"How do they do it?" An investigation into the practices of Australian teachers and principals working in low SES schools

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This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education of Murdoch University

2019
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

This work was undertaken with approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee, Murdoch University (Approval 2015/235)

……

Sarah Penn
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel extremely fortunate to have been able to indulge my passion and complete research in an area so close to my heart. However, this has been possible due to the overwhelming support I have received throughout this entire process and I would like to formally acknowledge the people who have inspired, assisted and guided me through this experience.

A big thank you to my principal supervisor, Associate Professor Laura Perry for her guidance and instruction throughout the journey and to my co-supervisor Lorraine Jacob for her input and feedback.

A big thank you to my husband, Ben and my three children, Sophie and to my twins Olivia and Alison (who arrived on this journey) for their patience, encouragement and understanding as I navigated my way through this experience. To my cheer squad: Mum, Dad, family, friends and colleagues who took the time to “check in” and inspire me to stay on the journey.

I would also like to acknowledge the principals and teachers who devoted their time and shared their knowledge and experiences with me so that this research could be possible. Each participant was an exemplary example of the teaching profession and the incredible influence an invested educator can have on their students.
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the pedagogical strategies used by teachers and principals of high performing government schools that serve large numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Individual interviews were conducted with 16 teachers and 4 principals from four low socio-economic status (SES) primary schools in Victoria, Australia that have higher than expected scores on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Participants were interviewed about the strategies that they use to promote learning in their classrooms and as a school. A secondary aim was to examine teachers’ perceptions of the efficacy of NAPLAN for informing learning and teaching. Three main themes were identified from the data and the strategies discussed were categorised as Teacher Pedagogy and Practice, Engagement and Leadership. To extrapolate, these themes identify what was deemed as most important by the participants when improving academic outcomes. The suite of strategies identified by the participants centre around identifying and overcoming the obstacles to students’ learning, using strategies to address and at times remove the obstacles, while fostering relationships and learning as a school community. All the schools considered themselves “student-centred”, underpinned by an ethos of accountability as educators, driven by the leadership of the schools. Participants believed that NAPLAN was useful for tracking performance gains over multiple years but it was unanimously viewed as an irrelevant tool for supporting learning or teaching. Teachers noted that they did not devote much time to preparing students for NAPLAN, nor did their school give it much emphasis either. Implications for practice suggest the importance of providing students from this cohort with a holistic educational experience coupled with strategic intervention in order to address the obstacles that are deemed prevalent for this student demographic.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

According to the Victorian Department of Education and Training, there are 1,555 primary schools in the state of Victoria, Australia servicing 518,507 students. (Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2017). Of these students approximately 11.72%, or 60,665 are living in poverty (Phillips, Miranti, Vidyattama & Cassells, 2013).

…and despite The Who band member Pete Townshend’s lyrics, when it comes to education for these students, the kids are not alright!

I, along with thousands of teachers and educators throughout Australia have taught, teach and will teach children who will find it very hard to learn at school. There will be a myriad of reasons why these children find it difficult to learn in a school environment. Some children will process knowledge differently to how it is presented in the classroom, some will be overcoming personal challenges such as developmental delays and disorders, some will be dealing with internal issues and problems and some, external. Then there are the children who have to deal with not one, but several of the previously mentioned obstacles to learning. These children enter our schools and classrooms often feeling like aliens sent to a faraway planet that presents nothing of familiarity for them. These children are often children who have been raised in situations of varying degrees of poverty, or, as termed more tolerably in Australia, children from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Australia tends to pride itself on being a society without the social class systems that define many other societies and cultures. As Veracini (2007) noted, “Australia has a long tradition of being routinely represented as an exceptionally egalitarian and classless society” (p. 271). However, despite these beliefs, Australia
is struggling with a widening gap in its society. In its 2016 Report on Poverty, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) found the following:

- Australia has failed to reduce the level of overall poverty over the 10 years between 2004 - 2014, with 13.3% of the population (2.99 million people) living below the poverty line in 2013-14.
- There has been a 2 percentage point rise in the number of children living in poverty in the 10 year period, now at 17.4% (731,300 children). (ACOSS, 2016b, p. 5)

These figures are expanded when broadening the variables to include people from ‘low-income households.’ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), data collected from the 2013-2014 collection period showed that over 4 million people lived in low income households. ‘Low-income households’ were defined as households with a weekly equivalised disposable income of between $205 and $511. This benchmark is also one of the commonly used indicators of poverty, set at 60% of the median income for all households. The ABS further notes that most of these households experience financial hardship and this is even more evident when there are low levels of assets and/or high levels of debt (ABS, 2016).

This research study was born out of a fundamental interest in a presently provocative area of education. Currently, Australian policy makers, educators and researchers are addressing the widening gap between the educational achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the achievement of other cohorts of students and what this means for future life outcomes and pathways. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in Australia, there is a strong association between low performance in the areas of reading, mathematics and science and the socio-economic status of the students’
families and schools. One of the concerning findings from the report is that a socio-economically disadvantaged student in Australia is five times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student (OECD, 2016). Another concerning finding is that the socio-economic gap in the probability of low performance is much wider in Australia than the average for other OECD countries. The average gap for the OECD countries increases by only 7 percentage points compared with 22 percentage points in Australia. The gap being the likelihood of poor performance if the student is from a low socio-economic background compared to students from other socio-economic backgrounds. As an example, please see below for two of the OECD’s charts (OECD, 2016), illustrating this data, the first regarding Australian students’ performance in mathematics and second regarding the resource allocation between disadvantaged and advantaged schools within the OECD countries. These charts convey the growing gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in Australia and how, as one causal example of this, resource allocation to low SES schools in Australia is significantly below those of other OECD countries.
Figure One: Cumulative probability of low performance in mathematics, Australia, PISA 2012. From OECD. (2016). Low-performing students: Why they fall behind and how to help them succeed. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi: 0.1787/9789264250246-en

Figure Two: Index of equity in resource allocation between disadvantaged and advantaged schools, PISA 2012. From: OECD. (2016). Low-performing students: Why they fall behind and how to help them succeed. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi: 0.1787/9789264250246-en
The stance behind this research study is that education provides the members of a given society the opportunities to learn and progress within the structure of that society. To elaborate, children have a much higher chance of growing up to be a contributing member of society with options and choices for their life outcomes if they have been exposed to and accomplished an efficacious education. According to Pecora et al (2006), children’s chances of successful life outcomes and achieving a fulfilling adult life are vitally increased with the successful and positive completion of compulsory education. Hillman (2005) found through longitudinal studies that young people who did not complete Year 12 successfully or at all are less likely to participate in any further education or future training and are significantly more likely to spend multiple periods unemployed and outside of the workforce.

Universally, young people from low socio-economic backgrounds who have spent time in care (foster care and institutions) and due to these risk factors were not able to successfully complete their secondary education are at a much higher risk of unemployment, being unable to progress through higher education pathways or towards a chosen career. They also face much higher risks of living in poverty, being recipients of government benefits and assistance, are less likely to participate in recreational interests, have poor self-esteem, experience emotional and psychosocial difficulties, become socially isolated, experience difficulties with relationships, suffer health complications, experience homelessness and are more likely to be involved in criminal activity (Berlin et al, 2011; Mondy, 2009; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Therefore according to research, removing access to a successful education appears to negate and minimise the number of life choices one has, including restricting access to lifelong learning opportunities, further minimising one’s possibilities (Fincher & Saunders, 2001).
For my chosen research topic and the basis for my research, I will be addressing a significant facet of pedagogy that has emerged from my own personal background as an educator. The questions that have emerged for me, from my experience, have had a profound impact on my personal career as a teacher and the careers of my fellow colleagues who work in the education sector. These educational questions have stemmed from my experience of working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds and trying to reach out to them in order to help them achieve academically. These questions and indeed, my personal interest form what Marshall and Rossman (2011, p. 63) call “the researcher’s positionality.” I believe academic achievement provides people with more options for their life and therefore is extremely important for young people who want to break out of their cycle of poverty.

**Research Aims and Question**

Currently, it is widely accepted that Australian teachers are time poor and feeling pressure in a crowded curriculum (Aloe, Amo & Shanahan, 2014; Bernard, 2016; Hardy, 2013). The educational achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds has been extensively examined. Researchers have developed theories regarding the “why” of the issue but translations of these theories into practices that could be immediately used by teachers within the classroom environment is what this study is hoping to contribute towards. Generally, it would be very difficult (and time-consuming) for a classroom teacher to take the knowledge that they can use practically while sifting through the information and theories that may or may not have basis for successful practical use in the classroom. To hear
from teachers themselves about what they are doing is the aim here, because research is often abstract and often does not provide concrete/practical strategies.

One example to highlight this issue is that of early childhood teachers who are often told at professional development seminars that current research has emphasised the importance of quality early childhood education on the continuing academic outcomes of children living in poverty. As a teacher, this is excellent to know but all the early childhood teacher can take from this theory is that what they do is important and needs to be of quality. A disconnect between the PD facilitation and/or a lack of practical resources and ongoing support once in the classroom has been highlighted as a major source of teacher attrition and withdrawal from the workforce (Aspland, 2016; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Paquette & Rieg, 2016).

Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to provide Australian pedagogues working every day with students from low socio-economic backgrounds with a ‘toolbox’ of strategies that are valid and authentic. By valid and authentic, I mean being used by teachers working in the classroom context with successful outcomes and discussed in said context so that the eventual audience for this work (interested teachers) can choose to try what they feel would be relevant to their own context and classroom. The aim will be to provide a toolbox of strategies that teachers can use immediately within their own classrooms to promote better academic outcomes for their students.

The toolbox will be informed by both research and practice at the coal face. It will include strategies that have a grounding in educational research and have been found to be useful to teachers. To develop the toolbox, I will first examine relevant theory and research and then examine how the theory relates to the participants’
pedagogical application in the classroom (if at all). I will then consider the strategies the teachers do use and investigate if and how they relate to educational theory.

By aiming this research at and for Australian teachers in particular, there is the potential to contribute to the literature by presenting strategies proven to be of use and effective by Australian teachers for Australian teachers. This is not to say that teachers and pedagogues working in international contexts with similar cohorts of students would not find use and merit in the strategies to be discussed here; however, by focussing on successful teachers in Australia, there is the opportunity to provide proven, concrete strategies in Australian contexts. With most of the similar literature being from international authors within international contexts, this study has the potential to contribute to the literature with an Australian focus.

There is a question around the simplicity of the concept of the strategy toolbox. Research has clearly shown that raising the educational achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds is complex as so many factors can come into play. Indeed, many studies argue that the school and the teacher may play a very small part in educational achievement compared to factors within students’ own lives such as their home environment (Bumgarner & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Payne, 2005). Also issues within education but seated outside of the classroom such as policy development and overarching school initiatives are important factors when considering the academic achievement of this cohort of students (Brooks-Gunn, Markman-Pithers & Rouse, 2016; Carey, 2014; Cummins, 2015; Ladd, 2012). However, the teacher’s influence remains one of the key factors that has been consistently highlighted as a major contributor to the success of high-achieving students from poverty backgrounds (Downing-Murley, Keedy & Welsh, 2008; Kiuru et al, 2015; Wong & Wong, 2009). What is absolute is
that in current society, teachers are the conduits for education via the classroom and the teachers that work with students from low socio-economic backgrounds need to continue to deliver curriculum and education regardless of the outside factors that influence students’ lives. Therefore, while this study acknowledges these outside factors and influences, the scope of this thesis remains encapsulated by the research aim. That is, to provide strategies that have been proven to work with teachers who have successfully achieved high results from this particular cohort of students for immediate use for other teachers working with similar cohorts of students.

To achieve this research aim, the knowledge gained from the review of the literature, along with the subsequent theories and findings will be used to create a framework encompassing the identified theory, opinions and considerations. This framework will then be examined to assess its usefulness by interviewing successful teachers who work within schools that cater to students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The aim for interviewing this specialist group of teachers will be to compare the theories and findings presented in the framework with the teachers’ own experiences of successful practical applications in the classroom environment.

Therefore born from this research aim, the research question is the following:

“What strategies do successful teachers in low SES schools use to support learning, and how do these strategies align with educational theory?”

As a secondary aim of this study, I will be examining teachers’ perceptions of the efficacy of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) for informing learning and teaching. Low SES schools that had higher than expected achievement on NAPLAN were invited to participate in this study. Due to the sample of schools and participants, it made sense to also ask teachers about their perceptions
of NAPLAN and its usefulness for teaching and learning. Again, there is an opportunity to contribute to the literature by examining the perspectives of teachers and principals who teach in low SES schools that have better performance on NAPLAN compared to similar schools. This secondary aim would also contribute to the literature about the impact of NAPLAN on teaching and learning generally and in low SES communities in particular as it will be directly garnering the opinions of the teachers who use and work with it.

**Overview of Design and Structure**

I personally come to this research from a transformative world view as discussed by Creswell (2014). This research approach is from a critical/transformative paradigm and therefore my epistemological standpoint is rooted in constructivism. The study has a qualitative research design and uses interviewing as its method of data collection. Four schools situated in Victoria were purposely chosen for the study. The schools were identified as high performing from their NAPLAN scores compared to similar schools. The context of similar schools were schools situated in areas of disadvantage with a high population of students and families from low socio-economic backgrounds. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) from the MySchool website was also used to identify the “similar schools.” The schools were all classed by the MySchool website as being in regional areas except one school, which recently had been classed as southern metropolitan after previously being considered regional. From each school, the principal and three teachers were selected as participants. The principals of each school chose which teachers would participate and then permission was sought from the teachers selected. The principals chose the teachers based on their experience in
the school, their perceived success with increasing academic achievement within the school and availability at the time of the scheduled school visits. Once the data were collected, data analysis became an ongoing process involving coding and the exploration of repeated themes and sub-themes.

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter is the introduction and gives a snapshot of the issues behind the research problem, states the research question and accompanying aims and provides an overview of the entire thesis. The second chapter is the literature review which goes into depth regarding the current research available regarding educational achievement for students from low SES backgrounds and perceptions of NAPLAN as an effective assessment tool. The third chapter outlines the research design and methodology employed for this research study. The fourth chapter reports the results about identified barriers and obstacles. The fifth chapter reports results about the strategies used by participants to promote learning. Chapter six reports results related to NAPLAN. Chapter seven provides a discussion of the findings. Chapter eight is the conclusion to the thesis and provides recommendations for research and practice and describes the limitations of the study.

Terms

The following terms are defined as they relate to the constructs of the study.

**Socio-Economic Status.** This study examines the practical concrete strategies used by teachers and principals for improving the educational outcomes of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In general, researchers do not agree on a single definition of low socio-economic status (Sirin, 2005). However, for the purposes of this research study in an Australian context, the definition of socio-economic status will be defined through the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS,
2006) introduction of the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). SEIFA is based on four indexes which is used as a measurement of socio-economic status according to area:

1. **Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage**: derived from Census variables related to disadvantage, such as low income, low educational attainment, unemployment, and dwellings without motor vehicles.

2. **Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage**: a continuum of advantage (high values) to disadvantage (low values) which is derived from Census variables related to both advantage and disadvantage, like households with low income and people with a tertiary education.

3. **Index of Economic Resources**: focuses on Census variables like the income, housing expenditure and assets of households.

4. **Index of Education and Occupation**: includes Census variables relating to the educational and occupational characteristics of communities, like the proportion of people with a higher qualification or those employed in a skilled occupation.

In regards to children and socio-economic status, it is acknowledged that children “in low-income families are more likely to have poor developmental outcomes…and to pass this risk on to their children in a cycle of intergenerational disadvantage” (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 33). Family socio-economic status is what this thesis will be considering as this is inherently the socio-economic background of a given student as discussed in the title. Family socio-economic status is “the stock of capital the family has at its disposal. Wealth, human,
and social capital are typically indicated by income, education, and occupational status respectively” (Cloney, 2016, p. 33).

**Poverty.** The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) has stated that as of October 2016, there are 731,300 children or 17.4% of all children in Australia living in poverty, an increase of 2 percentage points over the past 10 years (from 2004-2014) (ACOSS, 2016a). When children are referred to as “living in poverty” in Australia how is the poverty line defined in Australia and who decides what persons falls below this line? According to the Australian Council of Social Service, the term for poverty in Australia “refers to people living in relative poverty: those whose living standards fall below an overall community standard” (ACOSS, 2010). Traditionally, Australia has used the Henderson Poverty Line to measure poverty. This measurement was established by Professor Henderson in an inquiry into poverty in the 1970s and involves “using a benchmark of the disposable income required to support the basic needs of a family of two adults and two dependent children with other family units measured on equivalent scales” (Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, 2011). Current statistics reported on the Homelessness Australia website state that according to the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, just over two million Australians are living below the poverty line. This equates to 1 in 10 people with just over 400,000 of these people being children. This reveals 12% of Australia’s children as currently living below the poverty line (Homelessness Australia, 2011).

If 12% of Australia’s children are living in a low socio-economic environment, what are the statistical implications for these children in regards to their education? Again According to the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), considered the peak council for social research in Australia, low education levels are
the second cause out of five listed causes of poverty in Australia (the other four being work/income, housing, health issues and access to services). Low education levels are cyclic. Low education levels diminish employment options which in turn, reduces household resources to invest in education and schooling, resulting in the cyclic nature of low educational attainment within the family. The children of recipients of Parenting Payments (mainly sole parents), Newstart Allowance (unemployed people) and Disability Support Pensions are more than twice as likely as the general community to go without items such as up to date school books and uniforms (Davidson, 2008, p. 4). Based on the aforementioned definitions and the interweaving themes presented here, the terms ‘poverty’ and ‘low socio-economic status’ will be deemed as equivalent for the purposes of this research study.

**Student.** For the purposes of this research study, the term student will refer to the Oxford Dictionary’s definition as “a school pupil.” This study will, in particular, be referring to Australian Primary School pupils, approximately aged between four to twelve years of age.

**NAPLAN.** The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is the current national standardized testing program used in Australia. It is a series of assessments in the areas of reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy. They are undertaken in May of every year for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The tests are administered by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), an independent statutory authority and the school results are available on the MySchool website. According to the ACARA website, the aim and purpose of NAPLAN is to provide a national, reliable tool to determine if students are meeting educational benchmarks.
MySchool website. The MySchool website provides online profiles for Australian primary and secondary schools, including information on school programs and culture, workforce, academic performance, funding sources, student characteristics and enrolment and attendance rates. It is a public resource where parents, teachers, principals and the community can search the profiles of almost 10,000 Australian schools. The MySchool website includes information such as:

- the type of school
- student and staff numbers
- student attendance rate
- school financial information
- background information on the student composition of school
- vocational education and training enrolments and completed qualifications
- students who complete Year 12

It also publishes school results from NAPLAN assessments and compares school results with other “like” schools based on socio-economic status.

ICSEA. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) was created by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) specifically to enable school comparisons of NAPLAN achievement. An ICSEA score is calculated for each school in Australia. It is based on student factors that impact on educational achievement, including parental occupation and educational attainment as well as school-level factors (a school’s geographical location and the proportion of Indigenous students a school caters for). These student and school factors are used to estimate educational advantage or disadvantage at the school level (About ICSEA, 2016). ICSEA provides a scale that numerically
represents the relative magnitude of this influence, and is constructed taking into account both student- and school-level factors. The ICSEA scale was developed by collecting data on the family backgrounds of students and aims to identify the variables that strongly associate with student performance on NAPLAN (MySchool, 2016).

ACARA. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority is an independent statutory authority that was commissioned with the aim to improve the learning of all Australian school aged students. According to its website, it was established under Section 5 of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act on 8 December 2008. ACARA’s functions include the development of national curriculum, administration of national assessments and associated reporting on schooling in Australia. ACARA’s strategic directions are set by its Charter and any other written instructions from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council. In accordance with its Charter, ACARA submits its rolling quadrennial work plan annually to the Education Council for endorsement (ACARA, 2016).

NAPLAN

As mentioned previously, a secondary objective of this study is to examine teachers’ perspectives about the use of NAPLAN for assessment of student achievement and its impact more generally on teaching and learning. The purpose of including NAPLAN in this study as a secondary aim is that it was the only data available to me to as a novice researcher to identify “high-performing” schools. This is despite the controversy surrounding standardised testing and the contentious effects it is deemed to have on schools, stakeholders and markets. As Australian
education continues to move towards an age of standardised testing and benchmarks (Carter, Klenowski & Chalmers, 2016; Dreher, 2012; Klenowski, 2014), a polemic has arisen about the use of this type of testing and its subsequent implications for teaching and learning. School average performance on NAPLAN was used as a tool to identify participating schools because it was essentially the only data available to identify “successful” low SES schools. This raises an interesting sub theme for the study, however, because many questions have been raised about the validity and accuracy of such tests as a measurement of academic learning. According to Shine (2015), NAPLAN testing has from its very beginning continued to be the focus of concentrated news media attention, while consistently shifting the educational landscape, to the point where it is becoming a central device for representing Australian teachers’ pedagogy. Given the emphasis placed on NAPLAN by governments, media and the like, and its influence on teachers, students and the wider community, it is an important subject for research.

Therefore, the opportunity to question teachers and principals “at the coal face” about their opinions on its usefulness in gauging student achievement and school effectiveness was a fascinating secondary aim of the study.

To briefly explicate the background of NAPLAN in Australia, the program was implemented in 2006 when Julie Bishop, the Federal Minister at the time, and the Council of Ministers introduced common national tests, designated NAPLAN. State-wide testing of students in literacy and numeracy had been used in NSW since 1990 and in all other states and territories by the end of the 1990s. In 2005, then Federal Education Minister, Brendan Nelson and the Council of Ministers investigated the possibility of common national tests. The first tests were developed in 2007 and administered in 2008 under Julia Gillard who had become Federal
Minister (later, Prime Minister). Gillard upheld the program and used the results more comprehensively and transparently through the *MySchool* website (NAPLAN’s Origins, 2012).

The controversy that surrounds NAPLAN is similar to all other arguments and concerns towards standardised testing. Throughout the United Kingdom, U.S.A and other western nations, the use of standardised tests has become increasingly widespread. They are used to measure educational outcomes to assist in addressing concerns about the nature and extent of students’ learning and accountability behind it (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). One of the main concerns about standardised testing such as NAPLAN is pressure for schools to perform well on these types of tests, particularly when test scores are made public. This leads to questions around the reductive nature of testing when these pressures are in place. Research conducted in Queensland found the following:

> Significant test-centric practices are at play across schools, including, as evidenced in the research presented: A strong focus on teachers meeting, discussing and informing one another about NAPLAN; engaging in curriculum development practices which foreground NAPLAN, and; actively preparing students to sit the test, including, whether intentionally or unintentionally, teaching to the test. (Hardy, 2015, p. 359)

Another concern that stems from the possibly reductive nature of standardised testing is the awkward juxtaposition of trying to quantify data that is social and arguably, unquantifiable. This position is summarised by Broadfoot (2000) :-

> But even in those countries where the struggle to hold the pass of merit and competence is hardest, questions are even now being raised about the appropriateness of this nineteenth-century technology for shaping the education systems of
today and the citizens of tomorrow. The impetus for current debates is essentially a practical one. Can an education system dominated by the demands of academic, written examinations deliver individuals capable of contributing effectively to the workplaces of tomorrow when it will be their social and personal skills, their adaptability and their initiative which will be at a premium? How can creativity be encouraged in education systems in which the rewards currently go the dogged and the dutiful, the convergent and the conforming? (p. x)

Broadfoot begs the question of what consequences might be occurring to the very nature of pedagogy and learning if we attempt to quantify it through such assessment as standardised testing (and can it really be quantified?). Broadfoot also questions the validity of these types of assessment if the skills that people will require in the future are not measured in these tests and therefore, not taught and/or validated.

The last major concern that is debated in current literature in regards to NAPLAN and other forms of standardised testing and which also holds strong relevance to this thesis moving forward is the impact on the wellbeing of students, teachers and parents alike. According to Dufler, Polesel and Rice (2012), results from their large national survey with over 8,000 responses showed that approximately 90% of teachers surveyed believed that poorer than predicted NAPLAN results would have a negative impact upon the reputation of the school, particularly parental perception, the ability to attract and retain students and staff morale. Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) noted that “there has been a pervasive silence around the rights of the child/student and the ways in which they have been positioned by testing and accountability priorities” (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012, p. 76). Following from this, Ford (2013) noted the “staggering” inequality in NAPLAN test scores between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, concluding
“it is hard to imagine an education system that has failed a cohort of students so badly” (Ford, 2013, p. 98). Ford continued to discuss how the knowledge NAPLAN measures is not readily accessible to Indigenous students. The study also raised questions of test-performing abilities across different ethnicities and the inequality this may pose.

Continuing on from this issue of NAPLAN’s impact on student/teacher/parent welfare and the question of test-performing abilities between different cohorts of students, Reid (2009) contended that where a student lives is a better indicator of their NAPLAN results than where they go to school. Au (2009) describes this phenomenon as the “zipcode effect.” This is where a student’s achievement on a high-stakes test such as NAPLAN correlates with the socio-economic characteristics of where the student lives. Au’s research is indicative that this is an international phenomena that is now being observed through similar research in Australia.

Other studies have found, however, that NAPLAN is not always associated with negative outcomes and can even have positive impacts. Rogers, Barblett and Robinson (2016) found in their study of 11 independent schools in Western Australia that while emotional distress did rise during and immediately preceding NAPLAN testing periods, it was a very mild rise with no prolonged concerns. Hardy (2014) found that although schools were concerned with how to improve NAPLAN scores for performative purposes, the process provided an opportunity for active engagement and struggle by teachers and principals concerned about how best to facilitate students’ learning. Graham (2016) found a similar positive aspect as NAPLAN and its data were used to drive conversations to promote policy change at the department level in NSW, focusing on other aspects of the data such as
attendance and to shift discourses from inclusion to participation when considering special needs education.

Whether positive or negative, enlightening or subversive, NAPLAN remains the only major measurement tool available in Australia for stakeholders such as parents, teachers, policy-makers and researchers to use for the purposes of data review, association or collation of educational achievement. Therefore, having the opportunity to use NAPLAN to select study sites and then being able to discuss the validity of this process with one of the major stakeholders of this data, teachers, is an opportunity to contribute to the literature using the voices of the major players. Teachers are the players in this game who deliver, administer and observe the outcomes of NAPLAN (and not just the educational outcomes) and are often under the most scrutiny when results are made public (Shine, 2015; Thompson, 2013; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2012). The fact that the teachers interviewed were also working with students specifically from low socio-economic backgrounds, allows this research study to provide further insight into how this even more focussed group of stakeholders are coping with the integration of NAPLAN into their teaching environment. This point becomes particularly poignant when current research indicates that the lowest achieving students on NAPLAN are from disadvantaged backgrounds and include students who identify as having disabilities, are Indigenous and/or come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Lange & Meaney, 2011; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013).

What this thesis does not do is delve into the social and cultural mores that hinder the inclusion and educational achievement of children in poverty. This is a highly researched area with much breadth of data available and while powerfully
relevant, this falls outside the narrowed scope of inquiry for this research study and will only be briefly touched upon in reference to the study and data itself.

**Concluding Thoughts**

As discussed previously, the research aim of this study is to identify strategies that successful teachers use to increase the academic outcomes of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The focus is to refine the research and current theory for a more practical means. Therefore, the aim for this study and its subsequent contribution to the field will be to provide teachers and pedagogues with a valid theoretical framework and a toolbox of strategies, discussed in detail and authenticated by successful, expert practitioners working in the field and achieving the desired results for their students. This will provide an invaluable tool to not only inform less experienced teachers of “tried and tested” strategies but may also contribute to the retention of graduate teachers who may benefit from a more practical approach to use in their classroom management and practice. My aim is to provide a research-based practical guide for pedagogues to improve the academic outcomes of students while purpose ready for application in the classroom.

The secondary aim of the study is to investigate teachers’ perspectives about the use of NAPLAN as an assessment tool of student achievement and its impact on learning and teaching. Given that NAPLAN was the tool used to identify the schools in this study, it projected an interesting question around the validity of its data. Based on the findings of prior research, I thought it likely that participants would believe NAPLAN is problematic for this particular cohort of students. It could be that the very nature and process of standardised testing sets these particular children up to fail as it does not align with their previous experience of learning and teaching contexts.
Moreover, the poor performance of disadvantaged students on standardised testing could be due to the adoption of teacher-centred styles of pedagogy to administer the tests, as suggested by Thompson and Harbaugh (2013). This has the flow on effect of promoting less-inclusive classrooms where students are not aware of the assumed cultural knowledge and experiences that the test is based upon. I also expected that participants may find NAPLAN to be an unreliable indicator of a school’s success in the realm of academic achievement.

Therefore, the occasion to examine both the strategies that successful schools use to improve the academic outcomes of their students and the means by which we identify those schools as successful was an opportunity to contribute to the literature in a much more holistic way.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the research about proven effective strategies that teachers and schools can use to improve the educational outcomes of students living in poverty. Review of the literature identified four interwoven themes that can assist students disadvantaged by the issues of poverty to achieve academically. The themes identified will be used as the sections for this chapter which are early childhood intervention, academic program models, engagement and teacher pedagogy and practice. Strategies with research-based evidence of effectiveness were then identified from within the interweaving themes and listed at the end of each section. As the secondary aim of the study, this chapter also examines the literature surrounding the perspectives of teachers and principals in regard to NAPLAN and standardised testing in other countries.

Strategies for Low SES Schools

The main rationale for this research study is to discover research-proven, tried and tested strategies that teachers in low socio-economic schools have used to successfully raise the level of academic success of their students. For me, trying to find new ways to engage and teach students from poverty has essentially been, at times, a laborious game of “trial and error” from which I have seen many fellow teachers choose to walk away. While there is much research and discussion about how and why we have so many students from low socio-economic backgrounds that do not perform or achieve to the extent that other cohorts of students may achieve, there appears to be a lot less research for proven, concrete evidence for strategies that as a teacher, I could find and use or refer to, to help me and my colleagues improve
student outcomes. This is despite available research which has found the value in identifying effective teaching strategies for this cohort of students (Gore, 2001; Lingard & Mills, 2007). As Sharples, Slavin, Chambers, & Sharp (2011, p. 34) wrote, “Decision-makers should consider professional development and coaching in effective teaching strategies, (rather than curriculum), which make much more of a difference.”

The research that is available on proven effective strategies has come largely from international studies and while some information can be gleaned from the results, it is often unsuitable for the Australian context. One reason for this is that a lot of the research internationally is conducted on students and schools situated in urban settings with a high migrant population. In Australia, our most severely disadvantaged areas are usually in regional or remote communities (Edwards & Baxter, 2013). However, the research is being conducted and the issue is being considered which is extremely heartening as an educator and novice researcher.

There are many books that were investigated as part of this literature review, all claiming to contain proven effective strategies for bridging inequality gaps in education and surging this cohort of students through to academic achievement. One such book that has been heavily debated in scholarly circles is Gorski’s *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* (2013). While an engaging read and containing a lot of theory and opinion that would most definitely be backed for the most part by research, out of 10 chapters, only two were devoted to proven effective strategies and even then, they mainly consisted of teachers and schools being aware of bias and opportunities for learning. Nothing “concrete” that a teacher could use tomorrow in their classroom was included. Similarly, Gorard and Huat See’s *Overcoming Disadvantage in Education* (2013) was along the same lines of providing a good
theoretical understanding of the context of students in low socio-economic schools but not so much in the way of proven practical strategies that could be used by teachers in classrooms.

**Australian Indigenous Contexts**

In the search for proven effective strategies based in the Australian context, much of the research that identified strategies centred round Indigenous education. Indigenous education shares similar outcomes with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Chris Sarra’s work stemming from his own experience as a teacher of Indigenous students and as an Aboriginal man himself looks deeply into the deficit positioning of Indigenous education. Sarra’s research-based evidence centres on the success of raising the expectations of Aboriginal students through the teacher-student relationships. Essentially, expecting more from students and building that relationship of respect and agency garners higher academic outcomes (Sarra, Spillman, Jackson & Davis, 2018).

Many of the strategies identified also came from project based approaches. The Success in Remote Indigenous Communities project funded by the Australian Research Council found that while practices throughout successful schools might be different, i.e. investigative group work versus Direct Instruction, there was “a unifying philosophy behind the teachers’ intent with the adoption of these practices” (Jorgensen, 2015, p. 4). Essentially, this unifying philosophy comprises beginning with a school culture and vision (envisioned practice), supporting staff to enact and be a part of the vision (enabling practice) and enacting quality practice at the classroom level which included being explicit in learning intent and maintaining high expectations for students and staff (enacted practices).
Similarly, The Kimberley Schools Project is an evidence based approach that looks at practice from four strands of activity. The first strand is targeted teaching with schools and teachers being trained in explicit teaching and Direct Instruction. The second strand comprises early years learning and care where the project is augmenting place based services specifically for early childhood and implementing Abecedarian and Families as First Educator approaches. The third strand focuses on attendance and engagement which involved investigating eighty five different attendance programs and strategies, identifying the most effective currently in use and exploring opportunities for use. Finally, the fourth strand involved connecting community, school and learning where project staff work with the school leaders to strengthen these relationships (Louden, 2018). While the project is too early to examine even preliminary findings, it will be very exciting to see if this evidence-based approach has the desired outcomes.

One Australian project that “zeroed in” on the practice of the teacher was the Fitzroy Valley Numeracy Project. Teachers and educators who agreed to participate in the project were taken through professional development in the “First Steps in Mathematics” approach with associated resources (Jacob, 2011). Preliminary findings suggested that while teachers reported an increase in the pedagogic content knowledge in teaching focussed mathematics lessons and being able to better monitor student learning, their confidence declined in providing activities that were both engaging and explicit for students (Jacob & McConney, 2013). This project has provided some interesting indications to the role of focussed professional learning and Indigenous student outcomes in numeracy.

Perso and Hayward’s Teaching Indigenous Students project (2015) provided some research-based focus. Being Australian and recent, it went so far as to link
some of the ideas and strategies to the National Professional Standards for teachers, making it more tangible for the classroom teacher. Again, it only went into specific classroom strategies in one chapter but it did provide models for building the relationships with in this instance, Indigenous students that are conducive to learning. Strategies focusing on building teacher-student relationships, engaging with community and celebrating educational achievements and effort (similar to Sarra’s work mentioned previously.) This aligned well with other literature that showed how pivotal the teacher is in the learning process and how success or failure can be directly related to the teacher-student relationship.

**International Contexts**

Several major longitudinal studies have been conducted on the correlation between teacher-student relationships and its effect on subject areas and test scores, mainly in the U.S and U.K. Research conducted by Midgley, Feldlaufer and Eccles (1989) found that students’ perception and achievement levels in Mathematics rose or declined depending on the support of their teachers, and that this was even more evident in low achieving (at-risk) students. The “support” was defined as general warmth, friendliness, fairness and if the student believed the teacher cared about them. Goodenow (1993) found that teacher support through interpersonal relations was the most consistent and substantive influence on course grades and effort ratings in middle school English classes. In a three year study, Hughes, Luo, Kwok and Loyd (2008) found that teacher-student relationship quality (TSRQ), effortful engagement, and achievement in reading and mathematics formed a dynamic system that influenced at-risk children’s school trajectories from Year 1 to Year 3 respectively. Gehlbach, Brinkworth and Harris (2012) examined the influence of
change on student-teacher relationships over the course of one academic year and summarized the overwhelming evidence supporting a direct correlation between teacher-student relationships and student achievement: “To summarize, abundant evidence suggests that teacher–student relationships matter: how positive they are matters, how negative they are matters, they matter across numerous outcomes, they matter from one year to the next, and they matter for students of different ages” (p. 692). These studies (and others) provide a wealth of evidence that highlights the teacher’s relationship with the student as highly influential in the academic outcomes of students.

One of the most noted researchers on the topic of teacher-student relationships is Robert Pianta, an American academic who began his career as a special education teacher. His more recent work has focused on teacher quality assessment and teacher-child relationship using standardised observational assessment and video feedback (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014). Pianta’s research into relationship and its importance in student educational achievement has unequivocally confirmed that it is a key factor in student achievement. His “Student-Teacher Relationship Scale” (See Appendix A) is widely used to examine teachers’ relationships with young students.

**Emerging Themes**

As I conducted my review of the literature about effective practices for improving the academic achievement of students from low-income and/or low socio-economic backgrounds, four themes emerged. These themes were early childhood intervention, strategies used in academic program models, student engagement and
teacher pedagogy. The following is a synopsis of the literature examined under the four themes.

**Theme 1: Early Childhood Intervention**

In the 2012 edition of *The Handbook of Research on the Education of Young Children*, two chapters were devoted to education and children in poverty and both provided concrete ideas and strategies to promote educational attainment for children in this position. In the first chapter titled “Childhood Poverty”, Ryan, Fauth and Brooks-Gunn (2012) examined the implications for children in poverty and their readiness for school. The authors analysed research about the long-term impacts of poverty on the education of children. Longitudinal studies on the effect of welfare benefits and financial aid to families have shown some success on closing the “school readiness gap” for these children but that the effects wear off over time. According to the authors, what the research has clearly shown is that quality centre-based early childhood education and care programs that begin in infancy through to at least age eight and which employ highly trained professionals (registered nurses and teachers with degrees and early childhood certification) show the most comprehensive success rate in regards to student academic achievement, social adjustment, high school graduation and post school employment rates for students living in poverty (Ryan, Fauth & Brooks-Gunn, 2012, pp. 315-316).

The second chapter, by Chambers, De Botton, Cheung and Slavin (2012), analysed the effectiveness of early childhood education programs for disadvantaged children. The study used a quantitative research design to examine the academic outcomes of several early childhood intervention programs. The aim was to explore the most effective programs and establish the common themes in the selected
programs which could be of benefit to practitioners, early childhood educators and policy/program makers. Programs that had been evaluated in at least two separate studies with one being a large randomized or randomized quasi-experimental study and a collective sample size of 250 children or 20 classes were assessed. The evaluated effects could be on any of the academic or cognitive outcomes at the end of preschool or kindergarten. Out of 27 programs evaluated, six showed strong evidence of effectiveness. All six of these programs shared the following characteristics:

- A planned curriculum, usually with assessment frameworks.
- A teacher-directed approach incorporating a selection of child-initiated activities. Essentially, the teacher moderating and guiding the activities the children have chosen vs. dictating to the child what will happen next.
- Research-based design and practice that varied depending on the educational focus.
- An emphasis on academic skills such as sound, letter and word recognition in preparation for reading/writing.
- Initial support and ongoing professional development to aid teachers in implementing the curriculum of the program.

While the researchers admitted that systematic, large scale, longitudinal studies were still required, they stated that their study “identifies several promising approaches that certain programs were based on could be used today to help children begin elementary school ready to succeed” (Chambers, De Botton, Cheung & Slavin, 2012, p. 330). For example one of the most successful approaches noted was
developmental constructivist, which involves comprehensive programs emphasising child-initiated activities, music, art and stations of different focused activities.

**Theme 2: Academic Program Models**

Much of the research about successful strategies for improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students focuses on evaluations of specific programs. The most successful program identified by Chambers et al (2012), Direct Instruction, is a program created by Seigfried Engelmann in 1968 specifically for his work with disadvantaged inner-city children in the U.S. (Lindsay, 2012). The program was explicitly developed for at-risk students, as described by Englemann:

> Although Direct Instruction has potential application to a nearly unlimited range of instructional situations, it has been used primarily in “hard to teach” situations. The reason is that these situations provide a better demonstration of the approach’s effectiveness because these are situations that teachers typically feel most frustrated and in need of help. (Engelmann, 1980, p. 3)

In 2002, the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* devoted an entire issue to research articles about Direct Instruction. In essence, Direct Instruction involves breaking down a learning task into its smallest components, these components being explicitly taught by the teacher from scripted lessons with the mastery of the simple components first before moving on to the more difficult components. Over thirty years after the program’s inception, research overwhelmingly showed “the publication of several reports in the late 1990s identifying the DI model as one of the few models with significant research evidence for improving student performance in high-poverty schools” (Silbert, 2002, p. 267).
Another program that has been the focus of much academic research on its effectiveness is “Success for All”. Created by Robert Slavin, researcher and one of the Program Directors of the Centre for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) in the U.S, Success For All continually emerges in academic literature on this topic as a program that consistently attains educational achievement for students who are disadvantaged by their socio-economic status. CRESPAR and Slavin are involved in much of the academic research that can be found on this issue and consider themselves “the key players at the inception of the movement towards model-based school reform” (Slavin, 2000, p. 207). As noted by Ross and Grehan (2001, p. 48), “Success For All is one of the most extensively evaluated of all the comprehensive school reform models”. The program contains several elements and must be implemented stringently for successful outcomes. The program’s goal is to have every child where they need to be academically by year three of primary school, with no children being “left behind.” The program utilises trained reading tutors, a school-wide curriculum, an emphasis on preschool/kindergarten, eight week assessments to check academic progress, a family support team to encourage parental involvement and a program facilitator. The program strategies include cooperative learning, twenty minutes reading every night and an emphasis on language development (Slavin & Madden, 2000). Since its inception in the late 1980s, several qualitative and quantitative studies have examined the effectiveness of the program against control classrooms and nearly all have shown positive results in “closing the gap.” One of these studies was a six year multi-site study which showed unvarying improvement of Success For All students in all reading measures as compared to their matched counterparts in control schools. “A key finding in this study was that the longer a school implemented Success For
Due to limited longitudinal research about intervention programs, Success For All and Direct Instruction were singled out because of the longitudinal research applied to them and the successful results observed. This is not to say that other programs that profess to effectively raise the educational attainment of low-socio economic students are to be dismissed, however the purpose of this research study is to find the “proven” strategies and proof is easier to establish through longitudinal results.

In Australia, intervention programs such as Reading Recovery have been proven by longitudinal studies to show students “reading text at or above their grade level and that 1, 2, and 3 years beyond the intervention” (Schmitt & Gregory, 2001, p. 1). Reading Recovery is a program that is also detailed and explicit in its implementation. The program involves one-on-one time with educators for thirty minutes per day that focus on a variety of reading activities centred on the areas of phonological awareness, visual perception of letters, word recognition and analysis (Clay, 2002). The program has also shown to contribute to the social and emotional skills of children from low-socio economic backgrounds by “increasing their [the students’] level of belief about their value in the eyes of significant others. The gains made in feelings of significance are so plentiful that students also experience gains in their global self-concepts” (Rumbaugh & Brown, 2000, p. 27). This unexpected outcome of these academically reviewed intervention programs such as Reading Recovery infers the likely issues that a lack of educational attainment can have on a student and the possible impact this can have on his or her academic achievement.
Theme 3: Student Engagement

This particular theme is important in keeping students from low socio-economic backgrounds (and really all students) interested and performing at school. However, this theme was affected by a student’s outside influences the most as other factors in a student’s life can have a strong impact on their engagement at school. These factors include, for example, domestic violence, family financial burdens and lack of parental educational involvement. Research currently shows that while poor engagement and poor achievement by at risk students is not a cause and effect scenario, it does show that “family background only partially explains engagement levels, suggesting that school policies and procedures do have an effect as well” (Willms, cited in Harris, 2011, p. 377).

Student engagement is viewed through several conceptual constructs in the academic literature. The definition most agreed upon by researchers was defined as “a multidimensional construct encompassing a student’s feelings, beliefs, thoughts and behaviours related to the school context” (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong cited in Gilman, Huebner & Furlong, 2009, p. 197). These four components labelled academic, behavioural, cognitive and psychological/affective are represented in Appendix B. With this definition in mind, proven strategies to enhance student engagement across these four domains was extrapolated by myself from the research. The main emphasis was on using student engagement to close the achievement gap between students of low socio-economic status and those who are not classified as that status. One of the most prolific authors on the mindsets of students from different social classes is Ruby Payne, a self-proclaimed “guru” on the mindsets of the economic social classes and the hidden rules within class systems. Very popular with teachers and controversial with academics, (Bomer, Dworin, May &
Semingson, 2008; Kunjufu, 2006: Roegman, 2018) her beliefs and ideas are based on literature reviews and previous research into social class systems and her personal experience as an educator. Payne believes that there are hidden rules to each class system and that education and schooling are based on a middle class construct with all the hidden rules associated with the middle class system. Students from poverty are forced to operate within a different set of hidden rules from their own class and therefore are not privy to the hidden rules of the middle class operating within the education system. They are therefore placed at a disadvantage, with the result that many of them disengage from school. Payne’s strategy to improve the educational outcomes of students in poverty is to create support systems that provide students a pathway through their schooling and teach them the hidden rules of the middle class so that they can manoeuvre the way through the education system. (Please see Appendix C for a brief description of her “Additive model.”)

One of Payne’s examples of how students from poverty backgrounds disengage from education is how they interpret and react to events that occur at school. The following is a scenario taken from her book:

For example, if a student from poverty laughs when he/she is disciplined, the teacher needs to say, ‘Do you use the same rules to play all computer games? No, you don’t because you would lose. There are street rules and there are school rules. Each set of rules helps you to be successful where you are. So, at school, laughing when being disciplined is not a choice. It doesn’t help you be successful. It only buys you more trouble. Keep a straight face and look sorry, even if you don’t feel that way. (Payne, 2005a, p. 86)

While her ideas are very popular within schools across the globe for reaching out to children in poverty, her critics have used labels such as bigot, simplistic and money hungry, to name a few. As one critic stated, “Payne offers teachers and
administrators something very seductive: simple and comfortable solutions to complex school problems. Payne’s facile answers allow teachers and administrators to place the blame for low-income children’s lack of academic success entirely outside the schools” (Bohn, 2006, p. 14). However, despite disagreements about her approach, many teachers believe her theories have helped them to relate to and understand their students in poverty and have provided strategies to do so. So much so, that certain school districts in the USA including Orange County, California and Buffalo, New York require their teachers to attend Payne’s workshop (Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson, 2008, p. 2499). Despite this, there remains very little research proving Payne’s system is deficient or successful. It has been included in this review of the literature because of its overwhelming use in schools internationally and the framework’s popularity with teachers. Payne’s professional development program “Bridges out of Poverty” is one of the very few programs teachers and educators can access for learning about teaching students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australia (despite being an American course.)

The reason Payne has been discussed here at length is her work was referred to by nearly every single participant in the study. This will be discussed further in later chapters but it does segue into the literature on deficit thinking and more importantly for this study, its potential hindrance to academic success. The concerns surrounding Payne and similar work is that it presents (and encourages) a deficit thinking model, essentially pathologizing students and families from low socio-economic backgrounds as “the Other” and positioning the teacher/school as saviour to salvage the situation (Boucher Jr & Helfenbein, 2015; Gorski, 2008; Valencia, 2010).
An example of one of Payne’s application of her theories is the communication between the teacher and the student. Payne advocates that you explain to students in poverty the hidden rules that might be occurring during certain processes so they are not confused or feel defensive. Payne calls this the “Language of Negotiation.” As per the previous example, Payne tells teachers to expect that students from poverty are likely to react differently to discipline compared to other students. Payne advocates talking to students in a casual register but then explain what phrases and reactions would be more helpful to them in these situations. As she notes, “One of the bigger issues with students from poverty is that many of them are their own parents…The tendency is for educators to speak to students in a parent voice, particularly in discipline situations. To the student who is already functioning as a parent, this is unbearable, and almost immediately the incident is exacerbated beyond the original happening” (Payne, 2006, p. 49).

This use of “casual register”, followed by teaching words and phrases that arm the student with more suitable or accurate ways to communicate in the school environment, was also used in a study aimed at engaging Aboriginal students in numeracy studies. Warren and deVries (2009) found that using words that are used by Aboriginal children to explain numeracy examples and then introducing them to more accurate mathematical vocabulary was successful in assisting the students to bridge the gaps in their learning. For example, by “explicitly making the distinction between sentences such as ‘He bin boney’ and ‘He bin bonier’ to ‘He is tall’ and ‘He is taller’” (Warren & deVries, 2009, p. 170), it was found that many children could relate easier to the teacher and the concept when they could recognize oral language from their own lives.
In Australia, a significant and productive longitudinal research study into the engagement of students in poverty was conducted by Munns, Zammit and Woodward (2008). Named the “Fair Go Project”, the study was an eight year ethnographic research project for NSW DET’s Priority Schools Programs involving 10 educationally disadvantaged schools in Sydney’s South West. The findings of the study were that students inevitably receive engaging or disengaging messages from their school environment. Students of poverty more frequently receive disengaging messages, which leads them to the conclusion that school is not for them. The project created a framework centred on student engagement. The project involved working directly with teachers, usually in their early careers, to implement the project’s pedagogy in their classrooms. The pedagogy centred on strategies around the concept of the “insider” classroom and school. While it provided information about the physical space, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and relationships, specific strategies were not included. (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2006).

After implementation, the following four changes in the classroom environment were observed. The first change was an increase of student-to-student interaction, which lead to the improvement of students’ social and personal communication and metacognitive skills. Second, there was more opportunity for “safe risk-taking”, leading the students to become “greater risk-takers”, which in turn lowered instances of risk avoidance behaviour which is well documented in low socio-economic schools (Cefai, Downes & Cavioni, 2016; Roberts, Donkin & Marmot, 2016; Schoon, Parsons & Sacker, 2004) Third, there were more opportunities for participation in the classroom, which led to further discussions outside of the classroom, allowing the students to take ownership of their education and learning and foster interest in what they were learning. Lastly, the quality of the students’
work improved, leaving teachers amazed at how much understanding of lessons some students actually possessed (Munns, 2007, p. 311). The study concluded with its most important message from the findings: “Engaged kids really need engaged teachers!” (NSW Department of Education & Training, 2006, p. 78).

**Theme 4: Teacher Pedagogy and Practice**

The quality and effectiveness of the teacher became a major point of reference in all the literature concerning the educational outcomes of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. According to Marzano (2003) and his two year longitudinal study into improving student achievement, if a student has an ineffective teacher in an ineffective school, student achievement will drop from the 50th percentile to the 3rd percentile. If the same student has an ineffective teacher in an effective school, student achievement will still drop to the 37th percentile. However, if the student has an effective teacher in an ineffective school, student achievement will rise to the 63rd percentile (Marzano, 2003, p. 74). To narrow the scope further, what other studies have also found is that teacher pedagogy and experience is more important for teacher effectiveness than other factors such as subject matter knowledge and background qualification (Brown, Smith, & Stein as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Parlardy & Rumberger, 2008).

In Australia, the emphasis on teacher effectiveness and pedagogy, particularly in relation to students from low socio-economic backgrounds, has led to the Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (ETDS) project. Started in 2010, the aim of the program is in “developing and documenting an Australian university-based teacher education program specifically focusing on the preparation of high quality teachers for the disadvantaged school sector” (Burnett & Lampert, 2011, p. 40).
The pilot project has “program staff identify the highest-achieving students studying to be teachers. These students are then invited to enrol in the ETDS modified curriculum during their 3rd and 4th year practicums or field placements” (Lampert & Burnett, 2011). Based on previous research highlighting the importance of teacher pedagogy and student achievement, the soon-to-be teachers complete extra professional development in whichever areas they feel is required along with extra tuition in the latest research on pedagogy and educational disadvantage and practicum conducted in disadvantaged areas. The program’s existence highlights the recognition of effective teacher pedagogical strategies and the relationship between closing the achievement gap for disadvantaged students.

In Australia, many pre-service teaching graduates are being prepared to teach in schools in disadvantaged and low socio-economic communities. According to Mooney, Bush, Dawson, Mayes and Szadura’s report Teachers Matter (2014), 81% of initial teacher education providers are providing mandatory preparation for working in disadvantaged contexts with 100% of all the surveyed institutions reporting that there is some low socio-economic specific content embedded into teaching units. While this shows that initial education providers are aiming to better prepare teachers for working in these types of schools, one of the recommendations of the report was to consider an online research repository for innovative pedagogical practices and discussion to be available. This highlights how difficult, and how difficult I personally found it, to find strategies that actually work in the here and now. The report also recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted. I found that this is what makes it hard to come to a definitive conclusion about “what works” strategy-wise because the problem is so complex and under-tested longitudinally in the classroom environment (particularly in Australia).
Continuing professional development (PD) on instructional practices was considered by the majority of researchers in the literature as one of the most effective ways to increase the effectiveness of teacher pedagogy. Pedagogy PD was seen to be very effective in terms of improving student academic outcomes. According to Hardy (2008), curricula based professional development has swamped the market in Australia, leading to policy confusion at the federal level as schools are directed towards this type of PD when research and teachers want and require PD on instructional practice. Even in cases of whole school program reform, the PD on implementing the reform was seen to be the most important and it must be continuous. When the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services in the United Kingdom conducted research into strategies for closing the achievement gap for children and young people in poverty, the most important finding was PD on pedagogy for teachers. As noted by Sharples, Slavin, Chambers and Sharp (2011, p. 35), “Across all subjects and types of schools, the approaches most likely to improve learning outcomes for poor pupils are ones that provide extensive continuing professional development to teachers to help them make effective use of methods such as cooperative learning, classroom management and motivation, and teaching of meta-cognitive skills.”

As part of effective teacher pedagogy, relational pedagogy was deemed significant by many researchers in effectively raising educational outcomes of students in poverty. The concept of relationship between teacher and student so that learning can take place has been proven to have a powerful impact on the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students. In Australia, one of the most extensive studies into the outcomes of relationship-based pedagogy versus coercive styles of classroom management and instruction was conducted by Ramon Lewis in 2001.
Lewis’ study involved 3,500 students and 42 schools and found that coercive styles added to classroom misbehaviour and diminished student responsibility, while the use of relationship establishing strategies such as rewards, hints and discussion lowered the accounts of misbehaviour and increased student responsibility (Lewis, 2001). This was substantiated on an international scale when research modelled on the same study was conducted in 2005 with 748 teachers and 5521 students in Australia, China and Israel. Again, the findings showed that relationship based strategies such as discussion, recognition, reward, showed higher educational outcomes, fewer discipline issues and increased student responsibility than more coercive styles of pedagogy (Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005). The importance of relational pedagogy for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is even more evident because of the issues this cohort of students already face when entering a classroom.

In conclusion, the four aforementioned themes continually encompassed most of the subsequent literature and the strategies used by the teachers and principals were identified from the data and listed at the end of this chapter.

**Strategies from the Literature**

As mentioned previously, specific proven effective strategies that would suit the Australian context and were proven to work are difficult to find. It is more general in essence, surrounding what research appears to show as working (for example standards-based curriculum reform, teacher efficacy) rather than a specific list of strategies (for example all successful teachers perform cognitive pre-testing of their students at the beginning of each school year). However, looking at what literature and research was available to me, I have chosen to summarise what was
discovered under the headings – Teacher Practice, Literacy and Numeracy, and Leadership in the School. I have narrowed the subject areas down to literacy and numeracy because these are the areas deemed most important in the curriculum and are also what students are tested on in NAPLAN.

**Teacher practice**

Currently in Australia, reform for curriculum and assessment practices in schools is linked to the setting of national standards-based curriculum reform. Fenwick and Cooper (2012) found that the practices and strategies used by teachers working in schools situated in low socio-economic areas often conflict with the pedagogies attached to standards-based reform: “All of the teachers in the study believed that strategies and tasks needed to be modified so that students could work at their own ability levels” (p. 358), not necessarily to the educational levels set by the standards but to the individual learning outcomes. The authors suggested that if standards-based curriculum reform is to be implemented to do what the research suggests it should, then professional development is required to assist teachers to fully understand the concepts and pedagogies associated with it.

Much research from the U.K. and U.S. supports the use of standards-based reform for positively impacting student achievement. Research suggests that teachers who use the practices associated with standards-based reform can make a real impact on student outcomes if they can accurately identify the students’ prior knowledge, define clear learning goals and then use various strategies to help students achieve the common standards (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Konrad, Helf and Joseph (2011) found that in order to close the achievement gap, effective teaching strategies were not enough and that, efficiency had to be increased as well. The teacher must have
the ability to balance how fast/slow the content is being taught/learnt, highlighting that the learning rate of a student in a given amount of time is just as important as the strategies to assist them to achieve (Skinner, Belfiore & Watson, 1995). Marzano (2003) believed it was imperative to begin with a well-organised teacher who carefully considers the routines and procedures for the classroom, determines the classroom space and materials and allows for differentiated instruction such as allowing for easy transition from whole group to small group activities. This emphasis on teacher efficacy has also been repeatedly linked to the differences between high performing low socio-economic schools and low performing schools of the same status (Brown, Anfara & Roney, 2004; Smitta Dibapile, 2012). Reiterating this is Muñoz, Scoskie and French (2013), who investigated more effective and less effective teachers based on the achievement results of their students. They found that the number one characteristic of all the more effective teachers who successfully managed to close the achievement gap was how highly they valued classroom management and organisation as this lead to more classroom time focused on learning, building better relationships and a general sense of effectiveness on behalf of the teacher. This also correlates with research by Gore (2001) and Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard (2006), who argued that the effectiveness of the teacher and their practice are essential for successful academic outcomes. All these qualities were deemed as imperative when measuring the differences between high-performing and low-performing schools with similar student compositions.

**Literacy and Numeracy**

The literature highlights that students from low socio-economic backgrounds need more opportunities and exposure to literacy and numeracy as they generally get
less of this in their home lives. Wilson, McNaughton and Zhu (2017) found that students in low performing, low socio-economic high schools had comparatively less opportunities to read, had more complex subject-area texts and that proven effective approaches that have been deemed by literature to be effective such as extensive reading (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Hurwitz & Cziko, 1999), repeated practice ((Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness & Beckett, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) and reading mileage (reading prolifically) for fluency and comprehension (Allington, 2014) were not observed in these classrooms much at all. Cheung and Slavin (2013) found that students who cannot read well in the early grades are at a higher risk of performing poorly in later grades and found small group tutorials in small group settings with integrated supplemental programs had a positive, greater impact on reading outcomes for struggling young students. Wium and Louw (2011) found that the introduction of speech-language therapists to help support early childhood teachers and their practice resulted in higher outcomes for students who were previously omitted from the curriculum outcomes. What this means is, students who were not considered to be within speech/language levels for their class level achieved higher outcomes with teachers who were supported by the therapists.

Another identified issue in the literature was the transitions between year levels and the long break between the school years. Vale, et al. (2013) examined the summer slowdown between year transitions in primary and secondary schools and found that this particularly affected students from low socio-economic backgrounds (similar findings were discovered in the U.S.). Principals put this down to literacy and mathematics diminishing in the final term of the school year. They found this was particularly detrimental to disadvantaged students’ numeracy learning which set
them behind at the beginning of the following year. Therefore, it was imperative that schools in disadvantaged areas continue with their literacy and particularly their numeracy right through to the end of the year.

Early intervention and exposure to mathematical language and concepts was also deemed as highly beneficial to address gaps in student ability. Wium and Louw (2012) found that lacking the mathematical language required to problem solve led to poor performance in maths. This also led to teachers having low expectations of their students. The researchers found that implementing a continued professional development programme for teachers in mathematical language raised student performance. Similarly, Wright (2013) found that focused professional development for teachers, particularly on numerals and numeral sequences in early numeracy, is imperative for student achievement. Van Luit and Toll (2015) found that at-risk kindergartners with language deficiencies were assisted measurably by early numeracy education therefore creating a relationship between the two and an argument for early numeracy education. Siegler and Ramani (2008) found that playing a simple numerical board game for four 15 minute sessions over two weeks with pre-schoolers from disadvantaged backgrounds completely eliminated the numerical knowledge gap between these children and their peers from middle-income backgrounds.

Teacher collaboration in instructional teams has a very positive influence on student achievement in both literacy and numeracy. Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen and Grissom (2015) found from surveys and data taken from over 9,000 teachers in the US that schools that encouraged a professional learning community where teachers collaborated in teams had better achievement gains in maths and reading than their counterparts who did not adopt the same collegial structure.
**School Leadership**

School leadership is seen as an integral cog in a high performing school of any socioeconomic status. In 2006, the National College for School Leadership in the U.K found through their research that teachers are the most significant school based influence on students’ academic performance, and the principals are the second (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). With this in mind, the Australian government funded a project in Australian primary schools called ‘Principals as Literacy Leaders’ or ‘PALL’ as part of a government initiative to address the gap in literacy and numeracy outcomes for students in low socio-economic environments (Dempster, et al., 2012). The project discovered that principals saw good results from their disadvantaged students when they worked from a strong evidence base collated from professional conversations informed by school, student and community data. These principals also provided professional development, connected with the parents and community, planned curriculum and teaching across the school, implemented shared leadership and cultivated the conditions for learning. These principals also held a strong moral purpose when it came to decisions about their schools (Dempster, 2012).

Regarding the characteristics of principals that influence the performance of a school, Rabon (2002) found that a principal’s age explained the difference between high and low performing low socio-economic schools in Alabama. Rabon associated this with older principals (51 years +) operating from a traditional role of dealing with building management, fundraising and finances, whereas younger principals have more training to focus on student academic outcomes. Similarly, Kochan, Jackson and Duke (1999) acknowledged that principal training in the US had been
reformed to place the principal as an academic leader focused on student success. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found that teachers’ trust in the collegial and instructional leadership of the principal was an essential ingredient for a high-performing school. In the Australian context, however, with the current competitive pressure for improved student outcomes, McGraw (cited in Dempster, 2012) noted that there is a slowly moving downward trend in achievement from both the most able students in Australia and the most disadvantaged. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) acknowledged in its report ‘Improving School Leadership’ (Pont, Nuche & Moorman, 2008) that this downward trend is a direct consequence of the performance demands put on principals and schools. The overt concern to reach national benchmarks can mar the construction of a quality school environment and culture conducive to learning.

Bandaranayake (2016) applied qualitative comparative analysis to the causal complexities that cause the polarisation of high-performing and low performing secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. The research showed that while low socio-economic conditions nearly always generated low performance, the one low-socio economic school that did buck that trend and produced high-performing students (based on the Victorian Certificate of Education or VCE) had the following strategies in place: all the teachers at the school were senior and experienced teachers, motivated to teach and had been at the school for several years. Additional classes for struggling students were available during school holidays at teachers’ homes. The school had completely eliminated bullying. The students were motivated to strive for higher educational outcomes and had a positive attitude towards learning. The school had small class sizes, with the average being 14 students.
To summarise the rest of the literature on successful leadership in low socio-economic schools, Mulford, et al. (2008) investigated successful principals of high performing schools in high poverty communities. Through surveys and examination of the current literature, they found the following:

The attributes of successful principals when compared with the unsuccessful principals of schools in high poverty communities, would suggest that successful principals are more independent of the system and have a greater sense of purpose than their less successful counterparts. Successful principals appear to be less concerned about the expectations of employers and are better able to manage the tensions between ad hoc problem solving and strategic planning. The inference from the data is that successful principals are more flexible in their approach to systems and people, have higher levels of awareness and self-confidence, see themselves as leading learners (including through reading professional journals), willing to change in the light of new understandings, and demonstrate a capacity to work with others to achieve the goals of the organisation. They are more likely to persistently work for high student achievement and establish structures and a culture for teaching across the school. (Mulford et. al, 2008, p. 475)

Concluding Summary

Based on the literature and research discussed in this chapter, the following is a list of practices that is attributed to effective teaching and successful student academic outcomes. I have separated the strategies into three categories based on their repeated appearance in the literature: Teacher development, pedagogical practice and leadership.

Teacher Development

- Offer professional development surrounding standards-based curriculum and any reforms that occur.
- Develop teacher efficiency with time management including planned transitions between activities and lessons.
- Develop teacher efficacy in communication strategies and relationship building with their students.
- Provide continuing professional development for teachers on numeracy vocabulary, numerals and numeral sequences.

**Pedagogical Practice**

- Develop superior classroom management including structures and routines in place for learning.
- Identify the students’ prior knowledge, define clear learning goals and then use the various strategies to assist students to reach benchmarks.
- Seek more opportunity for students to read for fluency and comprehension. This may require ‘easier’ texts which allow for flow and understanding. More time devoted to reading in the classroom.
- Establish early intervention in the younger grades using small group tutorials and appropriate intervention programs.
- Take into consideration of classroom space and materials/resources.
- Support workers such as speech therapists, psychologists, etc readily available to support teachers with teaching and students with learning.
- Avoid ‘Summer Slowdown’ by teaching literacy and numeracy right to the end of the year, continuing to keep it a priority.
- Start teaching quality numeracy lessons earlier.
- Employ the use of simple numerical board games to teach young children about numerals and close knowledge gaps for children not previously exposed to number.
o Eliminate bullying. Implement zero tolerance programs and encourage a safe environment.

*Leadership*

o Create and support a professional learning community within the school that encourages collaboration within teams.

o Teach principals to instill trust in their teachers and remain visible and involved in all aspects of the school.

o Empower principals to embrace the role of academic leader focused on student success and teacher development.

o Allow principals to work independently of the system focusing on their goals and purpose for the school rather than benchmarks.

o Allow principals and teachers to take headship of creating a quality school environment.

o Retain a percentage of experienced older teachers who have been at the school for several years who can provide mentorship and knowledge.

*Teachers’ Perceptions of “Theory”*

Perception and awareness of educational theory by practicing teachers is another area of interest as I delve into whether the educational theory behind working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds ever gets put into practice in the classroom. And if it does, is there an explicit awareness and understanding of the use of theory by the teacher? Or is it a more implicit underpinning of the teacher’s own knowledge and experience that could outwardly be linked to a theoretical construct? The process of teaching teachers shifted in the early 1980’s, where an
emphasis on studying the observable elements of classroom teaching and process was replaced by a focus on the cognition/theory that underlies expert teaching (Berliner, 1986; Kagan, 1988; Shulman, 1987), essentially the psychological thought processes that occur to make a teacher “an expert”. Mayer (2014) traced forty years of teacher education in Australia from 1974 to 2014 and noted the change from the apprenticeship teaching models of the 1960s to the ‘process-product’ teaching of the 1970s to the focus on reflective teaching and cognition/theory as mentioned previously in the 1980s and beyond. Mayer notes that at the time of her writing, teacher education had become a highly scrutinised domain “in which questions are increasingly being asked about the quality of teaching and teacher education” (p. 461).

The connection between theory and practice can be contentious in education as teachers look for concrete strategies and practices hopefully framed by a sound theoretical framework. As Kim and Kim (2017) noted, “Teacher education has been discussed as the site where the perceived gap between theory and practice is most visible.” (p. 293). Theory informs the practice and in turn, practice informs the theory so the two are reciprocal in nature (Hutchings & Jarvis, 2012; Korthagen, 2010; Rasmussen and Rash-Christensen, 2015). However, this dynamic is seen as problematic. Shulman (1998) described the problem as follows:

The role of theory is problematic for at least two reasons. Theory achieves its power through simplification and narrowing of a field of study. In that sense, theories deal with the world in general, for the most part treating variations as error and randomness as noise. Similarly, the research that informs theory is often conducted under controlled or otherwise artificial conditions, whose connections to the everyday world of practice are tenuous. A second characteristic of theories is that they generally operate within discrete disciplines, in contrast to
practical problems, which typically cross
disciplinary boundaries. Theories are
extraordinarily powerful, which is why they are
the treasure of the academy and should be valued
by the professions; they are also frequently so
remote from the particular conditions of
professional practice that the novice professional-
in-training rarely appreciates their contributions.
(p. 517)

The theory and practice connection is paramount to understanding why “you do what
you do.” However, the theories used and their transference to practice can have
strong implications for professionals in the workplace.

According to Liu, Jones and Sadera (2010), instructional theory and practice
is in a constant state of change over time, however it is up to the educator and their
knowledge to decide if a theory or practice will be used effectively within the
classroom. Sometimes this comes after years of experience where skills and
knowledge are so entrenched that as Schön (1987) suggested it occurs with
seemingly little thought or effort or as Argyris (1985) described it as “tacit
knowledge”. This is often the circumstance when the teacher can demonstrate the
theory in practice but has difficulty articulating it verbally.

So how do teachers perceive theory and its “usefulness” in their work? Wang
and Marsh (2002) stated that their findings showed that a teacher’s perception of an
educational theory or practice is a strong indicator of the likelihood of the teacher
utilizing the theory or practice. The research also notes that teachers’ perceptions of
how effective a theory or strategy is, was influenced by their own knowledge about
the strategy and their experience with it (Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Gagnon &
MacCini, 2007). In lay terms, the better the teacher understands the theory and
research of a practice, the more accurately they will see the value of it and therefore,
the more motivated they will be to use it appropriately (Baker, Gersten, Dimino & Griffiths, 2004; Liu, Jones & Sadera, 2010).

Existing literature suggests that teachers’ knowledge of educational theories and their related practice are also important factors in teachers’ educational effectiveness (Hall, 2002; Liljedahl, 2008; Moore, Cupp & Fortenberry, 2004). According to Burbules (cited in Graham & Thornley, 2000, p. 237) this as a reflection of “different groups of people engaged in different (potentially related) endeavours” (practical or theoretical) with a need to bring them together. It suggests that the melding of the theoretical and the practical is essential for both learning outcomes and objectives to be understood by the teacher delivering the learning experience. Niemi, Kumpulainen and Lipponen (2015) found that combining the practical theory of the teacher and the pedagogical practices of the classroom, teachers could make their own implicit knowledge explicit and build on their reflective teaching and critical reflective practice. Similarly, Hennissen, Beckers and Moerkerke (2017) found in their study that by incorporating theory as part of teacher education and effectively linking it to practice, the cognitive schemata of pre-service teachers had grown and their conceptual knowledge had expanded measurably. In an Australian context, Morrison (2016) found that university based teacher educators “prioritised the importance of professional experience as a time for developing the practical components of learning to teach, underpinned by rigorous theoretical knowledge” (p. 120).

However, there are incongruent views held when it comes to the validity of a theoretical based education versus a more practical based education. According to Goodwin and Kosnik (2013), there is a notable call for theoretically-driven education to give way to more practical experiences and more applied learning. Sjølie (2014)
noted in her research that “Student-teachers’ encounter with pedagogy as an academic discipline-with a different epistemology than the one they know from their discipline specific studies-seems to cause considerable struggle that often ends in a devaluation and denigration of theory in education” (p. 729). Edling and Frelin (2014) discussed the problematic nature of presenting certain kinds of theory to student teachers because of their supposed efficiency in teachers’ work. These assumptions about theory and its limited ability to ‘capture what works’ can lead to stereotypes when describing theoretical content. Similarly, the issue of the meaning that one brings to the conception of theory shapes the way it is used in practice and this can be individualised. According to Smith, Hodson and Brown (2013, p. 238), conceptualisation of theory shifts in “a rapidly changing professional landscape where conceptions of teacher education are being adjusted to fit new priorities and requirements. Theory has become a moveable feast appropriated to suit new and diverse agenda.”

Louden and Rohl (2006) completed an Australian study as part of a national research project that aimed to find out how well-prepared pre-service teachers were to teach the subject of literacy. They point out that while Australian teachers are generally well regarded internationally there has been, on average, one national and/or state inquiry into teacher education every year. Their data included 21 national focus groups involving 150 teachers and teacher educators in six states and then three nationally representative questionnaire surveys involving 1,300 beginning teachers and senior school staff. The breadth of their study gave some powerful insight into this ‘disconnect’ between theory and using it in practice. Generally, senior school staff believed the content knowledge was not clear enough in how it would be integrated into practice. Teacher educators were still generally in favour of
the academic education with the main emphasis on theory and content knowledge but some did admit that the emphasis needs to shift. As one teacher educator from Victoria was quoted, “I think we as academics have to get in, get our sleeves up and be out there with kids and with teachers and in that context…I think that’s where it’s got to go. I don’t think we’re going to get away with continuing the way it is” (pp. 73-74). However, what was one of the most concerning results from the study was how underprepared beginning teachers felt once they entered the classroom, with only 45% of respondents who work in low socio-economic status primary schools feeling positive about how prepared they were to teach literacy. Results like this led Louden and Rohl to end their article by stating the following:

Whatever the mix of theory and practice teacher educators believe to be optimal, they can expect future teacher education students to echo the beginning teacher in this study who understood the problem as ‘too many theories and not enough instruction.’ (p. 78)

There is evidence summarised here from the literature which identifies a relatively consistent gap or disconnect between the theory and evidence and the practice in the classroom. When teachers are taken through the theory, monitored (as in a research study) and have a sound understanding of the theory, then it appears to be applied successfully in their practice allowing for implicit knowledge to become explicit and for theory to become of assistance to the practice creating a relationship between understanding and design (Hall, 2002; Liljedahl, 2008; Moore, Cupp & Fortenberry, 2004). However, the disconnect lies when the theory is misunderstood, its meaning interpreted to suit different agendas and contexts (for the better or worse) or becomes cumbersome. As one teacher “Laura” discussed in Kagan et al (1993, p. 125), “a teacher has a great amount of material that she must wade through, organise,
and communicate efficiently.” Thus, if this material cannot be linked with concrete strategies within the classroom, there is a concern that time is sacrificed without gain.

**NAPLAN**

The secondary aim presented in this study is to contribute to the discussion surrounding teachers’ and principals’ perspectives of NAPLAN as Australia’s national standardised testing program. As discussed in chapter one of this thesis, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy is included as a secondary aim of this study because while controversial, it was the only means in which to gather data regarding the academic performance of Australian schools and students and therefore used to select the schools for this study. Because the secondary aim of this study is to contribute to the discussion surrounding perspectives of NAPLAN, I review here what is currently being raised in the literature.

Presently, much debate lies in the Australian media regarding the effects of NAPLAN on students, parents, teachers and schools with the calling into question the validity of data collected from standardised testing such as NAPLAN. Generally headlines are negative in connotation, such as “Parents Snubbing NAPLAN testing” (Wilson, 2015) or “Plea to fix ‘girl-friendly bias in NAPLAN Testing” (Balogh, 2017) and “How NAPLAN is failing our children” (Bagshaw, 2015) to give just a small sample. While there is and will continue to be a debate surrounding the use of standardised testing such as NAPLAN in the media globally, there is only a small amount of research surrounding Australian teachers’ and principals’ perspectives of NAPLAN as a genuine means of measuring the academic performance of the individual student (against stated benchmarks), the teacher responsible for the learning and the school as a whole. One of the few studies was conducted by
Thompson and Harbaugh (2013) who examined how NAPLAN was perceived by a voluntary sample of teachers in Western Australia and South Australia. They found that the perspectives of the teachers were influenced by the state they taught in, the socio-economic status of the school they were employed in and what school system they worked in (either State, Catholic or Independent). Their findings align with international research on standardised testing where “high-stakes testing has a number of impacts on curriculum and pedagogy” (p. 310). Generally, their research showed that the perceptions of NAPLAN were “more negative” for the teachers working in Western Australia, in lower socio-economic status schools and in the government sector.

In Polesel, Dulfer and Turnbull’s (2012) study on the educator’s perspective on the impact of high stakes testing on school student and their families, over 8,500 educators nationwide were surveyed. Their findings suggested that teachers were concerned that NAPLAN could be having a negative effect on curriculum scope, pedagogy, staff morale, student well-being and a school’s capacity to attract and retain students. In regards to the perspectives of educators the researchers concluded that:

The concerns expressed in the international literature and also raised by teachers surveyed in this study suggest that further research is required to examine carefully the uses, effects and impacts of NAPLAN, as reported by a range of users, including systems, the teaching profession, parents and students (p. 9).

Along the same lines, Ward (2012) found that teachers were concerned with the negative impact that standardised testing such as NAPLAN had on pedagogy, limiting the opportunities for collaborative learning contexts with their students. Ward and APPA (2013) also found that educators believed that NAPLAN was
influencing how literacy and numeracy was being taught in schools as the structure of teaching these subjects changed to mirror test situations to ensure a strong as possible NAPLAN performance.

One very frightening statement from the research comes from Thompson and Cook (2014, p. 139) who state the following:

For Australian teachers, NAPLAN is becoming the most important vehicle for representing their teaching. The more they care about how their teaching is represented the more they attend to the scores used to measure their teaching and one potential consequence of this is a shift from caring about students to attention to the data.

However, this is still largely an indication from the research, not qualified fact. As concluded by Rogers, Barblett and Robinson (2016) “a lack of research studies investigating the effect of NAPLAN on stakeholders currently limits arguments about NAPLAN’s impact” (p. 340).

As NAPLAN in its current form has only been used in Australian schools since 2008, we can look to international research on standardised testing for a more holistic view of the subject from the perspectives of teachers. Currently the main players in standardised testing are the United Kingdom and United States, where its usage as part of teaching and curriculum practice has been employed for a much longer period of time and “has been implemented with particular intensity” (Au, 2008, p. 639). Therefore, more research is available on the perspectives of educators when implementing standardised testing as part of their practice.

Much of the research on the perspectives of teachers on standardised testing comes out of the USA. In 2007, national educational policy shifted to emphasise the evaluation of students, teachers and schools based on the students test scores from standardised testing (Scot, Callahan & Urquhart, 2009). A lot of the research is based
on quantitative data taken from small and large scale surveys. For example, Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation published a report based on a survey of more than 10,000 public school teachers which found that only 26% of teachers believed standardised testing was a truthful reflection of what students know (Rebora, 2012). Another survey of teachers, site administrators and school district administrators in Colorado found that of 510 usable surveys, 73% of participants believed that standardised tests are not a good measure of teacher effectiveness with 72% stating that they had access to evidence to prove that judgement (Ramirez, Clouse & White Davis, 2014). Some studies have been done into particular curriculum areas with an example being Aydeniz and Southerland’s (2012) study of 161 science teachers who had mixed responses to the administration of standardised tests but whose findings revealed a negative associative influence on science teachers’ pedagogy and the implementation of standardised tests.

A lot of research indicates that standardised testing is not inclusive when considering the learning requirements of different cohorts of students. Scot, Callahan and Urquhart (2009) interviewed Master degree graduate educators on their perspectives on high-stakes testing for accountability purposes. Their research concluded that “the powerful accountability movement is counter to best practice in meeting the needs of some students” (p. 50). In this instance, the researchers were referring to gifted students. In other studies, such students include English as a second language Latino/a students (Zoch, 2017), African-American students (Haynes, 2008), and students with special needs (Waitoller and Pazey, 2016). Students from disadvantaged, poverty and low socio-economic backgrounds have also been identified as not being served well by high stakes testing, as found by Baker and Johnston (2010), Diamond and Spillane (2004), Dianis, Jackson and
Noguera (2015), Jennings and Sohn (2014), Kearns (2011), Lipman (2013), Tanner, (2015) and Trujillo (2013) to name a few. This is an important facet of the topic because all the research reviewed clearly suggested a negative association between student achievement, standardised testing and students with different needs to the general classroom population. This has particular relevance to this present study because it highlights the concern in the literature that standardised testing can often be too insular in its application and content which can disadvantage students who do not fall into the general student cohort (white, middle class, students for example).

Another issue that is raised in the literature out of the U.S is the stress placed on teachers to the point where teachers have ‘been caught’ violating standardised testing protocol or in other words, cheating. Vogt (2013) discussed the fallout from a case in Atlanta, Georgia where 35 teachers, administrators and one superintendent were caught changing the test scores of students. He pointed out that such was the educators’ desperation to appear academically successful that they did not consider that changing the scores prevented the schools from accessing federal money to support struggling students. Vogt further noted that between 2010 and 2013, cheating on test scores was confirmed in 37 U.S states and Washington D.C. Similarly, Gay (cited in Richardson, Wheeless & Cunningham, 2008) found 35% of teachers she surveyed had colluded or contributed in some way in testing irregularities. The Dallas Morning News found evidence that teachers and administrators at nearly 400 Dallas schools had helped students cheat on the Texas standardised test (Vertuno cited in Richardson, et al., 2008). This type of prevalent violation of testing protocol does raise various issues in regards to implementation and intent when using standardised testing as a measurement of teacher, student and school success.
In regards to the United Kingdom, Ball (2008) notes that with the introduction of the national curriculum as part of the education reform act 1988, there has been a series of policy initiatives that have encouraged the shift of power from the teachers in the classroom to the nationally based management ‘centre.’ According to Gillborn and Youdell, (2000) the fallout of these reforms is an education system that consists of standards where all schools must “strive continually for more and more success; judged by traditional, biased and elitist criteria, where those who fail to measure up must look to themselves for the cause” (p.18).

Interestingly, Collins, Reiss and Stobart (2010) compared teachers’ perceptions of compulsory testing of student science achievement within England and its abolition in Wales. The findings noted that the abolition in Wales did not lead to immediate radical change and teachers did still favour giving students tests as part of their assessment. However, they believed they now had more time to focus on investigative science which is what the Science teachers in England expressed that they wished they had more time for. This desire for more “teaching time” and a focus on formative rather than high-stakes summative assessment is reiterated by Wyse and Torrance (2009) whose research led to this very same conclusion that a greater emphasis on formative assessment would be of more benefit to students and teachers alike. Andreasen, Kelly, Kousholt, Mcness and Ydesen (2015) compared standardised testing practices in England and Denmark. They concluded that the assessment practice of standardised testing clearly influences teaching as the U.K teachers in particular described very specific practices connected to the teaching for the tests. The researchers concluded that this was due to the high-stakes nature of the standardised tests in the U.K with funding and other rewards attached to the results, narrowing the scope for teacher creativity and style in the classroom.
In Ireland, standardised testing is a relatively new implementation but similar concerns have been outlined. Mac Ruairc (2009) discusses the implications of the recently introduced mandatory standardised testing into Ireland from a socio-cultural perspective noting grave concerns for the stigmatization of children living in marginalised and disadvantaged communities. He made several references to the dwindling number of studies on standardised testing in the UK up to this point as evidence that assumptions now exist regarding the relationship between low attainment on these types of tests and disadvantaged cohorts of students. What he noted as most concerning was that current literature suggests that low socio-economic schools that are succeeding in connecting curricula and teaching to the realities of students’ cultures, backgrounds and economic conditions are performing worst on these type of standardised tests. McNeil (2000) furthered this concern, finding that “the effects of bureaucratic controls on teaching and learning were not vague influences, but rather very concrete and visible transformations of course content and classroom interaction” (p. 11). Therefore, if a school does not see fit to concern itself and its instructional purpose towards the testing, then it will not do so well on said tests. This has strong implications for this study as these “high-performing” schools were classed as so, based solely on their results from NAPLAN.

To this point, most of the research that considered teachers’ perceptions with regard to standardised testing was negative in nature. To counteract this and provide a holistic and balanced view of the topic, I began to hunt for literature that shed some sort of positive light on standardised testing (because why is it being implemented in educational policy worldwide if it is so limiting as a tool of measurement and a process?). Buck, Ritter, Jensen and Rose (2010) found while conducting focus groups with teachers in the US about their perceptions of standardised testing, the
general opinion was positive: “Teachers said the tests provide useful data, the testing regime helps create a road map for instruction, standards and tests don't sap creativity or hinder collaboration, and the accountability imposed by the testing regime is useful” (p. 51). These teachers did have small issues surrounding test lengths and certain elements within the tests, but generally the belief was that this type of testing can be useful if implemented correctly. Klein, Zevenbergen and Brown (2006) found when they surveyed 20 elementary, middle and high school teachers that some of the teachers did feel that standardised testing provided focus for their teaching. Dreher (2012) found that while teacher perceptions of NAPLAN were negative overall, some participants did consider the point that it may “be useful in identifying ‘holes’ and ‘schools that may need greater literacy support’; or used as ‘a summative point’ to ‘reinforce teacher professional judgement’” (p. 347). However, throughout the literature, these small points of positivity were like trying to find “needles in a haystack” of negative literature and research against standardised testing and how teachers view its use in their practice.

To summarise, the literature about teachers’ perceptions of standardised testing is largely negative in nature with many implications illustrated for teaching, pedagogy, teacher and student identity, creativity and scope of curriculum, to name but a few. Standardised testing does appear to be quite problematic for classrooms and schools whose student cohort may consist of students who are gifted, require special needs, are from a different culture to the locale wherein they go to school or are from low socio-economic backgrounds. However, there does appear to be this underlying belief that summative assessment can be valuable to assessing student knowledge as teachers have, do and will continue to use it to benchmark student progress and provide direction for further instruction. It appears to be the time,
content and the high-stakes policy requirements that governments and legislators embed in to standardised testing as a measurement tool for various purposes that concerns teachers at an immediate level; in essence, how the test is created and administered and then used. I conclude by quoting Spolsky (quoted in Mac Ruairc, 2009, p. 47) who said…

“Tests should be labelled just like dangerous drugs: ‘Use with care!’”
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology that underpins the present study on the strategies used by successful teachers in low SES schools to support learning, and how these strategies align with educational theory/research. This also includes the secondary aim of the study examining NAPLAN. The chapter begins with a discussion on the significance and purpose of the study, followed by the suitability of the research design. The chapter will then delve into the theoretical framework used for the study, along with the overarching research approach. Then, the chapter proceeds with an explanation of the site and participant selections, the data collection methods and the data analysis procedures. Next, the reflexivity of the researcher, ethical considerations and the limitations of the study will be discussed. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the methodology and research design.

Research Design

A qualitative approach was used for this study. This approach was chosen as it offers the best possible means of garnering the understandings of the teachers’ own pedagogical practice and the feelings and beliefs associated with them. The study wishes to delve into the subjects’ own professional lived experience within their own contexts, as Marshall and Rossman (2011) noted:

Thus, for qualitative studies, context matters…For a study focusing on individuals’ lived experience, the researcher can also argue that human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them is understood. Because thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions are involved, the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspective that can be captured through face-to-
face interactions and observation in the natural settings. (p. 91)

The operational measurements of quantitative approaches are not suitable for this particular research design because, as described by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), a quantitative researcher subscribes to the view that the social world is like the natural world, an external and objective reality and the analysis of relationships and regularities is examined through and between selected factors. However, this research study requires a qualitative approach as qualitative research designs are “based on a constructivist epistemology and explores what it assumes to be a socially constructed dynamic reality through a framework which is value-laden, flexible, descriptive, holistic, and context sensitive; i.e. an in-depth description of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the people involved. It tries to understand how social experience is created and given meaning” (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 311).

The importance of qualitative approaches to capture educational practice has been emphasised by Elliot Eisner and is summed up by the following quote from his renowned book, ‘The Enlightened Eye’ (1993, p. 11):

It does not seem particularly revolutionary to say that it is important to try to understand how teachers and classrooms function before handing out recommendations for change. Yet so much of what is suggested to teachers and school administrators is said independent of context and often by those ignorant of the practices they wish to improve. If qualitative inquiry in education is about anything, it is about trying to understand what teachers and children do in the settings in which they work.

The deeper and more nuanced descriptions that are characteristic of qualitative research methods are “often more accessible to educators, including teachers and administrators” (Schultz, 2006, p. 361) than the language of quantitative
research methods, and therefore are more likely to evoke change in policy and practice. This is the overarching goal of this research study.

**Overarching Research Approach**

My study, my research and my design are rooted in constructivism, which “maintains that learning is a process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experience” (Merriam, 2006, p. 26). According to Guba and Lincoln (2004), the inquiry paradigm of Constructivism is relativist in its ontology signifying that realities are social and experientially based mental constructions. They go on to state that the epistemology of Constructivism is transactional and subjectivist. That means that the investigator and object/subject of the research are linked and the findings are created throughout the proceedings. The methodology is hermeneutical and dialectical stating that constructions are elicited through interaction between the investigator and respondents in a dialectical exchange (pp. 26-27). To consider this explanation in regards to my research, my focus is on the realities of teachers and students in the school environment and the subjective nature of perception between student, teacher and indeed myself, as novice researcher.

From this epistemological standpoint, I am approaching this research from within a critical/transformative paradigm. I come to this research from a transformative world view as discussed by Creswell (2014). Creswell discusses how Transformative world views examine constraints and strategies that are inflicted onto certain diverse groups causing oppression. I believe the structure of the current educational institutions and their systems force this particular cohort of students to operate in an infrastructure which is somewhat foreign to their own experience and makes it difficult for them to achieve to their full potential. With this in mind,
structures and strategies must be implemented in order to open the pathway for students working within these constraints.

My personal philosophies on the value of education for all students but particularly students from low socio-economic backgrounds form the personal meaning-making that I as the novice researcher bring to this research design. Schram (2003, p. 10) defines interpretation as the following: “Interpretation, following Peshkin (2000), means building upon assumptions of fact (what you and others perceive and select as important and meaningful in what you are learning) and incorporating them into a line of reasoning (interconnecting what you are learning with other actions and circumstances).” My philosophical assumptions are embedded within my interpretive framework as discussed in Creswell (2012) and allow myself as the researcher to consider what I am bringing to the research. This includes my views, understandings and experience as a teacher working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. I had to be very aware that my views, similar to the participants, are rooted in my previous experience. Some of that experience holds judgement for what I have seen and have indeed experienced as a teacher myself. How much of this has led me into a level of deficit thinking? While I have always valued myself on professionally providing the best education I could to all my students regardless of culture, background or station, I need to acknowledge and be conscious of how my experience and therefore my views frame the data of this research study or as Boucher Jr and Helfenbein (2015) stated, “deeper understandings of their own positionality in teaching the Other” (p. 742).
Theoretical Framework

In the process of meaning-making and discovering what makes sense to me, I sought a theoretical framework that would guide and clarify my interviews, data collection and analysis. I began by using Merzirow’s (1981) Transformative Learning Theory to guide my study and solidify my epistemological standpoint. According to Karpiak (quoted in Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 98) this theory is “a theory and method of enlarging the learner’s perspective and is most specifically suited to adults and their level of cognitive and experiential development.” From my positionality, I wanted my research to uncover strategies that teachers can learn to enhance their relationships with their students. This would require psychological shifts and cognitive understanding to change the experience in the classroom. This theory along with my interpretive framework informs and underpins the research questions I want to explore in this research design and is what comprises my conceptual framework.

However, from my research question and overarching purpose for this study, I started to consider these aims and questions in light of the literature. What continued to bounce about in my head was the consistent gap or disconnect between the theory and evidence and the practice in the classroom as remarked by several teachers in the literature. With this in mind and in order for the process and the data to make sense to me, I embarked on creating a theoretical framework to use as a lens to analyse my data. As this research study falls into the category of description and interpretative research (Peshkin, 1993) and while there is a lot of theory out there, I felt I needed to create a framework more focussed to my specific study. Lederman and Lederman (2015) encapsulates this idea in the following: “The discussion here is focussed on theoretical frameworks at a much more specific and localized
perspective with respect to the justification and conceptualisation of a single research investigation” (p.594). The literature surrounding my research question establishes that there is a problem that needs to be considered and therefore this provides the rationale for conducting my research study.

Throughout the review of the literature, I discovered four strands that interweaved throughout the findings about strategies that raise academic achievement for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. As discussed in the previous chapter, these were Early Childhood Intervention, Academic Program Models, Student Engagement and Teacher Pedagogy. As an addendum to this fourth strand of Teacher Pedagogy, relational pedagogy and the concept of the relationship between the teacher and the student became a very strong point of focus in the literature for pedagogical practice. Whilst these strands or themes were extrapolated from the literature, it must be noted that nearly all the literature consisted of research done overseas, particularly in the U.S.A and Britain so there was much less to draw from in the Australian context over a period of time (i.e. longitudinal studies). However, as a previous primary school teacher myself, these strands made sense to me and my concept of teaching in a primary school situated in a low socio-economic area in Australia. Therefore, I felt these strands from the literature should act as my conceptual lens to guide the analysis of my data.

Wolcott (2009) discusses the dual purpose of theory in qualitative research. The first purpose is to use theory as a way of asking your question and then to help guide you to a reasonable answer. In this sense, I have used established theory (Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory) to inform and construct my research question. The second purpose, which Wolcott discusses is in his words, “if you have a reasonable answer (solution, explanation, interpretation, etc.) for the question you
are pursuing, you can proceed with that as your focus” (p. 75). The strands from the literature review provide some possible answers so I chose to use them as a theoretical framework to inform my data collection and data analysis.

**Site and Participant Selection**

Due to issues of time, population size and location, I used random purposeful sampling for site and participant selection. With this technique, the researcher identifies a population of interest and develops a systematic way of selecting cases that increase authenticity for the sample and data. This technique is used when the potential sample would be too large as is the case for this study design (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994). There is an element of convenience within my sampling protocol as it was indeed the case to accept who was willing to be a participant within my study. The identified population of interest was teachers and schools who are producing “trend-bucking” results with students who are mainly from low-socio economic backgrounds.

Essentially, I was looking for low SES primary schools whose scores in reading and numeracy are considered above or substantially above the results of schools serving students from statistically similar backgrounds. These schools would be primary, situated in low-socio-economic areas with large cohorts of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. These schools would also be located in the state of Victoria that are producing above average means-tested academic results and outcomes from their students. I chose Victoria because most of my primary school teaching experience occurred there, and also because I was living there at the time of data collection. Collecting data in Victoria therefore allowed me to conduct face to face interviews (the reasons for this are explained later in the chapter). By narrowing
the sampling to government primary schools within the state of Victoria, the aim was to keep the sampling purposeful and representative of the larger population of primary schools within Australia whilst adhering to Doctoral thesis timelines and state juridictive processes for conducting research within schools.

To identify the schools that met these criteria, I used NAPLAN results and statistical data from the MySchool website. My reasoning for using NAPLAN is that quite simply, it is the best data available at this time. By best, I mean it provides the most comprehensive data for use, providing statistical information adhering to the categories mentioned in the previous paragraph. Quantitative in its design, NAPLAN produces statistical graphs and analysis based on the scoring of children on standardised tests delivered in Years Three and Five (it is also delivered to students in Year Seven and Nine but this was outside the scope of the study as these years are both completed in secondary school in Victoria.) However, I recognise the debate surrounding NAPLAN testing and assessment, hence why I interviewed teachers and principals on their opinions on the use of NAPLAN as a secondary aim of this study.

After gaining approval to approach schools from the Victorian Department of Education and Training, I searched the MySchool website for low SES primary schools in the state of Victoria that had substantially better achievement on NAPLAN than similar schools (similar meaning a similar cohort of students from similar socio-economic areas). This was the only criteria for the selection of the schools. The MySchool website groups “similar” schools according to socio-economic advantage using the ICSEA as discussed in Chapter One. The fact that they were all government schools situated regionally was a consistency possibly due to factors around how the schools are grouped according to ICSEA. I identified seven schools that met my search criteria. These seven schools were the only schools
that met the above criteria and were situated in Victoria (as the similar schools are grouped nationally, not by state.) My goal was to include four schools in my study. I contacted all seven schools to invite them to participate. Three schools declined my request to participate due to the time of year and teachers preparing for the end of the term. The four schools who accepted became the subjects of the study.

After I had secured the permission of these four primary schools who were willing to be involved in the research study, discussions took place with the principals to identify three teachers from each school. These teachers were chosen based on the principals’ opinion that they were exemplary at teaching low SES students, they produced great academic results from their students and they would be willing to be participants in my research. Once the teachers were identified, the teachers were approached and permission secured.

**School Profiles**

The profile of each school is illustrated in appendix D and are labelled School A, B, C and D according to the order I conducted the interviews. Below is a table outlining information regarding each school as stated on the MySchool website for reference:
### Table One

*Participant schools’ profiles from MySchool website*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Sector</strong></td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year range</strong></td>
<td>Prep-6</td>
<td>Prep-6</td>
<td>Prep-6</td>
<td>Prep-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>Inner regional</td>
<td>Outer regional</td>
<td>Inner regional</td>
<td>Major Cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enrolments</strong></td>
<td>99 Boys 52 Girls 47</td>
<td>203 Boys 103 Girls 100</td>
<td>108 Boys 51 Girls 57</td>
<td>454 Boys 221 Girls 233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% Indigenous</strong></td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% Language</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>background other than</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School ICSEA value</strong></td>
<td>915</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Average Australian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>value – 1000)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distribution of students according to socio educational advantage quarters</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top quarter</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle quarters</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom quarter</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each school was selected for participation based on the school’s NAPLAN results when compared with similar schools. With reference to “similar” schools, as previously stated, these are schools that are grouped together for the purposes of NAPLAN because they have students from similar statistical backgrounds as cohorts. The ICSEA levels are also used to group the schools. Schools are grouped on a national level. The MySchool website offers this extra piece of information in graph
form based on the subject area, the year level and the year. For example, Figure Three, taken from the *MySchool* website, represents Year 3 NAPLAN reading scores for the 2015 test for a group of similar schools. In this instance School B used in this study is represented by the blue circle.

*Figure Three:* School B - NAPLAN reading results for Year 3. From: [website- www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au)

The graph depicts School B’s results for the NAPLAN reading test given to Year Three students in 2015. Each circle represents a school within this particular similar schools category across Australia. The higher the school’s average score for their Year Three students in the reading section of the NAPLAN, the further towards the right, the schools will appear. School B is the blue circle and from its position on the graph, its scores are substantially higher than the statistically similar schools it is grouped with nationally. It was through these graphs that a shortlist of Victorian
schools was selected and then the four schools that agreed to participate, became the subjects of the study.

**School Locations**

The locations of each school were quite similar. The schools were not based in inner urban locales with higher migrant populations, which I initially assumed they would be. As the researcher, that assumption was based on studies from the United States and the U.K, in which schools with the highest amount of students from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to be geographically located close to major cities or part of outer urban sprawls (Freeman, 2010; Kendall, 2011; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Parsons, 2012; Waldfogel, 2010). However, with the four schools used in this study, three were located in regional areas of country Victoria with the fourth school recently being considered part of the southern metropolitan area of Melbourne. Up till 5-10 years ago, this school was also considered regional. What was noted in the ICSEA levels and their grading of schools were that there were many more Victorian regional schools that were under the 1000 level benchmark with nearly all the inner and outer metropolitan schools sitting near or over the 1000 benchmark. As stated in the introduction chapter, the ICSEA is the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage created by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) specifically to enable school comparisons of NAPLAN achievement. The benchmark of 1000 is considered the “average” or “middle of the road” level for Australian schools with a higher than 1000 level more socially advantaged than the average and below 1000, less socially advantaged than the average. The implications of this will be discussed in the next chapter.
Participants

The principals of each school had several attributes in common. All four principals had over 25 years’ experience working in education with two principals having 36 years’ experience. All four principals had been teachers previously and all four had taught in small, regional schools at some point during their career. Their teaching experience was varied, with one principal having taught overseas, one in private, single sex schools, one in Catholic schools and two in urban schools. Two principals were leading teachers before they stepped into their principal roles. Their ages ranged from 48 to 62 years with two principals being male and two being female. Two of the principals had pursued employment outside of education for a part of their careers but both principals expressed that it was their love of teaching that had brought them back to education. In regards to their own personal backgrounds, two principals identified as being from the middle-class, one principal from the working class whilst living in what was a low socio-economic area at the time of their childhood and one principal identified as being from a low socio-economic background and who related several personal experiences from childhood that affiliated them with the experiences of the children at their school. Interestingly, the two principals that identified as working-class and from a low socio-economic background were still living in the same areas that they had grown up in.

As part of the study, the principals of each school were asked to select three teachers each that they deemed to be exemplary or “standouts” in their pedagogy and practice. There were only two attributes that were mentioned as reasons they had chosen the teachers they had to participate in the study. The first attribute was the students’ academic results and the second attribute being teachers’ enthusiasm for their vocation. However, one principal did express that they believed all their
teachers were standouts and it was a bit to do with who would have time available on the day to be interviewed. When the teachers were asked why they think they might have been chosen to be a part of the study, the answers were far more varied. Please see Table Two.

Table Two

*Teachers’ perceptions about why they were nominated to participate in the study.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ Reasons for being chosen for the study by the principals</th>
<th>Number of times discussed in interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience working with low SES students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher enthusiasm</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student academic achievement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping them all safe in the classroom</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach other teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working at school for a long period of time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly experienced</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-student relationship</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given special needs students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background in welfare</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible for intervention programs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does many different roles within the school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experience was the main theme running through some of the responses as teachers discussed their length of time in teaching, their experience working in welfare and with this particular cohort of students. Experience was also attributed to
the ability to keep the children safe in the room which was explained in the following quotes:

I think in the beginning you are evaluated on if you can keep them all in the room. Then as you are gaining experience it is how you keep them engaged and then when they are engaged you can then teach them and that is when your principal will see that you are sensible and reasonable when the students are not running out all the time. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

You become known as a teacher who can keep them in the room therefore you become the teacher who gets all the children with special needs. That is the indicator. (Female teacher, Participant 16)

The teacher-participants in this study had a higher range of years of experience in teaching. Only one teacher-participant had less than 10 years’ experience: four years’ experience, all at their current school. Four teachers had between 10 and 20 years’ experience, two teacher-participants with between 20 and 30 years’ experience, four teachers with between 30 and 40 years’ experience and one teacher with just over 40 years’ experience in teaching. Similarly, all but one teacher-participant had spent the majority of their teaching career at their present school with most having spent between 16 and 30 years teaching at their current school. This has strong implications for the attainment of effective strategies which will be discussed further in the next chapter. As a result, every teacher stated that the bulk of their experience, if not all had been working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds and poverty. Even the teachers who had worked in different schools previously, stated that the cohort of students had been the same or similar. The age range of the teacher-participants was from between 27 and 62 years, with 10 being female and two teacher-participants being male.
Data Collection

Data collection for this research study was via an in-depth interview strategy. As this study is very much focusing on the experiences and the knowledge gained from these experiences, so “the primary strategy is to capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 93). By using interviews as instruments in my research design, the hope was to encourage the participants to discuss and crystallize for themselves their own methods and practice and give them the opportunity to reflect on and share their own skills and knowledge.

As mentioned previously, the interview questions were formulated from the theoretical framework and can be found in Appendix E and F respectively. The questions focused on teacher experience and success, challenges, strategies, professional development and perceptions of NAPLAN. The questions in my lists were useful for guiding the conversations whilst encouraging leads that the interviewees offered. This allowed for my interviewees to share stories, practices, and recollections of particular moments from their personal experiences (Seidman, 2006).

The general topic areas in my interview guide proved useful in helping me bring conversations back to key areas I hoped to learn more about, but I also remained open to leads that my interviewees offered, which I followed up with further prompts to elicit deeper reflection and elaboration from participants (Patton, 2002).

Whilst recording the interviews via the voice memo function on my smartphone and through the use of an Echopen, I also took field notes and observations to create a more holistic and ongoing analysis of the data. These were recorded in a
note book. The notes and observations served as a supplementary source to understand the interview data when it came to analysis.

I interviewed both principals and teachers in the interview phase. The purpose of interviewing the principals was to discuss their particular understandings of a “successful” teacher in order to help develop a definition for the study. I also discussed with the principals how they gauge if the teacher’s success in the classroom has been influenced by any wider school processes that have been a contributing factor to the students’ higher academic outcomes. The interviews with the principals was set for a one hour time frame, however, the interviews ran for 32 minutes, 50 minutes, 1 hour and 22 minutes and 1 hour and 48 minutes respectively.

I began by going to each school in person and interviewing the principals of the schools, which my participant teachers are employed at.

After interviewing the principals, the participant teachers were interviewed. These interviews were also conducted within the teacher-participants’ schools. I used my list of interview questions which essentially aimed to highlight if the teachers used elements of the constructed theoretical framework in their teaching and/or do they contribute their success to other strategies and practices that they employ within the classroom. If it was the latter, the teacher was encouraged to identify what these are, how they are deemed to work and why they believed the particular strategy works for them. The participant teachers were interviewed once. I offered an opportunity for a follow up interview if participants wanted to add any more information to their initial interview. All participant teachers declined the offer of a second interview in person but all agreed to be contacted by phone or email. I therefore contacted each teacher via telephone/email to ask if they wanted to add anything extra to their initial interview. I believe the reasons for declining a second
in-person interview were the large amount of time allocated for the first interview and the timing (it was moving towards the end of the school year, where teachers have a lot of other roles and responsibilities that would take precedence.) The time allocated for each interview was one hour each but as stated previously, two of the principal-participants and nine of the teacher-participants went considerably over this time allocation. What did occur for nearly all interviewees, was that they were often surprised in their ability to “open up” about their experiences and ideas once the conversation began in the first interview and therefore, did not feel the need to add additional information in the second interview.

Data Analysis

Within qualitative research, Lester (1999) discusses how we attempt to identify key themes within a large body of distinct and diverse data as this is central to the work of a researcher. I found that analysis of the data is an ongoing process throughout the entire research study as new themes and sub-themes were identified every time the data was interrogated. This is discussed by Glesne (2011), who stated that analysis is not a separate part of the research study but an ongoing process where the researcher is listening for possible new questions and directions in the participants’ comments with an analytical ear. The aim of interrogating the data over and over again is to continue to discover the themes and sub-themes that will eventually crystallise into “an essence to an experience that is shared with others who have also had that experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 201). I had the occasion to interrogate the data repeatedly as I transcribed the interviews word for word, typing the interviews into word documents as I listened to the recordings.
This emphasis on the ongoing and cyclical nature of data analysis was inherent for me through the field notes, memos and observations I recorded throughout each interview and afterwards, the post-interview questions raised and recorded and the delving into sub-themes not necessarily linked to specific questions but indeed highlighted for me that data analysis was already occurring before I had sat down to code anything. Alongside this, I kept a reflexive journal to continually analyse the transferability of the data and its applicability to the research question and aims of the study. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) discussed the nature of analysis in qualitative studies as “a reflexive activity that should inform data collection, writing, further data collection, and so forth.” Therefore it “should not be seen as a distinctive stage of research” (p. 6). This inductive approach allowed for a more holistic picture of the teachers’ and principals’ experience to emerge in order to form an understanding and interpretation of the participants and their experience.

When it came to the process of coding the themes, I realised that the themes and patterns that were highlighted from the literature and theoretical framework, were quite fundamental to the practices I was aiming to conceptualise. I began by using the themes raised in the literature review, namely early childhood intervention, academic program models, student engagement and teacher pedagogy and the teacher/student relationship. I repeatedly listened to each audio recording from each interview and transcribed the responses to each question, while comparing against memos and notes recorded during each interview. Because the context was so integral to the observations and discussions of the participants, all the analysis was considered in light of the school the participants worked within. The information was recorded on an Echo Smartpen and stored onto the Echo desktop software with a backup copy of each interview in the voice memo application in my smartphone. I
then transcribed the data into Microsoft word using the Echo software and then used Microsoft Word documents to assist in coding and for the confirmation of repeated relevant themes throughout the interview transcripts. I did this by beginning with priori codes pulled from the literature review and discussed in Chapter Two and then looking through the data for themes that either fell into these codes or juxtaposed them with new information. I then assigned the codes to the text manually and sorted within digital codebooks. The mapping and interpretation of the themes, codes and subsets were continually reviewed and examined for familiarisation for myself as the researcher and to garner the results from the data.

**Reflexivity of the Researcher**

With the personal experience and perception I brought to the decision and creation of this research study, reflexivity became an extremely important concept to consider during every stage of the study for two major reasons. Firstly, I was aware of my own subjectivity during this process and my own opinions of what I thought the participants should say in their responses, particularly in relation to my own personal experience. As stated by Delamont (2002, p. 8), “researchers must be aware of the subjectivity of their interpretations. Rather than attempting to eliminate ‘investigator effects’, the researcher should concentrate on understanding those effects.” I found that by continually reflecting on my own subjectivity, it allowed for me to consider my own perspectives and insights which helped to build a stronger understanding of the topic. As Goldstein (2017) stated: “Reflexive procedures, in which researchers engage a critical and conscientious evaluation of themselves in relation to the individuals or groups being researched, can substantially enhance the accuracy and ethical quality of social research by bringing awareness to influential
aspects of one’s biography or positioning that might otherwise remain hidden” (p. 149).

Continually noting and considering my own subjectivity was also central to forming a relationship with my participants so that they could provide open, detailed responses and felt comfortable doing so. As Toma (2000) argued, it is the relationship between the researcher and the participant which leads to “good data” and that “the process of research is a transaction between two people”. Therefore, “the researcher is not a detached observer but is a participant with the subject in the search for meaning” (p. 178). Bearing this in mind, it is my view that my collaborations with my participants produced quality insight and data, often going over the designated time because the participants were very willing to contribute more to the interviews. I did find that sharing some experiences and emotion behind the topic recommended by Goldstein (2017) allowed connection to occur and all participants stated they would appreciate feedback on the results of the study as they joined in the search for meaning.

This leads into my own positionality and strengths as a researcher in respect to the study. Several facets of my positionality tended to foster dynamic interview exchanges. As mentioned previously, there were certain factors that assisted in creating a candid, comfortable and valuable conversation with the participants. Firstly, my personal experience as a primary school teacher working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds gave me a solid grounding to conduct the interviews as someone who has faced the strengths, issues, fears and joys of working with this particular cohort of students. Essentially, I have “walked a mile in their shoes” and that allowed for a certain fluency and recognition when discussing these topics. My knowledge and experience in this particular area allowed me that insight
to assist participants to delve a little deeper for their responses. I believe this encouraged participants to expand on the topics raised and talk at length as they saw that I too was passionate and familiar with the content of the discussion.

I have also previously been in the position of interviewing adult learners who work with the same or similar cohorts of students within primary schools and early childhood centres in my capacity as an advanced skills vocational education TAFE lecturer. Therefore, I have had much experience in conducting interview formats such as competency conversations and assessment of prior learning sessions, which are structured purely to obtain as much information and data as possible from an adult learner regarding their experience, knowledge and skills. To do this effectively, I have completed further study in the “art” of planning, structuring and conducting these types of interviews for maximum effect and outcome. The main difference from interviewing for research purposes was that for such interview formats as competency conversations and assessment of prior learning sessions, the collection of data is purely in the best interests of the adult learner to assist them towards completing their study.

Other factors that led to conducive, data-laden discussions include my age, gender and appearance. I am approximately the median age of all my participants combined, allowing me to relate to younger participants as an experienced teacher willing to share my experience and collaborate and relate to older participants as a fellow teacher wanting to learn from their experiences and collaborate. I think my gender and appearance contributed to this too because I dress and present as a middle class working woman and the majority of my participants (and indeed, primary school teachers) are middle class working women. Unfortunately this does play into a deep-rooted cultural gender stereotype but an accurate one. According to the
Australian Council of Educational Research, 8 out of every 10 primary school teachers are female (Weldon, 2015, p. 5). So I look more familiar walking into a school to speak to teachers, than say a 19 year old undergraduate student or a 70 year old male university professor.

Bearing all this in mind and understanding that “the researcher must be visible in the frame of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and partial observer” (Lester, 1999, p. 1), which I do believe is imperative to qualitative interviewing, I also needed to be very aware of personal attitudes and bias that may have an effect on the interpretation of data (Patton, 2002). For example, I had several preconceptions regarding my participants’ answers on a couple of the topics raised in the interview questions. For example, I personally underestimated how important the support of a strong leader in the principals and leadership committees of the schools were deemed to be to assist in successful delivery for the teachers within the classrooms. My preconception (which was proven to be a misconception based on my own experience) was that teachers would see themselves as generally quite autonomous and unaffected by people and decisions from management and leadership unless it directly filtered to their classroom. Indeed, the opposite was true according to the data as teacher-participants repeatedly put a lot of stock in the fact that their principals and leadership were supportive, transparent and “available”. Some participants went so far as to state that it was imperative to them being successful at their own jobs. One other misconception I unknowingly harboured was the expectation of an overwhelmingly negative response to NAPLAN and standardised testing in general. However my personal bias against standardised testing arose here and I was proven wrong as many participants suggested that there was positive use and insight to be gained from
the NAPLAN results, particularly as a measurement tool to gauge learning growth between year levels. Therefore, remaining open to the data and the evidence and striving for a stance of “empathetic neutrality” (Patton, 2002, p. 569) became a strong point of reference when combating researcher bias.

In regard to the reliability of the data collected, I made the point of cross-referencing particular programs, professional development, school approaches and strategies that were discussed in the interviews and used within a school with each of the participants within that particular school. If an approach or professional development is going to be upheld as successful for the school in question, then the core understanding or implementation of the approach must be clear universally. As Capone and Petrillo (2016) stated, “Teachers are the key to success in inclusion: dialogue, participation, and collaboration allow full awareness to all as a community and, in consequence, ensures successful experiences in inclusion” (p. 875). I did also offer the second interview to each participant, to ensure that after the interview and a period of time to consider the interview, the opportunity was there to clarify or add to their original interviews. All participants declined the second interview with all stating that there was no further information they wanted to add.

**Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

As a student researcher conducting my first research study, Murdoch University provides as part of its proposal and application process, a requirement to apply to the Murdoch Human Research Ethics Committee for human research ethics approval (this is a requirement for any study involving human participants). This process involves completing an online unit called the Graduate Research Integrity Program (GRIP) which involves an introduction to research ethics and integrity. This
was an illuminating process to inform me of how to conduct a research study in an ethical way. I was also required to apply to conduct research in Victorian government schools through the Victorian Department of Education and Training. This too involved outlining the ethical considerations and implications that may occur or need to be addressed before entering a school. During these application processes to get ethics approval, the ethical considerations when conducting the research study became evident.

The first ethical considerations that needed to be addressed were confidentiality and working around children. Delamont (2002) discussed ethical issues relevant to fieldwork in educational environments including the need for pseudonyms for participants and their locations as one example. I provided this in my research notes for confidentiality purposes. I was not dealing with minors but as I was entering schools, a working with children check was required. I am a registered member of the Victorian Institute of Teaching so this takes the place of a working with children check (however I do possess both).

When conducting research with or about children, Alderson and Morrow (2011) discussed three ethics frameworks that provided me personally with a great base to start considering the ethical implications for my research. The frameworks, “based on centuries of philosophical debate” (p.17), are Duties (deontology), Rights and Harm-Benefit (Utilitarianism). To explain briefly, Duties consider aspects of justice, respect for autonomy and to consider if the research will be harmful and/or useless. Rights is concerned with the participant’s right to the best treatment, protection from harm, neglect and discrimination, self-determination and non-interference. Harm-Benefit considers how researchers can prevent harm and increase the chance of benefit from their work. These frameworks acted as a lens that I could
look at the design of my research through and gauge if it complied with these three ethical frameworks.

When completing the application processes for both the University and the Victorian Department of Education and Training, what was raised as an ethical consideration in light of Harm-Benefit was the small possibility that the interviews may evoke recall of difficult situations that may have led to refinement of pedagogical processes and which may be upsetting to the participant. In light of this consideration, I incorporated into the design the addendum that if this occurs and the participant is upset or uncomfortable, the interview will cease until the participant is comfortable continuing. This may include rescheduling the interview and/or abandoning a particular line of questioning. While this did not occur, I felt confident knowing that I was prepared for such a circumstance with a reciprocal action.

Limitations of the study were generally based on two factors. The first was the population from which I drew my participants and the second factor was the choice of NAPLAN data as an indicator of each participating school’s academic success. To address the first factor, the population sample was narrowed in scope to Victorian schools so that I could conduct the interviews in person. This did narrow the sampling pool considerably providing a geographic limitation of the study, which in turns limits the transferability of the findings.

To address the second factor, I refer back to the previously mentioned controversy around the validity of standardised testing as a tool for measuring the academic success of schools, students and teachers alike. According to Perry (2016), current research has been highlighting high levels of instability in value-added measures which leads to concerns about the omission of contextual variables in the planned measure. Perry examined the impact of disregarding contextual factors, the
stability of school scores across time and the consistency of value-added performance for different cohorts within schools at a given point in time. This final point is particularly relevant to my study as this point was brought up several times by the participant teachers in regards to NAPLAN. As one teacher-participant put it, “sometimes you just get a year of kids that can’t do tests – and that affects the whole school measurement.”

I hope to personally build on these findings in the future by extending the population sample size and comparing the differences between schools with these cohorts of students who are academically successful and those who aren’t to further delve into the factors that are contributing and inhibiting success on standardised measures of academic performance such as NAPLAN.

**Reflection on the Methodology and Research Design**

The individual realities and understandings as teachers and principals of this particular cohort of students and as participants of my research study have proved extremely captivating to me as I have sought to create a nuanced picture of the experiences of teachers who work with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. For many researchers and what I found myself is “the interpretation of data [is bound up with] the imaginative reconstruction of social worlds and often emphasize[s] the unique rather than regularities of incidence or pattern” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 7). I will now progress into the discussion of my results from the collated data as they relate to the theoretical framework and explore new grounds for theory and research. I will endeavour to reconstruct the social and educational experiences of my participants, emphasizing the strategies that have led to the
production of academic success for this cohort of students and the corresponding themes that weave across several individuals revealed in their words.

The process of writing and analysis is an interwoven practice that continually feeds each other when writing up research. As Frank Lloyd Wright stated, “Get the habit of analysis – analysis will in time enable synthesis to become your habit of mind” (http://www.brainyquote.com). Within the work of writing up my research, the continual analysis of my data right from when I began interviewing my participants, to transcribing the interviews to coding the themes and making connections to “putting pen to paper” so to speak, and collating my findings was a process that was constantly operating in the background. As I continue to communicate my findings through this thesis and share those findings with my audience, I certainly believe that this process has led to very clear, open paths to further exploration.
CHAPTER FOUR: BARRIERS AND OBSTACLES

The overarching purposes of this study were to address the growing gap in the educational achievement of student cohorts from low SES backgrounds and students from other cohorts and secondly, to examine the use of NAPLAN and its effectiveness as an assessment and grading tool for Australian schools and students. As mentioned previously four schools were visited, four principals were interviewed along with three teachers at each school amounting to 16 participants in total.

Whilst I was conducting thematic analysis on the data, I began by using the strands from my theoretical framework as priori codes. These were early childhood intervention, academic program models, student engagement and teacher pedagogy. However, during the course of coding the data, four emergent issues/themes arose that interweaved throughout the interviews and encompassed the four priori codes. I have named the four emergent issues as the following:

- Theme 1: Unique Challenges
- Theme 2: Grit
- Theme 3: Care
- Theme 4: It takes a village…

I used these issues to categorise the barriers and obstacles the participants identified along with connecting them to the initial priori codes. In this chapter, I report the results of the analysis as they relate to participants’ perceptions of the barriers and obstacles that their students face and how these impact their learning and teaching more generally.
**Issue 1: Unique Challenges**

All 16 participants in this research study were able to articulate the unique challenges that a teacher and a school faces when trying to support learning and academic achievement for students from a low socio-economic background. Participants believed these challenges would not be experienced so predominantly with other cohorts of students.

**Behind before we begin**

I think that’s the frustration for teachers. The kids come in already way behind and there’s the pressure of the Department saying, “why aren’t your kids up to standard?” We work so hard to get them to here but they’re still behind and its finding that answer to how do you move students? If they’re only moving six months instead of a year then that is not acceptable but what about when they are two years behind when they start school. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

All four principals and nine of the teacher-participants discussed how children from low-socio economic backgrounds enter school at the preparatory level already far behind standard benchmarks. One principal stated the following:

With the AEDC data we are red across the board for development coming into school. (Female Principal, Participant 1)

The AEDC is the Australian Early Development Census which is a population measure of how young children are developing across Australia. It is measured across five areas which are physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based) and communication and general knowledge. Children in the top 75th percentile are considered “on track”, those in the bottom 25th percentile are considered
“developmentally at risk” and those in the bottom 10th percentile are considered “developmentally vulnerable” (Understanding the AEDC Results, 2011). When the principal showed me an AEDC chart of her current cohort of prep students, all the children were in the bottom 25th percentile with at least a third of the students in the “developmentally vulnerable” percentile. Two other principals expressed similar comments regarding their AEDC data but I did not see the charts.

These developmental delays were also discussed as quite prevalent in a more generalised sense. Nearly all the participants discussed their opinions of a higher than average disability rate, both diagnosed and undiagnosed with this cohort of students. Behavioural disorders and learning disabilities were discussed repeatedly but physical issues were also mentioned.

We have over 10% diagnosed and not to mention undiagnosed with a disability and most of them don’t have funding. (Female Principal, Participant 1)

Then on top of that you have developmental delays, for example one little boy I teach didn’t get teeth till the end of last year so his speech is terrible, he lacks confidence in everything so then you need to deal with the belief in themselves as well. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

Another possible reason raised for the low development rates coming into school was the “Baby Bonus.” This was a federal government incentive scheme introduced in Australia in 2001 after Australia’s lowest ever recorded birth rate. It peaked at a payment of $5000 to parents of newborn babies before being phased out in 2014 and replaced by changes to the Family Tax Benefit Scheme (The Baby Bonus Generation, 2014). One teacher explained the issue as such:

I really noticed it got worse at (School D) a few years after the baby bonus was introduced. We would have these very, very young girls with their 4 and five-year-old’s. With their mums just
babies themselves, the kids had not been brought up properly, they didn’t have the expected social norms, they couldn’t mix well with the other kids, Mum was almost definitely single by this stage so you got babies with babies standing on your doorstep and the areas we teach in are low rent so that was a big downward slide. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

Another major issue raised by all the principal-participants was the high number of students who did not attend kindergarten before entering school. All principals expressed that this was a common concern and the results were very often low oral language skills and lack of social development when entering school. The teacher-participants reiterated this issue by expressing the following:

So they come in at a minimum of 6 to 18 months behind the average and you’re constantly playing catch up with that sort of gap. They are behind in prep, then they are behind in year one and so it goes on and on. So the kids are always that minimum of six months behind what the government would like them to be and whoever decides that that’s where they should be at that point in life. (Female Teacher, Participant 6)

All our kids come into school very low. They don’t know the alphabet, they can’t count to 10, they can’t write their own name, et cetera. So they start at a very different level and this is a challenge to get them up from where they are to the levels they are expected to be at. (Female Teacher, Participant 12)

This “gap” between what students should know coming into school and what they actually know was attributed to several factors by the participants that they classed as challenges usually unique to students from low-socio economic backgrounds entering school for the first time. The first was developmental issues to do with drugs/alcohol in utero: We have a high percentage of children who live in households where drugs and alcohol are used frequently including in utero so we have a percentage of children who were born drug or
alcohol affected. (Female Principal, Participant 1)

For me, I’ve got percentages which are much bigger here and some of that will result from drug and alcohol backgrounds so students who have been affected because they are alcohol or drug affected babies so that impacts on learning as well. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

Children’s lack of life experience when entering school and throughout their schooling was another issue raised by the participants that seems to be quite unique to this particular cohort of students. Several participants commented on the difficulty in discussing concepts in areas such as literacy when the students have very little to personally draw on to discuss, compare or write about.

One of the big challenges the teachers talk about is the lack of life experiences the kid has had which means their vocabulary is limited, their oral language skills are limited and their ability in writing is limited because they don’t have anything to base it on. So this year we have been really focused on trying to get the kids out and trying to have excursions and experiences. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

I would like to guide them out of the valley but not many of them will as they cannot picture themselves doing anything else because they have not had those type of life experiences. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

Very difficult to build on prior knowledge when the experience isn’t there. (Female Teacher, Participant 3)

When asked to elaborate on what life experiences the participants felt the students lacked, the following was stated:

Usually these kids don’t get read to or read at home like in middle-class families. (Male Teacher, Participant 8)

I would ask why is there such a big difference but now I know it is the amount of time their parents
spend with them and talking to them and reading with them. Those sorts of experiences these kids need. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

Hands down having an experience to base it on. How do you write about something if you have nothing to write about? I remember being in a PD and we said this and the lady said they can write about anything, they can write about a fence they saw on the way to school – well you could but how much could you write about it and if you have a limited vocab then how do you do that because you don’t have the words there for it. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

These unique challenges were what the participants highlighted as specific obstacles to learning that were particular to this cohort of students. As a result, there was a discussed prerequisite to have quality strategies in place to overcome these challenges and support learning. Several strategies were outlined to combat the issue of “the gap” between the national benchmark the student is expected to be at and the reality of where the student is when they enter school for the first time.

The External Cultures at Play

All participants highlighted the students’ lives outside of school as a contributing factor to the challenges they faced teaching in the classroom. Chaotic home lives and structures, access to staples and parental engagement were the three main areas of challenge that the teachers and schools had implemented strategies to address.

Chaotic Home Lives and Structures. Fourteen of the 16 participants discussed this issue as a major challenge to overcome when teaching their students.

This is a generalisation but I often find that they come from very chaotic homes. They didn’t really have anything that belonged to them because everything is shared and they never know if there would be dinner or what time is bedtime. (Female Teacher, Participant 16)
Don’t let things go home because they get lost in a chaotic home. So there has to be a lot of resources in the room that stay in the room. I think these kids work better without clutter because they are usually surrounded by clutter at home. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

The kids’ homes lives don’t have much structure. They will be walking the street to 1 AM. The boundaries are really loose at home and they do really thrive in knowing the structure and what is going to happen. (Female Teacher, Participant 11)

The chaotic home lives and structures can be for a myriad of reasons which fall outside the scope of this research study. However, this was another unique challenge that the participants had cultivated strategies to overcome in order to support learning.

Access to Staples. All participants discussed their strategies for working with students who often do not have access to staples such as food, clean clothing and transport on a regular basis.

They nearly always come to school not being fed so before the breakfast programs, I always had packets of biscuits and crackers in my drawer as you could see the kid failing in front of you. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

Another challenge is food. For example, one of my Koori girls came to school again today with no breakfast and she won’t say anything unless you ask her. So it is pretty difficult to concentrate when you are hungry. So we feed them as well and often we have to clothe them as well. Often they will come to school in the middle of winter in shorts and a T-shirt and then proceed to turn blue so we need to supply jumpers, jackets, etc. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

We have fruit in the mornings every day. The canteen makes frozen sandwiches to toast for kids that don’t have lunch. You will hear people say all it’s the parent’s responsibility they should be providing that well. yes, we know that but they
don’t and we need to help these kids learn. (Male Principal, Participant 45)

As it often falls to the school to provide access to staples that are not being provided for at home, this becomes another issue financially that these schools need to consider with their funding allocation. These staples are provided to both assist the child to concentrate and as a duty of care and every principal talked about the importance of providing these staples but then the pressure of allocating money when there are so many other areas that the funding could be allocated. Examples of where funding is also warranted is for the hiring of more teachers, relief teachers, learning resources, professional development for staff and specialist assistance for learning/behavioural disabilities were a few of the examples discussed by the principals-participants.

*Parent Engagement.* The last external culture that provides a challenge for supporting learning is the parent’s engagement with the school and with their child’s learning. Every participant discussed the lack of support for the learning and academic achievement from parents of their students. This was described as an external culture that had very different and often negative beliefs and views towards school and education. All participants expressed the difficulty in getting parents involved with the school and with their child’s education. Several participants discussed that most of the parents do not work, are often illiterate with a low skill base and have had poor experiences of schooling and education themselves. These attitudes tend to permeate to their children which can manifest as poor attendance and behavioural issues.

Attendance is the biggest challenge at school. The major problem we have is with attendance despite all I’ve just said. We still don’t have parents valuing education so therefore, they don’t value getting their kids to school on time and they don’t
The challenges lie in the ability of the parents to support the student and their ability to support the school in its endeavours as well. In a higher socio-economic community, you tend to have parents with skills that you can call upon to assist. So whether this has anything to do with SES we have a high proportion of these issues in our school. So we have to buy our skills or rely on volunteers which are few and far between. (Female Principal, Participant 1)

The challenges are getting the students to value education. A lot of our kids come from families where the parents and sometimes the grandparents don’t value education and are also often illiterate so really getting that point of value across to help you get a career and job. Even though they love the kids they often cannot support the kids in their education and so teaching the kids to be resilient and not to give up at the very first obstacle is important. (Female Teacher, Participant 11)

So again this is a challenge that the schools and teachers devise and implement strategies around in order to support the students in their learning. These strategies are discussed in the following chapter.

**Issue 2: Grit**

A lot of what I think we deal with is that lack of resilience and the belief that the world is out to get them, a victim mentality if you like. So it’s about fostering that development of progressing in a courageous and positive way. (Male Teacher, Participant 14)

The second issue that became an emergent theme through the data was the issue of resilience or grit. This is an emerging area of research for both students and teachers alike so as an issue for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, it is
not so generalised and can apply to other cohorts of students as well. Hochanadel and Finamore (2015) described grit in reference to academic achievement at college but the following highlights the issues faced by this cohort of students too:

Students face a wealth of challenges in college for example a lack of support, sometimes making it difficult to persevere. However, in an academic environment that teaches grit and fosters growth, students can learn to persist. Those who believe intelligence is fixed and cannot be changed exert less effort to succeed. Students who persevere when faced with challenges and adversity seem to have what Angela Duckworth calls, grit. (p. 47)

They go on to quote Angela Duckworth, a Professor of Psychology who describes grit as “a combination of passion and perseverance for a singularly important goal” and claims the following of her research: “My lab has found that this measure beats the pants off I.Q., SAT scores, physical fitness and a bazillion other measures to help us know in advance which individuals will be successful in some situations” (cited in Scelfò, 2016). The participants of this study discussed how strategies that they use in the classroom and on a whole school basis to increase the level of grit and resilience in both themselves and their students are important as it can be a real stumbling block on the student’s road to academic achievement.

Children tend to be passive and unmotivated in their learning even children who are considered talented do not have the intrinsic motivation to do better or make themselves better. This is a product of their upbringing. Issues with resilience. So (they) lack risk taking with their learning. Really trying to change the children’s mindsets when they enter the school. (Female Teacher, Participant 2)

Resilience can be very low with these children. (Female Teacher, Participant 12)
The issues the participants discussed regarding resilience and grit fell under the sub-themes of Resilience and Self-belief and Creating an Environment for Motivation.

**Resilience and Self-Belief**

All the participants discussed how imperative it was to change the students’ mindsets. The participants discussed that many students from low socio-economic backgrounds already feel marginalised and lack self-confidence, therefore they are risk averse when it comes to their education and are very hesitant to try again, if at first they do not succeed.

I don’t think kids are particularly resilient these days. They don’t seem to have a range of strategies for when things don’t work out the way they want them to. This particular group of students have resilience issues. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

One of the biggest challenges is trying to communicate to these students from these backgrounds that they actually have possibilities. That there is an actual possible, positive future for them. We work against the external cultures that promote such things as violence, commercialisation, jealousy, envy, those things that work against the inherent happiness and well-being of a child. To try and create an arena that allows you to counterpoint for these children that they do not have to be of that lifestyle, to give them permission to believe in themselves and to promote the best possible version of themselves so they can rise up and alleviate themselves from the culture they are in. (Male Teacher, Participant 14)

Therefore, when students live in an environment or culture that does not recognise failure as a stepping stone to success, what strategies need to be in place to support learning? This is where trust and the importance of the teacher-student
relationship became apparent in all of the data. Every participant discussed that this was one of, and in most cases the most important aspect of all if students are to succeed academically. To build the trust to try and fail in a safe environment so the students could develop resilience and grit was deemed as integral to their academic success. One of the participating schools have put relationship building into the teachers’ personal targets and teach the process for less experienced teachers:

When kids come here from other schools, we ask them do they like this school and they always say, “yes I love it, it’s great.” So, I ask them, “what’s the difference?” “Teachers talk to us here.” Which is about relationships. If you the teacher walk into a session and deliver a writing lesson and you don’t care who you are teaching to, I don’t care how technically proficient you are, you cannot teach here. We have formalised the process for less experienced teachers to train younger teachers in using them (relationship building strategies). (Male Principal, Participant 5)

The teachers also discussed their own strategies which contribute to building the relationships that foster resilience and grit in their students. These are discussed in the following chapter.

**Creating an Environment for Motivation**

One of the main problems that all of the principals and several of the teacher-participants raised was attendance. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not generally have a support structure at home that encourages school attendance. They may also be dealing with other external influences and cultures that contribute to the difficulty in getting to school each day.

I think one of the hardest challenges is motivation for the kids. It is unfortunate that the kids often come to school with a negative view of learning and that is often a reflection of their parent’s
views. So trying to kick that out of them is really tricky and what I find is they start to get a negative attitude about themselves as well which I think is a reflection on the low socio-economic area as well. So, it’s a really hard one to get over that. I’ve always tried to build relationships with these kids because if they don’t trust you they won’t give you anything. And if they know that you like them and they can trust you, there’s not much they won’t do for you. So, it’s breaking down all those negative views and perceptions. (Female Teacher, Participant 12)

So, in a lot of instances, these students who struggle with resilience and grit, need to also have the personal motivation to get to school each day because they may not have a parent at home who is able or willing to ensure they get there. Therefore, creating an environment where students can build those skills to motivate themselves to attend becomes so important and all the teacher-participants expressed their awe at what some students go through to get themselves to school each day. As one principal noted:

> We spoke about attendance before but yet the kids from the really tough places never miss a day because school is the only safe place they have and the teacher is the only adult in their whole life who is a sane, sensible person. (Male Principal, Participant 13)

When asked to clarify this comment, the participant stated that there was a lot of families at the school currently involved with child protection due to ongoing drug and alcohol abuse and violence. The participant also stated that some of these children only know adults as “affected” by drugs and alcohol. The participants all discussed strategies they have put in place both individually and on a whole school basis to assist in creating an environment for motivation so that each student intrinsically wants to attend school and learn. These strategies are discussed in the following chapter. What was evident from the data too, was the need for the teachers
and the principals to also foster that environment for motivation for themselves and each other. Two of the teacher-participants who had been at their current school since graduation discussed how it was the supportive environment of the school that had convinced them to stay on at the school long term.

This is a great school to work at but it is also a very challenging school. As a graduate, if I didn’t have the staff support I did, I would have left. (Female Teacher, Participant 6)

**Issue 3: Care**

We can get clouded in that lovely middle-class mire of this is not our concern or our responsibility but we can’t afford to with these kids. So we provide the sandwich and the water and the fruit and the kids come to school and think, “gee these people care about me” and then they want to do something nice for you. So, then they want to learn for you and then they eventually want to learn for themselves. The Ripple Effect in motion. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

Every participant in the study discussed how they care, the staff cares and the schools care for the students. The students’ well-being and understanding that they are in a safe place surrounded by people who care and support them was a paramount concept in all four schools. Research that supports this concept has been completed by several academics, one of the most prevalent being Nel Noddings who stated, “Clearly, in professions where encounter is frequent and where the ethical ideal of the other is necessarily involved, I am first and foremost one-caring and, second, enactor of specialized functions. As a teacher, I am, first, one-caring.” (Noddings, 2003, pg. 185). This was noted by the participants as of particular importance to students with low SES backgrounds because of the unique challenges surrounding their education.
For me – number one is relationships with the students. I think if a student feels like they are welcome then it’s a big difference when kids come in. We care for them and they know that. That’s not to say that they all come from struggling homes but the statistics from the office would say they do as far as disadvantage and it’s not because they have parents that don’t care about them. It’s that they have parents and guardians that have a lot of other issues going on. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

It is so important because you have to be able to interact with them from the minute they walk in to the minute they leave. They have to feel safe, they have to believe you care, you can’t give up for a minute on any of them and no favourites because they know the ones that come in dressed a little better and whose parents are always on time for their interference in the room so they know that and they need to feel the same to you. That’s the practice of teaching. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

One thing I did with my aide was a giant cut out of Wally and over a few weeks, every child got the chance to help create this Wally when they had been good and when it was finished, it looked magnificent. The looks on the faces of our poorer children was magical. They were in such awe and they were so proud. So it is things like that and they will respond because every child wants to be feel loved and a part of something. These kids don’t purposely come out wanting to be bashed around, they want to be loved and they want to be respected and they want to know you care. This is true of children across the board but the children who do not get much of this at home need it made up for at school. Give these children lots of chances to achieve amazing things at school because they will not get those opportunities at home and you want to build them up as much as possible. (Female Teacher, Participant 16)

What could detract from learning is if the child is looked at in isolation, not taking into consideration their background or not caring about their situation or what their story is. If you have a principal and staff that care about their kids, knowing more about them than the simple 9
AM to 3 PM and knowing the kid more than your student is going to help holistically to teach that kid. (Male Teacher, Participant 8)

One of the principals used a term to describe this concept of care for the students – “Professional Love.” This was in reference to how this particular school transitioned troubled and at risk students smoothly into their school. The following story holds several strategies (the rest that were discussed can be found in Chapter Five) and illustrates this concept of professional love and in the principal’s words “putting the care back into teaching.” The story is in reference to a child who interrupted the interview to receive a congratulatory sticker from the principal. The principal then relayed the following story regarding this child:

When that child came here, he was living in a residential unit, it really was a terrible story. We got a file on him this long that basically told us he couldn’t do anything and he was very angry and threatening. So we started with him having half an hour in here with me every day, just to have a bit of a chat and get a relationship going. At the beginning he couldn’t look at you and he was very shy but after a week of taking him around school and chatting to him and sitting with him in-class, I asked, “you are a good boy. Why am I being told you’ve been bad?” He says to me that if anyone looks it in the wrong way he just punches them. I held up my hands and said, “mate, we don’t do that here we can’t have anybody doing that here. You can’t touch people and we don’t swear here either. You can swear at home but not here at school.” I think he has had just one incident in the whole two years he has been here and that was just swearing. Why hasn’t it been like that since the beginning? Because people haven’t had courage enough to care for him. You have got to have professional love. Taking that time to be with him before introducing him to the school gave him a champion. I went to the direct residential unit, we took photos of the teachers and the school to show him. We built his knowledge of the school before he arrived so he knew what this school was going to be like. This all helped him
transition well. He is doing well, he is never going to help NAPLAN results but we don’t care about that, it’s a good measure for generally how the school is going but it does not take into account what this boy has achieved and it is a lot. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

**Issue 4: It takes a village…**

This theme emerged from the data because the participants from each school discussed how the school had engaged the community and outside supports in order to support their student population with their learning. This was deemed an issue because according to the principals, families and community disengage with education in low SES areas. The struggle to involve parents and the community in the education of students was an issue that the principals identified as integral to their school culture because it encouraged the students in their learning. The strategies used to create a space within the community of which each school was situated were deliberate and organised and involved engaging the parents, local businesses, outside supports and the community in general to celebrate and support the school and its students. This was viewed by several participants as the challenge and the solution seemingly at once.

The challenges lie in the ability of the parents to support the student and their ability to support the school in its endeavours as well. In a higher socio-economic community, you tend to have parents with skills that you can call upon to assist. We don’t here. (Female Principal, Participant 1)

I guess it’s really a lot around support. Support of students, support of teachers, support of parents and create that community and spearhead that supportive feeling. (Female Teacher, Participant 12)

In all cases this began with a strong leadership team within the school with a child-centred focus:
My strengths are around community engagement and because I grew up around the welfare roles – that’s my interest. So when I got there the community were not engaged. They had disengaged from the school and the school was the centre of the community so I spent that four and a bit years getting the community back engaged. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

Also, having good supports around you and your colleagues. This school is very good at that and we all work together with the children’s best interests first and we have an excellent leadership team that we can rely on for sound decision-making. (Female Teacher, Participant 7)

All of the leadership team at the school have teaching tasks so they’re all strongly involved with the children and what’s happening in the school rather than becoming out of touch sitting in an office. People from the school will go and pick up students and families and bring them to events and concerts, et cetera, so nobody needs to miss out and everyone feels included. This all builds community and relationship with the school. (Male Teacher, Participant 8)

The culture of each of the schools was heavily directed by the leadership team in consultation with the staff and outside resources. All the teacher-participants spoke of the support they feel from their leadership team and their fellow colleagues to improve as professionals and to contribute to a community of learning. The leadership team then drives the school to be become a centrepiece in the community. This addresses the support of students’ learning in three ways. Firstly, it engages the parents and gives a sense of ownership of the school by the parents and students. Secondly, it regulates behavioural problems as students develop a sense of citizenship. Thirdly, it begins to remove some of the negative external influences which can affect students’ perception of learning and their decision to attend school.

You make yourself a part of the wider community and you work to get kids involved with everything that happens in the wider community.
We’ve created a culture here. That leads teachers in wanting to be like that too and when we’ve selected our staff in the last 6 years, they have been people who have been willing to give a bit extra. They want to be a part of the community as well so they’re involved in footy clubs and netball clubs. At the moment the school just operates flat out all the time and it’s the centre of the community. We use the local library, we have before school basketball academy. We’ve got after school sports three nights a week which again grows that culture inside your school. The community is centred around the school like with our market and our op shop all those things. There are a lot of volunteers working around the place which again creates a terrific environment for kids to want to come and learn. (Male Principal, Participant 13)

Even the children who raise red flags about how they will manifest themselves in the adult world in the future learn how to de-escalate faster and faster when they’re given the opportunity to learn how to self-regulate and work as part of a community. Restorative is the way to go, it helps them to realise where they are in the process in becoming a better person and how to learn to continue to improve on that. (Male Teacher, Participant 14)

Lead your community in learning and inclusiveness and culture about kids that’s really what principals have got to do. You need to have respect for your community. We’ve got a show coming up in a couple weeks and we will put on a barbecue beforehand and we will make it all about community. One of the most difficult things about being a principal here is that there is racism in the community. Well that just allows us to be tribal and brings us closer together as a school community. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

The strategies to build this community for and around the students in order to further support the students in their learning are discussed in the following chapter.
Summary

This chapter reported on the barriers and obstacles that emerged as particularly relevant to fostering academic achievement for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The strategies the participants drew on to overcome these obstacles are summarised in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE STRATEGIES

The participants in this study were all very articulate in discussing the strategies that they use personally, in collaboration with colleagues and on a whole school basis to navigate the unique challenges and the particular issues that exist when working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The pedagogy of these professionals is such that they must truly have an inimitable “arsenal” of strategies and practices to encourage learning and academic achievement with this cohort of students. I truly admired the relentless pursuit of continuous improvement that all the participants, as a team and on an individual basis, relayed in their discussions. Because the participants were so forthcoming with their particular strategies, some repeated throughout the data, some mentioned once only, the strategies taken from the data have been categorised into the three main categories from the literature: Teacher Pedagogy and Practice, Engagement and Leadership.

Teacher Pedagogy and Practice

Many of the pedagogical strategies that the participants discussed involved particular practices for literacy and numeracy teaching, planning and assessment and classroom management. The participants discussed how their pedagogical strategies centred on the specific needs of this cohort coming into school.

Literacy and Numeracy

An issue that was raised by all participants is the low level of achievement in literacy and numeracy that teachers need to address when these students enter school. Achievement around speaking, listening, vocabulary and comprehension have a
tendency to be significantly below national benchmarks. Some of these students were deemed by the participants to have such low achievement in speaking and listening with a limited vocabulary that students were unable to speak in complete sentences, even small, simple sentences.

We battle a lot of things like this that other schools take for granted, like, that their kids will come in being able to write their names and know their numbers. All in all we start from dot. (Female Teacher, Participant 4)

Therefore to address this issue of “being behind before we begin”, the participants discussed the strategies they implement in the classroom. Strategies for speaking and listening were incorporated here, often within calming strategies to begin the school day. The calming strategies were to prepare the students mentally and emotionally for the school day and to create that separation from what might have occurred at home or outside school before attending. This was discussed as particularly important for younger students who may not have the coping mechanisms in place to psychologically prepare for a given school day.

I would not go a single day without sitting them all down and starting the day with a five minute show and tell. I have had mainly infants (Prep to Year 2) mind you. I would sit them all in a circle and they could have a turn if they wanted but by the end of a couple of weeks we would have a really calm grade. They would come in and within five minutes of sitting and listening to their peers, they forget that they didn’t have breakfast or the fight that happened before they got in the room. (Female teacher, Participant 16)

I would often start the day with a song. I would take the roll and then we needed a song. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

For older students, several participants discussed the need to make literacy and numeracy concepts as practical as possible.
…with literacy and numeracy, I get the kids into small groups so they can help each other and everything is made as practical as possible where possible. For example, looking at recipes and reading the recipe while doing it and taking turns and measuring, et cetera. (Female Teacher, Participant 12)

We look at teaching certain concepts in lots of different ways. For example, games, open-ended activities, very hands on often works well here. They often need to get manipulatives to help them work problems out. We are trying to build that idea of success and as long as you have a way of working it out that will get you to the correct answer, then that’s what works for you which encourages them to continue on. (Female Teacher, Participant 11)

One school discussed a whole school approach that is used for literacy and numeracy.

For literacy and numeracy, we work really hard with Professor Munro and the teaching strategies are embedded with teachers across the board. This is what we’re going to do, this is how were going to do it, this is what it’s going to look like and this is going to be the end result. We use really explicit teaching right down to our eye contact that needs to be maintained to using icons and sticking to very clear routines. Every child knows what is happening and what is going to happen next. So for example, we are doing text with the big books, the children know exactly what we are going to do, what the book is about and for particularly jumpy children what the story will involve so there are no surprises and everything is predictable. These children will often be too wired to be listening to the story anyway so by preparing them earlier and they know what the story is about already, they will be able to participate in the activities to follow. (Female Teacher, Participant 6)

Intervention programs for literacy and numeracy were also discussed by two schools as imperative to their practice. The first intervention program discussed was Reading Recovery. Four of the participants discussed that they were trained in the
program. While the program was deemed as important, it is not available to all children due to the time the program takes from the day to implement.

Reading recovery is an intervention program within the school but due to significant benchmarks children have to be out of class to access this, it’s not available to all children. (Female Teacher, Participant 2)

The other intervention program discussed in the data was QuickSmart Numeracy Intervention program, which again focuses on the explicit teaching of concepts. Participants from one school used it with students in Years Four to Six.

Below is the summarised version of the strategies discussed by the participants regarding literacy and numeracy. These are specific strategies that one or two participants mentioned or discussed as useful to them when teaching literacy and numeracy. The strategies have been sub-categorised into “Practical strategies used in the classroom” and “Whole school approaches.”

Table Three

Literacy and numeracy strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practical strategies for use in the classroom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Begin each day with a session of Show and Tell. Students take turns standing up and showing something to the class or discussing something they would like to share. It is an activity that promotes downtime to separate home from school and encourages language acquisition, confidence, listening skills and a sense of calm and stillness after what might have been a turbulent morning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Use songs to re-focus young students and promote calm.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o When beginning to teach reading, use books with black type on white backgrounds. It is difficult for some students to read lettering on pictures and coloured backgrounds. The Reading Eggs program has returned to this black on white reading and is highly successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Provide lots of new experiences and give examples of asking questions. Students from low SES backgrounds are generally taught not to question or converse so model for them what curiosity and questioning looks like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Teaching the basics with plenty of repetition allowing them time to master the skill such as with handwriting and working with numbers.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Discuss stories first so children can participate in activities afterwards even if they couldn’t concentrate on story.
- Use big books so they can come up and point to words.
- Oral games like quizzes because low SES children can be better at oral than written.
- Lots of conversation to get oral language skills up.
- For younger students: Have a day board with the children’s names laminated and when they come in, in the morning they put their names up on the board. Start with photos at the beginning of the year and then to just names and then everyone can read each other’s names.

**Whole School Approaches**

- Reading Recovery program – an intervention program for children aged five or six, who are the lowest achieving in literacy after their first year of school.
- QuickSmart Numeracy Intervention program – An intensive numeracy intervention program.
- ABC Reading Eggs – An online program involving activities for children to complete whilst teaching to read.

For regular classrooms these strategies are not new, unique or particularly innovative. In a busy school day they are often skipped without consequence. However for this cohort of students, these strategies make a big difference and according to the participants, it is these simple well known strategies that are effective in their particular classrooms for teaching literacy and numeracy.

**Planning and Assessment**

The category of planning and assessment is certainly an element of teaching that all schools would agree is important to their practice. However, within schools such as the schools in this study, it was reiterated over and over by the participants how important diagnosing student learning is because the children in a given classroom can be at many varying levels of understanding and often far below the Australian standards for the particular year level. Teachers have to be able to chart the progress of students individually so that they can identify progress and stagnation.
and to provide those children with a sense of achievement (that they otherwise would
not experience.) Several participants also discussed how they use continual
assessment to inform planning and allocated time is given to this.

We have what’s called data driven planning days
where we use the data we have collected to plan
for a six week block. We collect our resources,
look at our assessment. We look at things like our
maths teaching and what concepts should be
taught before others so the kids can make the
connections more readily. (Female Teacher,
Participant 10)

The concept of utilising planning and assessment as a reciprocal relationship
in teacher practice (one informing the other and vice versa) was considered so
integral by one school that funding and resources were diverted to support it.

But it’s a problem-solving exercise for every
single student and probably one of the things
teachers do really well here is that they know
their students really well and that comes from all
that data collection and sitting with teams of
people to look at it. To have time for teachers to
plan regularly – its costs us $10,000 a year to do
our data driven planning but it’s to have time
every 5 to 6 weeks to just sit and think about each
student in literacy and numeracy and plan.
(Female Principal, Participant 9)

Therefore, the planning is informed by the
rigorous assessment of each child to be able to
know where every student is currently placed and
what will be required planning wise to move that
student along in their learning. This involves the
use of assessment on two levels. Firstly, the
assessment of each child developmentally to plan
for potential issues such as developmental delays
or physical issues such as hearing or vision loss.
What we have done here is that we do a lot of
work around what the students know identifying
that so we can target what they need to learn next.
(Female Teacher, Participant 10)

First three days of every school year is spent
purely on assessment of the children. (Female
Teacher, Participant 3)
Region has provided support staff that can be with our teachers every fortnight. So teachers can go in and say I’m concerned about this child and so assessments will be done and either further assessment recommended or they will say let’s try these particular strategies. They will write up a plan for them and they will touch base with them at regular intervals. This is good for new students who have got some learning or behaviour difficulties, they will come with a file of information as they normally come from another local school but having the wellbeing (leadership) team they will usually have the information on the students already. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

All the participants discussed the importance of being able to assess for and identify any particular blockades to learning before the learning journey essentially took place. By allocating time and resources to the assessment of students on such an individualised level, teachers could gain a holistic picture of the student’s current strengths and weaknesses and then plan for a learning journey with a positive learning trajectory.

Secondly, the academic assessment of each student individually to chart individual progress as Australian standard benchmarks for the year levels, as per the curriculum, were viewed as generally obsolete when teaching this particular cohort of students. With such a potential range of skills, abilities, strengths and weaknesses in a particular classroom, students must be charted individually throughout their progress and learning goals otherwise, most of the students within the classroom would “fall through the cracks.”

About eight years ago we started doing individual targets for every kid on what they’re going to achieve. So we brought in targets that were to be completed by March every year on reading, writing, spelling and number. So for example Lisa is just below this in number so what is the
target and what is the strategies to get her to this level. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

A focus on growth individually because the children are such a low standard to begin with. They might not make benchmark aim but they may have grown in twelve-months. (Female Teacher, Participant 4)

These aforementioned strategies within the quotes are specific strategies that several participants mentioned or discussed as useful to them when using planning and assessment in their practice.

**Classroom Management**

Classroom management was deemed as crucial to practice by teacher and principal participants alike. A large amount of strategies were identified from the data. All the participants reiterated that the challenges the students faced, they as teachers faced and that the school at large faced living and operating within a low SES community were unique compared to schools in higher SES areas within Australia. Strategies centred on understanding and catering for the student’s strengths and weaknesses within the school and classroom environment.

These children are very good at survival and they build their own strategies very early. So, there can be many blocks to learning so you need to be observing or they will slip through the net. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

If the routines and structures are in place, school becomes the haven and safe place for these children to be and they want to be here. We are like a micro version as a Maslow’s hierarchy. They have some sort of control over their life here and their learning and that is a positive trust we encourage here. (Female Teacher, Participant 3)
The participants provided lots of strategies here from how to structure the classroom for maximum engagement through to considerations to do with emotional regulation after trauma and abuse to providing food and safety.

It is nice to have different places in the classroom it gives the children who need a break somewhere to go so they can have their own time because, generally speaking, children from low socio-economic families do find it more difficult to learn. So, they need to put more effort in and therefore sometimes they need a break. A library corner is good for this with a couple of cushions so they can go and plop down. It is a nice alternative to having a meltdown under a desk. (Female Teacher, Participant 16)

We have an expected behaviours matrix brainstormed by the teachers at school. This is based around respect, responsibility and ready to learn behaviours and what that would look like in a given situation and the matrix was created from that. These are on display around the school and are reviewed by the teachers and students quarterly. (Female Teacher, Participant 2)

For the first 20 minutes of the day, I have activities set up on the tables and the children join a table. There is four to a table and this allows children who are running late to walk in and join in as well. So they intermingle quite a bit from the start of the day which helps with teambuilding. (Female Teacher, Participant 7)

To reflect on the above quotes, the participants made it very clear that a lot of the preparation of their day and the organisation of their lessons and routines is tied to the strategies the participants use for classroom management. As previously discussed in the aforementioned quotes, the participants conferred the ways they create a safe environment where the students feel comfortable and supported and this in turn promotes positive behaviours from the students themselves.

The participants all reiterated again that such strategies as providing food to children, space to vent and regroup, and sourcing grants/funds for low income
families, are particularly unique to their cohort of students. Ensuring the students are fed and well resourced (uniforms, stationary, etc) was seen as conducive to limiting issues and removing the barriers and obstacles that could impact on classroom management.

Our kids don’t have set bedtimes, so they come to school tired with their eyes falling out of their head. They often have to get themselves up in the morning and get themselves to school. These are all factors that can enter the school and classroom environment that we have very little control over but obviously they can impede learning. Hence, we do our best with programs like breakfast and providing lunch, et cetera. We also have a fruit program so children can have fresh fruit. Those sorts of things help. It’s not an answer but it helps. (Female Teacher, Participant 6)

Uniforms for all children, no one misses out on excursions etc. We have a bus that picks up extended family for concerts, et cetera. Everyone shares everything. For example, breakfast is open to everyone. Fair doesn’t always mean equal so making sure the children know it’s based on particular needs, not everybody gets everything. (Male Teacher, Participant 8)

Organise the space so it is easy for children to walk around you and having enough, so children have their own things. It needs to be a well organised classroom with enough of everything for the children to learn. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

Below is the summarised version of the strategies discussed by the participants regarding classroom management. Many of these are preventative in nature with several participants discussing how, with this in mind, a lot of potential behavioural problems can be stopped before they manifest.

I tell all my student teachers that you must get into preventative mode. Prevent the potential issues, personality clashes and problems before they even begin and a lot of that lies in getting to know your students at the beginning of the year.
Learn to rove and where the trouble might come from and learning what works because what might work for one student in one class will not work in another class. So, use the beginning of the year to flesh all that out. Be adaptable and try to reinforce positively as much is possible. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

These are specific strategies that one or two participants mentioned or discussed as useful to them when considering classroom management in their practice. The following table centred on the strategies for classroom management has been sub-categorised into two themes: “Structuring the learning environment” and “Getting to know your students.”

Table Four

Classroom Management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structuring the learning environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Create different places within the classroom that students can go to when they need space to calm down. A library corner with cushions for example. Allow students this time to calm down as they learn to regulate their own emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Spend the first two months of the school year establishing the rules and routines of the classroom. Include the students in the establishment, including discipline policies and rewards. This also allows for setting up the classroom environment as a fun, learning community. Classroom rules are created in consultation with the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Have lots of resources in the room for the students which you can reiterate is theirs but do not let resources go home as they will not come back and this is not necessarily the child’s fault.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Have a really structured routine with no surprises – promotes safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Give them time in the mornings to regroup and release frustration after what may have occurred at home – provide a space in the classroom for that such as a quiet book corner or activities table where students can have structured quiet time before joining/re-joining the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Structure: A timetable in every classroom so the students know what is happening each day. Provides stability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Keep children who are a behaviour issue close to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o For younger students: Have photos for jobs so everyone has a chance to have the responsibility of the jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o For younger students: Songs between lessons for a break.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o If doing a whole school activity and want the parents to come, offer food. Example, a sausage sizzle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Aim for single desks with a locker underneath with all their stationary inside. This allows for ownership of their own set of things which is close to them. It also allows for more space in the classroom for mat time, art cupboards, etc.
- Small class sizes help with behavioural issues – maximum 24.
- A breakfast program/box of food available for students who attend without having breakfast.
- Extra people on yard duty as these students can find it hard to be in the playground.
- Consider the financial stress of uniforms and booklists etc for low income families – tap into grants, funding, etc.
- Access State School Relief for families. Also if a child has used state school relief in grade 6 it automatically rolls over into year seven but most schools don’t know this.
- Before and after school activities like Breakfast Club and sports.
- Emergency lunches for children.
- An expected behaviours matrix brainstormed by the teachers at school. This is based around respect responsibility and ready to learn behaviours.
- Discuss a broken contract in a calm manner always referring back to what has been agreed upon.
- If the child can’t bring themselves together then use the school procedure and have the child removed for the sake of the other students (3 minutes should be enough time to vent.)
- You must get into preventative mode. Prevent the potential issues, personality clashes and problems before they even begin.

### Get to know your students

- Make the effort to spend a minute or two each day with each student to promote a good relationship.
- Greet each child at the beginning of the day when they enter the room and say goodbye to each child at the end of the day.
- Recognise that some of these students will be dealing with trauma of varying levels in their lives past and present. This may even vary day to day. Distance and distrust is a survival mechanism so allow them to have exercise it. The more distance and distrust, usually the more trauma present.
- Talk with parents at beginning of the day to encourage relationship building.
- Sometimes certain physical gestures will be enough to bring a child into line such as lowering the head and raising the eyebrows works as some students becomes extremely embarrassed if their name is used.
- Get to know the parents and the families of the students. Invite them in to the classroom. Allow for younger children to attend with parents and accept that the session might be chaotic but you are building relationships.
- Low SES children need personal space and to learn how to give it.
- Be aware and prepared that children from low SES demographic tend to reach physical milestones a little earlier. Eg. Puberty earlier, physically larger earlier.
- Accept that they will yell and get angry but keep building the trust and they will learn to talk to you about their problems rather than screaming about it.
- Attendance can be out of their hands so be encouraging when they show up even if it’s at 10am.
o Learn their strengths and use that in behaviour management by reminding them of their strengths.
o Set up the trust between you – students need to trust that you can and will help them to learn and succeed.
o With low SES students, you will have some that need to vent – let them. When they feel safe enough to do it, they eventually stop feeling the need to do it.
o Punitive punishment is adversarial when dealing with low SES kids.
o Invest the time in getting to know your students at the start of the year or you will waste the rest of the year in classroom management.

**Engagement**

I think if the relationship is really good, the child will give you the chance to teach them and they will take an active interest in learning. (Female Teacher, Participant 16)

Consider now what some of the students of the participants of this study may have experienced outside the gates of their school: - varying levels of trauma, overcoming many obstacles to arrive at school on a given day and holding negative views regarding school and education imparted on them by parents who have been failed by the education system previously. These potential experiences or beliefs cannot be considered separately when looking at a student’s capacity for engagement in the classroom. All of the aforementioned aspects were discussed by the participants as having a direct effect on the students’ level of engagement in the classroom and with their learning. While the teacher and indeed the school can do very little about students’ home lives and parent views, they can utilise strategies to promote engagement of the students in their learning, with the parents of their students and with the community at large as part of their practice.

Two aspects that formed the basis for the strategies discussed regarding student engagement was personal grit and care.
**Grit**

As mentioned previously, grit and resilience are qualities that need to be fostered and developed when it comes to working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds in the school environment. According to Oriol, Miranda, Oyanedel and Torres (2017), grit and self-control have a strong correlation between academic self-efficacy and school satisfaction in primary school students. While the ability to persevere through difficulties to achieve academic goals was a persistent issue discussed with many of the participants of this research study, there was a distinction made between academic grit and personal grit. For example, Golden (2017) discussed critical bifocality when using the grit narrative. He suggested that you cannot divorce students from their lives and the restraints that can operate around those lives, particularly with students from poverty and claim that if they have more grit, they will achieve anything – essentially shifting the blame for academic performance back on to the student. The participants in this study all noted that their students already had an enormous amount of personal grit. The participants discussed how some of their students persevered through domestic violence, hunger, lack of transport, lack of clean uniforms, for example, to get themselves to school on a given morning.

> These kids haven’t had someone get them up and make them lunch and drive them to school and talk to them. Also, you do not know what day they’ve had. Their lives are led in a frenzy so they may have had a diabolical day yesterday but everything is calm and fine today. Even their calm times are more frenzied than say, my life.
> (Female Teacher, Participant 6)

There may also be ingrained attitudes towards school and learning that students hold, instilled by families who have themselves been failed by the educational system.
I think one of the hardest challenges is motivation for the kids. It is unfortunate that the kids often come to school with a negative view of learning and that is often a reflection of their parents’ views. So trying to kick that out of them is really tricky and what I find is they start to get a negative attitude about themselves as well, which I think is a reflection on the low socio-economic area as well. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

However, even if these students manage despite everything to get themselves to school, engagement can be difficult for them due to the issues discussed previously. This is where participants described strategies that can foster the resilience and determination to then stay at school and engage with their teacher, their peers and their school in order to learn.

We have a really good system here (whole school approach) that encourages responsibility and resilience and all the kids and staff are on board to acknowledge and encourage that with the kids and with each other. So everyone in the school has the same language. (Female Teacher, Participant 11)

Strategies for this particular theme of engagement strongly centred on promoting safety and encouraging responsibility. To build resilience, students must feel safe to try without fear of rejection or humiliation/shame.

The timetable of the day is posted in every classroom and the kids can look up and they know what they’re doing and it makes it safe for them and when they feel safe, they feel calm. (Female Teacher, Participant 12)

One of the big things I teach is the protection of childhood. I teach them that you turn into an adult when you start making adult choices. So, I get a jar filled with paper and I visually show them. Every time your brother says you can watch that, that’s a piece of your childhood. Every time you see a movie that is rated R that is a piece of your childhood gone. So reinforcing that idea that they should be a kid because a lot of them don’t get a chance to be that and I understand that they will
have to go back to it when they leave school but letting them know they can have a break while they’re here and sit and learn and play and be safe and think about what sort of wonderful future they would like. (Male Teacher, Participant 14)

Again, this signifies the importance of creating a safe, supportive space at school for students to want to be. By also teaching the protective behaviours discussed in the aforementioned quote, it encourages that understanding of school as a place to play and learn and to foster that sense of self preservation and growth. These are all qualities that instil resilience and pride in achievement such as with their own education.

Below is the summarised version of the strategies discussed by the participants regarding fostering resilience or grit to promote engagement. These are specific strategies that one or two participants mentioned or discussed as useful to them when fostering grit for engagement. These strategies have been sub-categorised into the more practically applied strategies and the psychological considerations that, according to the participants, teachers must be aware of. I have labelled these sub-categories as “Positive reinforcement and reward” and “As the teacher, bear in mind…”

Table Five

*The strategies to build grit for engagement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive reinforcement and reward</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Peer teaching with feedback for older students. This is where students have an opportunity to teach each other a particular concept and then older students can provide each other with feedback on how effective their instructions/teaching was.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Give all children a go at the special jobs or tasks. Gives a sense of pride and responsibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Have a special running project that can act as a reward for good behaviour. Once complete it fosters a sense of pride.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
- Give low SES students opportunities to achieve and create amazing things to build them up as much as possible. Example a class art activity that is ongoing and students can contribute to.
- Reward systems can work well especially with the little ones but they must be consistent.
- The class is a team and celebrate each other and work as a team. This really has an effect on happiness and that child’s desire to do the right thing.
- Inclusiveness, everyone has something to offer and to respect others.
- ClassDojo App for rewarding good behaviour. ClassDojo is an app for teachers, parents and students where a digital portfolio is set up for the student and good work, positive comments, etc can be shared between teacher, parent and student.
- Table points with a table trophy.
- Walk around the classroom with a stamp.
- The “Catch of the Day” which is a little fish reward system. When the teacher “catches” a student doing something really nice or positive then they get a little fish and they get to put that up on the wall. Fish can be given by other students too. For example, it can be recognition from the other students in the class who might tell the teacher that this student did something really nice for someone, was helpful, etc.
- Watch Supernanny – “I think she is great and am a big believer in time out.”
- The “Piggy Bank” analogy – This refers to depositing and withdrawing credits into a child’s emotional “piggy bank”. Make sure you are not always withdrawing (reprimanding, disciplining, etc), be sure to deposit as well (acknowledgement for great work, treating their friends well, etc).
- Give the students responsibility in the classroom so they can have ownership.
- “Enquiry gone Wild” session once a week where students choose the topic themselves and create questions and investigate and report.
- Give opportunities to choose and explore as not much of that happens at home.
- Have a focus on public speaking skills for older students as this promotes language, confidence, self-esteem and equity.
- For low SES children, reinforcing the choice they have in certain situations – ownership of their own development (anti-faternalism).
- Encourage responsibility and resilience through whole school programs implemented as a school and within each classroom. These programs focussed on anti-bullying and civics/citizenship. Professional development on grit and emotional regulation in children was discussed here.
- School wide approach – Lizzie Loot, a rewards program that teaches citizenship within the school.
- Be strict and follow the consequences as set out by the school’s discipline policy. Consistency and fairness leads to a sense of security.
- Celebrate success for each child which may be different things for different children.
- Encourage the kids to help with the awards at assembly, making clear what students need to do and getting them to present the award.
- Explicitly teach resilience and use of formal register (speaking clearly, using words and language appropriate for school) at school through discussion and activities.

**As the teacher, bear in mind…**

- Consider Maslow’s Heirarchy of Needs when developing students. The participant who discussed this was reiterating that as a teacher and school you must meet the most basic needs of the student first such as food, water, physical comfort before you can progress up the pyramid to esteem and self-actualization.
- Recognising the moments of trying and succeeding.
- Be aware of lack of resilience – victim mentality.
- Fostering that development of progressing in a courageous and positive way.
- Promoting safety with predictable classroom routines and structures
- The ultimate goal should be for the student to self-regulate so they can perform and learn within the culture of the school.
- Always maintain consistency.
- Have high expectations.
- Students need to be learning social and emotional skills as well as academic skills.
- Let them realise that they are stronger and can control their thoughts and feelings.

The strategies participants identified for this theme focused on fostering pride and responsibility for the students they teach. The participants all stated that many of their students have adults in their lives that are not capable of modelling such traits as resilience and pride due to their own personal circumstances and therefore may not be able to instil it within their children. As it was universally agreed upon in the data that students can learn from observing, the participants felt a responsibility to be that model of resilience, good health and confidence for the students to observe and learn from. Therefore, the developed strategies centred on providing opportunities to model and teach it in everyday situations and for providing opportunities for students to feel and demonstrate it.
The aspect of the participants’ practice that all discussed in their interviews at length was their care for the students and their relationships with the students. All participants deemed this to be the most important aspect of all in achieving academic outcomes for their students.

For me – number one is relationships with the students. I think if a student feels like they are welcome then it’s a big difference when kids come in. We care for them and they know that. That’s not to say that they all come from struggling homes but the statistics from the office would say they do as far as disadvantage and it’s not because they have parents that don’t care about them. It’s that they have parents and guardians that have a lot of other issues going on. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

Lots of years ago, we had one thing that probably changed our school and gave us great success for our kids academically and that was that we decided that relationships were really important for these kids so we got funding for small classes. We only have 20 kids in a grade (class). (Male Principal, Participant 5)

Wilde (2013) culminated her research into care in education in the following: “care-full attention in our day-to-day work nurtures the soul of what we do as teachers.” Wilde went on to quote David Orr who warned, “One of the dangers of education is the possibility of rendering students narrow technicians who are morally sterile and disengaged from the ethical implications of their actions” (Orr quoted in Wilde, 2013, p. 5). The participants of this study highly emphasised the importance of producing students who could care for themselves, their teachers and their fellow students and in turn, be cared for, creating a support network within the classroom and the school which fosters academic achievement.
The following contains the strategies participants identified that they use to promote a caring, nurturing environment within the classroom and the school and to assist them to build positive, trusting relationships with their students. This particular category is very teacher dependent as it relies on the implementation and the skill of the teacher to scaffold the relationships with the students. Again, these strategies were directly extrapolated from what was discussed in the data. These strategies for care are divided into the sub-categories of ‘Building the relationship” and “Who you are as their teacher.” This is to distinguish the strategies that are more practically focused on providing care through fostering the relationships and considering the psychological processes of how one cares for their students as a teacher.

Table Six

The strategies for care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building relationships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Utilise small group work so students can assist each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o A learning log for each student to ensure each student gets allocated time with the teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Classroom organisation and routines encourage boundaries which allow students to feel safe knowing how each day will be conducted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Students need to know that you won’t ever give up on them and that you care about them. This involves taking the time each day to touch base with each student and ask them something about their life that shows interest in who they are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Let the child start fresh in the new grade. Only look at the previous year’s profile if an issue emerges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Create and maintain boundaries for students: Making them aware of social conventions such as when and why they can approach the teacher and other students, when they can discuss topics with you (such as what they did on the weekend), what class rules are and are the rewards and consequences for maintaining/breaking rules, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Read previous year’s report with a big grain of salt as pre-judging can be dangerous as a teacher. Aim to break the circuit of behaviour. Labelled negatively coming into your class, leave labelled positively at the end of the year.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Allow every child to have a turn at the fun activities or jobs every week so they feel included. Children from a low SES demographic already feel marginalised so the connection to the teacher is even more important.
- Avoid aggression and loudness as will cause these students to recoil and regress.
- Use time as a tool. Give them time to settle in and give them your actual time.
- Recognise that distance and distrust is a survival mechanism so don’t be intrusive, let them observe and then slowly chip away.
- Know what each child’s likes and needs are.
- Learn how to redirect children back to learning without devaluing their need to share with you.
- To be able to build that relationship, the student needs to know about you and you need to know about the student. It has to be a two-way street and one can’t expect them to divulge everything about their life while knowing nothing about yours.
- Remember details like when their cat was going to have kittens and ask them about it. So then they know you, as the teacher are genuinely interested in their life and then there is something to build the relationship on.
- A respectful relationship is so integral to classroom management and also helps you to find out how they learn as well and the ways they find to learn so you need to develop that.
- With the students who haven’t particularly had a lot of success, let them see that you as the teacher are there to help them move forward, the change in them is wonderful.
- Establish the relationship and “deposit the credits” early on so if you need to ask for something, there is something there to work from.
- Friday fun – last hour of every Friday to spend with students doing something fun.
- Everyone deserves a turn of the good stuff.
- Have some sort of chill out time during the day, even if it’s a couple of minutes to have a laugh and a chat with the kids just to promote that positivity and sense of relationship.
- Use positive language, such as “Please walk” instead “don’t run.”
- Teach students meditation as a way to compartmentalise trauma.
- With these children you build relationships and trust through osmosis. Let them observe you as the teacher from a distance. The further the distance, the more distrust is present and usually the higher level of trauma present.
- Use restorative practices to gain trust. Essentially teachers and students work together to discuss problems and issues and focus on solutions in a helpful, non-judgmental way.
- Professional Love: Let them (the students) give you cuddles and give them meaningful compliments because a lot of these children will hear at home that they are dumb, stupid et cetera and those cuddles are so important in fostering that safe relationship with you as a teacher. These kids need it and if it’s going to encourage a positive relationship where they might learn and enjoy school then you can’t beat that.
- Talk to children when you are on yard duty.
As a teacher and a school, do not take on too much which leads to not targeting the learning.

**Who you are as their teacher**

- Students need a champion and that is the teacher.
- Teacher enthusiasm: Be enthusiastic and happy to be with them.
- No favourites – can be emotionally crippling to a child if they have put the trust and faith in you and then realise you favour others.
- You must follow through if you say you’re going to do something you need to make sure that you do it. Mean what you say.
- Have a default position of positive engagement. Essentially look for all the ways to engage with the students positively. It will then become second nature to do so.
- Have fun with the kids and show them your sense of humour.
- Celebrate a great lesson with the kids.
- Consider the joy you inject into the student’s experience – a happy child will learn.
- Recognise and celebrate their individuality.
- Remember that every child wants to be loved, respected and belong.
- Let them cuddle you if they need and want to, however don’t instigate cuddles and affection for yourself. It’s not about your needs and wants, it’s about theirs.
- Be your authentic self as an emotionally healthy adult and they will sense that health and be attracted to it.

The strategies listed above were nearly all centred on the importance of caring for your students as a teacher and the ability to build a positive and successful relationship with each and every student. The conclusion behind this is the importance of the teacher-student relationship based on the participants’ responses. The participants discussed the need as a teacher to enjoy spending time with your students, to want to and strive to build that strong, positive relationship. This really highlighted the teachers’ need to be emotionally healthy themselves so that they can provide that care for this particular cohort of students without burning out.
Leadership

All of the participants of this study discussed the effect of leadership on the academic success of the school and the teachers and students of that school. Both good and poor leadership was discussed. The principal participants were very open when asked what principals/schools can do to detract from learning:

Number one is be a poor administrator and all too often you see the person who is at the principal level or the assistant principal level who has got there because they don’t want to be a teacher. They want out of the classroom. They want to walk around in their flash suit or their spiffy clothes with the bling on because they don’t really want to be at the coalface. So, I think the thing that detracts from learning is, as an administrator, not understanding what the teachers are going through at the coalface. The further you get away from it, the more you’ve got to keep yourself in touch with all the problems that the teachers are going through. You gotta understand the kids, you gotta know the kids. (Male Principal, Participant 13)

I try to diminish it because I am a principal but every school that doesn’t perform has a poor principal. If principals are the benevolent dictators, it has no chance of working. If you haven’t got a leadership team that you value and you work well with and that feel strongly about the direction of the school and what we have to do well, you can’t do it individually through teachers, you need to do it through a leadership team and then throw them out to the school. Structurally that is up to the principal. I think the leadership of the school strongly sets the culture of the school. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

You need good leadership that allows us to do our jobs effectively. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

Leadership was discussed as imperative for setting the culture and direction of the school. Fostering community engagement, ensuring a student focussed ethos and teacher support were all viewed by the participants as falling to leadership to
instigate and cultivate. If the leadership was deemed strong and remained focussed on the academic outcomes of the students, the students would achieve academically and the school would be successful. This was evident in all the teacher participant data who strongly advocated for the necessity of effective leadership, particularly when working at a low SES school.

We are pretty lucky here. We have great leadership and mentor teachers, so nearly all of my strategies have come from my peers. (Male Teacher, Participant 8)

In regards to the strategies that the principals and leadership team of the participant schools use, all principals stated how hard they worked on refining their role in order to bring their school to success. This role was linked by every principal to creating a specific “culture” both within the school and to drive the school. Principals discussed sending their leadership teams to professional development on creating successful cultures that are not only strong educationally and administratively but also symbolically (what the school and the leadership of the school stands for and the belief system that drives the direction of the school).

Beliefs and values drive our school and within that in every classroom and in every document we have for staff, the primary consideration and in all decisions, is students. That is our culture. So with schools that do not perform well, they do not have good leadership, they are culturally naïve, they do not have a strong culture symbolically. In our system, currently, we have technical leadership, human leadership, educational leadership, symbolic leadership, cultural leadership. The only ones the department can help you with is educational leadership and technical leadership. They are the only ones they do help you on. Because they have no idea what cultural or symbolic leadership is. Organisation of culture is so important to allow people to do stuff. (Male Principal, Participant 5)
You gotta get your hands dirty and be part of the community and it stems back to what a great teacher is in the first place. You can’t be a good administrator in a school unless you do this. (Male Principal, Participant 13)

Our leadership team went and did PD courses on creating a high performance culture. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

This focus on the school’s culture was discussed at length by three of the four principal-participants. The culture of the school was considered imperative to drive the decisions of the school from the operational level right through to each classroom. This does align with current literature which strongly advocates for a shift from tight policies, structures and reforms at an external level to building and shaping the supportive environment and leadership within schools as more relevant and successful for student learning (Bowen, Robinson, Ivey & Ethell, 2017; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Toom, 2018).

Below is the summarised version of the strategies discussed by the participants regarding fostering effective leadership to drive the culture of the school towards academic success. These are specific strategies that one or two participants mentioned or discussed as useful to them when fostering an effective culture driven by the leadership and the strategies discussed were mainly extrapolated from the principal participant responses. Again, the strategies discussed in the data regarding leadership have been divided into categories. The sub-categories for the strategies discussed for this theme are “Leadership driven directives and strategies”, “Collaboration of a learning community” and “Fostering a culture.”
Table Seven

*The strategies for a leadership driven culture for success*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership driven directives and strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o The leadership team have teaching tasks and are strongly involved with the children.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Make the management and discipline policy of the school very transparent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Have meetings - People don’t mind going to meetings if they think it’s pertinent to what they’re doing in their classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Low SES students need someone to talk to so extra education support staff available is important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Literacy and maths coaches available for teachers to collect data, assess students and guide lessons and course content for teachers based on assessment and data collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o A good way to learn in the school is “running the pups with the old dogs”. Mentoring of graduate teachers and younger staff can be very effective. You need the older experienced people around in the school to be working side-by-side with the young ones and spending time with them and it works both ways. Older experienced teachers bring that experience and knowledge to the table and the younger teachers bring that exuberance and enthusiasm that can break through that sometimes jaded institutionalised vibe that might be allowed set in.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o As a school, learn how to tap in to grants – finding and applying for.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Do not incorporate programs that rely on untrained parent helpers. This can cause stress to both parents and teachers alike.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Principals need to give their teachers and support staff time to reflect on their work and collaborate with other staff. The schools in this study allocate funding for this.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Always remove students who are a safety threat to themselves or others. These students will then have discussions with leadership to promote school unity amongst the teachers and a sense of “professional love” for the student.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Ensure professional development money is spent on teaching teachers to achieve successful academic outcomes for their students.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaboration of a learning community</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Foster a collaborative staff environment. Share resources and ideas as a school – do not be concerned with ownership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o All staff on board so students know they can’t play teachers off each other.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Advocate the use of a “code of conduct” which is posteried around the school. Basically this is underpinned with the virtues of peace, truth, love, right conduct and non-violence and they all carry sub values such as kindness, manners, health, global citizenry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Have a “thought of the week” in development and consultation with the students. This idea has now been taken over by the students who come up with ideas for this with the estimation that approximately 8000 people will</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
be reading the thought of the week. The students get to embrace that idea that they can promote change.

- Stay really well resourced as a school. Have enough stationary, sports equipment, et cetera all in good condition for all children to participate. Fosters school pride.
- An open room at recess and lunchtime for children that is a safe space where they can observe positive teacher-student interactions.
- Staff from the school will go and pick up students and families and bring them to an events and concerts etc so everyone is included.
- Celebrate success of teachers, students, the school and the community.
- Principals need to show an interest in what is happening in the classrooms and with their teachers and they need to have their finger on the pulse with what is going on in their school.
- Utilise professionals like speech pathologists, psychologists, welfare workers in schools who are all fantastic resources for giving strategies for what works, putting you in touch with other resources to find out what else works, including something like quick screening tests to let you know if what you’re observing in a child is normal or will require further investigation.
- Engage local businesses to provide food, resources, etc and then offer them advertising through the school.
- Source people from different professions and from different backgrounds who have been successful in their occupations and invite them to visit and talk to the students.
- Team with another teacher for the more challenging students.
- Read educational research from journal subscriptions.
- Look for good teachers who model really great teaching and classroom management and utilise them for other teachers within the school. “Learning Walks” for teachers to learn from what other teachers are doing.
- Ask for help from more experienced teachers.
- Catch parents in the morning and ask for a meeting in front of a group – then you often get them there and you can get some insight on the student.
- Visit other schools that are known for doing really well with their student cohort and see what they do and if it can be replicated in your school or classroom.
- Team building is important. Teaching is a team game, it’s that type of occupation.

### Fostering a culture

- Have a great induction program to prepare teachers on the culture of the school and the cohort of students. This will provide a really good orientation to the school with very clear guidelines which will help incoming teachers and provide support both in and out of the classroom.
- A culture of sharing at the school and in supporting each other as colleagues if you are having a difficult day with a student.
- Promote a positive culture and be aware of “institutionalised thinking”.
- Aim for inclusive, encompassing approaches as a school.
- Establish a relationship with the families whose children attend the school.
Treat transient children like they will be at your school for the rest of their schooling and if they inevitably leave, you have given them a positive perspective on schooling. All incoming students and families meet the principal, leadership team and are introduced to all teachers at the school.

Every participant discussed how the leadership drove the collaboration with the community, the comradeship of the teachers and educators within the school and providing (and finding) opportunities to include anyone and everyone in the education of the students within the school. This seemed to provide the teachers, parents and students with a “sense of ownership” of their school and assist to foster the sense of pride for their own success and the success of those around them – community in the truest sense of the word.

**Australian Indigenous Contexts**

Of the four schools presented in this study, each school had a small to significant population of Indigenous students. There was an interesting philosophy presented by three of the schools who mentioned their Indigenous students. This was summarised by the principal of School C.

I think it’s still important to have high expectations and that’s massive and it’s massive for Koori students too. We’re about 15% Koori so not lowering the bar for people just because they’re from disadvantage or they’re new to the country or they’re Koori or this or that. So we’ve pushed really hard for people not to make excuses for our kids because school still has to be about learning. Might be learning different things depending on who you are and it’s important to look at every child as an individual. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

Because every participant that contributed to this study discussed the importance of seeing and knowing and catering for each student individually due to
the specific challenges of this cohort of students and the varying levels of academic understanding that may present in any given classroom, this was highlighted when discussing Indigenous students too.

So as a leader break down stereotypes, no collective nouns. I want names. I am not going to be talking about the Koori kids or the blonde-haired girls, we are talking about Mary or Corey or Jamaal. And drill down to the individual and have courage as a leader. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

Two of the principal-participants relayed personal experiences discussing two situations that they personally have been involved with to highlight some strategies they use for Indigenous students.

One of the little girls here stopped coming to school and I said to her, “what do you want to be when you finish school?” and she said she’d like to be a nurse. So I did the whole “well you’ve gotta be at school” talk and she’s Koori so I spoke to the team about getting her a mentor – someone in nursing so she can see that it’s possible because we’ve got kids here that don’t see it’s possible. Asked one kid, “what are you going to do when you leave school?” and he said, “probably drink and be on the dole like my dad.” So, if other adults aren’t shifting those expectations for them, that’s exactly what they’ll do. Every one of our students should have a mentor just to give them some hope – that is our aim. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

When I first got the role as principal, I had a teacher come in and tell me about young Wayne. Wayne is a Koori kid who the day before had flipped over a table, told everybody to get stuffed and left the room and didn’t come back. So I said to this teacher, “what would you like us to do about this?” He said he thought we should suspend him. I said, “okay tell me a little bit about Wayne.” The teacher said, “like what?” So I asked, “can Wayne read?” And the teacher said “not really.” “How long has Wayne been at this school?” “Since grade one.” I said, “well, shit if this kid has been at this school since grade one
and he is now in grade five and he can’t read no wonder he is flipping tables he should be flipping tables every day. Send him into me tomorrow and we are going to get Wayne sorted and no we are not suspending him.” I started changing the culture that day and yes, it didn’t half cause some ripples but we are here to teach. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

Because the focus of this study was on low socio-economic schools, rather than community based Indigenous schools, the Indigenous student cohort was not discussed in depth as it slightly shifted from the main focus of the study. However, as previously mentioned, the stance that the schools from this study have taken with their Indigenous student cohort is that they are all individual students with their own strengths and weaknesses (just like all their students) and should be assessed, planned for and cared for as such, as individuals rather than a separate cohort.

Summary

In summary, the emphasis on strategies for working with students from low SES backgrounds strongly centred on structuring the school environment and the members within it for maximum engagement in learning. These teachers know what their students’ needs are and this is why teacher ability and classroom structure such as smaller class sizes and designated areas to “cool off” were discussed over and over again with each participant. Leaders know their school, their teachers, their students and their families and drive the culture of the school. There is an accountability. These schools and educators work from a culture that is student centred which is underpinned by an ethos of holding themselves accountable which is driven by the leadership of the school. Acquiring funding for smaller class sizes, specialists such as psychologists and speech pathologists and to provide food, experiences and supplement books and uniforms for parents who cannot afford them
was a huge issue for every school with funding these strategies being the overarching concern behind the themes.
CHAPTER SIX: NAPLAN

In considering the secondary aim of this study, I as the researcher and past teacher myself expected that participants would view NAPLAN negatively and standardised testing negatively in a more general sense. This expectation was also shaped by the findings from previous research which found that many teachers who have to administer standardised testing viewed it negatively (Dulfer, Polesel & Rice, 2012; Thompson & Cook, 2014; Ward, 2012). However, the participants were very circumspect and practical regarding their opinions and what they viewed as the advantages and disadvantages of NAPLAN. The data from the interviews of all the participants were categorised into three themes – Frustration and Fear, Masking and A Relevant Use. These themes encapsulated the participants’ understandings, concerns and experiences with NAPLAN.

Theme One: Frustration and Fear

This theme encompassed nearly all of the negative attributes associated with NAPLAN as a form of standardised testing. In the first instance, the participants expressed frustration, not about the test itself but how it is viewed by the stakeholders, namely the students, parents and society at large and how it is ineffectively used. One principal illustrated his point with an example from his own life:

I’ll use my daughter as an example. She was dux at school. Very, very clever girl but in her grade three NAPLAN she got her results and she opened her envelope, because she’s a smart little cookie, and pulled it out and stuffed it down in the bottom of the bag because with a quick look at the graph, she thought she was underachieving and at the bottom of the pile instead of being in
the top 5% of Australia. So she hid it underneath her jumper and everything. She was devastated. Can you imagine that little kid in grade three who has never achieved anything takes that NAPLAN test home to Mum and there you are in the bottom 10% of Australia? So it’s not the top 10% that we’re worried about, it’s the effect that has on a little grade three kid. That dent in their self-esteem is very hard to recover from. They know they’re a dummy right from that NAPLAN result coming in. They stereotype themselves and that’s what we’re fighting against now, trying to break the kids through that barrier and it’s really bloody difficult once that first NAPLAN test is done and it goes home to parents. So that is something that I think is really, really detrimental to kids’ future achievements. (Male Principal, Participant 13)

There seemed to be a general consensus amongst the participants that this frustration of how NAPLAN is viewed by the wider community can make it difficult to relay to their students, who may already have resilience and self-esteem issues, that it is not reflective of everything they can do. Participants feared the negative impact of NAPLAN results may have on a student’s personal belief in themselves as a learner and the ongoing impact that may have on their school life.

I think too much stock is put into NAPLAN. It’s a group of tests in one week, way too early in the year which can set the kids up for failure and I don’t believe it is an accurate portrayal of what those students can do and how far those students have come. It is purely for the governments and stakeholders. So I put very little bearing on it. For example, my kids are now at a six which is at the end of prep level so as a teacher I do not look like I’ve done my job yet I know those kids have come a long way from when they arrived in my classroom (in Grade three) or indeed when they arrived at the school. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

In regards to this particular cohort of students, frustration was expressed at how NAPLAN was not able to show children’s improvement and did not take into account issues with these students both externally and academically.
Disadvantages can be it’s a bit frustrating for the staff (sic) because some of the students don’t test well. Then it’s harder with that resilience and it could be down to they can’t sit there for that long or they can’t read the instructions because their reading abilities don’t support them like what we do to support them. It’s not normally how they work. So I think that frustration for teachers is it doesn’t capture all the other improvements the kids have made. So that’s probably the biggest disadvantage that it doesn’t necessarily reflect what the teachers are working on. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

Never quite been in favour of one test for all students to snapshot one day and it doesn’t always give a real indication of what they can do. It’s just one piece of writing and the last few years it’s been a persuasive piece of writing which is quite difficult to do and we have found our kids don’t articulate very well their opinions and reasons for things. (Female Teacher, Participant 12)

Often our kids have issues at home so NAPLAN day they may have been up till three in the morning, they might have had a huge fight in the family before coming to school. Our kids tend to have more bad mornings that we have to salvage a day from than good mornings and great days but NAPLAN can’t take that into account. (Female Teacher, Participant 11)

Here lies the frustration that the participants expressed for their students.

NAPLAN can create issues of inadequacy or failure for students who may not understand that the assessment is a test that does not coherently reflect what they may be achieving in the classroom.

**Theme Two: Masking**

This theme emerged as a concern amongst several participants who believed that some schools and teachers are “masking” their results by employing a range of strategies to make their NAPLAN results appear different to what they actually are.
Teaching to the test, barring students who are deemed to lower the result average for the school in completing NAPLAN and the merging of school results in regional areas are the main concerns that were identified by the participants. Four participants indicated that this masking behaviour was quite widespread and interfered with accurate representations of the NAPLAN results for the (other) schools that they viewed as participating in this practice. The following was discussed in regards to “Teaching to the Test” as previous practices adopted by the school and practices adopted at “other” schools:

At one stage, the grade two’s were being taught results from previous NAPLAN tests to prepare them for the questions. That so annoyed me as that was valuable teaching time being used. Now all these years later, all pre-service teachers know is how to administer NAPLAN, they should be being taught how to test and monitor the children themselves rather than relying on results from NAPLAN. Everyone knows teaching to the test is a big no. (Female Teacher, Participant 16)

Too much time is being spent on teaching the children the strategies on how to approach NAPLAN and what is good teaching practice, is not to do a multiple-choice questionnaire. (Female Teacher, Participant 15)

One participant’s defence of their own school:

We don’t teach to the test, we give kids experiences with persuasive writing and narrative to better prepare them but that is part of the curriculum anyway. I do know that some schools do teach to the test and that would definitely impact student learning and the results of the test but we don’t do that here. (Female Teacher, Participant 11)

This practice of masking results through “teaching to the test” was highlighted as a big concern by several participants who believed that this practice was prevalent. However, only two participants from one school admitted that the
practice had occurred at their own school. The other participants who discussed this practice were adamant that it occurred elsewhere.

For the second aspect of masking, which was barring or withdrawing students that may lower a school’s NAPLAN average, participants stated the following:

Problems with it is that we know some schools cheat, schools are scared about what the results will show, schools withdraw kids, stuff like that. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

We know that kids at other schools are told they don’t need to come that day or are gathered up and taken to the library to do an activity while NAPLAN is administered, not good. (Male Teacher, Participant 8)

This particular aspect was discussed as a practice that occurred at other schools where students who were deemed to potentially perform poorly on NAPLAN were purposely excluded from taking the test. This would allow the NAPLAN results averages for the school to be higher, therefore appearing that the school was more academically successful. The potential consequences for this are huge when taking into consideration the damage this could do to a child who understands why they have been purposely excluded from sitting NAPLAN.

The third aspect of masking was best illustrated in an example provided by one of the principal-participants:

The schools who are worrying about that (what is in the test) are worrying because they can’t teach and they are worried about what it might unmask. For example ************** is a terrible school, the teachers are all dropouts and the students suffer but you can’t get their NAPLAN results because it merges with ****’s so there is a lot of masking going on. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

This aspect of masking is very much dependant on how NAPLAN results are collated and reported rather than practices that schools purposely engage in, such as
teaching to the test and excluding students. The principal-participant explained that certain schools are merged together when it comes to the NAPLAN results because of their small school size and close proximity to each other. How widespread this practice is was unclear but this can potentially skew the results for a given school who is merged with another.

**Theme Three: A Relevant Use**

As mentioned previously, the participants did articulate relevant uses for NAPLAN in their own practice and on a whole school basis. This ranged from comparing growth between year levels (Year Three and Year Five) and highlighting any areas that require further instruction.

We use NAPLAN to look at the movement between years three and five. We also look at growth to have happened right across the board not just at the tail end so that all children are still being challenged and are moving on and it is great indicator for that purpose. You can also check on anomalies that appear in the data and use it for reflection. There is no big build up with the test. So it is just a reflective tool for us and it works well in that regard. (Female Teacher, Participant 6)

If it is in context it can be a reasonably valuable tool because after all it is just one snapshot of a day in a child’s life. If a child does not do well it does start that conversation, so we can look into if it was a bad day or if there is something we need to focus on to help that child move forward. You wouldn’t disregard the results because they don’t suit that’s for sure. (Female Teacher, Participant 7)

I always print off and match the NAPLAN cohort data and compare it to state as well. We do really well and it’s an opportunity to go back to staff and celebrate. There’s years where we don’t do as well as others but generally it shows what we are doing is working and again, if it is not as positive
as we like that is why we have the school data and I have that for my region as well. (Female Principal, Participant 9)

We will send out when it’s coming up to NAPLAN time and we explain that it is a one-off test and that student might perform better or worse on the day. So individually, I think it can be very wrong but collectively I don’t think it is. So Sarah might do worse on the day and Doug might do better but overall the kids will collectively be on the mark. We have a rule here that if a kid performed better than what was expected or performed worse than what was expected we get the parents in and talk to them. Otherwise, it is gathering results for no reason. It doesn’t get a lot of airplay but you gotta tell the parents when the kids performed better than expected. Because the test might say that Sarah is in grade 3 but reading at a grade 6 level, then you gotta let the parents know that this snapshot isn’t entirely accurate. She has performed very well on a one-day test. We have an assessment schedule so the teachers know where each child is at, so we talk about NAPLAN in regards to the assessment schedule. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

The great thing about NAPLAN is that we’ve been able to use it to analyse what we’re teaching here against similar cohorts of schools and children and we can see where we’re failing. Not so much failing but not actually achieving the results we should be. So, we are comparing similar cohorts and it’s great for mapping continual growth between grade 3 and grade 5 so we can evaluate our programs from grade 3, 4 and 5 and prior to that we can evaluate our programs in the infant areas to see whether or not we’re actually hitting our targets. (Male Principal – Participant 13)

So generally all four schools did use the NAPLAN data to inform their direction in learning but all stated that they saw it is as secondary or supplementary tool to their own assessment schedules for the students.
Summary

The participants expressed their frustrations and concerns with the administration of NAPLAN to primary school students and the considerations when administering a standardised test to this particular cohort of students. However, benefits for the data produced by the test was discussed but very much on a school more than individual student level and as a secondary assessment tool to each particular school’s own assessment processes, which were described by several participants as vigorous and in-depth.
CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research study was twofold, comprising a specific research question and a secondary aim. Through a qualitative research approach using interviews I sought to find answers to the following research question and secondary aim:

- What strategies do successful teachers in low SES schools use to support learning, and how do these strategies align with educational theory?
- To examine the use of NAPLAN and its effectiveness as an assessment and grading tool for Australian schools and students.

I started by creating a specific theoretical framework extrapolated from the review of the literature to use as a lens to analyse the data.

In this chapter, I will review the highlights of the barriers and obstacles detailed in Chapter four and the strategies in Chapter five, compare with the research question of this study, discuss the implications of these results and share conclusions based on the data and supporting literature.

Discussion of Main Results

This section provides a summary of the main results in regards to the research question and the secondary aim of the study.

Teacher strategies

As highlighted in Chapter Five, the strategies that were identified by the participants were categorised into the themes of Teacher Pedagogy and Practice,
Engagement and Leadership. These themes emerged from the data and interwove with the theoretical framework’s key points of Early Childhood Intervention, Academic Program Models, Student Engagement and Teacher Pedagogy. The strategies supplied by the participants of the study crossed over and interwove through these key points. The participants were very forthcoming and open with their beliefs and opinions of what has worked for them in their pedagogy to help these students achieve academically. However, what was very clear was how these strategies did not so much refer to instructional modes and specific lessons and programs (though these were discussed in the data), it was the pedagogy of the teacher as the professional in the classroom, the culture of the school and the nature of strategies that were created and implemented to overcome the barriers and obstacles that students from low socio-economic backgrounds face when they enter education and their schooling life. I would go so far as to say that these participants were experts at addressing and solving these barriers and obstacles for their students.

Every participant was able to articulate the barriers and obstacles that students from low socio-economic backgrounds face when they enter school. Identifying the barriers and obstacles from the data which positively aligned with Early Childhood Intervention from the educational theory. The participants discussed that because this cohort of students tend to come into school very much behind academically to other cohorts of students that as teachers, they are “starting from scratch.” The participants discussed how this did have a lot to do with family dynamics and developmental delays but was compounded by a lack of early childhood intervention, including kindergarten or pre-school. Therefore a lot of the strategies listed for the first years of primary school were focused on language acquisition such as speaking and listening and social integration with an emphasis on
social skills, the establishment of rules and routines and preparing the students to be in a school environment. These aspects are usually taught and/or built on in an early childhood education setting such as kindergarten or pre-school. This aligns with several large studies including Britain’s Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study that demonstrated the effects of children’s preschool experiences had ongoing benefits that remained until the age of 11, in both cognitive and socio-behavioural outcomes (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010, p. 4).

The two themes of student engagement and teacher pedagogy and practice aligned directly with the educational theory. As Rivers and Sanders (2002, p. 4) state, “The single greatest effect on student achievement is not race, not poverty – it is the effectiveness of the teacher.” The participants all discussed how issues of trauma, low self-esteem, lack of self-belief, anxiety, et cetera were quite prevalent within this cohort of students. These issues also lead to problems with engagement and resilience as students used “survival” strategies to disengage and “not try” due to fear and/or expectation of failure. As these issues are generally not dealt with in the home environment and at times exacerbated by it, it falls to the teacher and the school to create and implement strategies to overcome this. Essentially, instilling grit and confidence in the student through care and as one principal put it “professional love” so that the student will engage with their learning. The participants stated that when a student from this cohort trusts you as a teacher and has a belief that you like and care about them, they become very willing to achieve for you as the teacher. Once this starts occurring, the participants claimed they could then slowly focus on shifting the student’s desire for learning from pleasing the teacher who cares about them to making it a more intrinsic process.
All participants stated that the most important factor in helping students from low socio-economic backgrounds to achieve academically was the relationship between teacher and student. As one participant noted,

*The teacher-student relationship is the most important thing. I greet each child every morning. I make sure I know what their likes and needs are. Learn their strengths and use that in behaviour management. We as teachers are the most stable adults in their lives and if you give them time they will do anything for you. We use restorative practices to help generate that trust in the relationship. Recognise and celebrate their individuality.* (Female Teacher, Participant 3)

This facet of teacher pedagogy was considered so essential by all the participants in the study, that one school actually puts its incoming teachers through a course about relationship building with students as part of their teacher induction program. It was remarked repeatedly through the interviews that if the teacher has developed a positive relationship with the student, then academic achievement, classroom management, behaviour management and school citizenry become much easier to implement for that student. The strategies and understandings to help build these relationships were clearly articulated by the participants and ranged from how to engage positively one-on-one with each student to whole school programs such as breakfast club and emergency lunches for students who do not have food that day. This was also where the importance of small class sizes was emphasised with nearly all the participants. Having less students in the classroom allows teachers the extra time in the day to devote to students one-on-one to foster those relationships with their students and more individually encourage academic achievement. Two of the principal-participants remarked that a large portion of their funding went into hiring extra teachers to maintain their smaller class sizes.
Leading on from the idea of care and the importance of the teacher-student relationship is the process of scaffolding a whole learning community around each and every student so that each student can feel celebrated and supported to academically achieve. This culture of community requires creating and nurturing from a strong leadership team within the school. The theme that encompassed this was identified as Leadership and in different ways encapsulates all of the four key points from the theoretical framework (early childhood intervention, academic program models, student engagement and teacher pedagogy). What was expressed by every participant is the structures and supports that need to be in place in order for students from low socio-economic backgrounds to achieve. These structures are required to counteract the obstacles these students face when trying to achieve academically. Some of the obstacles discussed by the participants that need to be directly overcome can include developmental delays, special needs, trauma – both previous and ongoing, family instability, parental attitudes to schooling and education, financial difficulties, drug and alcohol abuse in the home, domestic violence, lack of exposure to educational and life experiences, lack of exposure to routine and structure, etc. So particularly when schools are being presented with entire cohorts of students who may have personal obstacles, developmental obstacles, attitudinal obstacles and some with all of the above, school has to become a strong, embracing community that as one participant puts it “protects childhood” and fosters academic achievement.

So how does a school become a community that can do all this? According to the participants, the promotion of a child-centred culture was an absolute necessity and was described by one participant as follows:

We all have school beliefs and values which centres around kids come first. So, every decision
is based around that. For example, you have a sporting events and you want to take five aides with you, then we need to look at is that the best decision for the kids or is it just making life easier for you and the decision is made from there. It guides the behaviour of the adults and is in line with the ethos of school which centres around treatment, honesty, etc. (Female Teacher, Participant 5)

Therefore, all decisions are considered around what is best for the student and several of the participants provided numerous examples similar to the example above. Many of the teacher-participants repeatedly discussed the importance of having a leadership team within the school that supported the teachers, were available and transparent and fostered the aforementioned beliefs and ethos within the school. This finding was particularly interesting to myself, as I personally held the preconception that the teachers would consider themselves quite autonomous from the leadership of the school. This preconception was incorrect as some teacher-participants went so far as to say that the leadership was imperative in the success of their own roles within the school.

Moving outward from this core ethos of student centred leadership, is the external supports required to help these students to learn. Because developmental delays, special needs and psychological issues are highly prevalent in this cohort of students according to the participants, the schools need specialist support to address the individual needs of each student. Speech pathologists, psychologists, school nurses, welfare officers and occupational therapists are some of the specialist people discussed by participants. These specialists are applied for through Region (the regional education offices) to target the point of need within the school. This can be problematic to attract and hold a specialist, particularly in a regional area as the schools in this study are and so funding has to be found to assist.
Unfortunately, government funding can only go so far and that is where these schools are very adept at engaging the outside community and centring the school as a focal point for community engagement. This is no mean feat as it requires getting the parents of the students on board and then the community at large. As mentioned previously in the data, the parents of this particular cohort of students can be very difficult to engage in their children’s educational life. The participants discussed the low levels of literacy and skills in their parent population coupled with a general distrust towards schools and educational institutions often due to the parent’s own experiences with schools and education. Also, the parents often have varying issues in their personal lives which can also make it difficult for them to engage with the school. Even getting the parents to come in to speak to the teachers can be a difficult process that requires a suite of strategies.

What the participants did say often worked for them was celebrations that offered food such as sausage sizzles and pancake breakfasts for example. Two of the principals discussed that they were hired because of their strengths in community engagement and worked hard to be very approachable to their parent cohort. Some of the strategies noted was wearing casual clothes so parents wouldn’t feel intimidated, adopting a more casual register when conversing with parents, being visible in the school grounds at drop off and pick up and talking to parents at the school gate. In essence, removing as many of the hurdles as possible to help the parents feel welcome and respected and a part of the school.

By engaging the parents and assisting them to have a vested interest in the school, the participants noted that the parents were then far more likely to support their child’s education. The sense of ownership of the school by the parents and students was a running theme within the data. While several participants agreed that
it did not work all the time and there are always parents that just can’t be supportive of their child’s education for varying reasons, the implementation of these strategies allowed some parents to become vested in the school and support their child’s schooling where they would not have been otherwise.

This sense of ownership of the school is then expanded from the students and parents to the community at large. The schools in this study are all situated in regional towns except one which is centred in a smaller township which has been recently classed as “southern metropolitan” due to population growth. These schools have a constant presence in the community. They are always present at town markets, one operates its own opportunity shop, they involve the community in fundraising and according to the participants, the reasons for this is to again structure supports around the school and its students so that the students feel a part of a learning community that is supporting them to achieve academically.

What also must be mentioned that emerged from the data before moving on was one outside variable that every single participant discussed as being extremely helpful in the understanding of their students, their students’ families and working in a low socio-economic community. Every participant had attended and discussed Nairn Walker’s “Understanding Poverty” professional development seminar. This seminar is based on the work of American author and educator Ruby Payne. Dr. Ruby Payne and her work was previously discussed in the Literature Review Chapter.

Every participant discussed quite positively how this particular professional development had provided theories and concepts that have helped them to relate to and understand their students in poverty.

We did a PD years ago called Understanding Poverty. It was an incredible experience in terms
of learning how people in that poverty cycle actually view the world and understand it and that gives you a greater understanding of how to teach the children. It’s really affected me greatly and it’s become a crusade and a personal passion of mine. (Male Principal, Participant 13)

We have done a lot of work with Nairn Walker and Understanding Poverty to help us build relationships with parents and we have found that useful. It’s been great in helping us to understand the theory behind relationships with parents from poverty backgrounds and learning to use casual register to communicate and not be offended by swearing and slang, et cetera. (Female Teacher, Participant 7)

Try and get on board with the parents. The Ruby Payne generational poverty PD was helpful and that idea of a piggy bank where you are trying to deposit as much in as possible ready for that day you may need to withdraw. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

Indeed, I personally attended the same professional development many years ago in 2006 and did have similar perceptions regarding the content. This leads to the concern around a potentially deficit thinking model being presented to teachers in the work of Payne and then disseminated by the participants and indeed, myself in their practice. So the first concern is that the participants are viewing themselves and their students through a culturally deficit model. The critics of Payne’s work see it as classist, racist and peddling stereotypes to educators looking for simple solutions to complex problems (Bohn, 2006; Bomer, et al, 2008; Boucher Jr & Helfenbein, 2015; Gorski, 2008). The fact that it was raised by nearly every single participant in this study as a positive professional development that enhanced their understanding of their students is something to be considered very carefully. I did ask certain participants why they felt the professional development was beneficial and all remarked that it allowed them to understand their students more deeply.
Interestingly, some of the stronger comments that could be interpreted as examples of deficit thinking came from participants who claimed to also be from a low socio-economic or working class background themselves.

In looking for counter narratives to the deficit thinking model potentially presented by Payne, one such narrative that was identified was “the Philosophy of Abundance” (Miller, 1993). It is described as the following:

An abundance narrative presumes that all children are smart, that every child comes to school with rich cultural and linguistic experiences, complex language practices, and innate intelligence. This stance takes for granted that nearly all children, including poor children, have loving parents who care deeply for them and their futures even if not all families possess the same levels of economic and cultural capital to support their children. (Miller quoted in Dudley-Marling, 2015, p. 6).

While I personally appreciate the concept of this philosophy and indeed do believe that all children regardless of background, culture or identity are capable of learning and achieving, the above simply does not marry with a lot of my personal teaching experience and I believe the data of this study reiterates this, hence the theme “Behind before we Begin.” So this leads to the question, how do teachers who work with students from low SES backgrounds openly discuss the issues, complexities and strategies they require to achieve higher academic outcomes if they are going to be accused of classism or deficit thinking just by raising the concerns? Clearly, a more equitable framework for the discussion is required but it does also highlight the “gap” between theory and practice that this research study is also attempting to address. Roegman (2018) highlights the issue in regard to a school leader participant in her study with the following:

Payne’s work was the only approach to poverty and education that he found to be concrete,
helpful, and explanatory. If researchers, educators, and community members wish to support school leaders in developing different approaches to poverty than those presented by Payne and her colleagues, they would be wise to consider how school leaders come to their leadership practice. Working with future school leaders around their approaches to poverty, and how they may reflect their personal experiences and dominant discourse can help to prevent the next generation of administrators from uncritically adopting “common-sense” ideas. (Roegman, 2018, p. 206)

As Payne and her work was a variable that ran through all of the interviews it was worthy of discussion in this section.

**Perceptions of NAPLAN**

The participants’ responses and discussions regarding NAPLAN were very pragmatic in their assessment. As mentioned previously, I as the researcher held the belief that the responses to NAPLAN would be overwhelmingly negative due to Australian media reports and subsequent research literature on what teachers and schools think of NAPLAN and from research studies completed overseas on standardised testing. While participants did discuss concerns that were directed at the behaviours of other schools when administering and reporting on NAPLAN, when it came to their own students, the discussion was very matter-of-fact. As all of the schools interviewed completed rigorous individual testing of their students and used this to drive their planning, the general view of NAPLAN is that it is one test on one day and as one principal stated, “doesn’t get a lot of airplay.” Some participants mentioned the merit of using it as trend data between Years Three and Five. All the schools discussed it as a general overview of where their students are at academically and for this purpose, it held merit as a reflection of what their own data and
assessment was showing. Then if the NAPLAN data was very different from their own data, then there was an opportunity to take a closer look at what NAPLAN was showing. However, all the principal participants said this rarely happened and generally it was on par with their own, so NAPLAN data was never viewed any deeper than a reflection on what their own data was showing.

This association of NAPLAN data with the data collected by the schools makes a bold statement regarding the alignment of NAPLAN data as being “generally” accurate. I say generally accurate because several participants did state that when they find an anomaly, such as a student who struggles with reading suddenly receiving a higher than expected score for reading on NAPLAN, that could be identified and the parent informed so that no inaccurate judgements can be formed. In this sense, NAPLAN allows for that identification and discussion to occur which allows for more information collected around a particular child’s academic progress and then overall as a school. This also aligns with ACARA’s own principles within its Charter such as alignment with the national education agenda to fully inform schools and to review education benchmarks (ACARA Charter, 2018).

This pragmatism regarding NAPLAN was prevalent throughout the data for this research study. The teachers and principals downplay NAPLAN in their schools as the students that they are working with are unlikely to have strong skills in “test sitting” anyway which is a big requirement of being successful on a NAPLAN test or as one participant put it,

I know personally I never performed well in tests as I have test anxiety and with these children they can feel that pressure quite strongly. So even if they are quite good in a certain subject area, this may not be relayed in the test and that has to be remembered. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)
The participants also articulated that with their particular cohort of students, bad mornings or a bad “night before” can be a regular occurrence so a student may have had to deal with a lot happening at home with very little sleep. So to then sit that one test on that one day more than likely will not be a true reflection of what that individual student may know. There tended to be a general consensus in the data that NAPLAN is not designed with their particular cohort of students in mind and therefore the data that it conveys is to be taken “with a pinch of salt.”

So while the participants were pragmatic, there certainly was not the overwhelming negative feeling that I had anticipated finding. If, according to the OECD, the demand to reach national benchmarks has produced a downward trend in quality school environments (Pont, Nuche & Moorman, 2008), this was not related through the data in this study. However, there was a sense of containment or downplay so that the students would not be too affected either in their school routine or in their final results. In reference to the previous studies regarding NAPLAN and teacher perceptions, the findings from this study did not quite align. For example, Rogers, Barblett and Robinson (2016) and Thompson and Harbaugh (2013) found a more negative impact on state schools situated in low SES areas. The perspectives of the participants in this study were again quite pragmatic and not one participant stated that NAPLAN negatively impacted themselves as teachers. I put this particular perspective down to how each school was deliberately working to remove any potential stress to teachers, students and families by “handling” NAPLAN as a government requirement rather than a cause for concern. Every principal spoke of how this was reiterated to staff, students and families.

What was an interesting connection to the previous literature was the concern around “other schools” teaching to the test or having their true NAPLAN results
masked. All the previous studies discussed teachers’ concerns about NAPLAN representing and changing the way they teach (APPA, 2013; Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2012; Thompson and Harbaugh, 2013; Ward, 2012). The teachers and principals in this study did not discuss concern for their own pedagogy but two of the principal participants and four of the teacher participants did discuss their concerns regarding how NAPLAN is impacting on the pedagogy and practices of teachers, including graduate teachers, at other schools. This knowledge seemed to be garnered from colleagues who worked at these “other” schools where these practices were said to occur. This was an interesting new perspective because while these participants were concerned about these practices mentioned in the previous literature as occurring at other schools, they were adamant that it did not occur in their own.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The data from this research study has strong implications for educational policy for schools working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The primary aim of this research was to identify and examine the strategies that successful schools use when the majority of their student cohort are from poverty backgrounds. Similarities to the current theory identified from the theoretical framework for this study and the review of the literature show that early childhood intervention and teacher pedagogy remain integral to the academic success of this student cohort.

The importance of exposing this cohort of children to literacy, language, social situations, routine, structure in the early years which can all occur in a quality early childhood education setting is paramount to school readiness and as the literature shows ongoing success in their schooling life. Ryan, Fauth and Brooks-
Gunn (2012) delved into the implications for children in poverty and their readiness for school. The authors analysed research on what impacts the education of children’s education living in poverty in the long term. According to the authors, research has clearly shown that quality centre-based early childhood education and care programs that begin in infancy through to at least age 8 and which employ highly trained professionals (registered nurses and teachers with degrees and early childhood certification) show the most comprehensive success rate regarding student achievement, social adjustment, high school graduation and post school employment rates for students living in poverty.

The data from my research study conveys the same message as every participant discussed the issue of students from low socio-economic backgrounds not being ready for school when they enter and so play a game of “catch up” for the rest of their schooling lives. The considerations from this research and the literature indicate the necessity of providing early childhood education that is supported and funded for children whose parents are means tested as low socio-economic. Considering that parents are categorised under a number of socio-economic indexes based on funding for schools and communities this could be used to initiate which children could access free early childhood education where the additional costs such as transportation, childcare fees and any other potential costs were covered. This would remove the barriers to early childhood education, therefore dramatically improving the children’s outcomes once they enter school.

Leading on from this, the quality and effectiveness of the teacher became a major point of reference from early childhood onwards concerning the educational outcomes of students in poverty. According to Robert Marzano and his two year longitudinal study into improving student achievement, if the student has an
ineffective teacher in an ineffective school, student achievement will drop from the 50th percentile to the 3rd percentile. If the student has an ineffective teacher in an effective school, student achievement will still drop to the 37th percentile. However, if the student has an effective teacher in an ineffective school, student achievement will rise to the 63rd percentile (Marzano, 2003, p. 74). To narrow the scope further, other studies have also found that teacher pedagogy and experience is more important for teacher effectiveness than other factors such as subject matter knowledge and background qualification (Brown, Smith, & Stein as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Loewenberg Ball & Forzani, 2009; Parlardy & Rumberger, 2008).

Every participant in this study stated that they were fully committed to continuous improvement in their pedagogical practice and all but two teacher-participants stated that they felt supported to do so by their school leadership and their colleagues. Teacher-participants discussed the importance of keeping up-to-date with the latest research and having a knowledge base around the use of theory within teacher education. However, the general perception of the participants of current educational theory was that it needs a construct such as professional development to allow them as educators to make it explicit and “usable” for them in the classroom. The issue identified with this was every principal-participant found it to be an ongoing struggle to individualise professional development when funding was required to be syphoned off to so many other areas in these schools. Issues such as being situated regionally, lack of funding for professional development and travel expenses were all obstacles raised by the principal-participants in their interviews as obstacles to providing continuous improvement for their staff. As Wong and Wong (2009, p. 23) noted, “Research overwhelmingly supports the fact that teacher
knowledge and skills are the most important factors influencing children’s learning. And for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or troubled home environments, quality teaching is even more important.” Again, the pedagogy or the “how” you teach comes to the forefront. All the participants discussed how they have to be able to teach a topic several ways, at several levels while instilling grit and confidence through a caring relationship with each individual student in order to achieve academic success. This became a strong conclusion in the data as the link between the student’s academic success and the fact that nearly every single participant of the study was a highly experienced pedagogue with many years’ experience was very clear. If schools want to increase educational outcomes for their students from low socio-economic backgrounds, they must support their teachers to be the very best pedagogues possible and implement policies, programs, quality professional development and support structures that can support this.

However, what was also very evident from the data is that it does take a committed leadership team to support the teachers to support the students to achieve. Where this becomes problematic is the interference of certain encircling influences mentioned throughout this thesis. One of the main issues with supplying quality, effective teachers to the areas that need it the most is that experienced teachers are not effectively recruited to work in low socio-economic areas. Five of the teacher-participants stated that they moved away from family and friends as graduates to work in their current school and stayed because of the supportive community of the school anchored by a strong leadership team and the financial incentives offered through such government programs as The Incentives to Attract Graduate Teachers Program. Two participants discussed that they had seen many pre-service and graduate teachers who as one participant put it,
(They) come in and they’re only doing teaching because they didn’t have the results to do anything else and it’s sad because you know they are not going to be any good. I think the tertiary entrance point for teaching should be much higher for this reason so we attract the right people who really care about kids because it’s all about the kids. (Female Teacher, Participant 10)

Metropolitan teaching positions can be highly competitive so often graduate teachers have very little choice but to apply for full time positions in remote or rural areas as this is where most of the placements are situated. The issue here is that graduates must leave their homes and often where they have completed university to live in these areas until places “open up” in metropolitan schools. Most of these areas are classified as low socio-economic, transient and under-resourced so the children, who need the influence of an effective teacher the most, are generally provided with graduates who are completing their remote posting, underprepared for the issues of these areas. Lack of professional development opportunities, resources, experienced mentors and consistent support structures only compound the problem and it is not unusual for some of these students (who need consistent quality teaching) to have more than two teachers in one year (Kline, White and Lock, 2013, Roberts et al, 2005). The difference with the schools in this research study is that they retain their graduates because of their passion for children, their commitment to their school and the community it is situated in, and through this ability to implement and maintain support structures, retain and celebrate their experienced mentors and fight for their professional development and resources. Essentially, developing a student-centred culture, driven by the leadership of the school and underpinned by an ethos of accountability as a school for the teaching and learning of their students.

The schools in this research study are successful because of what they do and how they do it. The innovation that is required to support this cohort of students to
learn and to create the structures to encourage this is quite incredible. What was very strongly represented in the data was the nature of structures and strategies required that may not necessarily fall into a typical school’s role to help these children come to school and then to learn. Indeed strategies around curriculum when students enter school with very limited skills, strategies around fostering grit and resilience so that these students will be willing to try, strategies around building relationships and caring for the students and strategies around engaging all possible areas of the community to foster success was evidenced in the data. Essentially, the strategies to remove the barriers and obstacles were crucial to improving the academic outcomes of the students.

We just take the blockades away that stopped them coming to school. (Male Principal, Participant 5)

Several of the participants discussed how welcoming their schools would be if other schools wanted to come in and see how they operate. This is a potentially very effective suggestion for policy makers as well as to see what it actually takes to foster academic success in a school situated in low socio-economic areas.

The secondary aim of this study was to consider the implications of NAPLAN and its data in respect to the schools presented in this research study as a sample of schools nationally situated in low socio-economic areas. According to ACARA (quoted in Carter, Klenowski & Chalmers, 2016) the annual costs in relation to NAPLAN testing are approximately between 7 and 7.5 million Australian dollars with the government costs of administering the tests between $19 and $21 per student. When funding is so tight for these schools working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds, the hope would be that NAPLAN is a powerful “measure through which governments, education authorities, schools and the
community can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes” (http://www.nap.edu.au/about/why-nap). The data from this research study shows that NAPLAN is not perceived to be a particularly relevant measure for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The inference from this is that students, teachers and schools working in low socio-economic areas with a particular cohort of students are being measured against criteria that is not particularly valid to their practice or policies. The schools in this study already participate in rigorous assessment of students on a much individualised basis and this allows them to monitor and cater for each individual student across an often vast range of abilities. While the participants in the study were not dramatically against NAPLAN, their opinions ranged from not relevant to somewhat interesting for looking at trend data between years three and five. All four schools showed very little concern about how their results are displayed on the MySchool website and showed no interest in comparing themselves to “similar” schools. Participants from all four schools stated they couldn’t waste the time in class to “teach to the test” as the teaching time they have with their students is too valuable to lose on teaching “test-sitting.” The schools all showed a lack of interest in the competitive aspect of NAPLAN which has been proven in the literature to cause varying levels of stress for other schools, teachers and students. However, this attitude may be a variable because they do so well on NAPLAN. It would be interesting to consider, if that variable would exist if they scores on NAPLAN were not so successful?

The question to be asked then is NAPLAN worth it? For the costs and the time it incurs, the data in this research study suggests that it is not – at least not for the schools themselves. When these schools need funding in so many other areas that could contribute to the academic success of their students, a test that provides some
minor trend data and a small opportunity to give themselves a pat on the back does not seem a valid and sufficient use of funds and time. Indeed, one could deduce from the participants’ responses that they are successful in their NAPLAN scores because ironically, they pay very little attention to it. However, three of the principal participants did discuss that they were aware of schools who were very concerned about NAPLAN results and in their attempts to implement strategies such as barring students who may perform poorly from sitting the test or teaching to the test, either performed poorly or masked the fact that the students of that school were not academically succeeding. These points have very strong implications for the purpose of NAPLAN moving into the future.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

For me, this research study started many years ago as a graduate teacher in the very first classroom I taught in. I was lucky enough to get a position at a school in the area where I grew up. At the time, it was described as one of six areas in Victoria that Professor Tony Vinson, a member of the Federal Government’s social inclusion board, named Victoria’s most socially disadvantaged (Tomazin and Nader, 2009). Since then, I have been a teacher working in early childhood, primary and vocational education for fifteen years. For all of that time, I have been working in schools and educational institutions situated in low socio-economic areas with a high student population from poverty backgrounds. I have had the opportunity to work with some fantastic students and colleagues in these schools, in Victoria, Western Australia and in the United Kingdom.

Through my experience, I have been exposed to the social constructs and issues of people dealing with the day to day issues of poverty which has encompassed almost my entire teaching career to date. While I like to think I have had some success in improving the educational outcomes of my students living with the issues of poverty, I have also felt the failure of not understanding or grasping the socio-cultural constructs these students are operating within. I have found throughout my teaching experience and professional development different strategies and aids that I believe have helped me run a classroom. My fellow colleagues and I have often debated what strategies, ideas and scenarios work best, what does not work, what should work but does not, and what needs to be taken into account when trying to engage this particular cohort of students in the classroom.
So this truly is a passion of mine: to observe, to understand and to learn what successful teachers and schools do to support the academic success of their students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Then to “box it” so to speak and share with other teachers and educators, particularly graduate and beginning educators and teachers so that they too, have a stronger possibility of improving the educational outcomes of their students from poverty. Through the data from this study and because of the articulate openness and willingness of my participants to share, I have been able to achieve the first aim of my study – to discover some of the strategies that successful teachers in low SES schools do to support learning. This has proven successful and fascinating for myself as I have learnt the importance of the support structures around both student and teacher and how integral it is to get these right before considering looking at the curriculum to teach. The data has also starkly brought home to me the need for extra funding so these schools can put these support structures in place. The ingenuity and creative thinking of the principals and the teachers within these schools to give these students “a fair go” was both awe inspiring and worthy of admiration and respect. I have also shown how the teachers and principals in my study translated educational theory and research through their professional judgements, experience and common sense into concrete strategies to successfully improve the academic outcomes of their students.

The secondary aim of my study was to examine the use of NAPLAN and its effectiveness as an assessment and grading tool for Australian schools and students. Two areas of concern were identified by participants regarding NAPLAN and other forms of standardised testing from the literature. Firstly, participants questioned the relevance of NAPLAN and the data it produces for assessing student academic achievement. This is particularly poignant for students from low socio-economic
backgrounds, where research has previously indicated that a student’s results on a test like NAPLAN correlates with the socio-economic area where that student lives (Apple, 2006; Au, 2009; Lange & Meaney, 2011; Madaus & Clarke, 2001; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). The second concern regarded the impact of NAPLAN on the wellbeing of students, teachers and parents alike. I expected that there would be a general consensus among the participants that NAPLAN is highly problematic and an unreliable indicator of a school’s success in promoting academic outcomes.

The responses from my participants supported my position…to a limited extent. My underlying assumption as the researcher stemmed from a general view that NAPLAN is a cause of stress and pressure for schools, teachers and students alike. This was not the case for the schools in this research study. These schools reported that they had very structured data collection and individualised testing already in place, so they regarded NAPLAN merely as a mandatory requirement. The results of NAPLAN were only relevant as secondary data to confirm the data they were already collecting. There was also a general acceptance that NAPLAN was somewhat irrelevant as it did not capture what their particular cohort of students could really do. What was a fascinating conclusion from this section of the research study was that ironically, the nonchalant view of NAPLAN and the very little emphasis that was placed on it within the schools may have actually contributed to these schools scoring highly on the test. If indeed NAPLAN has the potential to be a cause of stress and concern, particularly for government schools situated in low SES areas (Rogers, Barblett & Robinson, 2016; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013), removing the emphasis (“it’s just one test on one day”) may alleviate stress and pressure for teachers and students. It can then be administered within the schools free of that
stress and pressure, which in turn could lead to better outcomes as students and teachers can perform under more calm, supportive and less-stressful conditions.

**Contributions to the Research Literature**

The data from this study has confirmed prior research on the challenges that teachers and schools face when educating students from low SES backgrounds. In addition, the contribution to the research literature is the specific strategies that teachers and schools in a Victorian context use to improve the academic outcomes of this cohort of students. As mentioned previously, most of the strategies were centred on combating the challenges that a student from a low SES background faces external to the school environment. Previous research does identify external challenges that this particular cohort of students often face when trying to learn in an academic environment. However, the participants in this study have pinpointed what they do to address these challenges. This contributes to the literature by extrapolating from the data the perspective of the teachers working “at the coalface” and identifying those strategies and how they align with current educational theory. I think this will be particularly useful for pre-service and beginning teachers who previous literature identified as wanting that clear practice as well as the theory (Liljedahl, 2008; Louden & Rohl, 2006; Moore, Cupp & Fortenberry, 2004).

The data collected around NAPLAN and the teachers’ and principals’ perceptions of it as a mandatory requirement in their classroom provide a pragmatic voice to the research on the matter. While much research has been conducted around educators’ perceptions of NAPLAN, both in favour and not, the participants in the study provide a novel perspective, namely that the teachers and the schools clearly do very well on the test compared to similar schools but in contrast do not put a lot of
time or effort into the preparation of it or into the analysis of it post-test. As teachers and principals working in low SES schools, there was a consensus from all participants that it is not particularly pertinent to their cohort of students due to the challenges these students face on any given day. These schools and educators have already accepted this belief as fact and so structure their school, their teaching and their practice very much around this cohort of students, not NAPLAN as a benchmark for their success as a school and as educators. This is an interesting contribution to the literature because rather than the stress and pressure that previous literature has highlighted as a concern for low SES schools participating in NAPLAN, these schools give it very “little airplay” but then do really well. This begs the question – Do these schools do well because they are so pragmatic in their view of NAPLAN?

Limitations

This research study used a small sample of schools and participants to discover the strategies to support learning and to garner the opinions on the topic of NAPLAN. Larger sample sizes across Victoria and other states of Australia could move this ‘snapshot’ to a more encompassing picture of how to academically support students from low socio-economic backgrounds with further strategies, which could contribute to an even more comprehensive ‘toolbox’ for teachers as mentioned previously. It could also provide further insight into the schools’ pragmatic perspectives about NAPLAN. While this was an interesting facet of the data, larger sample sizes would provide a more holistic representation of whether this view is an anomaly or if other schools in other areas that also do well on NAPLAN share similar views.
There is a concern that needs to be addressed as potentially limiting to the study in regards to the participants and the strategies they use being worked out of a culturally deficit model. Indeed, there was much discussion around what students “lack” and therefore, what the teachers and the school need to provide in order to address this. While this deficit thinking was addressed in the Discussion Chapter, it does need to be acknowledged as a potential limitation to the study. After all, this is a qualitative study based on the experiences, knowledge and opinions of people and that the strategies offered in the data are provided through the lens of the participants. Further research is required to test the efficacy of these strategies across a wider population base as to divorce the strategies from any concerns about potentially deficit origins.

The other limitation of the study was time. While I had originally structured the data collection to be one hour interviews with a potential follow up interview for teacher-participants, the participants all declined the second interview. While the first interviews nearly all went well over the allocated one hour, the interviews were often peppered with interruptions, which potentially could have affected the data. I think it would have been very useful to collect additional data by observing some of these strategies in action in the classroom. However, due to the time of year (towards the end of fourth term – close of the year) and due to the ‘busyness’ of schools in fourth term, time was at a premium, which is the main reason why I think the second interviews were all declined.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In regards to the research question on what strategies schools use to support the learning of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, this thesis
recommends three areas in which future research would be valuable. While there is prevalent research in the following three recommended areas, there is very little longitudinal studies in the Australian context which could examine the impact on students’ academic achievement throughout their educational career.

The first recommendation is for further research on what early childhood intervention could better prepare children from poverty to achieve at school. Children from low socio-economic circumstances may have three issues they present with when they enter school. The first issue may be physiological due to physical representations such as developmental delays, Foetal Alcohol/Drug Syndrome or physical trauma such as a head injury. The second issue may be exposure to varying levels of trauma, which is recognised as Adverse Childhood Experiences (Felitti, 2002), that have ongoing physiological and psychological effects for children as they move through their schooling into adulthood. The third issue is social factors which can lead to such concerns as lack of language acquisition because language is not used prevalently in the home, beliefs and views regarding education, and lack of resources for basic needs. The findings from this thesis show that schools need to employ strategies to address these issues once the child is at school and the previous literature clearly shows that earlier childhood intervention would help to prepare children to become successful students in school. So what forms of early childhood intervention is going to be most beneficial for children living in poverty in Australia? While current research has highlighted international studies, longitudinal studies on intervention and its ongoing effect to academic achievement in Australian low SES schools would provide a springboard that could be used to then ensure these children do not enter school “at a minimum of six to 18 months behind” the national benchmarks.
The second recommendation is to examine how important the concept of ‘care’ is when raising the level of achievement for students in this cohort. Concepts such as ‘professional love’ and building relationships were stated as integral to their success by all the participants of this study, so much so that some participants discussed that their relationships with their students was the most important element in their pedagogy and their success. If this is the case, should building relationships with students be more prevalent in professional development and initial teacher education? As one of the principal-participants stated, his school actually provides their incoming teachers with professional development on relationship building to enhance their practice. Again, to what extent does a good relationship between student and teacher affect a student’s educational outcomes? And what does a ‘good’ relationship look like? There is a lot of research around this subject but in an age of technology where people can pick and choose potential relationships based on swipe left, swipe right, would the implementation of social skill and relationship building subjects at Australian universities increase the potential for pre-service teachers to successfully build those integral relationships with their students? Then longitudinally, how does this impact students’ academic achievement over the long term?

The third recommendation from the research is to delve deeper into community and citizenship roles for schools and their impact on educational achievement and learning. The schools in this research study all positioned themselves as part of a wider community that supported their students to learn. This ‘culture of community’ permeated down from a strong and dependable leadership team through to teachers, students, parents, outside professionals, local businesses and to the community at large. To be able to add some level of quantification to how
school cultures and their ties to the community enhance the educational achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds could be beneficial to the structures of Australian schools moving forward.

In respect to NAPLAN as an accurate measurement tool for academic achievement, I personally would like to use the findings from this study as a springboard to a much larger study by covering a nation-wide population sample and comparing the differences between low SES schools that have varying levels of performance on NAPLAN to further delve into the factors that are contributing and inhibiting that success. Whilst the participants did not give NAPLAN a lot of “air play” in their schools, they all agreed that their high scores on the NAPLAN tests were an accurate representation. This begs the question if this is the case for all high-performing low SES schools or are there anomalies present here. Further research would also clarify NAPLAN’s worth as an accurate measurement for schools with cohorts of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. It would also be of use to investigate if the pragmatic view of the schools in this study directly correlates with their success on NAPLAN in consideration of similar schools. If further research identified this view as precursor to success, this may have wide reaching implications for schools Australia wide and for their preparation for NAPLAN.

**Recommendations for Policymakers and Teacher Educators**

According to the study’s findings, supporting learning in low SES schools has everything to do with overcoming obstacles to learning. So many of the strategies used by the teachers and the schools in this study were centred on structuring the culture and environment of the school so the students have no barriers
to their learning. Anthony Hockey, a deputy principal in Melbourne, relates his experience:

One of our problems, as teachers, is that usually we can only deal with what presents at the school gate. As much as we’d like all our students to arrive settled and ready for learning, many factors contribute to the difficult behaviours we might struggle to deal with in our classrooms. Students may have had to deal with absent, neglectful, abusive or alcohol- or drug-affected parents while also dealing with their own fears, hunger, lack of material possessions, mental illness or other issues before they even enter school. (Hockey, 2010, p. 13)

It is not easy to teach in a school where the majority, if not all of the student cohort are dealing with the issues described by Hockey above. It is not easy to face children and scenarios that can be extremely hard to observe and deal with. These schools have worked very hard to create a culture and a community that is highly supportive for this particular cohort of students and these teachers are exemplary examples of the teaching profession.

So why isn’t this happening everywhere? Schools have to rely on a leadership team that will foster this environment of inclusion and support and this includes supporting their teachers to be the very best pedagogues possible and implementing policies that can support this, such as programs, quality professional development, and support structures. It is my belief that if teachers feel more comfortable and more confident in their own skills and knowledge, then creating positive, supportive relationships with their students will be a lot easier to foster and nurture. Teachers need to be exemplary to work effectively in these schools or supported to become so.

Currently, the teaching profession in Australia is quite negatively perceived in the media and society at large. It pays on the lower end of the salary scale compared to other university degree vocations that require four years of full time study. It tends to
attract candidates that have “fallen” into the profession due to its lower entrance requirements, rather than chosen it as a passion (Kagan, Chestnut, Hunter, Burch & Wilson, 1993; Murnane & Steele, 2007). Then lack of support once in the workplace can all lead to the high levels of teacher attrition, with an estimated 25% of beginning teachers leaving within five years of graduating (Forseille & Raptis, 2016; Hartsuyker, 2007).

So the implications of this research strongly indicate that a school that is supported to support its teachers and students will produce better academic outcomes than a school that is not supported to do so. This support hinges on government funding and policy change and high standards of leadership and pedagogy within each school. In regards to NAPLAN, the implication here is that it holds very little relevance with these schools. According to several participants, the parent cohort do not use it to choose the school based on the results, the teachers and leadership of the school give it very little airplay because they are aware of the issues of their student cohort which skew results and the students are protected from the potential pressure of it by the teachers who do not want it to impede learning. Therefore, the overarching conclusion of NAPLAN from this research is that it is an expensive and time consuming exercise that holds no tangible value to the schools that cannot operate within its academic parameters. As mentioned previously, the participants all regarded NAPLAN as secondary data which is used to compare growth between Years Three and Five and to compare with the data these schools already fastidiously collect. While only two teacher-participants stated that they did not believe that NAPLAN provided anything of value to their practice, the general consensus among participants was that NAPLAN was not designed with their students in mind and therefore any data that it provides has to be considered in light of this.
Three main recommendations have emerged from the findings of this study. The first is that each principal-participant and nearly every teacher-participant discussed the desire and their enthusiasm for collaboration with other schools and educators to share strategies, experiences and resources. The opportunity to collaborate more on a strategic level as teacher educators was highlighted repeatedly as a desire that as regionally based schools, there is not a huge opportunity to do outside of their immediate area. Three of the principal-participants and five of the teacher-participants discussed how they would welcome other schools and educators to their school to observe their practice and learn from their successes. Every participant noted that the opportunity to visit other schools and educators to learn and share ideas would also be welcomed. Providing opportunities for schools to do this, particularly with similar schools, was clearly a desired aspiration and could potentially lead to cumulatively better practice for all concerned.

The next two recommendations are for policy makers. What was abundantly clear throughout all the data is the lack of funding that these schools receive when it is these schools that need more of the pie, so to speak. The inventive and innovative ways the principal-participants discussed to stretch their funding was admirable but left me as the researcher, quite hollow, when these schools have to find money to provide food, transport and clothing whilst other schools that do not need to provide access to staples or a high degree of educational intervention to name two issues, get the same amount (sometimes more) of the state and federal funding. This is certainly not a revelation particularly in light of media attention on educational funding and the Gonski reports but to see the discrepancy up close and what these schools are combatting just to educate their students was sobering indeed.
This leads to the final recommendation for policymakers and that is the true worth of NAPLAN for schools situated in low SES areas. All the participants of this research study stated that very little was placed on NAPLAN and its subsequent scores because it was not particularly valid to their cohort of students. When these students can have extremely difficult mornings more often than not, and chaotic home structures which leads to late nights and lack of food, and are nowhere near the benchmarks the Australian standards currently set, one test on one day does not provide a holistic representation of what a given student can do and this is problematic when the emphasis should be on achievement and learning not aiming for benchmarks, this cohort of children are not ready to hit. As mentioned previously, for such an expensive test, could the funding be better utilised within the schools themselves to actually contribute to the education of the student? The finding from this study would certainly suggest so.

Conclusion

As a teacher myself, I have had to deal with what presents in my classroom and sometimes there are factors at play with our students that cannot be solved in the school environment. When issues like this are compounded by other variables such as peer pressure, large class sizes, overcrowded curriculums, social and parental scrutiny, and reduced funding for resources, it can be extremely difficult to refocus the emphasis back onto educating the student. This is where the schools in this study have got very clear about who their students are and maybe more importantly, who they themselves are, as teachers and educators. What is even more heartening is the dedication of these educators who strive for the achievement of their students. As one principal participant stated:
I think there are magnificent, dedicated principals and teachers and schools out there. You can go anywhere in Victoria in the lower socio-economic areas and there are some incredibly dedicated people who are really trying to change the world. If you save one kid, well that’s one kid that you’ve saved. One kid that’s not going to go down the drain, one kid that’s going to achieve and hopefully one kid that will pull some others up with them. (Male Principal, Participant 13)

This knowledge and clarity guides their practice and pedagogy as they fight for each and every child with care, compassion and ‘professional love.’ Each school and every participant holds themselves accountable for their students’ learning and every single decision is underpinned by a strong, leadership-driven ethos of a culture that places the student at its very heart. Indeed, this may be the big “take home” message of this research study.

To conclude, I again quote Anthony Hockey, who eloquently sums up the passion I saw in the participants of this study for their vocation and their students:

Any teacher can teach the easy students, but great teachers continue to strive to help that difficult student turn the corner, settle down and have a positive future. That doesn’t always happen, but when it does, don’t we just love being a teacher? (Hockey, 2010, p. 14).
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Robert Pianta’s Student-Teacher Relationship Scale

STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP SCALE – SHORT FORM

Child: ____________________________
Teacher: __________________________ Grade: ____________

Please reflect on the degree to which each of the following statements currently applies to your relationship with this child. Using the scale below, circle the appropriate number for each item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitely does not apply 1</th>
<th>Not really 2</th>
<th>Neutral, not sure 3</th>
<th>Applies somewhat 4</th>
<th>Definitely applies 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. If upset, this child will seek comfort from me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. This child is uncomfortable with physical affection or touch from me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. This child values his/her relationship with me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. When I praise this child, he/she beams with pride.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. This child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. This child easily becomes angry with me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. It is easy to be in tune with what this child is feeling.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Dealing with this child drains my energy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. When this child is in a bad mood, I know we’re in for a long and difficult day.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. This child’s feelings toward me can be unpredictable or can change suddenly.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. This child is sneaky or manipulative with me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. This child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© 1992 Pianta, University of Virginia.
Source: http://www.uen.org
Appendix B: Appleton, Christenson and Furlong’s Student Engagement Construct

Source: http://checkandconnect.org/default.html
Appendix C: Ruby Payne’s Additive Model

The additive model, a term used by Ruby Payne to describe the work of her company, aha! Process, combines the value of accurate problem identification with a positive, strength-based, communitywide approach to change. Applying the glass half empty/half full model to the three economic classes and the work of aha! Process would look like this:

For the person in poverty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Middle Class</th>
<th>Wealth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Additives</td>
<td>Additives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To survive in poverty, individuals must have reactive, sensory, and non-verbal skills. This means they have the ability to read situations, establish relationships, and solve immediate and concrete problems quickly. In that environment, individuals have a full glass; they have the assets and strengths to survive.

When individuals in poverty encounter the middle-class world of work, school, and other institutions, they do not have all the assets necessary to survive in that environment because what is needed there are proactive, abstract, and verbal skills. The additive model offers insight into how hidden rules of economic class work, along with a framework for building resources, a way to fill up the glass.

When the person in middle class encounters wealth, the same is true—but to a greater extent.

For the person in middle class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle Class</th>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Wealth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Additives</td>
<td>Additives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Individuals raised in a middle-class environment learn the hidden rules, mindsets, and means of survival the same way persons in poverty or wealth do: through osmosis. To learn the survival rules of one's environment, virtually all one has to do is breathe. So the glass is full so long as individuals remain in their environment. But should those persons suddenly find themselves in poverty—or even in a poverty neighbourhood—would they have the assets needed to survive there? The glass would be half empty. But there is a more common scenario that brings people in middle class and people in poverty together, that is in the institutions run by middle-class people. In this scenario both groups come with a glass half full because they may not understand the rules or value the assets of the other person or the other class. Here is where the additive model can help. It names the problem and offers insight and awareness; it opens the way to build relationships and eventually to better outcomes for both.

As middle-class individuals interact with people in wealth they may not know any more about the rules of survival in wealth than the person in poverty knows about the rules of middle class (and how the values of the additive model apply).

For the person in wealth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wealth</th>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Middle Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Additives</td>
<td>Additives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The additive model has something to offer people in wealth as well. Where the worlds of wealth, middle class, and poverty intersect, the additive model can assist. Due to their connections, influence, and power, people in wealth often are in the position to design the policies and directions of the institutions that the middle class run and that the people in poverty use. If wealthy individuals' poverty and middle-class glass is only half full and all they know is their own rules of survival, then it can result in policies that are ineffective and counterproductive.
Hidden Rules of Economic Class

Hidden rules: the unspoken cues and habits of a group. All groups have hidden rules; you know you belong when you don’t have to explain anything you say or do. These rules are held by racial, ethnic, religious, regional, and cultural groups ... to name a few. An individual's cultural fabric is made up of many threads, one of which is economic class. Where the threads are woven together the different cultures act on behaviours of the individual and group. Of these rules, economic class is a surprisingly strong thread, one that is often overlooked—or at least minimized.

The additive model holds that:

The hidden rules arise from the environment in which a person lives, that they help persons survive in the class in which they were raised. This means that the rules of class are not to be criticized, but that we simply add options, new rules, a wider range of responses, and an ability to negotiate more environments. While these are framed as choices and not identity, any individuals who begin to work on achievements—such as economic stability, education, or getting sober—are changing their identity. How they make the transition is a choice: Will they stay connected with people from their past, or will they move into new circles? This is an individual and often painful choice/ process. Being aware of the choice can smooth the process, whatever the decision.

• It is beneficial for middle class people to learn the hidden rules of poverty—and not just so they’re able to help people in poverty make changes, but because the hidden rules of poverty have value in their own right. Perhaps first among these is the value of relationships and the time given to them. The ability people in poverty have to establish quick but intimate relationships is an asset. In the additive model, change takes place, not just in the individual but in the theories of change and program designs of organizations. Middle-class organizations often have based their work on middle-class mindsets without an adequate mental model of poverty or knowledge of the hidden rules of the people they serve.

It is by adding to the hidden rules that one is raised with that people develop a range of responses that will give them control over their situations and open doors to new opportunities.

Appendix D: Participating School Profiles

Profile: School A

Source: www.myschool.edu.au

(School A) is located on the outskirts of the major provincial town of Ballarat. Built in 1978 with an unusual open plan design, the school is currently being refurbished. Due to a recent demographic shift there has been a decline in enrolments, with a current enrolment of one hundred and thirty-one students. (School A) aims to equip students with the skills and enthusiasm to confront the challenges of the 21st century. We provide an environment of co-operative endeavours, where there are high standards for social interactions and high expectations for academic achievement. The focus is effective teaching and learning aimed at providing successful student outcomes with a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy. We provide specialist programs in art, information and communication technology, and physical education. In addition, a range of high-quality intervention programs are provided, including Reading Recovery. The curriculum caters for individual needs so that all students are challenged and extended. Students at (School A) are offered an Active After School Sport Program, choir, breakfast, lunch, free fruit programs, and indoor/outdoor lunchtime play program. Our students are central to all that happens in our school community.
Profile: School B

Source: www.myschool.edu.au

(School B) is situated 290 km east of Melbourne in the rural area of East Gippsland and draws its students from Bairnsdale and neighbouring communities. (School B) is committed to meeting the needs of all students and is active in developing and promoting additional programs and initiatives. The school has extension programs in the areas of academic achievement, visual arts, performing arts and sport. In addition to these extension programs we provide a variety of intervention programs at all levels. Our Deaf Program is recognised throughout Australia for its excellence, implementation and understandings. (School B) has a culture which places the students as the primary consideration in all decision making. Our school values are Respect, Honesty, Inclusiveness, Communication, Engagement of Humour and Teamwork/Cooperation. All staff are committed to the needs of students and work cooperatively to ensure that our school values are implemented and developed. As a school we are proud of the achievements of our students across a broad spectrum of areas which are centred around the ongoing development of the whole child, academic, physical, social, spiritual and emotional.
(School C) is committed to continuous improvement. We strive for strong educational, social and wellbeing outcomes. All students are supported to take responsibility for their personal, social and academic learning, empowering them to become productive members of their community. To achieve these goals we provide a positive, caring and safe environment. We have well established processes and practices in place to ensure all students are able to engage in an education that unlocks their potential. Our school prides itself on being able to develop individualised programs for the diverse range of our students' needs. We offer individual and small group programs including maths and language intervention as well as social skills. We have a whole school focus on developing our students' oral language capacity. We are recognised as a school that strongly supports our Koorie and ESL students who make up 10 and 20% respectively. The school has recently undergone significant refurbishment with further plans in place. The school is in a 'Neighbourhood Renewal' area and is strongly supported by the local community. We work closely with Good Beginnings, facilitating Playgroups twice weekly.
(School D) provides a caring, vibrant and challenging learning environment. (School D) encourages students to have a passion for learning and a desire to be productive, responsible members of an ever changing society. At (School D) we share values with our community. We value respect for self, others and the environment and building positive supportive relationships, optimism about life and our future, humour as an important means to create a resilient and happy culture, ownership of one's own behaviour, integrity in who we are and all we say and do, responsibility for our self and our impact on others and the environment, celebrating and acknowledging our individuality and taking pride in the achievements of ourselves and others. (School D) is supported by a great community. Parents are involved in a wide variety of programs. The school maintains a vigorous approach to the teaching of literacy and numeracy with the school providing an integrated approach for the comprehensive education of all pupils including those with special needs.
Appendix E: Interview questions for the Principal participants

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you think constitutes success for a teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Can you identify certain teacher(s) that you deem as particularly successful within this school? In your opinion what makes them stand out from their colleagues?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What is your experience in education up to this point?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How long have you been in the education sector?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What schools and cohorts of students have you worked with in the past?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How long have you been at this school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>What challenges do you face working in schools with large cohorts of students from low SES backgrounds?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>What challenges do you feel teachers face working with students from poverty backgrounds and/or low SES?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>What strategies does the school employ to promote student learning on a whole school basis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Have you found professional development and/or whole school approaches to be significant in providing your teachers with skills and knowledge to achieve higher academic outcomes for the students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>What things can Principals/schools do to detract from learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>What factors in the school and classroom environment do you believe impact the academic achievement of students from poverty backgrounds and/or low SES?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>According to the MySchool website, this school and its students have performed above the NAPLAN levels of other schools in similar geographical locales with similar cohorts of students. Would you agree with this assessment? Why/why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>As a Principal, what are your thoughts and views on NAPLAN and particularly on its use as an assessment tool for grading students and schools?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What are the advantages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What are the disadvantages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>In your opinion, what can other Principals and schools do to promote learning and engagement in low SES schools?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F: Interview questions for the Teacher participants

1. You have been identified by your Principal as a successful teacher within this school. If you had to take an educated guess, why do you think your Principal identified you above some of your colleagues as a successful teacher?

2. What do you think constitutes success for a teacher?

3. What is your experience in teaching up to this point?
   - How long have you been teaching?
   - What schools and cohorts of students have you worked with in the past?
   - How long have you been teaching at this school?

4. What challenges do you face working in schools with large cohorts of students from low SES backgrounds?

5. What challenges do you face as a teacher working with students from poverty backgrounds and/or low SES?

6. What strategies do you employ to promote student learning?
   - What strategies do you employ to promote literacy in the classroom?
   - What strategies do you employ to promote numeracy in the classroom?
   - What strategies do you employ to foster student engagement in the classroom?

7. The teacher/student relationship has been identified in previous research as particularly significant when teaching students of low SES. What is your opinion on the relevance of the teacher/student relationship when teaching your students?
   - What does a positive relationship with a student of low SES look like?
   - What do you believe are the outcomes of a positive, effective teacher/student relationship?
   - If deemed relevant, what challenges do you face in fostering positive relationships with this particular cohort of students?
   - What strategies do you use to help foster positive relationships with your students?

8. Classroom management is another area of pedagogy that previous research has indicated is significant in helping students to learn effectively. What management styles and discipline strategies have you/do you use that you have found to be effective in the classroom?
   - Why do you think they are effective?
   - What outcomes have they provided to deem them effective?
9. In regards to your own “toolbox” of strategies and ideas that you use as a teacher in your classroom, how did you discover/come across these strategies to trial in your own teaching?

10. Have you found professional development and/or whole school approaches to be significant in providing you with any of these strategies?

11. What can Principals and schools do to promote learning and engagement in low SES schools?

12. What things can Principals/schools do to detract from learning?

13. What factors in the school and classroom environment do you believe impact the academic achievement of students from poverty backgrounds and/or low SES?

14. According to the MySchool website, this school and its students have performed above the NAPLAN levels of other schools in similar geographical locales with similar cohorts of students. Would you agree with this assessment? Why/why not?

15. As a teacher, what are your thoughts and views on NAPLAN and particularly on its use as an assessment tool for grading students and schools?
   - What are the advantages?
   - What are the disadvantages?

16. In what ways has NAPLAN impacted your students’ learning?
   - What are the advantages and disadvantages?

17. What advice would you give to teachers in low SES schools who are struggling to promote effective learning with their students?

18. In your opinion, are there any strategies that the school could employ to support teachers working with these cohorts of students to be as effective as possible?