagement, while reactive measures (e.g., delivering reprimands or sanctions) have been demonstrated to diminish student engagement and lead to more exclusionary disciplinary practices (e.g., school

suspension), especially for students experiencing disadvantage or barriers such as disability or trauma (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019; Hepburn et al., 2021). Yet, studies (e.g., Borgmeier et al., 2018; Pas et al., 2015; Sullivan, Johnson, Owens, & Conway, 2014) reveal that Australian teachers commonly employ reactive classroom management practices, particularly in secondary schools.

Hepburn et al. (2021) suggested that there may be many factors contributing to the disproportionate use of reactive approaches in high schools, including difficulties maintaining consistent classroom expectations because of student exposure to multiple classes, common teacher perceptions that older students should know how to behave resulting in a lack of explicit teaching of expectations and acknowledgment of good behaviour, and the common characteristics of adolescent behaviour (e.g., testing boundaries and questioning authorities), leading to more disciplinary actions. Additionally, statistical data across Australian jurisdictions have demonstrated that exclusionary and reactive practices are predominantly applied in response to low-level disruptive and disengaged behaviour that can be more effectively managed through proactive methods (Hepburn et al., 2021; Graham, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2014).

Teacher training and coaching

Various scholars have reported that there is a substantial lack of teacher training on evidence-based classroom management. Some studies have highlighted the urgent need for pre- and in-service training that:

1. Translates key practices into observable elements and clarifies how to apply them (Hepburn et al., 2021).

2. Addresses the underlying causes or functions of student misbehaviour, as this has been established as a knowledge gap amongst educators (Sullivan, et al., 2014).

3. Emphasises the importance of preventative strategies, given the overuse of reactive methods (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019).

4. Is practical and relevant to real-world classrooms, to ensure that teachers are not alienated by highly academic approaches to evidence-based practices (Cook & Cook, 2016).

Kennedy et al. (2017) recommended using multimedia training materials that can be accessed flexibly and repeatedly to enhance teacher knowledge and application of effective classroom management, especially in remote settings with limited resources or training personnel. The positive impacts of such training on classroom management are well-documented (Kamps et al., 2015; Reglin et al., 2012; Simonsen et al., 2020). However, existing studies evaluating classroom management training primarily focus on

implementation fidelity and the effects on teaching practice and have failed to analyse impacts on student outcomes.

Several studies have contended that classroom management support must encompass school-based mentoring and coaching – where teachers are observed by an expert or skilled peer and are provided with performance feedback – to promote sustained practice changes in the long term (Hepburn et al., 2021; Kennedy et al., 2017). Such coaching provides teachers with opportunities to reflect on their practice and underlying beliefs, set goals for classroom management, trial and develop new skills, increase their use of specific evidence-based practices, and gather and analyse data to inform student interventions (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019; Hepburn et al., 2021). Multiple base-line studies have demonstrated that teachers employed more effective classroom management practices when offered a combination of brief training followed by opportunities for feedback and planning (Briere et al., 2015; Farmer et al., 2013; Hagermoser Sanetti et al., 2018; Motoca et al., 2014).

School-wide approaches

School-wide approaches to implementing initiatives – including those focussed on classroom management – involve coordinated activities. Critical to their success are continuity and consistency of implementation, holistic consideration of social, emotional, and academic skills, a focus on relationships between students and teachers and among students, and positive and high expectations at both classroom and school levels (Goldberg et al., 2019). For teachers, school-wide approaches can promote collaboration and, most importantly, facilitate teachers learning from and supporting one another to implement initiatives (Penuel et al. 2006). This can help teachers better understand the initiative's requirements and its implications for their practice, resulting in a greater likelihood of changed practice and reduced implementation variability (Penuel et al, 2006).

Classroom management, like other teaching practice areas, is influenced by broader contextual factors and school-wide approaches that shape teacher workload and efficacy (Hepburn & Beamish, 2019). In two US-based survey studies, primary and high school teachers (total sample n=88) listed a variety of broader issues that inhibited effective classroom management, such as time constraints, limited resources, insufficient training and expertise on behavioural issues, and a lack of family input (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009; McGoey et al., 2014). Schools must establish a proactive disciplinary framework that identifies evidence-based practices as a first step to shifting school culture and teacher views on classroom management (Hepburn et al., 2021; Wildy et al., 2014). One such strategy was used by a small rural K-12 school in Western Australia in a study comprising interviews and observations. As reported by the school principal, behaviour management plans were developed and displayed in every classroom for quick reference, yielding positive results such as exemplary student behaviour at inter-school events (Wildy et al.,

2014). However, further evidence is required to support such schoolwide strategies across different contexts (e.g., larger schools, urban areas).

Assessment processes

Inclusive assessment task design

Proactive planning and accessible assessment task design are necessary to promote positive academic outcomes for students with varying abilities and needs, including gifted students and those with disabilities, as well as other groups at risk of underperforming, such as Indigenous and non-English-speaking students (Freeman, 2017; Graham et al., 2018; Rajagopalan & Gordon, 2016; Thurlow & Kopriva, 2015). Formative assessments support learning by offering opportunities to test the abilities of students, pinpoint their needs, and determine the degree of scaffolding required to enable them to access and engage effectively with course content and subsequent assessment tasks (Freeman, 2017). It is an essential part of explicit teaching as it allows instruction to be built upon students' current understanding (Freeman, 2017; Killen, 2016) and enables teachers to provide immediate feedback to students (Hughes et al., 2017). Indeed, the frequent querying of students that Hughes et al. (2017) recommend is an important way to conduct formative assessment.

Research suggests that in-school assessments in Australian and international contexts primarily cater for the 'average' student and often fail to accommodate the needs of students with varying abilities and alternative modes of learning (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2020; Henderson & Jarvis, 2016). For example, gifted students master proposed content more rapidly and require additional and diverse forms of assessment to test and monitor their abilities and efforts, but these tailored practices are seldom offered to them in regular classes (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2020; Henderson & Jarvis, 2016). Several studies have suggested that practices such as providing variety and choice in assessment tasks and incorporating critical thinking and abstraction (e.g., open-ended questioning) are crucial in honing the talents of gifted students and enhancing their academic performance (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2020; Kanevsky, 2011; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Rogers, 2007). The benefits of these assessment practices extend to all students, allowing them to show what they can do and the depth and complexity of their understanding (Scherer et al., 2016). Students with learning difficulties can reveal surprising abilities when offered choices about the ways they demonstrate their learning (Scherer et al., 2016).

Students with disabilities are reported to be the most likely to be excluded in assessment processes due to a lack of adjustments, especially those having disabilities considered to be 'mild' such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), who predominantly study in mainstream Australian schools (Graham, Tancredi, Willis, & McGraw, 2018; Marshall, Stojanovik, & Ralph, 2002; Mulholland, 2017). Graham et al. (2018) evaluated an 8th grade sample English

assessment task in collaboration with English teachers from two Australian high schools. They found that the assessment comprised design features that would exacerbate the challenges faced by students with ADHD and DLD (Graham et al., 2018). The authors suggested that although well-intentioned, teachers may enact evidence-based assessment practices such as establishing learning intentions and success criteria (Sharratt, 2018) through detailed and reiterated instructions. Such approaches can exponentially increase complexity for students, thereby diminishing the chances of those with ADHD or DLD appropriately applying instructions and achieving academic success (Graham et al., 2018). They suggested a range of assessment-design practices to promote visual, procedural, and linguistic accessibility for students with ADHD and DLD, such as using short and simply structured sentences, employing bias-free language, using consistent terminology, providing definitions of specialist jargon, excluding less relevant information, creating white space between sections, using readable font sizes, and seeking feedback from students (Graham et al., 2018).

Student-led assessment

Other studies have investigated the impacts of student-led assessment and goal setting on student learning (e.g., Chang, Tseng, & Lou, 2012; Sebba et al., 2008). For instance, Fletcher (2021) explored the benefits of using large-scale assessment rubrics as a basis for student-led evaluation. In a qualitative study with 7 teachers and 126 students (Years 2, 4, and 6) from a non-government school in the Northern Territory, the author piloted a formative self-assessment template based on existing NAPLAN writing assessment rubrics (Fletcher, 2021). Through interviews and document analyses of student writing samples, the study found that students used the self-assessment process to self-regulate their learning and identify specific learning goals to improve various areas of their writing (Fletcher, 2021). Although the study did not report the impacts of these self-assessments on students' academic outcomes (e.g., their NAPLAN results), it nonetheless demonstrates how large-scale rubrics with detailed descriptors of student progression can be valuable tools in providing avenues for student self-reflection.

Standardised exams

Disjunctions between the strongly framed evaluative mechanisms of high-stakes examinations (e.g., NAPLAN, HSC) and the relaxed, pedagogically progressive classroom practices of Australian primary schools have been noted by researchers (Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Hughes & Brock, 2008) and can be a concern for parents (Sriprakash et al., 2015). While high-stakes tests can have a formative function, they are not suited to the provision of immediate feedback to support students' learning. They can inform school planning and curriculum, but their primary purpose is evaluative of the education system (Dylan & Thompson, 2008).

Leadership practices

There is widespread acknowledgement across studies spanning many decades that effective leadership is a key contributor to high-performing schools, supporting student learning through improving a school's capacity for academic achievement (Cheng, 1994; Gross & Herriot, 1965; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Wildy et al., 2014; Wiley, 2001).

Distributed leadership

There is strong support in the literature for principals and other school leaders to enact *distributed leadership* – the sharing of leadership among school staff members occupying various roles – based on evidence suggesting that such approaches strengthen the collective vision and buy-in from people at all levels, thereby improving schoolwide practices and learning outcomes (Harris, 2008; Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, & Strauss, 2010; Riley & Webster, 2016). Distributed leadership, also known as *shared* or *collaborative leadership*, requires the principal to recognise the skills and abilities of different staff members, build on their strengths, and work collaboratively with them to address issues (Schrum & Levin, 2013). It may take many forms, including delegating responsibilities to teachers and allowing them to work within teams to guide specific aspects of school practice (Schrum & Levin, 2013). Distributed leadership requires trust and a sense of safety in the emotional and professional bonds between staff, as Louis (2007) supported, who demonstrated that schools with high levels of trust exhibited more shared decision-making.

There are a range of empirical studies linking distributed leadership to positive academic outcomes. For instance, in a US-based study, Hallinger and Heck (2010) analysed the results of a longitudinal dataset collected from 198 primary schools over 4 years, involving a cohort of 13,000 third-grade students and surveys with teachers. After controlling for a variety of student variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, mobility, English language proficiency, and special education status) and school characteristics (e.g., student cohort composition, teacher experience, etc.), the study found that collaborative leadership was positively associated with school capacity for improvement, which in turn was positively related to student growth in reading and mathematics (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Furthermore, some studies have demonstrated that when schools have some form of shared leadership systematically built in, they experience less of the adverse outcomes often seen when principals leave (e.g., reduced academic performance). Distributed leadership may therefore be a way to achieve sustainable school performance (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Seashore Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Wildy et al., 2014).

Instructional leadership

There is also widespread support in the literature for a set of practices often described as *instructional leadership*. A leader demonstrates this approach through possessing strong knowledge of the curriculum and principles of quality teaching and learning, and applying this expertise to provide constructive feedback to enhance teaching or develop a system in which others deliver this support (Seashore Louis et al., 2010). Principals in secondary school settings are less likely to offer direct instructional support to teachers due to the presence of multiple specialised disciplines represented in the curriculum (Seashore Louis et al., 2010). Studies exploring instructional leadership in high school contexts have, therefore, focused on indirect approaches such as improving learning environments for teachers and stimulating innovative practices (Seashore Louis et al., 2010).

Examples from high-performing schools

Qualitative research in Australia and the US offers insights into specific practices related to effective leadership approaches, as highlighted by teachers, principals, and parents from high-performing schools. For instance, Schrum and Levin (2013) conducted a study with eight award-winning public schools with varying student numbers (from 400 to over 2,000), a range of socioeconomic conditions, and from rural and urban areas across eight states in the US, to investigate how leaders and teachers work towards school improvement and student achievement. The researchers conducted more than 150 interviews and focus groups with school leaders, teachers, support staff, and parents, 300 hours of classroom observation, and analysis of key school documents (e.g., school improvement plans, principal blogs, meeting minutes, and student achievement data) (Schrum & Levin, 2013). Drysdale and Gur (2011) described a model of successful school leadership based on case studies of four high-performing primary and secondary government schools with small- to moderately-sized student numbers in Victoria through document analysis (e.g., school review reports, newsletters, etc.) and interviews with principals, teachers, parents, students, and other school staff (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011). Notably, a range of themes featured significantly in the findings of these studies.

In both studies, *distributed leadership* emerged as a prominent component of effective leadership, reported to positively impact school performance, staff culture, and student outcomes (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Schrum & Levin, 2013). School principals were said to demonstrate distributed leadership through practices such as taking consensus votes on key changes, collaboratively evaluating learning outcomes, sharing decision-making about curriculum and course developments, involving teachers in the recruitment of co-teachers, and instating multiple configurations of teacher groups to champion different initiatives (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Schrum & Levin, 2013). These practices include opportunities for teachers to develop and exercise consistent judgment. *Instructional leadership*, whether applied directly or indirectly, was also considered essential in challenging and enhancing teaching practice and was displayed through actions such as establishing professional

learning communities, facilitating debate and an exchange of ideas at staff meetings, encouraging peer observation, regularly visiting classes to assist students and teachers, and introducing an innovative arts-based curriculum to cater for students with disabilities (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Schrum & Levin, 2013). Other strategies and methods discussed in both studies included acknowledging and celebrating staff talent and student excellence (e.g., allocating specialised work to teachers skilled in certain areas, displaying student work), employing values-based approaches (e.g., using language, words, symbols, and actions to emphasise the school's vision and core values), and enacting targeted community engagement (e.g., building parent-school partnerships, developing strategic relationships with external agencies) (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Schrum & Levin, 2013).

These findings indicate that the abovementioned school leadership approaches and practices may effectively yield positive student outcomes across various school contexts. This is evidenced by the strong support for these strategies across diverse school contexts represented in both studies (i.e., different socioeconomic conditions, student ages and cultural backgrounds, specialties, student numbers, geographic locations, etc.). One challenge in analysing and comparing research exploring effective leadership practices, however, is that these studies often investigate a limited set of leadership behaviours, thus making comparisons across studies difficult (Seashore Louis et al., 2010).

Collaborative practices

A wealth of existing research supports the notion that school performance is inextricably tied to staff structures and interactions, and that instructional quality and student achievement are improved when teachers are actively involved in promoting cultural shifts and collaborating on various practices (King & Newmann, 2001; Louis & Marks, 1998; Schrum and Levin, 2013; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; Wildy et al., 2014). Several studies have highlighted the need to foster purposeful professional communities focused on enhancing teaching practice and student learning (Hord & Sommers, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Seashore Louis et al., 2010). In a US-based longitudinal study comprising surveys with teachers (n=4,491 in 2005-6 and n=3,900 in 2008) from primary and high schools of various sizes and socioeconomic backgrounds, Seashore Louis et al. (2010) found that students' mathematics scores were significantly associated with professional communities and teachers' trust in professional communities. Such findings suggest that these professional peer relationships, when underpinned by trust, are important factors influencing student performance (Seashore Louis et al., 2010). A positive and safe school climate, characterised by supportive relationships, is necessary for staff to exchange and discuss ideas and to reflect on their own practices and the impact of their teaching on student learning (Wildy et al., 2014).

Joint planning & teaching practices

A broad range of research has established that collaborative lesson and curriculum planning provides several benefits for teachers in different national contexts (Dudley, 2013; Fernandez, 2002; Fernandez et al., 2003; Lawrence & Chong, 2010; Lewis et al., 2006). One form of this collaboration popularised in Japan, the lesson study model, comprises small groups of teachers planning a 'research lesson' that is taught by one group member, while others observe one or two 'case' students (Cajkler et al., 2014; Dudley, 2013). The lesson is then evaluated by the group to address specific learning challenges for 'case' students, and subsequently refined where necessary (Cajkler et al., 2014). A study in the UK tested the impacts of the lesson study approach through interviews with 4 mathematics and 3 modern language teachers in an urban high school (n=1100 students) and found that participating teachers reported important gains, including a greater focus on student-centred approaches, heightened confidence to innovate and take risks, and more student engagement (Cajkler et al., 2014). The study also found that these opportunities for collaboration reduced feelings of professional isolation, especially for early career teachers, who felt a sense of stagnation when working in silos (Cajkler et al., 2014). However, such collaborative processes require dedicated time to develop and employ, and are expected to yield small, incremental improvements in student outcomes in the long run. As a result, they are neglected in school systems that are under resourced or seeking quick-fix impacts and improvements (Cajkler et al., 2014).

Other collaborative practices, such as in-school peer-mentoring and coaching, classroom observations paired with constructive feedback, and special interest committees, have been shown to generate a variety of benefits, including enhanced knowledge of curriculum content and instruction, improved ability to observe students and identify their needs, more motivation and self-efficacy, heightened sense of joint responsibility, and greater understanding of students' prior knowledge (Cajkler et al., 2014; Dotger, 2011; Dudley, 2013; Lewis, Perry, & Hurd, 2004; Ylonen & Norwich, 2012). While much of the literature has discussed the positive impacts of collaboration on instructional practice and teacher wellbeing, there are fewer studies that have analysed in depth how these approaches have shaped academic achievement and other student outcomes.

Consistent teacher judgment

Teacher judgments, particularly those related to student achievement, convey powerful messages to students about their abilities (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999) and have implications for student motivation and self-concept. Because teachers' judgments of students' current performance are closely related to their expectations of students' future achievement, teachers' judgments, like their expectations, can result in self-fulfilling prophecies. When their achievement is overestimated, students have higher self-concepts of their ability than similarly performing students whose achievement is underestimated (Urhahne et al., 2011). Urhahne (2015) showed that the connection between teacher

judgment and student performance is mediated by the differing emotional support provided by teachers depending on their judgment of their students' ability. Students thus receive verbal and non-verbal messages about their ability through teachers' interactions with them and their motivation and engagement; hence, their achievements are influenced as a result (Archambault et al., 2012).

The accuracy of teacher judgments is important not only for the motivation of individual students and student groups but also for the decisions that teachers make about their subsequent teaching, including their choice of tasks (Urhahne & Wijnia, 2021). Accurate and consistent teacher judgments are important for the comparability of assessments of student work and can be enhanced by moderation processes that involve teachers working together to achieve consensus judgments of work samples (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smit, 2010). In addition to improved consistency of judgments, social moderation processes whereby students' work is collectively judged against clear standards, can build teachers' confidence in their capacities as assessors of students' learning while improving their ability to make accurate and reliable judgments (Koh, 2014). Such practices also contribute positively to teachers' autonomy and agency (Koh, 2014).

Collective teacher efficacy

Bandura (1997) defined collective efficacy as the belief that together teachers can enhance student outcomes. It is more than simply the sum of individual teachers' self-efficacy but, rather, is an emergent property of schools (Goddard et al., 2000). Analogously to the association of teacher efficacy and improved student achievement, collective teacher efficacy helps to explain the differing impacts of schools on student achievement (Goddard et al., 2000). Collective teacher efficacy has been shown to lead to better teaching (Tschannen-Moran et al., 2015). It is positively related to student achievement even when SES and prior attainment are controlled for (Strahan, Gibbs, & Reid, 2019). Conversely, low collective efficacy can lead to teachers experiencing feelings of futility and failure (Bandura, 1993).

Assessing collective teacher efficacy requires teachers to consider the competence of their colleagues. Teachers can form opinions of colleagues' competence during collaborative activity and the perception that one's colleagues are competent (high collective teacher efficacy) motivates collaboration. Collective teacher efficacy is thus both a product and a driver of collaboration (Durksen et al., 2017). Activities in which collective teacher judgment is employed and developed are important collaborative contexts for the development of collective efficacy.

Community engagement

Parent-school partnerships

There is a wealth of literature suggesting that parent-school partnerships are significant in promoting a variety of short-term outcomes (e.g., literacy and numeracy development) and long-term benefits (e.g., social, emotional, and academic growth) for students (Daniel, 2015; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012). Parental involvement in such partnerships may take many forms, including volunteering in school activities, contributing to the curriculum, participating in parents' groups and councils to influence school policy, planning local events and social initiatives, and communicating between home and school about their child (Daniel, 2015; Epstein, 1995). The *Epstein Model of Parental Involvement* (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein et al., 2018), a widely cited framework for understanding school-parent partnerships, emphasises that schools play a central role in facilitating parent engagement. However, there is a pressing need to identify effective strategies to foster and maintain parent-school partnerships with families from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, particularly during the high school years (Daniel, 2015). Parent involvement in family-school partnership activities declines for various reasons as students progress through the year levels, including increasing student independence and more parental engagement in paid work (Daniel, 2015). Families may be less likely to engage in parent-school partnerships due to language barriers and unfamiliarity with Australian schooling systems (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Kim, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Community engagement models

A growing body of research supports using different community engagement models to improve partnerships with culturally diverse families, including Indigenous parents, and promote positive student outcomes (De Gaetano, 2007; Lewis et al., 2011; Yunkaporta, 2009). For example, an initiative called *Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities* improved students' literacy through collaboration with Indigenous leaders on place-based reading action plans (Johnson et al., 2014; Johnson & McKenzie, 2016; Lovett et al., 2014; Riley & Webster, 2016). Children from participating schools who regularly attended this program experienced an increase in home-based support with reading and made significant academic gains (e.g., Year 7 students' NAPLAN scores improved to the extent that 90.5% were performing at or above national minimum standards) (Gutierrez et al., 2021).

Another study comprising interviews with nine career coaching staff from nine Victorian high schools found that cultural liaison officers were instrumental in preparing students from African backgrounds for post-school transitions into further education or work and facilitating communication between schools and the students' families (Molla, 2021). The author recommended other community engagement strategies, such as delivering information sessions for parents on the labour market, to mitigate factors (e.g., family

misconceptions about qualifications and low student self-efficacy) that impede student achievement and transition into viable opportunities.

Practices promoting wellbeing & belonging

Research has demonstrated that a student's sense of wellbeing and belonging within their school is positively associated with academic outcomes (Allen et al., 2017; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Stewart, 2008). Evidence suggests that when basic psychological needs (e.g., feelings of autonomy or agency, efficacy, safety and connectedness) are satisfied, engagement and achievement follow (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Jang et al., 2012; Reeve & Lee, 2014; Tarbetsky, at al., 2017; Vansteenkiste,et al., 2010). For instance, a study of 4,822 students (Years 7–9) from 20 urban schools on the East and West coasts of Australia found that high self-efficacy and positive interpersonal relationships (e.g., healthy teacher-student interactions) were consistently related to higher achievement in literacy and numeracy, with the effects significantly stronger for children with ADHD (n=164) (Martin et al., 2017). The authors highlighted that different groups of at-risk students especially require support to bolster their academic resilience, as they are more likely to encounter academic adversity (Martin, Cumming,et al., 2017).

Researchers have proposed various practices to foster individual student wellbeing that tie in with other evidence-based strategies, such as explicit teaching, proactive classroom management, and curriculum differentiation. For example, some have recommended supporting students by providing choices in learning processes, explaining rationales for activities, acknowledging student perspectives, and offering task-based feedback and reinforcement contingent on student effort (Martin, Cumming et al., 2017; Tarbetsky et al., 2017). Others have suggested that teachers can promote students' self-efficacy and motivation by facilitating opportunities for moderate-to-high rates of success (e.g., dividing tasks into smaller manageable components and tailoring activities to students' skills and knowledge) (Hunt et al., 2009; Killen, 2016; Martin, Cumming et al., 2017). Evidence also suggests that connectedness and belonging can be enhanced by developing students' social and emotional competence and encouraging them to set prosocial personal goals related to their wellbeing al., 2017; Stewart, 2008).

Theoretical perspectives

A number of theoretical perspectives both informed the research and have potential to ground further research and connect the practices and enabling conditions identified. They are described in the paragraphs that follow.

Strengths-based research focuses on the strengths and positive potential of students, educators, families, and other relevant parties as the primary focus of inquiry, as opposed to their deficits or weaknesses (Maton et al., 2004; Zimmerman, 2013). Accordingly, ASRC aimed to explore individual-level strengths, such as cognitive, behavioural, and

psychological capacities (e.g., self-efficacy, positive coping strategies, talents, knowledge, resilience), and practices that have cultivated and bolstered them (Maton et al., 2004). As such, a number of theoretical perspectives both informed the research and have potential to ground further research and connect the practices and enabling conditions identified.

Self Determination Theory states that people thrive when they have a sense of relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Teacher autonomy refers to the capacity of teachers to make decisions about their work for themselves, either as individuals or with colleagues. It incorporates teacher agency which focuses on teachers' capacity to independently make decisions and act upon them in their classrooms (Lennert da Silva & Mølstad, 2020). Both autonomy and agency are exercised within constraints that are typically external, perhaps related to government regulation, in the case of autonomy (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014), and concern resource and other limitations of the immediate school environment in the case of agency (Errs, 2018). This report, uses the term teacher agency, consistent with the focus of the research on practices within schools, unless cited research or survey scales refer to teacher autonomy. Similarly, the report refers to student agency to convey the capacity for students to make independent decisions about their learning activities except when citing research or referring to survey scales that expressly refer to autonomy.

Student relatedness was evident in these data, with students describing their connection to the community, school, and teachers. Student agency was evident in students' descriptions of how the Ambassador Schools encouraged and supported them to take responsibility for their actions towards each other and in their learning endeavours. A sense of competence was promulgated in the Ambassador Schools through a focus and recognition on mastery of key skills and knowledge. These three constructs can be measured in school populations using validated scales, linking them to effective micro-practices. Two examples are the emergence of autonomy-supportive pedagogies (Reeve, 2009) and strategies to enhance teachers' relatedness with students (Klassen et al, 2012).

Teacher Collective Efficacy refers to the collective sense of efficacy for all teachers in a school; in other words, their shared belief that together they can positively impact student learning. Student focus groups can provide insight into what students see their teachers doing in the classroom, and these data conveyed very strongly that high expectations for all students was a default setting for Ambassador Schools. These data can be triangulated in other sections of the broader report, including the teacher surveys and interviews.

To better understand students' academic development and success at school, the researchers used *Social-cognitive Theory* (SCT) as an overarching model. Bandura's (1997) SCT recognises the importance of context when considering relationships among environmental (e.g., teacher support), personal (e.g., self-efficacy, goal setting), and behaviour or outcome factors such as aspirations and plans. Within SCT, Bostwick and colleagues (2022a) have tested a broader growth orientation as a multidimensional growth

construct comprised of growth-focused motivational beliefs, including growth mindset (improvement-oriented beliefs about intelligence and ability) and growth goals (personal targets set by students). These are a particularly relevant focus for ASRC as previous – and current – research links such growth-focused constructs with student wellbeing (Bostwick, et al., 2022b).

Martin (2007) has validated an integrated theory-based model as the *Motivation and Engagement Wheel*. Conceptual work by Martin and Dowson (2009) also identified a range of theories that, together, can ground and guide projects seeking to identify enabling conditions and practical implications for student success. For example, achievement goal theory and goal setting theory for understanding personal growth approaches (e.g., mastery) and self-determination theory for helping recognise the conditions that can satisfy key psychological needs (e.g., relatedness and autonomy). Self-determination theory states that people thrive with a sense of relatedness, autonomy, and competence. For example, relatedness can be elicited from students when asked to describe their connection to the community, school, and teachers.

Martin and colleagues (2022) continue to apply theories of motivation and engagement when theorising and investigating growth goal setting through large-scale research. For example, they partnered with CESE to conduct a synthesis of research and found that instructional support was associated with students' growth goal setting – that is, "specific, challenging, and competitively self-referenced targets that match or exceed a previous best effort or performance" (Martin et al., p. 753). Growth goal setting via personal best or self-based goals was positively associated with gains in engagement and a reduction in potentially negative effects. Theory- and research-based recommendations can be found in the related 'What Works Best' (2020 update) practical guide for schools published by CESE (2021) Growth goal setting – What works best in practice.

Growth mindset is the belief that intelligence is not fixed but can be developed (Dweck, 2002). That is, not only is it possible to learn, but one can also become better at learning. Because of its foundation in the belief that change is possible, growth mindset has been associated with self-efficacy. Street et al. (2022), for example, recommended teachers provide students with feedback aligned with growth mindset early in a learning sequence because of its potential to enhance self-efficacy. It has also been associated with greater academic resilience, motivation, and a tendency to set more challenging learning goals (Schleicher, 2019). Schleicher (2019) suggested instilling a growth mindset by teaching students about the brain's capacity to change, attributing success to hard work, and avoiding lowering expectations when students experience difficulty. Growth mindset is also a potentially powerful way to impact academic achievement at scale. In a large-scale Chilean study, for example, growth mindset was associated with higher achievement and appeared to ameliorate the effects of poverty on achievement (Claro et al., 2016). As noted above, growth mindset and growth goals set by students for their own learning comprise a growth orientation (Bostwick et al., 2022a).

Discussion and conclusion

The literature review has revealed considerable support for the use of practices associated with explicit teaching, effective school-wide approaches to classroom management, catering for the diversity of student capacities and needs in curriculum delivery, supporting teacher collaboration, the use of distributed and instructional leadership practices, engaging effectively with the school community and supporting student wellbeing and belonging. There is strong alignment between these practices and those recommended in the NSW DoE '*What works best: 2020 update'* report.

Although existing studies offer strong empirical evidence to support the use of these practices, this literature review has demonstrated various research gaps. First, there is an urgent need to further explore how different contextual factors may shape the delivery and impact of these practices to identify more nuanced approaches for implementing them in the highly diverse contexts of NSW schools. Additionally, some studies focus on the implementation fidelity of specific practices (e.g., collaboration) and their impacts on instructional practice and teacher wellbeing; but fail to evaluate how these practices impact student outcomes. Some practices (e.g., differentiation activities for gifted students, bilingual programs in secondary schools, 'sheltered instruction' for non-English speakers) require more rigorous testing further to investigate their impacts on academic performance and student engagement. Other practice areas, such as those related to classroom management – although well-supported by empirical evidence – are underutilised in classrooms. There is a need, therefore, for further research into the factors that enable or inhibit the uptake of these evidence-based classroom management practices, particularly in secondary school contexts typified by cumulative challenges in teaching practice and additional risks of student disengagement. There is also a pressing need for further research into strategies that cultivate and bolster parent-school partnerships, especially with families from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

It is important to note limitations associated with the extant research literature. These include a reliance, in many cases, on self-report data, the prevalence of small studies, research designs that preclude causal findings, and the failure to appropriately consider the impacts of contextual factors on the impacts of various practices.

2 Research Methodology

The aim of the ASRC in Stage 1 was to develop a body of rigorous, evidence-based research on the effective practice that characterises Ambassador Schools.

The objectives of the ASRC were:

- Develop a body of rigorous, evidence-based research on effective practices that characterise Ambassador Schools and that contribute causally to their success.
- Identify effective practices that can be tested and then scaled for application in contextually similar schools where appropriate.

From these, the following overarching question was developed. This overarching research question was underpinned by two sub-questions:

1. What specific pedagogical and leadership practices distinguish Ambassador Schools?
    a. What is the range of effective pedagogical and leadership practices evident in NSW government schools?
    b. To what extent do these practices align with the research literature and related Department of Education documents concerning effective practices for enhancing student outcomes?

This chapter details the research methods employed to collect extensive and rich data from a range of participants and how these data were analysed and synthesised to produce robust findings in relation to the research questions.

The research program was underpinned by a detailed literature review encompassing research conducted in Australia and internationally concerning specific pedagogical and leadership practices that enhance student outcomes. The mixed methods approach to data collection involved detailed case studies of each of the 10 Ambassador Schools and 16 contextually similar schools. The case studies were designed to maximise engagement by adopting a strengths-based appreciative inquiry approach (McCashen, 2017; Reed, 2007) focusing on what participants valued in their contexts and believed to be making a positive contribution to student outcomes (Eacott et al., 2021; Eacott & Munoz Rivera, 2021). The aim was to reflect the 'lived experiences' of a variety of school stakeholders, and so the case studies employed surveys (students, teachers, principals, parents), interviews (principals and teachers), focus groups (students), shadowing (principals, teachers, students) and classroom observations (teachers and students). In addition, the researchers were attuned to the presence of practices identified from the literature. The

case study protocols were adapted from those previously used by the researchers (e.g., Callingham et al., 2016; MacDonald & Murphy, 2021). In addition, the creation of synthetic controls for specific Ambassador Schools was used to provide causal evidence of the impacts of specific historical initiatives to test the efficacy of the approach for evaluating the effectiveness of subsequent initiatives.

In the context of a one-year project, the initiatives were necessarily retrospective and limited to those with sufficient specificity and instituted at a point in time that allowed their impacts to have been realised. In addition, the quality (completeness, timeframe, continuity over time) of baseline data from the Ambassador schools and from a sufficient number of the schools that contributed to the synthetic control was sometimes a limitation.

The research was conducted by a team of researchers from the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the University of Canberra (UC), and Charles Sturt University (CSU).

The following sections describe the research methodology in more detail, beginning with a description of the participating schools, followed by detailed descriptions of each data collection method used to develop the case studies and of the ways in which the data from the various sources and different kinds were analysed and synthesised. The chapter concludes with a description of the limitations of the research.

School selection

Two types of schools were identified to participate in this research: Ambassador Schools, and schools that were contextually similar to each of the Ambassador Schools. This approach recognised that effective practice could be found in all NSW government schools. Identifying practices that distinguished Ambassador Schools required an approach that involved comparison with other schools and that was mindful of the contextual differences among schools and hence, the applicability and relative effectiveness of various practices in different schools. It was anticipated that the distinctive practices of Ambassador Schools would, in many cases, be a matter of the specific ways in which a given practice was implemented (e.g., the extent to which it was implemented across the entire school), the combination of effective practices used in a given school, and the presence of particular conditions that enabled the success of the practice.

Ambassador Schools

Ten Ambassador Schools were selected by the NSW DoE based on their strong performance compared to contextually similar schools across a range of measures, including NAPLAN reading and numeracy targets, expected growth, attendance, and HSC performance. They were chosen to represent a broad range of NSW government schools reflective of the breadth of the NSW Public School system and are listed below:

Table 1. List of Ambassador Schools

Primary Schools	High Schools
Auburn North Public School	Fairvale High School
Millthorpe Public School	Cabramatta High School
Bonnyrigg Heights Public School	Macarthur Girls High School
Charlestown South Public School	
Winmalee Public School	
Huntingdon Public School	
Mathoura Public School	

Note: More information can be found at: https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/school-success-model/school-success-model-explained/ambassador-schools

Contextually similar schools

Each Ambassador School was matched with two Contextually Similar Schools[3]. Contextually Similar Schools were included to broaden the range of good practice examined with a view to establishing the extent and nature of any unique features of Ambassador Schools contributing to their performance. The Contextually Similar Schools were identified by the NSW DoE using a maximum variation sampling method. A total of 16 Contextually Similar Schools participated in the research. Of these, 12 were primary schools and 4 were high schools. The number of Contextually Similar Schools was sufficient to allow distinctive practices of Ambassador Schools to be identified through available data and comparisons of each Ambassador School with its matched Contextually Similar Schools and comparison of the sets of Ambassador and Contextually Similar Schools.

Research participants and data collection methods

Of the 26 schools, nearly two thirds of the schools were primary schools (19). The schools ranged in size from fewer than 100 students to nearly 1500 students.

Four participant groups were invited to participate by contributing data as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant groups and data collection types

Participant Group	Data Collection

[3] The ASRC team were not involved in the selection process for the AS. They were involved in co-designing the approach to selecting CSS but not in the actual selection.

Principals	Survey, interview, shadowing
Teachers	Survey, interview, shadowing, classroom observation
Students	Survey (Year 2 and above), focus group, shadowing
Parents/carers	Survey

All participants were recruited in collaboration with the principals from each of the schools. School-based participants were invited to participate in each aspect of the data collection to ensure maximum coverage and add to the data's depth and rigour, and hence the robustness of the research findings.

Interviews and focus groups

Principals from Ambassador Schools and CSS were invited to participate in an online semi-structured interview and were encouraged to invite 1-2 teachers from their school to participate in an online audio-recorded semi-structured interview. The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes. The interview protocols for principals and teachers were adapted from previous research conducted by the researchers (e.g., Callingham et al., 2016, Fenton et al., 2019; Mackenzie et al., 2019). Principal, teacher and student focus group interview protocols were as similar as possible to facilitate the triangulation of data across these participant groups.

Each school was also invited to provide a student focus group. The schools that agreed to participate invited 6-8 students to participate in a face-to-face focus group[4]. In order to ensure that the voices of students across the year levels, K-12 students were included, a suggested year-level range for the focus group was provided. The focus group interviews were conducted in the schools for up to 60 minutes.

An interactive, informal strengths-based approach was used for the interviews and student focus groups to ensure they were conversational and based on key themes. The student focus group protocols were adapted depending on the students' ages.

The key themes covered in the principal and teacher interviews and student focus groups interviews were:

- Context and culture of the local community
- Meaning of success and what it looks like
- What it is like to be a principal/teacher/student in this school.

[4] A couple of the focus groups were conducted online, where time constraints did not allow for face to face. One school organised 10 students to participate in 1 focus group.

Interviews were audio/video recorded with each participant's permission and then transcribed for analysis. Transcripts of individual interviews were reviewed and approved by interviewees.

All participants provided written consent for participating in each aspect of the research.

Surveys

Surveys provided an efficient means of gathering data from more participants than would have been possible using interviews and the like. Principals and teachers were asked about their education, qualifications, and current and previous teaching roles. Validated scales adopted or adapted from previous research were used to measure a range of variables that have been associated with effective teaching and effective schools. These included such constructs as self-efficacy, perceptions of school culture, teacher-student relationships, and their own and others' aspirations for students, community links, and barriers to students continuing their education beyond Year 10 or Year 12. Two surveys designed for students (primary and secondary) included relevant constructs from the principal and teacher surveys. The parent survey similarly included relevant constructs from the other surveys. Maximising the similarity of the surveys for the different participant groups facilitated the triangulation of data, adding to the robustness of findings. Further details, including definitions of the various constructs, are provided in Chapter 4.

All participants received a copy of the Participation Information Statement, which included information about the project and their participation to ensure that they could make an informed decision about participating in the project.

The research team invited each principal to participate in a 20–25-minute online survey, delivered using the online platform, Qualtrics. Principals were invited to share online links to the relevant surveys with teachers, students, and parents within their school communities.

For all participant groups, consent to participate in the survey was implied by completion of the survey, with an 'opt-out' approach communicated to parents and students. Parents/carers of students could opt out from the research on behalf of their child/ren at any time during the two-week window following the date that they received the Participation Information Statement and before the survey was administered to students. The students whose parents and carers opted out on their behalf were not given access to the survey.

A small number of schools requested hardcopy surveys for students, and these requests were accommodated. The surveys, associated information, and consent documents were translated into languages commonly spoken by parents/carers in two schools to ensure the perspectives of participants from non-English speaking backgrounds were represented

in the data. In all cases, survey participation was anonymous and voluntary, with only the name of a participant's school entered as an identifier.

Shadowing

The purpose of shadowing was to gain insight into 'a day in the life' of principals, teachers, and students. Shadowing provides researchers with firsthand observational data about the activities and experiences of participants that can reveal aspects of participants' practices that may be taken for granted and hence not mentioned in interviews. They provide a context in which researchers can ask about specific occurrences and how usual they are, the reasons for actions taken, and the implications of situations and events observed. Shadowing also assists researchers in understanding the context in which participants work and learn and can thereby contribute to interpreting data collected through such means as interviews.

To collect these data, researchers followed and observed selected principals, teachers, and students throughout a 'typical' (as identified by the participant) work/school day or half day. Shadowing was conducted so as to be minimally intrusive in order to maintain the authenticity of the observations. Participants could request observations to pause or end for periods, and at times they considered them inappropriate (e.g., when dealing with sensitive or personal matters, time constraints).

Researchers also made detailed field notes about the environment, interactions, relationships, and practices they observed during shadowing. No specific framework was used to guide the researchers' notetaking to maintain this activity's authenticity. Instead, they documented events and conversations as they saw them. They were, however, cognisant of the aims of the research and hence alert to specific practices that may be linked to student outcomes as encapsulated in the literature review. Researchers also asked shadowed participants to clarify aspects of observations at times when doing so would not cause disruption. This was often in a debriefing session once shadowing was complete. Written consent was obtained for all participants, with students requiring written consent from a parent/guardian. Field notes for each participant were written up, summarised, and provided to participants for amendment and approval before being included in the data set for analysis.

Researchers considered the following aspects during the shadowing:

- Documenting what they saw from an unbiased point of view
- Recording conversations in brief
- Noting important keywords and phrases
- Defining the physical environment and nonverbal properties of communication

- Recording time notations
- Making a list of queries to ask later
- Correlating observed activities with related data sources and frameworks.

All participants were informed of the nature of the shadowing observation through the Participant Information and Consent Form prior to the fieldwork and were welcome to ask questions of the researcher prior to or during the shadowing.

Classroom observations

The CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) approach was used to analyse classroom interactions between teachers and students with a focus on student development and learning. The CLASS is an evidence-based model of teacher effectiveness, grounded in developmental theory (e.g., bioecological theory) and tested internationally, which provides a way to assess observable and related teacher-level supports in the classroom (Pianta & Hamre 2009). According to Pianta et al. (2012), teacher-student interactions across all year levels are the “primary mechanism of student development and learning” (p. 1). The CLASS was particularly well suited to the aims of the research as it guides a trained observer to attend to what Martin and Dowson (2009) refer to as ‘connective instruction’. That is, the “who, what, and how of everything that is happening at the classroom level, with particular attention to the teachers’ instructional interactions and behaviours” (Pianta et al. 2012, p. 7). While the CLASS places the focus on teacher-student interactions by observing the lead teacher in the room, it does not target a single student or single teacher/adult in the room. Instead, the intent is to reflect the value of the classroom environment for all students by capturing the resources presented to all students in that setting.

AS and CSS teachers were invited to participate to obtain observational data (minimum of 20 minutes) of one teacher with one class of students per school. The teacher involved in the classroom observation was asked to provide written consent. Informed consent was also sought from students and their parent/carer. Due to the sensitive nature of the observational data collected via video recording, the classroom observation video recordings were only included in the analyses if the following conditions were satisfied:

- The participating teacher provided consent.

- All students and their parents/carers provided consent.[5]

Synthetic controls

Extant data from the DoE was accessed in consultation with the DoE to construct synthetic controls for particular Ambassador Schools. Synthetic controls can enable causal connections between specific practices or initiatives and student outcomes to be established. They are an innovative alternative to randomised controlled trials when these are not possible (i.e., in natural situations in which many variables cannot be controlled). Data from a large number of NSW schools not participating in the research were used to create a synthetic control school for Ambassador Schools where specific initiatives or approaches were identified from the case studies, had time for their impacts to be realised, and had a sufficient quality of available baseline data. The in-depth case studies conducted in two of the Ambassador Schools identified specific practices for possible testing in this way.

Data used included publicly available data such as enrolments, SES of school community, degree of rurality, and data provided by the NSW Department of Education such as school staffing profiles.

Sample

This section details the number of participants across various categories who participated in the research. It demonstrates the volume of data collected and the diversity of perspectives that contributed to the research and influenced its findings.

The research team conducted fieldwork in 26 NSW government schools. For 22 of these schools, fieldwork visits were conducted in person. The in-person fieldwork visits were used to conduct the principal, teacher, student shadowing, student focus groups and classroom observations.

In cases where an in-person visit was not possible (e.g., because of the impacts of flood events, participant availability) the fieldwork was conducted online. In these cases, shadowing and classroom observations were not conducted.

Table 3 provides the number of participants for each participant group and data collection.

[5] In situations where a teacher consented to the observation and students/parents were informed but written consent was not available from some students/parents, only researcher's notes (and not a video-recording) were included in the analyses.

Table 3. Research participant numbers

	Group	Number of participants		
		AS	**CSS**	**Total**
Interviews	Principals	10	14	24
	Teachers	21	21	42
Student Focus Groups	K – 12	84*	84*	168
Surveys	Principals	9	14	23
	Teachers	253	97	350
	Student (PS)	1025	1134	2159
	Student (HS)	2515	1128	3643
	Parents/	253	16	269
Shadowing	Principal	10	10	20
	Teacher	10	11	21
	Student	9	7	16
Class Observations	Teachers	7	7	14
	TOTAL	**4205**	**2543**	**6936**

*Note: *Based on an average of 6 students per focus group*

Data analysis

Figure 1 provides an overview of the data analysis process that was used to identify specific teaching and learning practices that distinguished Ambassador Schools. The elements of the process are unpacked in the paragraphs that follow.

Data analysis was conducted by teams consisting of an ASRC researcher and one or more research assistants with expertise in data cleaning, data entry, and/or sophisticated qualitative and quantitative analysis. Each team focused on a particular data type. Protocols were developed for the analysis of each data type to ensure consistency across multiple analysts. All analysts were trained in data management, security, and the relevant protocols. Analysis began as soon as the data set was complete and consent had been verified.

Analysis of the various datasets (interviews, focus groups, surveys, classroom observations, participant shadowing) were conducted in parallel with each team producing an individual school report. In the case of Ambassador Schools, the reports focused on distinguishing practices. For Contextually Similar Schools, reports focussed on strengths and factors contributing to success as defined by the school.

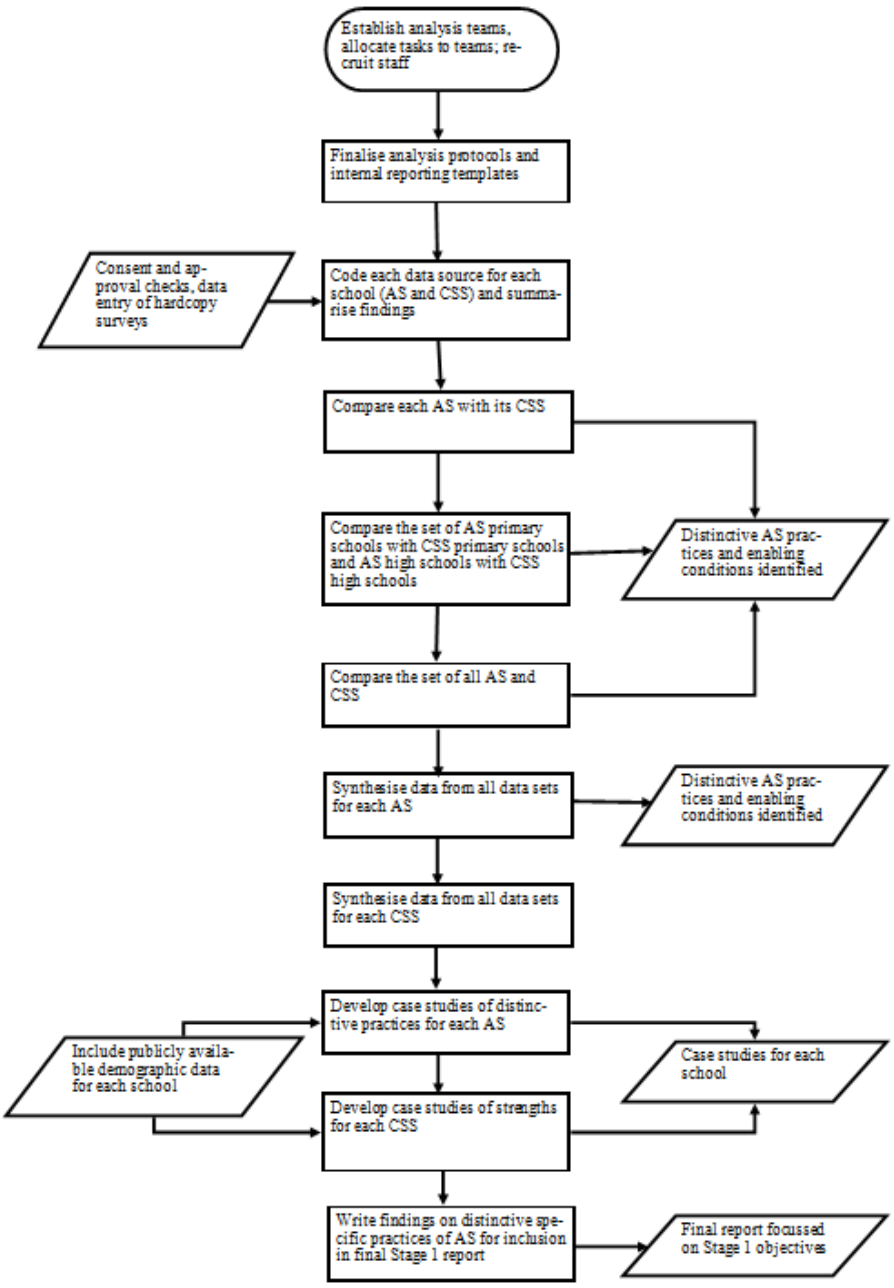
Each data analysis team synthesised the 10 Ambassador School reports and 16 Contextually Similar School reports for their data set to produce a synthesised report for the two school types. The synthesis focused on identifying specific teaching, learning, and

leadership practices, along with enabling and constraining factors that were clearly evident across Ambassador Schools.

The individual school reports synthesised results for each data type and findings from the synthetic control analysis were then synthesised. Combining multiple data types from multiple sources can strengthen the reliability of findings by confirming findings from a particular source, reducing the impacts of any possible researcher bias, and assisting with the interpretation of results from particular sources. The synthesis was aimed at addressing the objectives of the ASRC in Stage 1, namely to:

- Develop a body of rigorous, evidence-based research on effective practices that characterise Ambassador Schools and that contribute causally to their success; and
- Identify effective practices that can be tested and scaled for application in contextually similar schools where appropriate.

Figure 1. Data analysis overview



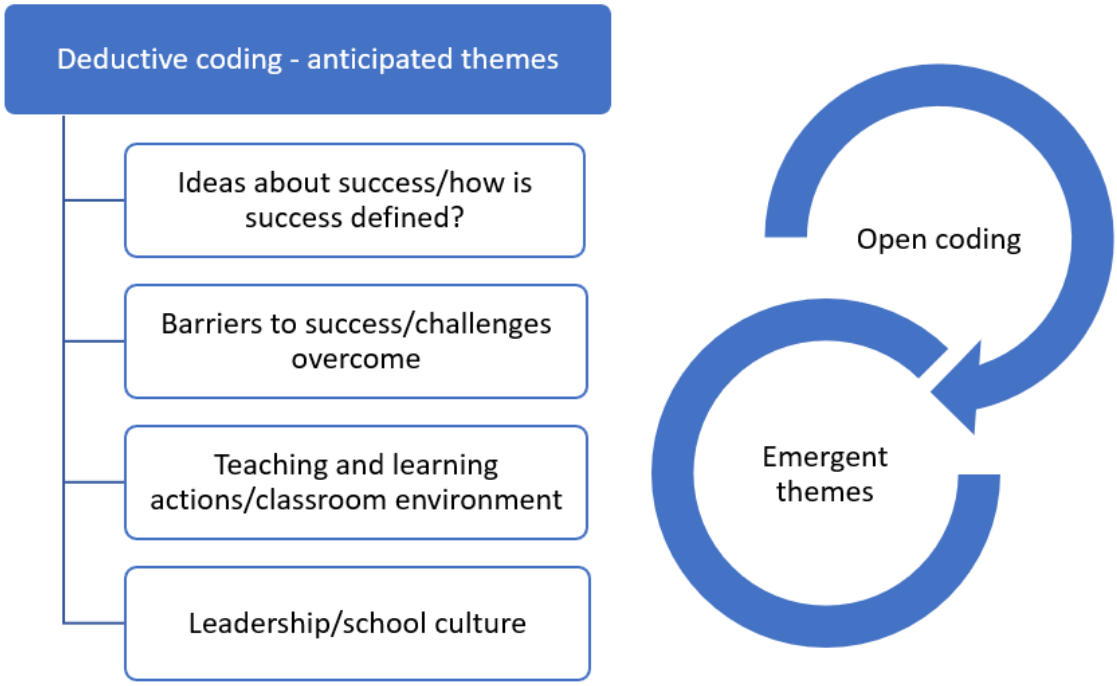
The following section provides, by way of illustration, an example of the approach to the analysis of one data set – teacher interviews.

Interview data

The ASRC interview analysis team began by developing a coding approach for the teacher interview data as an initial data exploration to inform subsequent analytic approaches for the corpus of study data. The approach used deductive and open coding to identify salient

themes in the data. Deductive coding explored anticipated themes, while open coding sought emergent themes. Combining the two approaches allowed the researchers to interrogate the data for specific practices identified in the literature review while allowing novel or unanticipated findings to emerge.

Figure 2. Approach to interview coding



The teacher interviews were in-depth qualitative explorations of effective practices that improve student and learning outcomes or that support high-quality teaching. Given their conversational nature, extensive data preparation was required prior to analysis. Most of the individual interview transcripts were more than 100 pages, and cross-checking between transcripts and audio recordings was used to ensure data fidelity.

The protocol required each research assistant conducting this analysis to analyse a small portion of the data. Results were then compared, and discussion of any discrepancies was used to refine the analysis protocol and strengthen common understandings of the approach used to maximise the findings' reliability.

Limitations

This section outlines the main data collection limitations:

- The schools are representative of a range of contexts in NSW however, the small sample size is acknowledged. The research outcomes and conclusions will need to be carefully tested for suitability to scale and context.

- Some schools participated in only some data collection activities. For example, those schools that could not be visited in person did not participate in classroom observations or shadowing. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 2, large amounts of data across the various methods were collected, ensuring robust findings from the synthesised corpus.

- Due to the data collection's self-report nature, the measures' positive framing, and the focus on success, participants tended to rate most survey items positively (e.g., a principal's high job satisfaction). Moreover, survey data collection was dependent on one time point.

- Future data collection opportunities can contribute to validating the survey measures with Ambassador School and Contextually Similar School stakeholders. Varying sample sizes within and across school types also limited the types of analyses of survey data that could be conducted (e.g., some schools were lacking in both principal and teacher survey data).

- Confidence in the strength and capacity of synthetic control as a methodology was confirmed. Analysis of synthetic control data identified two Ambassador Schools showcased growth through a pre- and post-implementation model. Although this methodology was effective in establishing efficacy of practices and enabling conditions across two schools, it was not established across all ten Ambassador Schools. Hence, the findings of the synthetic control analysis have not been applied at this stage of the research.

- When comparing Ambassador School metropolitan student responses to regional/rural student responses, only primary school student results were reviewed for distinguishing factors as no comparisons were available for Ambassador School high schools (all Ambassador School high schools were metropolitan).

3 Results: Interviews and Focus Groups

The following sections outline the key findings from the interviews with principals and teachers and focus groups with students from Kinder to Year 12.

Interviews with principals and teachers

The following sections provide a synthesis of the interview data from principals and teachers, with a key focus on teaching and learning, and leadership practices, along with enabling conditions that have contributed to the success of Ambassador Schools.

Data and method

Data from 19 schools was included in this synthesis (10 Ambassador Schools and 9 CSS). A 'coverage' approach was used through comparative analysis focusing on Ambassador Schools. When available, the principal interview and at least one teacher interview (randomly selected) were coded and analysed for each Ambassador School and selected CSS.

Table 4 summarises the data used in the analysis.

Table 4. Overview of data sources for principal and teacher interview synthesis report

	Ambassador Schools	Contextually Similar Schools	Total
Number of principal interviews analysed	10	6	16
Number of teacher interviews analysed	10	7	17
Total	**20**	**13**	**33**

Key themes – including specific teaching and learning actions, and leadership practices that were apparent through analysis of the principal and teacher interviews from Ambassador Schools – have been described and illustrated by including direct interview quotes. In addition, several enabling conditions were identified and included to provide a holistic representation of Ambassador Schools' contexts and cultures that may have influenced their success. It should be noted that Ambassador School practices and enabling conditions identified as distinct were also present to some extent in some CSS. The point of difference appeared to be the implementation and scale at which these practices were enacted and embedded holistically across Ambassador Schools.

In many cases, the examples used to illustrate distinctive practices also exemplify broader practices not highlighted in this synthesis. The illustrative quotes presented within this analysis have been de-identified to maintain the confidentiality of the interview participants.

Distinctive practices identified from Ambassador Schools within the Principal and Teacher interview data

Data-informed practice

Amongst the Ambassador Schools a common theme was the use of data to inform practice. Although data was mentioned in CSS interviews, Ambassador Schools seemed to generate more of their own data – rather than relying only on NAPLAN and other standardised data – to inform whole-school practices. These data were used in ways that not only addressed areas that were identified as needing improvement but were considered holistically with a view to identifying how the school could move beyond their current achievements and improve their practices. The following examples illustrate how specific Ambassador Schools proactively sought data from sources within and outside their schools to inform initiatives that led to significantly enhanced student outcomes.

Examples

AS#1 Public School– development of the Instructional Leader Model

The development of the model relied on strategic staff recruitment and allocation of responsibilities, use of an external consultant, and detailed consideration of a school considered exemplary in terms of its use of instructional leadership to obtain objective data about their existing practice and detailed information about how to move forward.

> *You could ask consultants to come and conduct a review and you'd have two consultants, and you'd have a DP from a school and then some members of your staff. Now, we had four of those, we requested four of those over a 10-year period…* ***Then we engaged [someone] as the fourth and we asked him to look at our teaching and learning****. The one about the leadership was in 2015 could you come down and assess the quality of our teaching and learning? He made 11 recommendations, one of which was to develop our own instructional teaching model. Also, to visit the extraordinarily good [primary school]… So, we* ***went down to, seven of us I think, went down and spent three days embedded in [primary school] culture and their programs. We came back and said we're going to develop the AS#1 instructional teaching model, which is a framework and it's pretty stringent for reading – not for writing – other areas of English and for***

mathematics… it was a seven-to-eight-month process of professional development.

AS#4 Public School

Probably seven years ago we – we had a great clientele here. We had great staff. We had sound pedagogy we thought, and we thought we had great teaching practices. But we were all thinking the same thing, like, we're working really, really hard with these kids and we're probably not seeing the results that we should be getting. ***That was when we went out to look at some research and have a look at some local schools that were starting to get some great results and that was where we went on the ...journey. So, we had a commitment from our staff. Our staff were really keen to try something new because what we were doing wasn't working; wasn't working effectively.*** *So, we took all bar, I think, three of our staff shadowed teachers at [primary school] for two days. We came back and we thought, "Well, their kids are no different to our kids; it's just what we're doing". So that was when we embarked on the... journey and I guess the rest is history for us now* ***because seven years on we're seeing just amazing results from our kids.*** *There's - I think there's a shift in even the learning culture here at school.*

Suddenly, ***three or four years down the track, our NAPLAN results jumped from pretty average, to being the highest performing school in [our region], out of [200+] schools, which we sort of – when the NAPLAN results came out, we were just totally shocked. We thought they'd made a mistake. Then, that's been maintained over a period of two or three years****, so consequently, we have lots of enquiries from other schools, not just locally… now we're getting interstate schools enquire, asking to come for a visit as well. I'm incredibly proud of our – I guess, the way that the staff embraced that, took that pedagogy on, and all knew that this would make a difference to our kids. The results that we've seen academically, the kids absolutely love that pedagogy, and are so engaged.*

AS#10 Public School

So, ***we use a lot of evidence-based practices and I guess a lot from the*** **What Works Best** ***so we're using the data to inform our practice. One thing that we do very effectively is that differentiation. So, there might be three or four maths groups within a classroom, or there might be three so we're really catering for the point of need, and bring the children along that journey with where to next****, now we know this and this is what we're going to be working on next. Our current focus is effective feedback, and the more that we're focusing on it in professional learning and we know that we are providing effective feedback very effectively throughout the school but we're just looking for some consistency so that there's that consistency throughout.*

AS#9 Public School

> *Different, different to what you've seen. I would say differentiated and teaching at point of need.* ***We always use the phrase teaching at point of need and people say to me I don't understand what that is. So, we use a lot of formative assessment, a lot of data analysis. We program and observe and scribble as we teach****, if you walk into my classrooms, you won't see whole class lessons. You will see lots of little groups on the floor, you might see a couple of students working on their own depending on what they're working on.*

AS#3 Public School

> *There are avenues you can look at in terms of, like, NAPLAN, external data, and that sort of stuff, but I think the most important thing is,* ***we keep a lot of data ourselves in terms of what we are doing in our planning, in our information, what we are actually assessing and how we're assessing it, and reasons why we're assessing it. We're not just assessing for assessing's sake. We're assessing for reasons, to actually get the answer that we want, and it's linked into our school plans as well, because our school plan is all about teaching and learning as well.*** *So, everything is there for a reason, not a case whereby I have to, okay? So, everything has a point to it, and when it has that point to it, we want to achieve that point. It's not for us, it's for them, and as I say, it's them in terms of the kids and the families that are actually in front of us.*

Specific pedagogical practices and teaching learning actions

Ambassador Schools often referred to specific teaching and learning practices or pedagogies that were implemented across the whole school. Whilst general practices such as 'explicit teaching' were also occasionally referenced by CSS, in the Ambassador Schools the approaches appeared to be implemented as whole-school initiatives that informed multiple aspects of their schooling instead of adopting the practices in more isolated ways. For example, explicit teaching was linked with team-teaching in AS#8, and team-teaching in turn, was a mentoring strategy in AS#9.

The Ambassador Schools appeared to be using these practices at higher levels, utilising evidence-based approaches and often drawing on an *'investigative'* mindset to improve their practice. Ambassador Schools also gave the impression of using these practices effectively within their school contexts and cultures.

Examples

AS#8 High School – Explicit teaching and team-teaching

> *One of the things that I guess I've been pushing in the different – so basically each of our DPs looks after a stage here. So, the Deputy Principal of Stage Five with their Stage Five Head Teacher teaching and learning – they sort of drive those initiatives. So, in the stages where – so I've been in Stage Five and Stage Six. We really sort of I guess* ***evaluated the programs and really, I guess, rewrote everything to have more of a focus on explicit teaching and that gradual release of responsibility.*** *So, what we saw at that point in time was that there was a lot of project-based learning where students may or may not have been developing those skills. But there certainly wasn't enough explicit teaching of skills. And 21st century skills you know teachers are not trained in those at university to explicitly teach like they are with maths or English or any of the other courses.* ***So, the programs reflect a significant amount of explicit teaching now… The other thing that we've been introducing more and more is team-teaching.*** *So, most of them – so Seven, Nine and Ten we actually have two classes together for each of those periods with two teachers. And they're using different models of team-teaching to actually deliver the programs as well.*

AS#2 Public School – Teacher agency to select appropriate teaching and learning practices based on a whole-school instructional framework

> *I would say that teaching is an art and this is the thing that at [AS#2] you're enabled to do as a teacher.* ***There's no cookie-cutter stuff round here. There's no reading from scripts, there's no prescriptive – you know if you walk into a classroom, across my 11 classrooms, I would anticipate that the teachers would be using their skills and their understanding of pedagogy to teach that lesson that best suits the style for their kids, right?*** *So, you don't walk into one kindergarten room and hear a phonemic awareness lesson and at the same time that phonemic awareness lesson is happening next door. Doesn't work like that around here…* ***essentially how we work here is there is an instructional framework and then teachers respond flexibly to point of need.***

Support for new teachers/onboarding/mentoring (including new to school and early career)

Many Ambassador Schools reported supporting early career or new-to-the-school teachers through various means, often above and beyond what could be termed the usual process. Some examples of these support methods include professional learning, team-teaching and buddy initiatives, or the use of 'off-class' executives.

Examples

AS#9 Public School

> ***New teachers, I often put them in a team-teaching role when they walk into my school so that they can actually see our teaching and learning in action. Because it can be quite challenging if you walk into a classroom and you've never seen it in action. So, often if I'm going to start a new casual teacher, I will employ them for a day where they're just team-teaching with the classroom teacher.***

AS#6 High School

> ***We pay for a head teacher mentor for all our early career teachers – we have an induction programme and we put them with a buddy and we also have regular meetings after school where we go through all those things about school culture and how we do things and reports and timetable and, you know, the – the executive structure – those sort of things. So, we have that induction programme which goes all year, every fortnight after school on a Wednesday and the head teacher mentor goes in those classes, as well, helps people with their accreditation reports, et cetera and, also, you'd have your own curriculum head teacher.*** *We – and I was saying yesterday, we don't have any early career teachers that we lose. I don't think in the 15 years I've been here, we've lost any… they would get support from a head teacher and mentor, their own teacher, regular, you know, induction programme sessions and we,* ***also, have an aspirational leaders programme that one of my deputies is running where we get people within the school to talk about certain aspects, like, you know, writing your CV, or the merit selection process, or doing an interview and – or, you know, how to teach things, you know, in a particular area, you know, more competently, or whatever. Whatever people say their – are saying that their needs are, we – we get a speaker in from school. If we don't have anyone, we'd ask an expert, someone outside to come and talk to us, like, from NESA****, for example. So, we have that structure as well and then, also, we support people to go on professional learning activities outside of school. So, the way I've worked that is because we can't have everyone out all the time. We limit it to four people out a day, four staff members out a day. So, you know, if you've got something going at the University, we might let two people go because we might have two already out at some sporting activity, or something else.*

Collaborative planning and shared resources collaboration

Several of the Ambassador Schools discussed collaboration, particularly in relation to resources and lesson development. Many discussed the value of providing additional planning collaboration outside of RFF and School Development Days, including

opportunities to interrogate student work samples and data (e.g., AS#5) and to plan together (e.g., AS#3). Collaborative opportunities such as these often allowed teaching staff from entire grades or stages to come together to analyse and discuss classroom and student data to program to enhance student outcomes. These activities contribute to the development of consistent teacher judgment, are important contexts for professional learning and facilitate the development of collective teacher efficacy as individuals become aware of the growing competence of their colleagues.

Examples

AS#4 Public School

> ***Collaboration comes as quite a shock, it comes as quite a shock to a lot of people who come to our school to say the degree to which we collaborate, particularly from a teaching point of view****… Whereas our school is very united; a lot of sharing of lessons and material and things like that, also in terms of the division of the workload, you know very much a team sort of atmosphere… And that's a real culture across our school, so all the teachers have a running buddy and they work with that other class, you know, a collaborative manner, even just in terms of organisation and things like that… and that's open for anyone in the school to us so things like lessons and resources and things like that are open for everyone to use.*

AS#1 Public School

> ***What we offer you is collaborative planning opportunities, ultimate support, high quality exemplar lessons. And now we have a bank of really high-quality K to six lesson plans.*** *That we use [online platform] to house so it's not like teachers are planning and they [are] sort of hidden away in folders on their desktop or in their classrooms.* ***Everything is transparent, everything is shared. A teacher might take on two weeks of programming... and they work in a team of five...*** *But that base [program] is collaboratively designed together, but the execution might be done on a more individual teacher basis.*

AS#3 Public School

> *One of the best things that I have in my school,* ***I have planning meetings every five weeks....*** *Now, I've got, say, seven or eight teachers on a grade, so* ***they'll come off together on a grade, and they'll have a planning meeting for the whole day, where they actually plan their literacy and their numeracy and other areas in regards to it.*** *Our huge focus is on literacy and numeracy. They also get two hours of RFF a week,* ***so when you talk about what's sustainable, what is sustainable is the fact is that we plan, and we're ready to go into our classrooms, because every five weeks we have a planning day, and across the***

year, that's seven days of planning, and every single week they have RFF, which is two hours as well. Again, they're all together. It's not a case of having one teacher, two teachers. I make sure of the fact that they're all off together, and making sure that they can then plan together, work together, collaborate together, and have a really good understanding of going back and feeling confident.

AS#5 Public School

We call them collective teacher efficacy days, and we have three. *We've got three this term, so we have a vocab focus, a writing focus and a maths focus. So,* ***they meet, they have three days each term to focus on those things, and in that time – and you know, it's really good for our beginning teachers – they bring a data set, and an AP leads that discussion around the data****, so it depersonalised that, and then they all sit as a stage, and they all talk about, you know, the assessment, what that child – what they wanted the assessment to achieve, did it achieve it, what was the child showing them?* ***It really is a collaborative approach, and it really is a highly supportive way that we do things at school. I think that is a great benefit for our new and beginning teachers, because they see – like, while they don't have to be active participants in the first one, they see how it works, and they see that, you know, it doesn't matter if you've been teaching for a thousand years, or you know, two years. You still are going to be asking those questions, and you still are looking at each thing that you do as a brand new – with brand new lenses, because each child is going to be different.*** *So, that is a big thing that we do at school. When I bought that in, in 2019, initially it was very – because they were very closed doors, didn't share anything, so – and* ***now, it's a non-negotiable. Like, my staff say to me, you need to find the money to have these days for us, because it is a significant investment over the year, and the staff are like, nope, you need to find that, because they are non-negotiable, which is a significant achievement, considering, you know, they wouldn't even open – in the staffroom, they would not talk about teaching practices or share ideas at recess and lunch. It was, like, you did not talk about that, because you didn't want judgement. But now, it's like, you know, they do it all the time, always asking for ideas, and you know, these are non-negotiables that we have to have.***

In addition, activities such as team-teaching mentioned in the previous section, are inherently collaborative.

Enabling conditions

In addition to the specific practices identified, there were enabling conditions that appeared to be specific and unique to Ambassador Schools. Enabling conditions were considered to

be elements of school context or culture that supported teachers in implementing effective practices. These enabling conditions were often integrated with, and inseparable from, the success found in Ambassador Schools. Enabling conditions found across the Ambassador Schools are described below.

Whole-school vision

The Ambassador School principals had a vision for the school and were supported by staff in implementing and working towards that vision. Ambassador School principals highlighted the importance of having supportive staff who aligned with the culture of the school, and when staffing vacant positions, actively sought out teachers who would 'fit' with the school culture and vision.

Examples

AS#1 Public School

> ***We don't have high expectations at AS#1 we have AS#1 expectations because every child, every staff member, and every parent knows what AS#1's expectations are.***

AS#4 Public School

> *I'm a real advocate of employing the right person, at the right time, and having a choice.* ***I think if we're going to have a remarkable – and the best – education system in the world, then you need the best teachers, you need the best staff.*** *And as a staff member, you and I know that* ***a fantastic staff member in one context may not suit them in another context. It's because of the clientele, because of the location, because of the environment, because of the other makeup of the staff.***

Leadership as an enabling condition

Linked with a clear, whole-school vision, it was apparent that many Ambassador Schools had strong leadership, generally by the principal, who encouraged whole-school thinking and school-wide approaches. In principal and teacher interviews, School Leadership Teams were frequently described as strong, dedicated, having a vision for the school, bringing the school and community together, employing staff who shared the same vision and shaping those who did not. Principals highlighted their interest in, and commitment to, being active in the teaching and learning of their schools. These principals often visited classes, engaged in playground duties, or were present at school pick up and drop off, in addition to their regular duties. As is evident from the examples provided in relation to the distinctive practices identified from Ambassador Schools from teacher and principal interview data, school leaders played key roles in facilitating and orchestrating the

conditions in which teachers could engage in the practices. Specific actions included inviting experts to talk to staff, allocating school resources to valuable collaborative activities, and arranging timetables for teacher groups to work together.

Examples

AS#1 Public School

> ***I'm responsible for the outcomes...I know our children really well, and I know the types of people our kids will respond to.***

AS#2 Public School

> *I think that what AS#2 has* ***benefitted from in the past has been quite steady leadership.*** *When you come to being a principal at AS#2 you're here for a good amount of time. I've seen – so for many of our teachers who work here I'm only their second or third principal. Our previous principal here was here for 13 years. The one before that for seven.* ***So, I think if that's humming along well, I think that's a contributor to success.***

Understanding of unique contexts

The Ambassador Schools staff tended to be more aware than staff in other schools of the same contexts and worked with their unique context and community. For example, this was particularly clear in schools with high EAL/D student numbers through the provision of services that their parent and carer community needed.

Examples

AS#7 High School

> *Our parent literacy classes where they came in to learn English at the school and our computer literacy classes. And one of the goals behind that that computer class was to be able to write a resume, to be able to send and receive emails, creating their own email accounts* ***so that they had skills to kind of improve their life and hopefully that filtered through to their child's life. And that's the big thing, taking the burden off their children to write those resumes for them to do those job applications so that their children can focus on their education, and they can be a bit more self-sufficient in the community.*** *We found when we were doing that, parents would let their friends know about it, so we had community members whose child didn't come to AS#7 attending those sessions. And even our parent information sessions where we get psychologists to come in and discuss the use of mobile phones and how to use it safely, that was after hours, that was on that Saturday we ran that, for three hours and we had like a hundred parents coming in.*

That was amazing, we had to hold it in the hall. And ***we get those ideas from our P&C, they ask for these things and we listen to them, and we provide them with these kinds of opportunities.***

AS#1 Public School

Many of our families do come from language backgrounds other than English, and many of our mums are illiterate in English and also illiterate in their first language, because Afghanistan is one of the countries that a lot of our students come from, and unfortunately parents, some of our mums, didn't have the opportunity to attend schooling in their home country. ***So we must be respectful of this so in all of our formal communication we have opportunities, where our Community Language Teacher will actually translate the note and send that home and we'll send that home with families who have indicated that they would like a translated note.*** *When the information is such that we believe our family won't be able to access even the written copy,* ***we will video record, especially during the learning from home period, we will video record the principal verbalizing the message send that out.*** *And our Community Liaison Officer, or our SSO, or our Community Language Teacher, whoever we believe would be the best person for the job will translate that message and we'll send it out through our digital platforms that way,* ***so we try to cover our bases to ensure that the largest percentage of parents have received the vital information that that was necessary.***

AS#10 Public School - Attendance and Wellbeing

We focused on attendance and wellbeing because for them to achieve well they need to be here all the time, so we had a real big focus on that. *And even like now, this morning there were probably four adults in the playground, one lady was cooking the breakfast because – it came from a few years ago, we had a ride to school morning, the kids had breakfast with that and then some children were so much more settled and we're like oh, imagine the child coming and, you know, my children get up at 6 o'clock so by the time school's nearly starting at 9 o'clock that's a long time since they've eaten.* ***So there's the breakfast program in the morning and accessed by many and I would say most of those children have actually had breakfast and then having that second top up, what a nice – walk into a school, go and have [a drink] , piece of toast, great way to start the day, have a play, they play in the morning for about half an hour. And one measure is at 8:30 when school starts, this morning, there were about 10 children arriving, like they want to be here and that's what we love.***

Community partnerships

Ambassador Schools were stronger in partnering with their community through community resources, active Parents and Citizens Associations (P&C), or high parent engagement, interaction or attendance with school events. Several Ambassador Schools described the mutual respect developed between the school and community, along with the trust given by the community to educate their children. The parent community was often involved in decision-making and kept informed through regular communications regarding many aspects of such things as school events.

Examples

AS#4 Public School

> *One of the things we do,* ***we have a mentoring program, where we've got 12 retirees, and have had for 10 years now, our mentoring program****. Those 12 retirees, some of them are the ones that started 10 years ago, but that has changed over time as well. We've got probably 80 percent of them are ex-teachers,* ***who want to give back to their community and school****.* ***Every one of those mentors has one child they focus on****. We tend to start them off with probably a year three or four child, and they follow them through for two or three, sometimes four years. Sometimes they're vulnerable kids, sometimes they're a little bit academically low. Sometimes, their family situation requires, or can be supported or helped or bolstered by that connection with an older person, so it might be a child that has no grandparent in their life. So, we line up one of our retirees, our mentors, who come in for half an hour, 35 minutes a week. It's not in key learning time. We find a time that works for them, but also works for the child. They don't want to be taken out of class when something that they love is happening in their class, that's crucial, so we negotiate around that…* ***Sometimes, that relationship goes for years. You know, we found at different times, that relationship has continued on into high school as well, once they've left here, so that mentoring program is just an absolutely crucial one.*** *For example, we've got a little boy this year, in year three, single mum, and has grandma around as well, and aunty, so he doesn't have a lot of male connection, but we've set him up with a male mentor, a bit like a grandfather figure.* ***His mum loves the mentoring program, and she specifically requested could he be with an older male mentor, because he hasn't got a lot of males in his life, so that's given that whole new dimension to him, as well. The program, for him, is just working wonderfully.***

AS#3 Public School

> ***What we have around us is a community that is a trusting community, a community that understands, a community that values, a community that knows what's happening in terms of their schooling of their children, and that's***

something that's quite powerful, because we let them be involved in the decision making of our school. The most important thing is that we give all the information as possible, to answer them saying what's happening in our school, so it gives them a chance to put themselves into being part of that decision making process. So, the parents are really heavily involved, but are seen as really key players in the school, and we value them. *Because we value them, they are then sealing value by coming and being part of different activities that we run throughout the school, so they participate, and they have an opportunity to really feel that – what they are learning, as well. My community is 92 percent NESB, so it is a very large community, and a large community is actually Vietnamese and Chinese, as well as Afghani, so those large communities really do have an impact in terms of teaching and learning, because the majority of the parents want to leave their children at the gate and say goodbye to them, but because the parents trust us, they trust us that we take their kids, and we do teach those kids, but they then have that understanding that we will come back to them, and we will talk to them about what's going on.* ***We'll find time to make sure that they are part of our education plan.*** *We make sure that they know what's going to be happening in our school, and that communication, you know, the personal skills that we have in terms of the whole school makes it a really powerful thing for us to actually work with.*

So, whatever happens in our school, the community knows. Whatever happens, our teachers know, our children know. It's a very big family combination, where we all know what's happening within our school. Because we are a large school, a thousand-odd kids in our school, that makes it harder in some cases, with communication, but it's really having those effects in terms of actually making sure people communicate, and every single person, be it teachers, has a responsibility.

AS#9 Public School

I love the fact that we've got really genuine relationships, authentic relationships, that's what I love most. *I love that personal touch being a small school it's a bit like a really big family as opposed to being I guess just a school and then parents are separate. Yeah,* ***we've worked really hard on open, honest, genuine relationships that are positive relationships and partnering in learning.*** *So, I guess that's what I love the most. I'm also pretty proud of the fact that we now have students who really are talking quite extensively about their learning and what's happening in the classroom and what they're doing next with their parents which is really positive because we've worked really hard in that space.*

AS#2 Public School

Do you know what I love? ***I love that I can make a phone call to just about anyone of my parents and they're on board. You know they are happy to use their***

connections, they're happy to use their influence, they're happy to use their man hours. All of that. But very rarely am I met with a "No," from my community. My community just chip in and help out. At all levels. Volunteers in a classroom, volunteers at swim school, our twice yearly AS#2 Markets that are the major fundraiser via the P&C. You know P&C executive positions. Anything I ask of the community they say yes to. And in return what they ask of us is listened to and well considered. *Obviously, there are some things that are out of our control and there are constraints around that, but I can respectfully explain that and they understand.*

Summary

The principal and teacher interview data present a multi-faceted view of success in schools. The interviews allowed key stakeholders to discuss opportunities and challenges impacting success within their respective schools.

Key themes that emerged from the interview data highlighted the role of cohesion within Ambassador Schools, referring to staff, school vision, and wider school community support as being contributing factors to success. In Ambassador Schools, there was an emphasis on the importance of support for teachers through professional learning, mentoring, collaboration and collegial relationships, with parent engagement and partnerships also playing a role in the success of the schools.

As stated earlier, while examples from the Ambassador Schools are discussed within this report, there are instances where these key practices have been mentioned within CSS data. The key difference which is highlighted in the examples above, is the scale at which these practices are adopted and used by the Ambassador Schools, acknowledging and working within their unique settings and school culture.

Focus groups with students

The following sections synthesise the data from the focus groups with students from Kindergarten to Year 12. The following sections focus on the specific practices that characterised Ambassador Schools.

Method and data

In total, data from 28 focus groups were included in this synthesis. The table below summarises the data used in the analysis.

Table 5. Overview of data sources for student focus groups

	Ambassador Schools	Contextually Similar Schools	Total
Number of primary school focus groups	9	10	19
Number of high school focus groups	5	4	9
Total	**14**	**14**	**28**

Specific pedagogical practices and teaching learning actions

Students in many Ambassador Schools mentioned several specific practices. In particular, three key practices were consistently and prominently represented in the student focus groups:

- High expectations
- An emphasis on student wellbeing
- Diverse student activities.

These practices were evident across both Ambassador Schools and CSS. Rather than doing something radically different from other schools, Ambassador Schools used the practices described below more systematically and explicitly than CSS.

Quotations from students are used to describe each practice. Any names included are pseudonyms.

Keeping students in their zone of proximal development

Across schools, many students discussed the concept of teachers challenging and extending students while keeping expectations reasonable. Participants often drew on metaphors of ‘pushing’ to describe the experience of being appropriately challenged by teachers to perform in particular ways. Notably, the practice is not characterised by challenge alone. Participants consistently noted that the challenge should not be too demanding but ‘just enough’ to encourage growth.

Examples

AS#6 High School

> *…and the teachers don't put more weight on our shoulders than we can handle. They kind of understand how much we can hold, right, and then they put that weight on our shoulders, and they slowly put more, so we can become stronger in our knowledge.*

AS#7 High School

> *They know their boundaries and as [student]said, they always try to push you to the best. But they always know when to stop and they know when you feel uncomfortable or when you're being pushed too hard.*

AS#5 Public School

> *So there's another reason why I like the teachers because they make you work hard, but not too hard.*

Explicit recognition of success

Both primary and secondary school participants consistently expressed an appreciation for explicit recognition for their effort or achievements. This recognition typically took the form of a symbolic token (e.g., a sticker, a merit award), which could either be made explicit to only the student (e.g., a sticker on work) or to the whole school (e.g., formal recognition at school assembly). Notably, a high grade or mark did not count as a recognition of success for participants. Students saw high grades as evidence of success but not as recognition of success. For these reasons, students understood the *recognition* as distinct from *feedback*; effective feedback involves *appraising* student performance, whereas for participants, recognition involved *acknowledging* student effort.

Examples

AS#10 Public School

> *We have little tickets. And we do a draw every Monday with them. And you write your name on them. And you only get them if you are behaving.*

AS#8 High School

> *We have a pride assembly at the end of each term where students who have like done especially well in classes or like have participated in sports and gone to things such as Zone.*

AS#6 High School

> *I think a different approach to this is for me, personally, while I would love to get straight A's in every subject, and for every test, I feel like success is more related to my own personal best, and it's more related to if I can't work at this pace, then I can at least try my best to improve from the previous time. I feel like that, in itself, if there is an improvement, I am one step closer to my final goal, which may be an A, it could be a B if I'm struggling, but I think because every student is going at their own pace, everyone's definition of success is going to be different, because your personal best is not always going to be my personal best.*

Community engagement

One of the practices that was strongly represented in the Ambassador Schools was the integration of community elements into school life. Several of the examples drawn from Ambassador Schools in Sydney's Western and South-Western suburbs showed the integration of multicultural practices into school culture and activities. Another example illustrates an even closer integration of school and community whereby rewards for students' behaviours are connected to local businesses. This practice could not be linked to any single teacher or classroom within the school; it required a concerted effort across an entire school culture and, in AS#10 case, across an entire community.

Examples

AS#6 High School

> *I think that the main idea of what everyone has said is based around culture and multiculturalism, which I think is true, but adding onto that, specifically in [AS#6], I feel like we embrace the cultures, and it honestly makes the learning experience, like, a lot more enjoyable, because when we're learning about cultures and countries, some people from those ethnicities get to relate, and add onto that.*

AS#7 High School

> *Here at [AS#7] High School as well, we have a program where we do lion dancing and that comes from just the Asian background. It's a great way to let people who aren't Asian in our school to get a feel of the Asian community as well because we get to perform it during food festivals and other kinds of community events that happen at our school here.*

AS#8 High School

> *Like everyone else said, it's like we have like a strong school community, and we have like events each term. So, what did we have last term? This term we had Jersey Day and we had Spirit Week.*
>
> *I think last semester we had like multicultural, and we celebrate IWD. And then recently we did RUOK Day.*
>
> *It's a very like inclusive school community where we can all collaborate.*

High Expectations

Participants consistently noted the high expectations of their teachers. These discussions were typically linked to concepts of student perseverance and teacher support. For example, students from AS#10 Public School spoke of 'the learning pit', a metaphor used to describe a student's ability to overcome challenging material by climbing out of the pit.

Examples

AS#10 Public School

> *We call it the learning pit...and then you've got to slowly climb out and you are not in the learning pit anymore.*

And the teachers don't yell at you if you get something wrong. They talk to you about what you did wrong, and they say to keep on trying to get it.

High expectations were not only linked to classroom activities; teachers and peers also encouraged students to participate in extra-curricular activities.

AS#7 High School

> *You know how I applied for SRC? I actually wouldn't have applied for it if it weren't for my English teacher. She sort of didn't pressure me but encouraged me a lot and that really boosted my confidence at the time as well because I wasn't very confident during that time. I was only thinking of applying for SRC and she was the one who gave me that little push. I feel like that supported me a lot in the long run leading to where I am now. Not only that, my other peers also encouraged me to apply for SRC and things like that. I just can't thank them enough for it.*

Emphasising wellbeing

Students in Ambassador Schools focus groups frequently reported feeling safe and supported in their schools. AS#7 High School students discussed the school's 'wellbeing'

day to support their mental health and the school's focus on personal bests (rather than fostering a sense of competition amongst peers). AS#2 Public School students discussed their 'buddies', noting that they planned on becoming buddies themselves when reaching Year 6. Overall, there was a strong sense of connection for students in all the Ambassador Schools. The type of connection varied between schools, including connections between students and their broader community, school community, friends, teachers and curriculum.

Examples

AS#7 High School

> *There's also wellbeing day so like if something is happening that day is like dedicated for like your wellbeing this group that decides on what happens on that day and people can join it and give what their advice is… It's a day off where you don't do any subjects you just focus on your wellbeing and do activities that are very active and calm your brain instead of worrying about subjects. It's just in case you are overwhelmed.*
>
> *That's just one thing that our school tells us to do because the more you compare yourself to others, the more you'll put yourself down and so our school always tries to get us to be ourselves, be our own person just so we can better ourselves and not compare ourselves to others and things like that.*

AS#2 Public School

Student: *And the buddies help us.*

Researcher: *The buddies help you? Who are the buddies?*

Student: *They're big* [overtalking 15:33].

Researcher: *Are they from Year Six?*

Student: *Yeah.*

….

Researcher: *So buddies is really important. Do you think you'll be buddies?*

Student: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *To other kids when you're bigger?*

Student: *We will.*

Student: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *You will be buddies? And you'll help out other little kids when you're big kids.*

Student: *Yeah so when we're big kids…*

Researcher: *Look after them. Yeah.*

Student: *We're big kids they'll be little kids and we can teach them.*

Diverse student activities

The Ambassador Schools were characterised by the diversity of activities made available to students. In primary schools, students typically valued diversity of activities because it helped maintain engagement. In secondary schools, diversity was valued because it offered new learning opportunities for students. In general, it seemed that students appreciated exposure to different ways of learning at school to ensure a consistent sense of variety in their school lives.

Examples

AS#9 Public School

> *Yeah, like if you say, "I don't want to do this", then the next day they make it more fun.*

AS#8 High School

> *It exposes us to different things ...like many different… subjects that help us maybe choose a career and future, I feel like the school does that pretty well.*

AS#6 High School

> *Like [student] said, all the teachers definitely have their own way of teaching, and I think – but equally, the teachers also understand that we also have our different ways of learning, like visual learning, sometimes we learn things by reading, or by writing. So, the teachers definitely understand that, and for most subjects, I find them more engaging, because sometimes, the teachers do a bit of everything. We can be watching videos online, we can be writing, or they could be giving us sheets, handouts that we fill out, which I find is interesting, because while it also helps us in a way we already know that we can learn efficiently in, it also helps us discover ways that we didn't know that we could learn so well in. So, that's what I find is really helpful and engaging.*

Enabling conditions

Community and identity

One of the most salient themes in the focus group responses was the connection between schools and their communities. ‘Community’ was typically described in two separate but complementary ways:

1. The physical (e.g., natural landscape, community facilities)
2. The social (e.g., multiculturalism, camaraderie).

Descriptions of community were often couched in positive language. Notably, what was valued by students was highly variable and often contradictory between schools. For example, the vibrant, multicultural, and bustling suburban nature of AS#7 High School was described as a community strength while the students in the small, rural, and quiet AS#10 Public School valued these features of their community. What connects these responses is not the communities' features but rather the students’ sense of belonging and identity that communities offer students.

Examples

AS#7 High School

> *If I could just start, our community is really diverse. It’s multicultural. What I really like about it as well is that a lot of people know each other here and everyone gets along even though we’re all from different backgrounds and things like that.*

AS#10 Public School

> *It's nice because you don't really need to worry about much because not many people here come out a lot because they're mostly older people around here.*

Diverse notions of success

Like the diversity of community characteristics represented, participants articulated a broad range of evidence of success. Unsurprisingly, success was often linked to academic achievement. However, students in Ambassador Schools offered a diversity of markers of success, including sporting achievement, perseverance and achieving personal bests (rather than peer competition). Notably, students did not report success as doing better than others – Ambassador Schools did not seem to foster competition among students, instead encouraging students to compete against their prior selves.

Examples

AS#7 High School

That's just one thing that our school tells us to do because the more you compare yourself to others, the more you'll put yourself down and so our school always tries to get us to be ourselves, be our own person just so we can better ourselves and not compare ourselves to others and things like that. So like [student] said, I reckon that doing well in school is just being the best that you can be, being the best version of yourself and things like that. Our school always tries to make us strive for our better selves, whether it be in sports or grades or just whatever you enjoy. As long as you do well in that, that's what our school tells us, that's what doing well in our school means.

Importance of kindness and caring

Students frequently discussed the importance of emotional support from teachers, peers, and themselves. This support could be within explicit teaching contexts, but more often it related to affective or physical support. What was important for students was feeling safe, supported, and cared for by teachers and peers. This factor is related to, although distinct from, the practice of emphasising wellbeing described above. Emphasising wellbeing in visible and regular activities (e.g., wellbeing days, wellbeing programs), evidenced by students' ability to refer to these practices specifically by name in the focus groups. In contrast, a culture of kindness and caring involved incidental or unplanned actions (e.g., a student helping their peer if they see them crying) that created a sense of safety.

Examples

AS#1 Public School

You have to be showing responsibility and when someone's crying you say "what's wrong" then you bring them - then you wash their face.

AS#2 Public School

Once I fell over and someone was coming. A kid was coming to help me on my first day. And a teacher and a kid and then they sent me up to the office.

AS#6 High School

You pretty much got it on spot, but you know, one other thing is that this school has a very, very much – I mean, pretty much all schools have this, but here, there's very much a zero-tolerance policy to any types of harassment and bullying. For example,

the school will get onto it when there's a report. For example, I reported a student once, because he was a big bully, that's all I'm going to say about him, and within about a week, they'd [acted], so they listen to the students' concerns.

Conclusion

The focus group interviews revealed specific practices that enabled Ambassador Schools to achieve success. Overall, the data suggests that Ambassador Schools are distinguished by the consistency and scale of the practice. They do what works more routinely and broadly, making effective practices part of their everyday school culture.

It may be possible to generalise these effective practices across a range of schools. Another method of generalisation that might be used in concert with the micro-practices would be to ensure the antecedent cultural conditions that allow this repertoire to be fully expressed in the Ambassador Schools are present in the intervention schools. Self Determination Theory and Teacher Collective Efficacy are theoretical tools likely to be useful to this end.

4 Results: Surveys

This second results chapter synthesises the survey data collected from principals, teachers, students, and parents as part of the project. The chapter begins by describing the method and focuses on distinguishing factors that Ambassador Schools participants reported. The surveys did not focus on specific learning practices but rather on constructs associated with educational success. For example, survey school climate was of interest, given the importance highlighted through other forms of data collection.

Method and data

Participants and Procedures

Five online surveys were created to gather the perspectives of 5 stakeholder groups from the 26 participating schools (10 Ambassador Schools and 16 Contextually Similar Schools): Principal, Teacher, Primary School Student, High School Student, and Parent/Carer.

The surveys were designed within the Qualtrics platform (licensed through UNSW), with modified versions of student and parent surveys provided in hard copy to schools that expressed a preference for collecting responses in person.

Most survey data were collected online with staggered start dates (see Table 6 for a summary).

Table 6. Timeline of 2022 online data collection

Participant Group	First Online Respondent	Last Online Respondent
Principal	29 July	23 September
Teacher	29 July	17 October
Primary Student	31 August	3 November
High School Student	9 September	4 November
Parent/Carer	15 September	21 November

Note. Data entry of responses from hard-copy surveys were completed at the end of November.

Participants' responses were anonymous, with only school names used as identifiers during analyses.

Participants

An overview of survey participants (by school type) is presented in the table below. For the purposes of this report, the analysis team have summarised the key strengths identified by Ambassador School participants.

Table 7. Overview of survey participants

	Ambassador Schools	Contextually Similar Schools	Total
Principals	9	14	23
Teachers	253	97	350
Parents/Carers	253	16	269
Primary Students	1025	1134	2159
Secondary Students	2515	1128	3643
Total	**4055**	**2389**	**6444**

Measures

Measures and scales within each survey were a combination of existing validated items and self-developed items specific to the purpose of the project and to each respective stakeholder group. Survey development began with measures and scales previously administered through a Department-funded project on rural and remote schools. Items were adapted for the purposes of the ASRC Stage 1, with additional scales included to help identify areas of perceived ‘success’ at the participating schools. Table 8 presents the types of survey data collected with examples.

Table 8. Examples of ASRC survey data

	Principals & Teachers	**Students (Primary & Secondary)**	**Parents/ Carers**
Demographic information	School name Gender & age Level & subject/s Qualifications Experience/context of schooling & teaching	School name Gender & age Year Level Language/s Family members	School name Gender & age Occupation Language/s
School experiences	Beliefs about teacher & parent influence; Beliefs about students (general & ability in literacy, numeracy); School climate	Beliefs about learning (e.g., feeling capable in literacy & numeracy); School climate	Beliefs about teachers' influence on students; School climate
Motivation & Engagement	Job satisfaction Self- & collective efficacy Adaptability Orientations (growth; mastery); perceived autonomy support	Enjoy, value, and feel agentic at school Self-efficacy Adaptability Orientations (growth; mastery); perceived autonomy support	Parental engagement
Aspirations & Plans	Perceptions of parents/ carers & students; Expectations of different student pathways	Importance of continuing past Year 10; Encouraged by teachers & parents/carers; Perceived barriers	Importance of continuing past Year 10; Encouraged by teachers & parents/carers; Community connections; Perceived barriers
Opportunities for success	Professional learning	Importance of learning interesting things, playing in sports or clubs, teachers that care, families and community involved, outside space, etc.	Importance of teachers with subject/ year expertise, choices, playing in sports or clubs, teachers that care, families and community involved, outside space, etc.

Analytical Strategy

The analytical procedures and statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) software.

Procedures prior to analyses included filtering out responses that did not meet the inclusion criteria. For example, participants who did not list their school's name were excluded, as were those who returned incomplete surveys.

Responses for each survey type were first analysed and synthesised to identify strengths-based results across surveys for each participating school (see Key Strengths listed below).

Next, statistical analyses such as *t*-tests were conducted to evaluate the difference in mean scores on a range of constructs across different school types. This included:

1. Ambassador Schools and Contextually Similar Schools (dependent on sample size)
2. Contextual groupings (pre-determined matches of Ambassador Schools and Contextually Similar School/s)
3. Primary and high Schools
4. Metropolitan and regional/rural.

Key strengths

The strengths highlighted in this section are not necessarily unique or greater at Ambassador Schools: instead, this section includes examples of highly rated responses by participants. Sample sizes also determined the extent to which mean differences could be calculated. For example, the principal survey results are only presented for the Ambassador Schools and are purely descriptive given the small sample size (AS = 8 and CSS = 14).

Principals

Participating Ambassador School principals (4 males and 4 females; Mean age of 49 years) all reported high job satisfaction.

Most (6 out of 8) reported strengths in the following areas:

- **School experiences:** Teacher-student relationships were identified as a positive influence that included respectful teachers who reportedly used structured strategies that supported student agency, such as listening to students' thoughts and providing relevant support.

- **Motivation and engagement:** This included confidence in their own leadership (self-efficacy), adaptability, and management (e.g., promoting their school's multi-faceted development), as well as in the professional abilities of their school staff in terms of productivity, work collaboration, and problem-solving. A growth orientation was reported with strong beliefs about the abilities and behaviours of students, teachers, and principals in learning, teaching, and leadership being changeable and believing in its capacity to improve (e.g., growth mindset).

Teachers

Teachers (*N* = 253) from 8 of 10 participating Ambassador Schools provided survey responses. Ambassador School teachers (67% female) ranged in age from 22 to 75 (*Mean* = 42 years old) with one who identified themselves as Aboriginal. Most were teaching Years 7-12 (80%) and 25% were 'teaching out of field' for at least some part of their teaching load. Primary and High School teachers at Ambassador Schools reported similar strengths across a range of measures known to influence student experience and achievement.

Strengths reported by teachers were summarised across the 8 schools, with most (at least 6 out of 8 schools) providing high ratings in the following areas:

- **School experiences:** The encouragement – and the involvement – of parents/carers in student learning by the school and the perceived preparedness of students for their next stage of education was highly rated. Furthermore, the teachers reported strong beliefs in students' ability to understand schoolwork, to do well in mathematics and/or numeracy, English and/or literacy, and their desire to help/support students through effective teacher-student relationships.

- **Motivation and engagement:** A high level of teachers' self-efficacy was reported in relation to student engagement (e.g., motivate students to do well in school, help them to value learning), instructional strategies (e.g., craft good questions for students) and classroom management (e.g., control/prevent disruptive behaviour). Teachers were reportedly adaptable in new/existing situations (e.g., think of new options and revise/adjust their thoughts). In addition, teachers believed a student's ability is not fixed at birth and can be improved throughout the school (e.g., growth mindset). Similarly, they believed every teacher could improve their natural/true teaching abilities using different methods throughout their career. It was noted that teachers tried to improve/understand/master their content in the best possible way for better outcomes.

Primary school students

After conducting initial statistical procedures, the final primary student dataset from online and hard copy surveys from both Ambassador Schools and CSS consisted of responses from 2,121 primary students (*Mean* age = 9.46 years).

Students from 15 out of 19 participating primary schools (7 Ambassador Schools and 8 Contextually Similar Schools) provided survey responses. Ambassador Schools were represented by 1,013 students (49.7% female) who ranged in age from 6 to 13 years old (*Mean* age for Ambassador Schools primary students = 10). Examples from a range of measures known to influence student experience and achievement included high ratings of motivation and engagement; motivation (*M* = 6.10 out of 7), engagement (*M* = 5.53), and perceived autonomy support (*M* = 5.61 out of 7). Overall, strengths-based reports for Ambassador Schools highlighted three areas:

- **School experiences:** Self-beliefs in learning (e.g., competence in numeracy and literacy-related subject content) were highly rated. Most students were reportedly confident in the knowledge learned from the school and concentrated on the schoolwork. School climate (e.g., supportive and safe school environment) was also rated highly.

- **Motivation and engagement:** High ratings of learning motivation with classroom and school engagement were reported by most students. They perceived staying at school as enjoyable and strongly valued the importance of learning in school. Students also positively reported on growth orientation (e.g., curiosity and growth mindset when learning new things).

- **Opportunities for success:** Access to various resources, social, and sports spaces was considered important. For example, students rated multiple aspects of school life highly and included high-academic performance, a variety of learning opportunities, friendships, teacher-student relationships, and outside space. Other positive influences on school life, such as family and community involvement and physical activity, were also rated highly.

High school students

Students (*N* = 3643) from 6 out of 7 participating high schools (3 Ambassador Schools and 4 CSS) provided survey responses. Ages ranged from 11 to 19 (Mean age of 14) with more than half (55.1%) identifying as female. The Ambassador Schools high schools were represented by 2,515 students. From a list of 15 aspects of school, students rated subject choice as very important; mean value of 6.25 (out of 7).

Students at Ambassador Schools also provided high ratings across a range of measures known to influence student experience and achievement. Examples of motivation and engagement, rated on a scale of 1 to 7, include highly valuing school (*M* = 5.25), mastery orientation (*M* = 5.38), personal best growth orientation (*M* = 5.41), and perceived autonomy support (*M* = 5.17).

Overall, strengths-based reports for Ambassador Schools highlighted four areas:

- **School experiences:** Influential teacher and school factors were highly rated and included specific influences from their mathematics teachers (e.g., answers their questions fully and carefully by making them understand the needs of the class).

- **Motivation and engagement:** Students provided positive ratings when asked about their growth-oriented motivation to learn (e.g., personal goals to learn better than before) and agreed that it is important to understand and master the topic/content in class as much as possible. There was overall agreement in students' beliefs about their ability to improve at school and about the importance of their learning. Moreover, students reported positively on adaptability (e.g., can adjust their thinking or expectations and seek out new information or resources or people in a new situation at school) and on understanding that what they are learning at school will benefit their future.

- **Aspirations and Plans:** Overall, students agreed that education beyond Year 10 and 12 was personally important and of importance to their friends and their community. The role of parents/guardians in encouraging students to do well in school and stay after Years 10 and 12 was also considered a significant influence. Aspirations and plans for after Year 10 were also broadly influenced by things happening around the world.

- **Opportunities for success:** Students placed a high importance on a range of opportunity indicators such as getting good grades, having good friends and fun at school, caring teachers, subject choice and opportunities provided through sport or clubs.

Parents/carers

Most Ambassador School parent/carer participants who completed the survey (*N* = 253) were female (78%) and aged 40-54 (69.4%) with a variety of occupations reported. Most (93.3%) reported speaking at least one language other than English at home (44% Vietnamese) and 3.6% identified as Aboriginal, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

School experiences

Parents rated positively (agree/strongly agree) the extent to which teachers at their children's school provide sufficient support to students.

Motivation and engagement

Parental engagement was identified as a key strength through positive ratings.

Aspirations and plans

Student aspirations and parents'/carers' educational plans for their children indicated, for example, that they agreed that teachers had high expectations for their students, encouraged higher education as a post-school option, believed that the students can learn, and interacted positively in teacher-student relationships.

Opportunities for success

Parents highly rated the importance of opportunities for success provided by the school and beyond (e.g., subject choices, opportunities for sports, family and community involvement). Parents also rated positively (agree/strongly agree) the extent to which teachers at their children's school provided sufficient support to students. For example, they agreed that teachers had high expectations for their students, encouraged higher education as a post-school option, believed that the students can learn, and interacted positively in teacher-student relationships.

Enabling conditions

In addition to the key strengths identified by participants (summarised in the previous section), statistical analyses such as *t*-tests were conducted to evaluate the difference in mean scores on a range of constructs across different school types. This included comparisons of survey data from Ambassador Schools and CS schools (overall and across contextual groupings of Ambassador Schools and CS matches), Ambassador Schools Primary and Ambassador Schools High School (students), and Ambassador Schools Metropolitan and Ambassador Schools Regional/Rural Schools (primary students).

Ambassador Schools Principals

Initial results highlight the ratings of 3 factors (out of 20 possible factors):

- School support (M = 6.72, SD = .36)

- Importance of education (*M* = 6.81, *SD* = .37)
- Parental engagement (*M* = 6.54, *SD* = .41).

Ambassador Schools Teachers

Initial analyses were conducted to examine the importance of 8 factors (out of 14 possible factors).

For Ambassador Schools primary teachers, the following 3 factors may be particularly important:

- Parental engagement and student aspirations (*M* = 5.98, *SD* = .71)
- General and domain-specific beliefs (*M* = 5.86, *SD* = .69)
- Teacher-student relationships (*M* = 4.68, *SD* = .42).

For Ambassador Schools high school teachers, initial results highlight the ratings of several factors, including parental engagement and student aspirations (*M* = 5.32, *SD* = .90), general and domain-specific beliefs (*M* = 4.73, *SD* = .86), and teacher-student relationships (*M* = 4.19, *SD* = .57).

Examples are presented in Table 9, with higher scores indicative of agreement.

Table 9. Perceptions of Ambassador Schools teachers at primary schools and high schools (mean values)

	School Experiences		**Motivation and Engagement**				
	Teacher-Student Relation	**School Climate**	**Job Satisfaction**	**TSE**	**CTE**	**Adapt**	**Autonomy Support**
Scale	1 - 5	1 - 7	1 - 7	1 - 9	1 - 9	1 - 7	1 - 7
PS	*M* =4.68	*M* =6.25	*M* =6.14	*M* =7.14	*M* =7.46	*M* =5.87	*M* =5.86
HS	*M* =4.19	*M* =5.86	*M* =5.48	*M* =6.68	*M* =6.16	*M* =5.5	*M* =5.15
Total	*M* =4.29	*M* =5.94	*M* =5.61	*M* =6.78	*M* =6.42	*M* =5.59	*M* =5.29

Note: Mean values are based on Ambassador School responses <49 primary teachers and <193 high school teachers. TSE = Teacher Self-Efficacy, CTE = Collective Teacher Efficacy, PS = Primary School Teacher, HS = High School Teacher

Ambassador Schools Primary and High School Students

Overall primary students provided higher ratings for school experiences, motivation and engagement, and opportunities for success, whereas high school students provided higher ratings for aspirations and plans. Comparisons of Ambassador Schools student responses also revealed higher ratings at regional/rural schools for student experiences and opportunities for success, whereas ratings for aspirations and plans were higher at metropolitan schools.

Ambassador Schools Student Responses

Examples of enabling conditions that may be contributing to student success in Ambassador Schools related to students' school experiences, their motivation and engagement, aspirations and plans, and the opportunities to achieve success that they perceived.

Survey responses from primary school students in Ambassador Schools evidence high levels of confidence and effort in English and mathematics ((*M* = 4.22, *SD* = .62). High school students in Ambassador Schools also reported relatively high ability and confidence to learn English and Maths, along with an appreciation of English and mathematics teaching facilities in their schools. In addition to higher coping ability, Ambassador Schools high school students were reportedly giving their best, understanding and mastering material in a class at a high level. These students also reported high levels of confidence in future planning and preparation, with encouragement from family and teachers. They also placed a high degree of importance on getting good grades, the availability of school resources (e.g., sports, clubs, friends, facilities, teachers) and their families.

5 Results: School Observations

This third and final results chapter is divided into two sections and outlines the key findings from two types of observations with schools involved in this research project. These were:

1. Shadowing observations with a principal, teacher, and student, and
2. Classroom observations with a teacher and their class of students.

Shadowing

The following sections present the synthesis of the participant shadowing data collected from the principals, teachers, and students from participating schools.

The following sections:

1. Describe the data collection and analysis method, and
2. Present findings about key strengths and practices observed among Ambassador Schools.

The key strengths and practices have been organised into four broad categories:

- School administration and management
- Student wellbeing and welfare support
- Staffing and professional working environments, and
- Teaching and classroom-related practices.

Many of these specific practices were also found in CSS. The Ambassador Schools appeared to practice and embed them within whole school contexts in more proactive, comprehensive, collaborative, holistic, and consistent ways.

Methodology and data

In total, data from 61 sets of shadowing notes were included in this synthesis. Table 10 summarises the data used in the analysis.

Table 10. Shadowing data collection summary

	Ambassador Schools	Contextually Similar Schools	Total
Number of Principals shadowed	10	11	21
Number of Teachers shadowed	10	11	21
Number of Students shadowed	10	9	19
Total	**30**	**31**	**61**

This analysis included participant shadowing data from 21 schools (10 Ambassador School and 11 Contextually Similar Schools), with data obtained from a principal, teacher, and student in most schools. Of these, 16 were primary schools and 5 were secondary schools. Each school's data was analysed and summarised into individual report templates identifying key strengths and practices observed during shadowing, including illustrative examples and quotes. Individual school reports were then thematically coded and summarised into a Microsoft Excel table to allow for side-by-side comparison between all Ambassador Schools/Contextually Similar Schools, and individual Ambassador School and matched Contextually Similar Schools.

The following sections provide a synthesis of the most common and distinctive strengths and practices identified across Ambassador Schools through participant shadowing, with additional insights gained through comparison between data from Ambassador Schools and Contextually Similar Schools.

Observed strengths and practices

School administration and management

Leadership qualities

There was slightly more evidence among Ambassador Schools of leaders who were highly knowledgeable of their community, school, and students' contexts, strategically innovative, truly collaborative, community-oriented, highly resourceful, and especially proficient in prioritising focus and tasks.

Effective administration and resource management

One interesting practice that was explicitly captured in 2 Ambassador Schools were references to the professional boundaries of leaders who were identified as 'strong leaders'. These leaders were also identified as having clear divisions between their professional and personal lives.

Examples

AS#3 Public School

> *Every day as soon as I get in the car – I don't take things home with me. I don't think it's fair to my family. I don't think it's fair to me. I think it's important that I'm able to be able to level things out and put them into perspective and when I think I'm ready to do it, I will do it and set it up… I don't read my emails at home...*

AS#2 Public School and CSS Public School:

The principal at AS#2 Public School had clear professional boundaries and practices in place – typically arriving to school at 6.45 am, leaving school at 3.20 pm with an explicit practice to not read or respond to emails or 'dojos' after 4.30 pm, or before 8 am.

Although these examples in the shadowing data are limited, they are significant. The examples stand out because they sit in stark contrast to a significant number of examples in the data that showed staff (particularly principals and assistant principals) at both Ambassador School and Contextually Similar Schools) having excessive and potentially unsustainable workloads. For example, the assistant principal at a Contextually Similar School who, on top of working typical school days, also worked late into the evening 3-4 nights a week, and a full day most weekends, stated:

> *I love helping people… I was just supporting people to be their best and when I see the impact on kids, that makes it worthwhile. But it's extremally exhausting and it's not sustainable.*

Leaders in Ambassador Schools were explicitly focused on finding ways to minimise the administrative burden on staff (especially teaching staff) so more time and focus could be given to teaching and learning. This involved a combination of strategies to make more time to focus on 'what really matters' including:

- Minimising the number and amount of time spent in meetings
- Facilitating collaborative practices that support autonomy (such as sharing of work and resources and reducing workload from waiting for approvals etc)
- Establishing a strong and trusted executive team to oversee different aspects of school planning and management, and
- Developing useful systems and resources for staff to use in lesson planning and preparation.

AS#1 Public School

In line with a school-wide implementation of a direct instruction teaching model, leadership had invested in a comprehensive library of resources available on the staff intranet. Resources included detailed lesson plans, video demonstrations of lesson plans, teaching practices and classroom management strategies, and a library of activity guides. Not only did this support consistency in school-wide practice, but it minimised the amount of work required by teachers to plan out lessons.

AS#4 Public School

Teachers were provided with resources to assist in lesson planning and preparation (such as lesson plans, warm-up activity PowerPoints, etc.). Developing these resources was labour-intensive originally but ultimately made class revision and preparation much easier and quicker for teaching staff.

AS#10 Public School and AS#9 Public School

Another feature observed more often in Ambassador Schools was a high level of resourcefulness to support student learning. Many Ambassador Schools for example:

- Run additional programs to support students and the broader community
- Maximise access to and use of grants and government program funding
- Facilitate the provision of additional staff in the classroom (AS#10 Public School)
- Provide one-to-one reading support to a specific student in need (AS#9 Public School).

Evidence-based and data-informed practice

Examples of evidence-based and data-driven practice were found in the data for most schools. Ambassador Schools were more likely to be firmly grounded in established evidence-based practice and theory which was embedded in school structure. They were highly effective in analysing and using existing data sets (e.g., NAPLAN, People Matters survey, etc.) and implemented comprehensive and independent data collection processes within the school.

Examples

AS#9 Public School

There was a strong focus within the school on data-driven practice with diagnostic data collection processes woven throughout lessons, involving teachers taking notes on

individual students relating to progress, needs, etc. There was a strong understanding that data was crucial to gain insights into the school and to provide guidance in planning, management, and classroom practice, with expressions that this process appeared to have improved teachers effectiveness with students across multiple-stage classrooms.

AS#1 Public School

The principal of the school had commissioned an independent study and review of the school in 2015, resulting in several recommendations that were delivered in a report and which the principal has strived to implement into the school plan.

AS#6 High School

It was also expressed that it is important to be mindful of any measures that are adopted and used to define 'success' to ensure that students are still understood as being individuals with unique qualities, capabilities and needs. This includes evidence-based strategies determined from whole-of-school data.

As well as typical 'measures' of success being measured, it was seen as equally important to keep tabs on other areas of school life to measure progress such as student wellbeing and mental health. Moreover, it was important to treat students as individuals with distinct backgrounds, needs, etc. and that "they were not just numbers and data" (Teacher).

Student wellbeing support

Student wellbeing support

Regard for student wellbeing was captured in the shadowing data for most schools. Schools were responding to varying levels and types of student wellbeing including the negative mental health impacts of COVID-19 restrictions, students with trauma (such as among many students with refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds), and the unique needs of various student cohorts (such as Indigenous or EAL/D students), thus shaping the types of approaches and interventions schools used.

Shadowing data suggested that student wellbeing is well supported in Ambassador Schools, with several key practices and features observed (and explored in the following sections) that may contribute to their effectiveness.

Holistic views of student wellbeing

Holistic views of wellbeing involved developing an understanding of and consideration for, students' different types of needs including (but not limited to) their emotional, social, cultural, physical, academic, and environmental needs, and how these interact and impact each other. When viewed in this way, prioritising student wellbeing isn't seen as separate

from academic performance but rather connected to and with the potential to enhance student performance. Wellbeing was conducive to academic growth and thus it was necessary to consult with students and consider wellbeing in school-wide practice.

Example

AS#3 Public School

> *We created a wellbeing environment for our school and the reason we created that was based on the information that we have from our students and [on] how successful they can be. (Principal)*

Integration of holistic and comprehensive wellbeing approaches

Ambassador Schools were more likely to have adopted holistic approaches to wellbeing. They treated their school and school community as though they consisted of various interconnected parts that could facilitate improved student wellbeing. Schools with particularly comprehensive wellbeing support tended to engage the entire school community (which could include leadership, teaching and support staff, parents, caregivers and families, and other community connections) on multiple levels to support the wellbeing of students.

Example

AS#2 Public School

The school principal had adopted a strong wellbeing focus which involved embedded strategies and practices that supported wellbeing levels, including:

- The adoption of ‘compassionate leadership strategies’
- Partnering with [DoE approved wellbeing provider] to aid in the implementation of integrated, school-wide practices (including informing lesson planning and classroom practice) to facilitate mental wellness
- Integrating values designed to promote wellbeing into the school values and culture (namely, the values of gratitude, empathy and mindfulness in line with the [DoE approved wellbeing provider] design)
- Normalising the act of ‘checking in’ on one another (which was also an observed in practice both among and between leadership, staff, and students), and
- Working collaboratively with staff to assess individual students’ wellbeing needs and develop strategies to support them.

Holistic approaches also recognised that the wellbeing of the school community and its various factors (i.e., wellbeing and parents/caregivers) were connected to, and thus impacted, student wellbeing. For example, issues with staff wellbeing had negative implications for students.

Deep knowledge and focus on students' wellbeing needs

Present at nearly all Ambassador Schools was a deep knowledge and understanding of the school context and students among school leadership and/or staff. This could include knowledge of local and school community contexts (such as knowledge and consideration for factors of cultural diversity, socioeconomic status, local industries, geographic challenges, and zoning changes) and knowledge about students' specific contexts, situations, backgrounds and needs at the individual level. This deep knowledge could be used to better understand the wellbeing needs of the school community, but also could inform the development of approaches and interventions that were suitable to the particular school context or student.

Example

AS#3 Public School

During a meeting, the principal and assistant principal focused on individual students' wellbeing support needs, demonstrating a deep knowledge of specific students' backgrounds, home/family situations, and mental health issues. This included discussing a specific student who was impacted by PTSD and discussing how best to support them, which so far had involved working with the family and connecting the student to a federally-funded organisation that supports children and their families to access psychological and psychiatric treatment.

Where deep knowledge of a particular cohort of students was not already present, schools sometimes opted to employ support staff with relevant knowledge who could advise on how best to support these students appropriately, including school counsellors and community liaison officers.

AS#2 Public School

The school had recently employed a Ukrainian refugee as a community liaison officer for the school to aid in supporting the increasing number of Ukrainian refugees who were moving into the local community (and the Ukrainian children who would likely attend the school).

Proactive responses to student wellbeing issues

Ambassador Schools had more proactive processes in place to support student wellbeing. These processes tended to be part of a deeply integrated and holistic approach that aimed to meet students' various wellbeing needs by building structures and practices within the school that minimised risks of issues occurring, or to build capacities to manage issues effectively if they did arise.

Examples

AS#9 Public School

AS#9 Public School had several distinctive and proactive wellbeing practices that included fortnightly check-ins with each student's parents/carers (providing ongoing opportunities to touch base, receive updates on students' issues, needs or progress which could be recorded in student profiles, and provide support to parents/caregivers where needed), and weekly wellbeing built into the school curriculum to develop students' emotional regulation, resilience and coping skills. The school leadership staff believed this contributed to improved student emotional wellbeing, staff-student relationships, and a sense of comfort in asking for help.

AS#6 High School

The principal had worked closely with their leadership team to adopt and implement a proactive model of school management, in contrast to a more reactive approach that had been used in the past to respond to the school's complex context and challenges. It was felt that a proactive model better met the goals and aspirations of staff, students, and the wider community and was more attentive to the needs of the school community. This model was characterised by a clearly defined and mapped process of improvement which was informed by the executive team's deep knowledge of the school community context and its needs.

Staffing and professional working environment

Staffing and a positive working environment

Most Ambassador Schools had relatively stable (i.e., permanent, long-term staff), numerous (with some schools having additional staff in classrooms to provide additional support and facilitate small group learning) and/or appropriately qualified staff teaching to their specific subject expertise.

Example

AS#6 High School

A key strength identified by leadership at the school was the stability of its staff (including teaching and administrative staff), who had connections to the local area and who were typically committed to the school as long-term employees. The school also managed to retain early career teachers and attract casual staff despite shortages. It was also beneficial that there were members of staff who specialised in EAL/D pedagogies and who were culturally and linguistically diverse, with members of staff fluently speaking a variety of languages, including those that were commonly spoken by the largely EAL/D student population.

Whilst a multitude of factors (some of which may not be within the power of the school to change) may contribute to staffing issues, practices that promote staff wellbeing, relationships, and professional development may aid in attracting or retaining staff.

Staff agency and involvement in professional learning

A characteristic that distinguished Ambassador Schools was the higher levels of agency and involvement that staff had in their professional learning including staff independently seeking out external opportunities (and being supported by the school to do so), choosing the topic and focus of professional learning sessions, or being the ones to plan, develop and deliver professional learning.

Examples

AS#5 Public School

The school had developed and invested in a comprehensive and regular professional learning structure for staff, which included:

- Weekly professional learning sessions that were typically initiated and led by staff members
- A once-per-term (i.e., four days per year) collective professional learning day for teachers (supported by significant financial investment), as well as
- Additional professional learning sessions that were occasionally organised by executive staff focusing on the school's strategic directions.

AS#7 High School

The principal had a strong focus on professional learning with whole-school professional learning sessions in place (i.e., five sessions per term). A teacher explained that staff were

given the choice of what theme professional learning would focus on each school term. They explained that the theme that had been chosen for that term was ‘data’ which aligned with the school’s strategic direction to improve data collection and analysis to inform school practice, however they had specifically chosen the topic to learn how to use data analysis to better identify which students needed help and how to better support them.

Collaboration and agency in planning and practice

Most schools demonstrated some evidence of collaboration among staff, however Ambassador Schools were more likely to evidence stronger collaborative cultures and practices overall which were apparent in such things as an explicit focus among leadership on collaborative approaches, systematically embedding practices to facilitate collaboration among staff (such as through regular collaborative meetings or staff-led sessions).

Examples

AS#5 Public School

The principal emphasised the value of collaboration (rather than cooperation) as underpinning their approach to leadership, which was enacted through various embedded practices that also enabled staff agency. This included working in collaboration with assistant principals to enact the strategy improvement plan with APs having relative freedom to manage the strategic direction they were responsible for, encouraging staff to pitch ideas for professional learning and lead weekly sessions, dedicating one day per school term to collaborative professional learning for teaching staff, and having teaching staff be responsible for coordinating their own meetings and planning activities for each school stage.

AS#4 Public School

Leadership encouraged staff to work collaboratively and supported this by aligning RFF time of teachers on the same stage with the expectation that about half of that time would be spent working collaboratively to plan across each stage. Working collaboratively in this way appeared to reduce individual workload and decrease the need to work outside of school hours.

Collaborative approaches also tended to bolster teachers’ autonomy, with some examples among Ambassador Schools included encouraging staff to pitch, develop, or coordinate school events, initiatives, and programs, stepping into roles with more planning responsibilities (e.g., AP, technology ‘leaders’, professional learning facilitators), and giving teachers agency in the classroom (such as to try new teaching techniques or adapt lesson plans to meet the needs of their specific class).

AS#8 High School

During a debrief meeting with an early career teacher, the principal highlighted that the school had a "history of good beginning teachers growly quickly" with teacher responding:

> *"All thankfully because of this environment with positive reinforcement, encouraging each other and experimenting with new ways of teaching styles in any form – to just experiment with different teaching strategies to see if they work and if they don't, at least you have the freedom to, which is a wonderful thing."*

Agency in the classroom was also observed in another teacher's explanation of her morning:

> *"Once I got to school, I checked the success criteria... And I had a look at what I had done... because I was doing a similar lesson to what I'd done with another year 8 class where I'd kind of winged it on the spot. Like I had my program and I have my plan of what I'm going to do but it took a slightly different direction that I felt worked really well and I wanted to try that with this morning's class. And so I revised what I had done for that class."*

Teaching and classroom-related practices

Positive staff-student interactions and relationships

Redirection of student behaviour was rarely needed in Ambassador School classrooms. When required, redirection was always done casually and gently but firmly, and never involved punitive or shame-inducing tactics.

Example

AS#3 Public School

The teacher was always positive, enthusiastic, encouraging and provided lots of positive reinforcement to students through compliments, especially for positive behaviours – "how lovely, you have such beautiful manners ", "you are so kind", "thank you ", "I love that you are looking, you know what to say!", "thank you so much!", "you're working so hard, I'm so proud of you". She interacted with children as if what they had to say was important and valued. The children were very comfortable with the teacher and happily approached her to ask questions or strike up conversations of interest ("If you could have any superpower, what would it be?").

AS#8 High School

Whilst providing feedback to a teacher, the principal explained:

"It's never made into a thing. It's not drawn attention to... You don't treat the challenging behaviour like it's an issue. It's a very respectful way to deal with a class that is lacking in focus. But because you are showing respect to the students, to give them more time to improve or change that behaviour, they do, and they do so straight away. You didn't once address a student for bad behaviour. You're very quick and natural in acknowledging that something is going on that you want to change… You just move on, and in all cases, the students moved on with you."

Positive interactions between school principals and students were more often evident in Ambassador Schools. Positive principal-student interactions were facilitated by creating numerous day-to-day opportunities for principals to engage with students in positive ways, including being present at morning drop-off/afternoon pick-up to greet students, taking on recess and lunch duty, dropping into classes, having an open-door policy, stopping to chat with students throughout the day (such as walking through the hall or library), or actively participating in school activities and programs. Interactions were friendly, relaxed, encouraging and supportive, and these characteristics remained even when encountering difficult situations.

ExampleAS#9 Public School

Before the first bell, the principal was notified of a critical incident with a student who had locked themselves in the bathroom … They went and spoke to the student and provided a safe and quiet space for them. The principal took responsibility for supporting the student [over the course of the day] … talked with the student about their struggles (e.g., home issues) … and conducted a follow-up with the parents. There was a very strong rapport between the principal and the student, and it was clear that the student had complete trust in the principal as a major source of support.

A strong indication of strong staff-student relationships, which was more prominent in Ambassador Schools, was students being the ones to initiate interactions with staff (including in their 'free' time), such as going into their classrooms before class to greet their teacher or talk, visiting the principal in their office, or staying after class to continue an informal conversation.

ExampleAS#2 Public School

There were several occasions where students approached and initiated friendly interactions with staff, including a student visiting the principal's office to 'show off' their costume for Ukraine Day they were proud of and several students 'popping in' to visit their class teacher for a 'hello' or a chat before the school day had begun.

High student expectations and strong guidance and support from staff

Consistent use of language around success and frequent, explicit communication of high expectations was more evident among Ambassador Schools. It appeared to be very important that communication of high expectations was supported by ensuring that these expectations were also achievable for students (as a group but also individually). Strategies to build students' confidence to help them believe in their ability to achieve success included encouragement and positive affirmation, as well as acknowledging progress and achievement. Strategies to provide the necessary instruction, guidance and supports necessary to help students achieve included providing clear and consistent communication around learning goals, lesson intentions and success criteria, and adapting lessons and strategies to suit students' needs and capacities. Definitions of achievement and success also extended beyond the academic to include positive behaviour and personal growth.

Example

AS#8 High School

Lesson intentions, learning goals and success/marking criteria for class activities and assessments were all clearly and explicitly communicated to students at the beginning of classes, including verbally and through visual reminders (PowerPoint slides, written on the board, etc.). Teachers would come back to these points throughout their lessons to ensure students had a clear understanding of expectations. This appeared to be an ingrained and consistent process as this was noted in three different classes (English, Music, and Biology) all run by different teachers. Students appeared to be engaged and understood what was expected of them.

AS#7 High School

Overheard in a discussion among teachers during a professional learning session:

> *"You need to teach students the key points so they don't feel they can fail… Teach them the small techniques. For example, with a 7-mark question, teach them to at least write a definition so they can get a mark or two rather than waffle on and get no marks because some students who see the questions might just go... 'I can't do it.'… The idea is to tell the students that there is always a way to pass and that the exams are made in a way so that [they] can pass."*

Acknowledging and rewarding success

More commonly among Ambassador Schools, school-wide scale student achievement was acknowledged and rewarded in several ways, such as through school award/reward systems, the presentation of awards at daily assemblies and award ceremonies, through

structured reward systems, public recognition in school assemblies, schools' social media or newsletters and personal recognition by leadership (i.e., principal speaking to students' directly to acknowledge achievement).

Example

AS#1 Public School

There was an established 'Gold Award' system that involved students earning 'points' for achievements in class and positive behaviours (such as those that were in line with the core values of the school). Once a student had earned enough points, they were invited to an award ceremony to receive an award badge which their families were invited to attend and participate in. Those who had earned a Gold Award were also treated to a trip to the cinemas at the end of the year. The award was designed to be attainable by all students through good behaviour and effort and did not require any 'special' or outstanding level of achievement. Students who had received the award demonstrated great pride in their achievements, and the prospect of getting points appeared to encourage increased engagement and effort from many students.

AS#3 Public School

In classrooms, the school assigned points typically associated with the five school values – learning, responsibility, cooperation, kindness, and respect – however, teachers were able to incorporate other behaviours/expectations to assign points in line with what they thought suitable for their specific class. In an observed lesson, the teacher had set up a prize system where once students had reached 20 points, they could spin a wheel and win a prize. The prizes had been designed by the students themselves and included things like 'sit next to a friend', 'use a pen for writing' and so on.

Establishing consistency and routines

Two Ambassador Schools demonstrated an explicit and dedicated focus on establishing consistency, stability, and routines in their schools. This included implementing school-wide or class-specific teaching approaches, lesson structures, and classroom routines, as well as making efforts to support staffing stability.

Examples

AS#1 Public School

The school had gone to great efforts to devise and implement strategies to roll out its school-wide direct instruction teaching model to maximise consistency and to support teachers through the changes. This included whole-school professional learning sessions, the development of comprehensive resources (e.g., lesson plans, video demonstrations,

activity library), and an in-depth ‘one-to-one curriculum implementation strategy’ (which involved teachers meeting individually with a curriculum leader every week where they would determine goals and discuss how best to support the teacher, such as by observing and providing feedback on lessons, taking classes to model a teaching strategy, organise team-teaching sessions, conduct assessment moderation). The school already appeared to have successfully established norms and routines, which seemed to enhance the flow of lessons with students already having a sense of what they needed to do, where they needed to go, and how they should behave.

AS#10 Public School

The school prioritised consistency, ensuring that both students and teachers had consistency in their teaching/learning on a day-to-day basis, which was facilitated through structured days and routines. This was supported in various ways, such as through leadership dealing with unexpected events or changed directly to minimise the impact on students/staff, a focus among leadership on maintaining consistency in school planning, working to ensure stable and permanent staffing, and supporting routines and structure in the classroom with the observed demonstrating a very structured and systematic approach in the classroom (such as through the presence of a class/lesson schedule on the board that students could see and which they would tick off as they day progressed). Ingrained routines appeared to enhance lesson transitions and reduce the need to redirect students' behaviours.

Differentiation and inclusivity

Differentiation was evident in Ambassador Schools in the form of building classes around student ability and by teachers tailoring lesson plans, activities, approaches and content in line with the needs of the particular class.

Examples

AS#3 Public School

> *“In our classrooms, it’s not the same thing being taught… It’s being differentiated. Every single classroom has a differentiation approach in terms of making sure that you’re able to get what’s needed.” (Principal).*

Small group work typically involved assigning students within a class to levelled groups based on level of ability, progress or need, and tailoring the learning and support approach to each group’s needs. This level of differentiation was more prominent and emphasised in AS data, and which appeared to be supported by a stable and numerous staff.

AS#10 Public School

While already a small school, there was prioritisation put into a small, ability-based group learning approach which assigned students into different groups for different subjects/activities in line with each student's perceived understandings, skills, and needs. A great deal of effort was put into applying for funding and grants to continue to support additional staff in the school to facilitate this small-group learning.

Differentiation often took place on an individual level, with numerous examples of students being given individualised tasks in class, such as through ability-based worksheets, and teachers providing individual classroom support with an approach tailored to each student. Individual students could also receive differentiated support outside of the classroom, such as through specific programs or tutoring.

Conclusion

There were clear points of distinction of Ambassador Schools which may be indicative of key strengths and practices that are enabling of success, including:

- Professional boundaries – e.g., school leaders having clear divisions between professional and personal life
- High levels of prioritisation and administrative efficiency – e.g., having strategies in place to minimise 'busy work' and administrative burden on staff in order to dedicate more time and focus into teaching and learning
- High levels of resourcefulness – e.g., applying to all available internal/external grants, partnerships and programs to maximise funding and resources available to support student learning, and run programs to support the school community
- Strongly grounded in data and evidence – e.g., comprehensive data collection and analysis processes in place to inform practice, approaches and practice being heavily grounded in established evidence-based practice and theory
- Well integrated support for student wellbeing – e.g., comprehensive, holistic, and proactive approaches embedded into school structures to support and build student wellbeing
- Deep knowledge – e.g., school leadership and staff having deep knowledge of the local community context, school community and its students as a collective, but also on an individual level.
- Strong, stable and context-appropriate staffing – e.g., permanent long-term staff, an appropriate number of staff to support the particular student population, having the

right ‘type’ of staff for the students, such as teachers with EAL/D experience in diverse and multicultural contexts.

- Deep collaboration and teacher autonomy – e.g., strongly engrained professional collaboration, autonomy-supportive practice for staff.
- Strong staff-student relationships – e.g., particularly strong rapport between staff and students, highly supportive staff-student dynamics, a deep knowledge of individual students, and students demonstrating enthusiasm to interact with teachers.

Classroom observations

The following sections synthesise the data from the classroom observations, starting with a brief description of the method and then summarising the key strength and practices of the Ambassador Schools.

Method and data

Data collection

Classroom observations were made in 14 schools (7 Ambassador Schools and 7 Contextually Similar Schools). Table 11 summarises the data used in the analysis.

Table 11. Overview of observations data

Data Collection	Ambassador Schools (AS)	Contextually Similar Schools (CSS)
Video recorded data collected and approved for analysis	4 Primary schools 3 High Schools	3 Primary schools 2 High Schools
Observational notes (written) approved for analysis (not video)		2 Primary Schools
Video recorded data collected but not approved for analysis	3 Primary Schools	2 Primary Schools 1 High School
No data collected		5 Primary Schools 2 High School

Note: Each researcher was supplied with one iPad and one Swivl robot to be used for video recording.

Participants

The data synthesis included in this report focused on observational data collected from teachers in 5 primary school classrooms and 5 high schools (7 Ambassador Schools and 3 Contextually Similar Schools).

Analytical strategy

The analysis team selected one observation (approximately 20 minutes) from the data available from each of the 14 schools (7 Ambassador Schools and 7 Contextually Similar Schools).

Two researchers with expertise in teacher education and child development coded the 20-minute records for teachers' strengths and practices. Coding was guided by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

The CLASS broadly measures teacher-student interactions across three domains – emotional support, classroom organisation, and instructional support – along with a student engagement indicator that serves as a global measure of student functioning. The dimensions, comprising of key domains and indicators, allowed for the identification of specific teaching and learning practices. For example:

- Emotional support was observed through specific teacher behaviours that promote students' social and emotional functioning in class and academic achievement in areas of positive climate, displaying teacher sensitivity and showing regard for student perspectives.

- Classroom organisation was observed through the classroom processes related to the teacher's organisation and management of students' behaviour, time, and attention, including behaviour management and productivity.

- Instructional Support was observed through the teacher's actions that promote student gains in "usable knowledge" built upon learning how facts interconnect, are organised, and are contingent on one another. For example, practices such as consistent, process-oriented feedback, higher-order thinking skills and presenting new content in a broad, meaningful context. Attention to instructional learning formats that maximise learning opportunities was also observed through how teachers engage students in and facilitate activities.

- Student engagement was observed through the degree to which students were focused and participating in the learning activity (e.g., the difference between passive and active engagement). This dimension focuses on the whole class experience as facilitated by the teacher.

Key domains within each dimension were scored using a scale from 1 (low or no evidence) to 7 (high or consistent evidence) when coding the observational data. The numerical scoring system was used as a guide and not for the purposes of statistical analyses. Following the scoring of at least one 20-minute observation per teacher, strengths-based practices and examples were summarised. Where possible, Ambassador Schools results were considered in relation to contextually similar schools.

Specific practices

Overall, student engagement was observed in Ambassador Schools when students were encouraged to support their peers and were given explicit roles and responsibilities in the classroom.

What follows is a summary of observed strengths and practices identified within each of the 3 domains:

1. Emotional support
2. Classroom organisation
3. Instructional support.

Emotional support

When observing students' social and emotional functioning in class, researchers looked for teacher behaviours and practices promoting students' academic achievement. We specifically looked for indicators across three known dimensions of emotional support:

1. Positive climate (e.g., shared positive affect, positive expectations, respectful language)
2. Teacher sensitivity (e.g., anticipates problems, individualised support, students take risks)
3. Regard for student perspectives (e.g., flexibility, meaningful peer interactions and content).

Distinguishing features of Ambassador Schools are described in the sections that follow;

Provision of a safe environment for learning

1. Responsiveness and attentiveness (e.g., questions and needs of all students were attended to).
2. Teachers displayed genuine enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment when interacting with students about their learning.
3. Teachers displayed warmth as demonstrated through non-verbal behaviours (e.g., smiles and physical proximity, visual contact, and verbal praise).
4. Teachers consistently demonstrated positive regard for students' efforts.

5. Evidence of mutual respect in interactions among students, between teacher and students and among adults in the room.

Classroom organisation

When observing for the classroom processes related to organisation and management of students' behaviour, time, and attention, researchers looked for indicators across three known dimensions of classroom organisation:

1. Behaviour management (e.g., consistent, low reactivity, redirections, problem-solving)

2. Productivity (e.g., tasks provided, clear instructions, time cues, disruptions minimised)

3. Negative climate (e.g., frequency, quality, and intensity of teacher and student negativity).

Given the pace and efficiency of routines observed (i.e., absence of chaos), researchers inferred that the following indicators of organised practices had been explicitly taught and are applied consistently.

1. Clearly articulated instructions and behavioural expectations led to time- efficient transitions and high productivity levels

2. Positive redirection of behaviour

3. Consistent use of positive language.

Instructional support

When observing for practices that maximise learning opportunities, researchers looked for indicators across three known dimensions of instructional support:

1. Instructional learning formats (e.g., clear learning targets, variety of materials, interactive)

2. Content/concept understanding; analysis & inquiry (e.g., meaningful connections, higher-order)

3. Quality of feedback and dialogue (e.g., prompting, affirming, distributed, cumulative).

Several supportive practices were observed during lessons delivered in Ambassador School classrooms:

1. Specific and positive feedback that gave students clear guidance on how to improve or progress.
2. Explicit instruction that incorporated modelling and ‘think-alouds’, and made reasoning visible to students.
3. Encouragement of metacognitive processes through goal setting, strategic control, evaluation, and reflection.
4. High use of positive mental health terms in teachers’ verbal explanations or scaffolding.
5. Extended back-and-forth exchanges were guided by teachers’ open questions.
6. Complex and rich vocabulary was embedded in task-relevant conversations.
7. Environment encouraged challenge and cognitive risk taking, with errors recognised as sources for further investigation.
8. Students had an active role in supporting the learning of peers as helpers or as checkers of own and others’ work.
9. Students made decisions about the level of difficulty of tasks they were to engage in.

Enabling conditions

Enabling conditions that supported the practices evident in Ambassador Schools were also identified under each aspect of the CLASS Framework.

Emotional support

Positive climate

> *“I’m seeing lots of smiles, lots of ticks, awesome!” (AS#1 Public School)*

> *“That was great, give yourself an applause” (AS#1 Public School)*

Cooperative peer interactions, positive communication, and respect (e.g., used student names, calm voice) (AS#8 High School)

Teacher sensitivity

> *“ XX (student name), which one did you do? That one. If you were not feeling confident you could have done this one” (AS#1 Public School)*

"Put your hand up if you got a question incorrect. That is fine. I think what would have happened is, you may have needed to re-read the question and find your starting point" (AS#1 Public School)

Student comfort was apparent as they participated freely (e.g., responded to questions, offered ideas). Teacher showed awareness of time sensitivities e.g., checks in with students to see if they need more time (AS#8 High School)

Regard for student perspectives

"I love to see how people are feeling super confident after this lesson. Great investigators here. You should all be detectives. No! Mathematicians, you should all be mathematicians!" (AS#1 Public School)

Teacher made connections to current student life and communicated usefulness (e.g., exemplar for an HSC question). (AS#8 High School)

Opportunities for meaningful peer interactions (e.g., discussions in small groups) (AS#8 High School)

Behaviour management

"Unless you have your hands up, I cannot hear your questions" (AS#5 Public School)

"Do you understand everything you need to do?" (AS#7 High School)

Proactive: "Do you need a calculator? – I'll get you a calculator?" (AS#7 High School)

Positive redirection of behaviours: "Can you pop that bit of plastic in the bin so we don't get distracted? Thank you" (AS#10 Public School)

Productivity

Examples included clear instructions, little time wasted, materials ready, and time cues.

Instructional learning formats

Roles and responsibilities: "Who would like to be the photographer?" "You chose… you are the photographer today" (AS#10 Public School)

Promoting involvement with learning targets: Student asks why they are doing the task and teacher responds with "you will get good practice by doing it." (AS#7 High School)

Student raises hand and teacher moves close to respond. Teacher starts with an explanation of the circle/cylinder and then assists through hints, prompts, clarifications, and follow-up questions: "Do you have…? That's how much? True? So then you would find…" (AS#7 High School)

A variety of interactive modalities were used (e.g., a video clip, active listening). Active facilitation (e.g., effective pacing) and student engagement (e.g., adding vocabulary to a live Google doc while teacher is reading). (AS#8 High School)

Content understanding

"I have a reflection task for you. This is a recap on our learning and to see if you can apply what we have just learnt…Today we learnt about compasses, how to show NE, NW, SE, SW and use abbreviations, and how to use our knowledge to describe locations. Think about that...if you achieved your learning goals for today and what helped you achieve your learning goals. When you are ready, you can tell the person next to you." (AS#1 Public School)

"[Teacher sits in the chair next to the student] "So you have to find the volume; I'll write it down on your page, and if you look on the board… [teacher proceeds step by step]… what's next to it?… what is it going to be?" (AS#7 High School)

Depth of understanding was facilitated through varied perspectives: "These are the 3 questions I want you to consider, you can do these in your groups, but I want you to write individual responses…" and "If you were to… what would you write instead…" (AS#8 High School)

Analysis & inquiry

Teacher: "Why do you think you got a few wrong?"

S: "I didn't read the question properly"

Teacher: "Oh, I like that. So, you didn't read the question properly. What could you have done to get the correct answer?"

Student: […]

Teacher: "Yeah, not necessarily reading it over and over again but taking time to understand. Well done for reflecting on that. I know, next lesson we will work together on that." (AS#1 Public School)

"I want you to make a prediction about what is going to happen next. Think back to page…" (AS#4 Public School)

Higher-order thinking was prompted via instructions to interpret and explain. The complexity of the task and associated questions appeared cognitively challenging and engaging for students. (AS#8 High School)

Feedback and dialogue

"Did you expect that reaction? Tell me why …" (AS#4 Public School)

"Are you getting the feeling that…?" (AS#4 Public School)

"Who can tell me what a holster is? What is a riot to you?" (AS#4 Public School)

The teacher facilitates meaningful peer dialogue: "XX (student name), can I ask you to sit with YY (student name) so you can compare your answers...and remember, if your answers are different, what do you need to do? Investigate!" (AS#1 Public School)

Student asks when then get their exam mark, other students comment. Teacher models growth mindset: "It's just a mark, I never said pass/fail. It is [about] if you can do better next time." (AS#7 High School)

Teacher consistently expanded, summarised, or clarified student responses and peers engaged in meaningful dialogue during group work. (AS#8 High School)

6 Conclusion: Specific practices and enabling conditions

Specific learning, teaching and leadership practices have emerged from synthesised findings from the various data collection methods employed in this research. The findings presented in Chapters 3 to 5 are synthesised in this chapter to identify specific practices and enabling factors that distinguish Ambassador Schools and likely contribute to their success.

These practices and enabling conditions have been identified through the deep analysis of at least three of the data sets. As much as possible, the voice of the research participants has been used to describe these practices and enabling conditions.

Causal relationships between specific initiatives implemented some years ago in two Ambassador Schools, and the subsequent success of these schools were identified using comparisons with synthetic controls. The initiatives for consideration emerged from the data collected as part of the ASRC research described in this report. Further insights into the power, and direction, of associations identified here may be possible through a judicious design for future research that includes more extensive and longer-term use of synthetic controls as well as longitudinal monitoring of the impacts of specific practices in new sites.

The substantive findings from this research have been grouped into specific teaching and learning practices and enabling factors. As noted through the data analysis presented in the three results chapters, these elements are often difficult to separate, and all are bounded by their context. In addition, their effectiveness, as well as their distinctiveness in Ambassador Schools is dependent on the way in which they are implemented, including their combination with other practices.

Ten teaching and learning practices that have contributed to the success of Ambassador Schools were identified. The ten practices are:

1. Data-informed practice
2. Explicit teaching
3. High expectations
4. Instructional support and leadership
5. Classroom management
6. Whole school vision/approaches

7. Positive teacher/student relationships
8. Focus on student wellbeing
9. Teacher and student agency
10. Growth orientation.

These practices are described in detail later in this chapter.

The research also identified six enabling conditions that allowed teachers and school leaders to implement the effective practices. These are:

1. Collaborative practices
2. Wellbeing and emotional support
3. Growth mindset
4. Professional learning (PL)
5. Proactive leadership
6. Routines.

This research provides evidence of the crucial role that enabling conditions (italicised and bolded in this section) played in the effective implementation of the distinctive practices (italicised but not bolded in this section) identified in Ambassador Schools, and how the use of the distinctive practices was interconnected and implemented in ways that were mutually reinforcing. For example, *Classroom management* and the enabling condition, ***Routines*** (see later in this chapter for examples) are to be expected in most schools but Ambassador Schools had *Whole school vision/approaches*, connected to *Wellbeing and emotional support*, *Positive teacher/student relationships*, and ***Proactive leadership***.

There were many other examples of connections among the distinctive practices and enabling conditions. For example, ***Collaborative practices*** underpinned the use of *Explicit teaching* in AS#8, a high school in which team-teaching was used to reinforce and embed explicit teaching of topics (Chapter 3). The team-teaching was a form of structured collaborative ***Professional learning*** and the fact that these interwoven practices and conditions were in place exemplified *Instructional support and leadership*, in service of a *Whole school vision/approach.*

In the high school, AS#7, student focus groups (Chapter 3) indicated that the school held a wellbeing day during which the normal school timetable was replaced with “activities that are very active and calm your brain instead of worrying about subjects”. This initiative, represented a *Whole school (vision) approach*, *which focuses on student wellbeing, and is*

supported by the enabling condition, ***Proactive leadership***. In the same focus group, students also explained that they were encouraged to strive to be their personal best rather than to compare themselves with others (*High expectations*, *(Teacher and) Student agency, Growth orientation*).

At AS#6, a high school, student focus group data provided evidence of *High expectations* and *Positive teacher/student relationships* working together; students reported that teachers "put weight on our shoulders, and they slowly put more, so we can become stronger in our knowledge" but also that "teachers don't put more weight on our shoulders than we can handle". The students trusted that the teachers (*Positive teacher/student relationships)* had their interests at heart (***Wellbeing and emotional support***) even as they challenged them to achieve more. *High expectations, Positive teacher/student relationships,* and ***wellbeing support*** were mutually reinforcing at the public school, AS#5. There, a student reported that the teachers "make you work hard but not too hard".

In AS#1, a primary school, observational data (Chapter 5) showed that *Explicit teaching* was implemented as a consistent *Whole school vision/approach* supported by a library of resources provided as a result of ***Proactive leadership*** that exemplified *Instructional support and leadership*. Interview data (Chapter 3) revealed one way resource libraries had been built was through the ***Collaborative practice*** of planning high-quality lessons with colleagues that were shared using [an online platform] so "everything is transparent, everything is shared".

Data-informed practices characterised AS#3, a primary school, underpinned their *Whole school vision/approaches*, always with the goal of enhancing teaching and learning. They considered external and standardised test data such as NAPLAN but also considerable amounts of school-generated assessment data. The principal evidenced *Instructional support and leadership* in ensuring everything they did with data and assessment was ultimately to benefit "kids and the families".

Context also enmeshes these practices and enabling conditions. While context is often taken for granted and not well articulated in the research literature, it is nearly universally understood to exert a major influence on educational practices and achievement. Context typically refers to the characteristics of the setting, and the circumstances, within which a practice is implemented (Seddon, 1995). This may include location, resourcing, staff characteristics (such as skills and experience, and student factors such as socio-economic status, Indigeneity and gender. The elements that constitute a context all come together uniquely in each school and provide certain opportunities whilst also providing some constraints on practices. In this research, a school's context was never seen as a limitation as to why something could not be enacted or achieved. Instead, it was the basis of realistic assessment of the affordances and limitations of the context that then enabled deliberate design to be undertaken. As such the way each school went about their effective practices was distinct from one another.

Many of the practices described here may not be unique or novel, with other schools likely to be implementing the practices. However, it is instead the fidelity of their implementation and enactment in their context that is most significant in the Ambassador Schools. This goes to leadership and school culture, and the consistent and deliberate use of multiple forms of data to inform and monitor practices. Each school was characterised by a clear vision accompanied by a deliberate strategy based on cooperation and collaboration and the development of shared values. That staff felt engaged, empowered and involved, and students felt valued and cared for created the preconditions for the practices described below and separated these schools from Contextually Similar Schools.

The principals of the Ambassador Schools all demonstrated great insight into what made their school effective. Common themes in relation to principals' inferences about successful schools typically referred to positive and inclusive school cultures, a culture directed towards learning, and a focus on student welfare. The perception that 'success' was related to engagement in learning, students' sense of belonging and a collaborative staff culture was notable in Ambassador Schools. These all reinforced the deep interconnection between leadership, the enabling conditions, and teaching and learning practices in each context.

This deep interconnection also highlights an important limitation in this research and constraint on the replicability of its findings. The range of measures, including reading, numeracy, attendance and HSC results that underlie schools' selection in the program do not themselves reflect the conditions that enabled their attainment. Furthermore, the 'plateau effect' following reforms aimed at enhancing standardised test scores suggests that reforms based on achieving a short-term lift often narrow practice and do not result in sustained and continuous improvement (Sahlberg, 2017; Luke, 2011; Goldenberg, 2013; Fuller et. Al., 2007). The reinforcing interrelationship between leadership, enabling conditions and teaching and learning practices is an important nexus not well explored and examined in educational reform research to which this research and future implementation can contribute.

Teaching and Learning Practices

The specific Teaching and Learning practices identified in this research as distinctive in Ambassador Schools are described here. Table 12 maps data collection methods, in no particular order, from which each practice emerged.

Table 12. Teaching and learning practices

	Interviews	Focus Groups (students)	Surveys (principals & teachers)	Surveys (students)	Surveys (parent)	Shadowing	Classroom observations
Data-informed practice	X			X		X	
Explicit teaching	X					X	X
High expectations	X	X	X	X		X	X
Instructional support and leadership	X		X	X	X	X	X
Classroom management			X			X	X
Whole school approaches	X						X
Positive teacher / student relationships			X	X	X	X	X
Focus on student wellbeing		X				X	
Teacher / student agency	X			X		X	X
Growth orientation			X	X			X

Note: Not all could be evident in each dataset due to the focus of each method

Data-informed practice

School leadership teams made strategic planning decisions based upon an understanding of the research on practices that have been shown to have an impact on enhanced student achievement. This strategic planning was based on an analysis of the available data – both systemic data and school generated – and progress was monitored, evaluated and modified using these same data. Available resources were deployed to support this plan, strategically directed to areas likely to have the greatest impact on student achievement.

Data-informed practices were part of Ambassador School culture, with teachers using knowledge of students' prior achievement (and relevant contextual information) to set appropriately challenging work that enabled students to achieve success, build confidence, and extend themselves.

Data-informed practices makes learning visible for leadership, teachers, students, and the community.

What	How
Practice 1. Data-informed practices: These were embedded in the cultures of Ambassador Schools. Teachers used their knowledge of students' prior achievement and needs to provide appropriately challenging work. Strategic planning decisions at the school level were based on the analysis of data generated at system and school levels.	• Leaders provided time and required teachers to proactively gather student data and used data to inform teaching and learning. • Leaders and teachers undertook data-gathering processes that attended to both student academic achievement and wellbeing. This was used to drive strategic support and development and made relevant data accessible. • Resources were used to analyse data in innovative and effective ways. • Data was considered promptly to respond to student needs and inform teaching practice. • Diagnostic data collection throughout lessons included teachers taking notes on individual students relating to progress and needs.
Example 1: A principal reflects a whole school approach to collecting and synthesising individual student data to inform teaching practice "We have an individual student learning profile for every student in the school. That brings in a range of internal, external, and other relevant contextual information about the student... We have these [one page] individual profiles that the staff can access at any time. It has things like NAPLAN and HSC performance. It has their summary (of a student's') academic performance across their time at the school through semesterised reporting, has their E-A-L-D phases if that's relevant, whether their language background is other than English, has some information in relation to wellbeing."	

Explicit Teaching

Teaching strategies were deliberate and made expectations visible to students. Lesson intentions were made clear from the beginning of class, with the intentions and success criteria supported by rubrics in language familiar to students. Notably, students the researchers observed in Ambassador Schools could use this language to describe their learning and measure their work against both the criteria and the rubric. Teachers' instructions and feedback were deliberate, clear and explicit and directed to observable characteristics in students' work and behaviour. There were no ambiguous instructions.

Lessons typically followed a familiar routine. This included deliberate strategies to assist students to 'tune in' to learning. Teachers systematically revised key concepts and skills and fostered student engagement. Learning intentions and success criteria were displayed on boards or screens. Throughout a lesson, concepts or skills were broken down into constituent parts, then interrogated and rebuilt by students. This ensured that concepts and skills were explicitly taught and demonstrated and could be produced by students in observable and measurable ways.

What	**How**
Practice 2. Explicit teaching: Teachers ensured students were clear about what they were learning in each lesson and how they would know they had achieved that learning. Instruction was clear and engaging, lessons followed predictable patterns, and students received immediate feedback on their efforts.	• All teachers created classroom environments that were predictable and structured, using routines and scaffolds for learning. • Intentional and visible teaching and learning strategies were present in all lessons. • Teachers provided explicit instructions, clear learning intentions and made expectations clear to students in every lesson. • Metacognitive processes led by teachers enabled students to evaluate their own progress against success criteria. Teachers provided informative, specific feedback against learning intentions. Teachers provided clear instructions and differentiated activities to scaffold and extend students.
Example 2: Explicit teaching of handwriting (Year 2/3 classroom observation)	

Writing letters

T: (addressing the class) We are going to work on a letter that just doesn't want to stay the right size, "S". I see capital S all over the place, and lowercase s where there should be capitals. So, one line of your capital S and lowercase s. **Remember your lowercase s should be half the size capital** (while modelling on the board)

S: Why don't we just do one line with capitals and one line with lowercase

T: We could...**I want you to get used to seeing the difference, so if our capital is next to our lower case (S s S s S s) we can really see that difference between them.** Nice and curvy (as she continues modelling on the board).

T: [You] **tick your best one** (as she walks around the class checking students' writing)

High Expectations

In Ambassador schools staff universally expected that all students could and would achieve. High expectations were observable through the focus on student learning, providing appropriately challenging work, and the ongoing and systematic encouragement and support for students and their families to engage in activity that supports learning. Ambassador School teachers demonstrated a focus on learning, which when combined with an intentional provision of emotional support, enabled student success and cultivated the student's self-belief in their capacity to learn.

What	**How**
Practice 3. High expectations: The expectation that every student could and would achieve was conveyed through appropriately challenging work and systematic encouragement and support for students and their families.	• School leaders and teachers modelled a whole school emphasis on setting high expectations and providing encouraging and supportive reinforcement. • Teachers' high expectations were explicit and embedded in learning intentions and success criteria for lessons. • Teachers provided explicit instructions and modelling that made expectations clear to students in every lesson, including explicitly 'unpacking' assessment criteria.

	• School leaders and teachers deliberately and consistently communicated to students that achievement is possible for everyone. • Encouraging language was used to engage students in lessons and teachers provided positive reinforcement for student activity and behaviour that would contribute to success in learning. Teachers set high but realistic learning activities that encouraged students to "work hard" with the right amount of challenge. • Teachers enabled mixed-age groups for subject areas which enabled appropriate learning challenge for students. • Teachers provided opportunities for learning extension connected to real-life contexts.
Example 3: Making success achievable for all (Year 7 Teacher Shadowing) Teacher articulated to students that success is achievable by stating "You need to teach students that there is always a way to [achieve]...teach them the small techniques, for example, with a 7-mark question, teach them to at least write a definition [and answer what they can]."	

Instructional Support and Leadership

All students were provided with consistent and ongoing, process-orientated feedback at their level of their demonstrated understanding. Instructional support went beyond explicit teaching because of the levels of recognition of and attention to individual student need. Teachers followed consistent lesson structures which included activities to support knowledge building. Teaching included differentiated activities for students to ensure all students were appropriately challenged, and students received consistent and ongoing feedback. Feedback was focused on building skills and knowledge. Teachers demonstrated a deep understanding of each student, and their context. This was evident through differential explanations with students throughout the lesson that were appropriately pitched and drew in appropriate background knowledge or experience to engage and connect with the student. Success criteria, or evidence of learning, were unpacked by the teacher and understood and used by students to describe their learning.

The school leaders' focus was resolutely on teaching and learning. They demonstrated the necessary curriculum expertise to act as instructional leaders. Students, teachers and the community were supported by the leader or leadership team to understand and accept the expectation that there would be a resolute school-wide focus on teaching and learning. Throughout a school day, priority was given to leadership tasks that directly impact student learning and that ensured a safe learning environment. Other leadership activity that related to site management, general administration or more tangential relationships to student learning, were typically attended to outside of the school day. As much as possible, leadership team and staff meetings focused on supporting teaching and learning. School leadership teams were engaged in ongoing professional learning and were typically the lead learners on any new approach. They modelled new approaches and supported teachers' learning.

(NB The term 'leadership teams' was used given the scope of the research sample, noting however that some Ambassador Schools are small schools. In small schools, typically staff shared the work of a leadership team in a larger school)

What	**How**
Practice 4. Instructional support and leadership: In concert with explicit teaching, differentiated instruction was used to ensure that all students were appropriately challenged and supported to learn. School leaders were focused on the school's core business – student learning – and ensured that the school's routines and structures were focused on supporting teaching and learning. Leaders had the necessary curriculum expertise to lead teaching and learning.	• Classrooms were characterised by consistent positive regard and warm interactions between teachers and students. Teachers provided individualised support, reassurance, and assistance to students and each other. • Teachers focused on teaching "at point of need" using highly differentiated learning activities, based on data, including student work, to develop individual students' knowledge and understanding. • Teachers provided and supported students to complete individualised work informed by data about student need. • Teachers and school leaders adopted a "side-by-side" approach with students and their colleagues.
Example 4: "Teaching at point of need" (Principal interview) "I would describe it as teaching at point of need, highly differentiated and I would say flexible. It changes, it's dynamic and it changes every day based on what students show	

us they can do today and that decides what we teach them tomorrow. I would say it's responsive to the need that's thrown at us at that point in time and highly self-reflective where we challenge, analyse and try to do better."

Classroom management

Teachers demonstrated a pro-active classroom presence, where they were aware of the entire class and responding through verbal and non-verbal means to encourage engagement in the lesson. After providing whole class instructions teachers would work systematically with small groups and individuals. Teachers actively moved around the class providing just-in-time feedback and guidance and encouraging persistence. Non-verbal communication was used to project their awareness of other areas in the classroom. Teacher presence was reinforced by school leaders and teams. Incidental interactions with students were characterised by a focus on learning, including behaviour management which was typically redirected towards impacts on an individual's learning. School leadership took an active role through instructional leadership before administrative leadership.

What	**How**
Practice 5. Classroom management: The routines of explicit teaching contributed to orderly classroom environments. There was a relentless focus on maintaining the conditions in which learning could occur. This underpinned behaviour management which was proactive with teachers moving about the classroom providing guidance and encouragement.	• Teachers maintained a strong presence in classroom moving and interacting actively with all students. • Teachers communicated instructions and curriculum content clearly. • Teachers and school leaders set and consistently maintained behavioural expectations. • Teachers ensured quick and effective transitions in and between classes ensuring maximum time on learning. • Teachers engaged in ongoing monitoring of student behaviour.
Example 5: Organised and predictable learning environment (Principal interview)	

“The teachers are just so respected by the kids, but, I think, it’s because they’re well prepared, they know their subject content, they start the lesson straight away, they get the kids on task, they – the feedback is positive, but, also, that if they say they’re going to do something, they’ll do it…”

Whole school vision/approaches

Every Ambassador School leader had a clear vision for the culture and daily operation of their school. They created shared values, reinforced positive and collaborative professional behaviour and maintained a relentless and resolute focus on student learning and wellbeing. Ambassador Schools were particularly characterised by the positive interactions between teachers and students, especially in classrooms to encourage persistent learning.

Ambassador Schools shared a commitment to creating safe, inclusive and engaging learning environments. All staff embodied this vision. Specific approaches that contributed to establishing and maintaining a shared vision included implementation of programs and events across the whole school and actively calling out or celebrating activity and successes that reinforced school’s vision. Whole school approaches often related to instructional approaches, wellbeing or classroom management.

What	How
Practice 6. Whole school vision/approaches: Ambassador School leaders had a clear vision for their school based on shared values. Effective practices were instituted consistently and coherently across the school and were understood and supported by staff.	• Leaders actively communicated the schools’ coherent vision/values/ approaches and provided opportunities for the school community to become familiar with them. • Leaders consistently communicated the expectation that students and staff should model school values. • Leaders engaged the whole school community (students, staff, and parents and carers) in wellbeing programs or instructional. approaches, sometimes drawing on external support and expertise to build capacity and capability.

	• School leaders established school-wide systems for acknowledging positive behaviours and achievement that clearly aligned with school values.
Example 6: A shared vision for the future (Principal Interview) We would have a very, very high level of collective teacher efficacy. But what we've developed at [AS 1] is a very high level of collective whole-school efficacy, where all students, all staff, all parents have a shared vision of where we're headed, how we're going to get there, so that our students become the very best and most successful young people they can become.	

Positive Teacher / Student relationships

In Ambassador Schools interactions between teachers and students and between principals and students were consistently positive. Positive relationships between staff and students were evident when students initiated interactions with staff. Students would go to class early or stay afterwards to talk with their teacher or visit the principal to engage in conversation. Principals and school leaders facilitated positive interactions with students by being highly visible throughout the day. For example, they would greet students at the beginning of the day, engage in supervision duty during breaks, drop into classes, maintain an open-door to students, and take opportunities to stop and chat with students as they moved around the school. Importantly, interactions between staff and students remained positive even in difficult situations such as the rare occasions when behaviour needed to be re-directed.

What	**How**
Practice 7. Positive teacher/student relationships: Interactions between teachers and students, and between principals and students, were consistently positive. Students appeared to enjoy talking with their teachers, and principals orchestrated opportunities to	• Leaders modelled positive, warm and professional communication with all members of the school community. • Teachers provided instructional and emotional support through positive student interactions, referencing student context or past experiences to engage or deepen learning,

interact with students throughout the day.	creating a respectful and positive classroom climate.
Example 7: Feeling comfortable in the classroom (Student focus group) "You can get comfortable with your teachers and that makes a really comfortable environment…they always try to encourage you to the best. But they always know when to stop and they know when you feel uncomfortable or when you're being pushed too hard."	

Focus on Student Wellbeing

Ambassador School leaders and teachers were concerned for student wellbeing. School-wide and classroom approaches to supporting wellbeing were founded on deep knowledge of students and their individual circumstances and needs. Structures and processes were in place to minimise risks to students' wellbeing and to respond to and manage issues effectively when they arose. While all schools are concerned about their students' wellbeing, Ambassador Schools were distinguished by the proactive and systematic approaches that they adopted to addressing and building positive and resilient school cultures and climates.

What	How
Practice 8. A focus on student wellbeing: Ambassador Schools were proactive and systematic in providing wellbeing support for students. The strategy and approaches adopted were based upon deep knowledge of students, their circumstances, and their needs.	• Student wellbeing was prioritised by leaders as a whole-school strategy with intentional whole-school activity. • Feedback systems encouraged positive behaviour and discouraged behaviour that negatively impacted on learning opportunities for a student and their classmates. • Leaders and teachers conducted wellbeing checks with students, looking out for mental health or other concerns, and provided support to students and families in need.

	• Leaders, especially principals, liaised with support services outside-of-school to ensure access if needed and as required.

Example 8: Weekly wellbeing intervention (Principal Shadowing)

The school ran weekly wellbeing sessions that were built into the curriculum to build students' emotional regulation, resilience and coping skills. The principal reported that this had contributed to improved student engagement with increased rapport, sense of comfort asking for help, and a positive headspace for students.

Teacher and Student Agency

A feature of Ambassador Schools was that over time professional autonomy[6] and agency has become central to professional satisfaction (Lennert da Silva et al., 2020) and students' sense of belonging (Van Ryzin et al., 2009). While there were shared visions and approaches in each school, teachers were also given autonomy to act with adaptive expertise (Timperley, 2023). Teachers were trusted to implement key aspects of each schools' agreed whole school approaches to teaching and learning like consistent lesson planning, articulating learning intentions and making success criteria explicit, whilst also given the professional autonomy and agency to draw on their distinctive professional expertise and pedagogical style. This ensured teachers felt connected to the school approach, while also being able to fully engage their professional identity. In the secondary environment, and specialist primary areas, staff were able to modify whole school approaches to ensure specific-subject or content disciplinarity was embedded in the implementation of whole school approaches. The professional trust that underpinned teacher agency and autonomy was the foundation of a collaborative professional environment where teacher-peer feedback and learning took place. This also enhanced staff wellbeing and collective efficacy. In Ambassador Schools professional trust was exhibited between leaders, teachers and non-teaching staff, students, parents and carers, greatly contributing to the positive climate and wellbeing of all members of the school community.

Students were also provided with opportunities for agency and autonomy in lessons and were actively involved in the way aspects of lessons unfolded. This included decisions on

[6] As noted in the Literature Review contained in Chapter 1, autonomy encompasses agency. Both autonomy and agency are exercised within constraints which are typically external in the case of autonomy, and concern resource and other limitations of the immediate school environment in the case of agency.

the format and order and of some learning activities, and the selection of the degree of challenge or examples to engage with. Students were enabled by teachers to lead in the classroom, monitoring time, managing equipment, and supporting peers. However, Ambassador School teachers maintained a proactive and powerful presence in classrooms at all times.

What	How
Practice 9. Teacher and student agency: Trust and respect underpinned collaborative relationships in Ambassador Schools. Teachers decided how whole school approaches could be applied in their classrooms and subject areas. In the context of explicit teaching, students had choices about the degree of challenge and the examples with which they engaged.	• Leaders and teachers worked collaboratively to build professional trust which was reflected in teacher agency and autonomy and the collaborative environment that supported continuous improvement in each school. • Leaders were actively invited or regularly engaged in classrooms creating a safe and supportive environment for teachers and students. • Teachers provided opportunities for students to exercise agency and autonomy in how learning was experienced in classrooms. • Teachers implemented key aspects of the schools' teaching and learning plan and ensured specific subject or content disciplinarity were embedded.
Example 9: "Class drop-ins" (Principal shadowing) During the day, the principal dropped into three classes, remarking that they did so as much as possible and "whenever I need joy", which the principal felt helped keep them in touch with students' school lives and stay grounded. During a Kindergarten class, the principal sat at the table with students and jumped into their activity. The principal used it as an opportunity to look over individual work and check-in with how students were doing that day. The teachers seemed to welcome the visits and the visit did not seem to disrupt the flow of the class, and students were visibly comfortable with the situation indicating that the visits were normal and not just "for show" during research observations.	

Growth Orientation

Ambassador Schools were supporting every student to make progress every day. The emphasis was on a deep understanding of content and making connections to contexts and relevance of learning opportunities on the current and future opportunities for students. Ambassador Schools did not define success as simply achieving 'good grades'. This was fostered through teachers establishing collaborative rather than competitive classrooms that supported students to set growth goals for their own learning, and environments in which students felt safe to take risks and errors were framed as opportunities to learn. In Ambassador Schools' classrooms, students were encouraged to challenge themselves and each other in their learning and were supported by their teachers to do so.

What	**How**
Practice 10. Growth orientation: Classrooms were focused on learning rather than competition and performance. Teachers created and sustained environments in which students could challenge themselves and learn from failures as well as successes.	• Teachers provided instructional support that promoted deep learning, cognitive risk-taking/challenge, and a metacognitive vocabulary. • Student motivation was encouraged by teachers who reframed errors as instances for "investigation" and encouraged students to formulate challenging questions for peers to resolve. • Teachers and leaders created safe environments for positive risk-taking, marked by an openness to different views, curiosity for students' (and teachers') reasoning and a consistent focus on reinforcing behaviours that contributed to effective learning and teaching. • Teacher and student dialogue was marked by the use of metacognitive vocabulary, demonstrating a shared understanding of learning expectations and shared approaches across the school.
Example 10: Personal bests (Student focus group)	

Our school always tries to get us to be ourselves, be our own person just so we can better ourselves and not compare ourselves to others and things like that. So like [student] said, I reckon that doing well in school is just being the best that you can be, being the best version of yourself.... Our school always tries to make us strive for our better selves, whether it be in sports or grades or just whatever you enjoy.

Enabling Conditions

Enabling conditions refer to the features in an Ambassador Schools' context that make it possible for teachers to implement the effective practices that have supported student learning over time. Teachers and school leaders are responsible for creating the conditions for the successful implementation of effective practices identified in this research. It was sometimes difficult to distinguish enabling conditions from practices, especially as the actions of teachers and leaders were, in most cases, deliberately established and cultivated over time. In Ambassador Schools, enabling conditions were the backdrop against which effective teaching, learning and leadership could be implemented coherently and consistently across each school.

Table 13 maps how each enabling condition was evident in each data set in no particular order. There is significant overlap between conditions, though each also has specific characteristics that can be described.

In addition to the conditions noted in Table 13 and described thereafter, there were significant themes in the qualitative data for this research pertaining to the importance of school staffing. Ambassador Schools reported positive staff retention, and research participants deemed the influence this has on consistency, coherence and fidelity as significant. Furthermore, some schools had additional staff due to opportunities like supplementary funding. This meant some schools could have two adults in a classroom and/or small group activities. This staffing supplement was often supported by principals seeking a wide range of grants from various levels of government, NGO's and departmental schemes. Ambassador Schools principals persistently maximised their staffing and funding to ensure conditions where high-impact teaching and learning practices were supported.

Table 13. Enabling conditions

	Interviews	Focus Groups (Students)	Surveys (staff)	Surveys (Students)	Surveys (Parents)	Shadowing	Classroom Observations
Collaborative practices	x	x	x		x	x	x
Wellbeing & emotional support	x	x	x	x		x	x
Growth Mindset		x	x	x		x	x
Professional Learning						x	
Routines	x					x	x

Note. Not all could be expected to be evident in each data collection method due to the focus of each method.

Collaborative practices

Effective collaboration in Ambassador Schools was reliant on the deliberate and systematic establishment by school leaders of organisational structures to enable it. School leaders, especially the principals, reinforced that collaboration was not convincing others to adopt their position but instead was about establishing collaborative processes that would contribute to a professional environment built on trust and professional respect. Leaders ensured there were appropriate and regular opportunities for all staff to be involved in planning and decision making and modelled that engaging with multiple perspectives can lead to better outcomes for students.

The obvious approaches school leaders applied here were having an ‘open-door’ policy, maintaining high levels of visibility and mobility throughout the school, releasing teachers from classrooms to work on professional learning, structuring multiple sessions for professional learning to enable equitable access, and encouraging and supporting peer learning. While leadership teams typically led innovation, teachers and non-teaching staff were also empowered to trial new approaches and share insights with colleagues.

Wellbeing & Emotional Support

Although student learning was the resolute focus of Ambassador Schools and their specific practices, wellbeing and emotional support were implicitly entwined in the way this focus was enacted. This extended to both students and staff. Wellbeing and emotional support for students was based on a deep knowledge of students and their community and strong relationships with students' families. As much as possible, challenges were diminished to ensure students could focus on their learning. Strategies included breakfast

programs, provision of materials, and supporting extra-curricular or enrichment activities. Notably, addressing student wellbeing needs was discreet and proactive, such as the provision of class materials subtly and without bringing undue attention to the student.

Students also reported a strong sense of belonging, fostered through a welcoming, caring and supportive environment that ensured students' voices were encouraged, heard and involved in decision making. The environment observed in Ambassador Schools was characterised by an ethos of care, with staff-student interactions consistently calm, kind and positive. As part of this environment, there was a deliberate focus on understanding and labelling emotional responses and learning how to control and regulate emotional responses.

Growth Mindset

Growth mindset was characterised in Ambassador Schools by observations from researchers that there was a consistent belief that not only can everyone learn but they can become better at learning. It was integral to each school's focus on student learning, wellbeing and practices of high expectations. Ambassador Schools were characterised by having students, teachers and leaders with a growth mindset. A growth mindset was evident in communications and reported in survey data. Observable practices included learning about learning (metacognitive practices), lesson success criteria, and a persistent focus on learning in teacher, leader and student interactions. Growth mindset was also evident in school leadership teams' approach to professional learning and was used to model the school as a learning environment for all. In some instances, this also included parents supporting their learning to, in turn, support their children.

Professional learning

Professional learning directed at the ongoing improvement of student learning was a consistent focus of Ambassador Schools. The development of a professional learning culture was strategic, directed, and appropriately paced to ensure high impact. This strategic professional learning was directed at areas identified (using data) as a need in the school and was judicious in its scope – only a small number of approaches are focussed upon at any one time to ensure improvements were not overwhelming and can be implemented with fidelity. The impact of professional learning was constantly monitored, evaluated, and recalibrated to ensure the desired outcome was achieved. Again, school leadership teams typically led professional learning and all staff were encouraged to contribute their insights and learning.

Professional learning was the bedrock upon which successful strategies in each school were built. Professional learning was deliberate and strategic and aimed at supporting identified areas of focus for the school. While led by school leadership, staff were encouraged to share their learning throughout the implementation of professional

development initiatives and other learning they have undertaken. Overall, a disposition that teaching and learning is a ‘work in progress’ aimed at continual improvement was evident. The impact of professional learning was enhanced through continuous cycles of implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Proactive leadership

The leaders of Ambassador Schools exercised their instructional leadership proactively. They maintained a high level of visibility throughout the school day. They played an active role in the learning that occurred in the school and used their visibility to reinforce the values and learning focus of the school while also redirecting and de-escalating emerging distractions from this focus. The actions of leaders were deliberate and strategic, and informed by their educational expertise and deep knowledge of the school’s context and that of its students to ensure potential problems were avoided.

No matter how challenging the circumstance or interaction, these leaders showed consistency in their emotional regulation and focus. Supportive and encouraging language, and physical gestures, were observed during shadowing in all interactions, with these characteristics reinforced in other data collection methods.

Ambassador School principals also embodied a capacity to manage multiple competing demands confidently and calmly. This included the ability to make decisions. It went beyond multitasking and towards simultaneous engagement that was purposeful and informed. Emotional regulation and effective multi-tasking appear to be linked to personal development and learning and may be a personality trait. Principals’ focus was resolutely on student learning (broadly defined) and its enabling factors – supportive positive relationships, staff expertise, resourcing, school/system support, organisation, clear expectations and communication. There is a risk of personality trait bias, but some practices may be learnable. Principals appeared to have undertaken deliberate professional learning and professional reading in areas of social and behavioural leadership and personal development. The hours that principals worked may be a systemic risk.

Routines

Ambassador Schools ensured consistent learning environments daily and lessons followed predictable patterns.

Routines were key in the classrooms in Ambassador Schools. At the lesson level, the structure tended to involve the explicit identification of learning intentions and success criteria. Rubrics also supported these to describe the success criteria, using language familiar to students. Teachers also maintained a consistent, calm, and caring demeanour making the environment emotionally consistent.

Routines were also important at the school organisation level. In many Ambassador Schools the leadership team worked consistently to ensure the day followed a familiar routine. This involved managing staff absences and curriculum enrichment activities to minimise any change to routine and ensuring that small group activities or literacy and numeracy time proceeded as usual. In large schools, lesson routines, including entry to the room and lesson beginnings were easily maintained due to students' familiarity with these approaches. The use of casual staff accustomed to the school’s routine was also important here (where applicable).

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