

# **The expendable teacher in COVID-19 times: A poetic inquiry into the reconfiguration of governmentality in Victorian schools**

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## **Abstract**

*The actualization of a neoliberal rationality has been widely explored in global education policy and Australian schools. This paper draws on engagements with neoliberalism as rationality made 'real' through government practices, specifically those that reify the teaching profession into one of risk-management and problem-solving at the expense of deliberation about purposes. In this paper, redacted policy poetry and participant-voiced poetry are employed in parallel to explore the COVID-19 crisis as it emerged in the State of Victoria, Australia with a specific focus on the reconfiguration of risk-management discourses through blanket policy directive. This paper identifies and explores three themes highlighted by this reconfiguration of risk discourse and shifts in modes of governance during this time that are magnified by a teacher's affective and practical responses to the situation. They are: (1) collective teacher response to overt policy decisions that compel the teacher to embrace risk; (2) contradictions of expectation for schools to continue as usual; and (3) an explicit shift away from instrumental evidence-based pedagogies toward new purposes, pedagogies, and community engagement with little guidance.*

**Keywords:** *Governmentality, Neoliberalism, Poetry, Teachers, COVID-19*

## **Introduction**

This paper was written during an unprecedented time<sup>i</sup>. COVID-19 dominated the media landscape, fear and rampant self-interest saw supermarket shelves laid bare, and complete societal shut down seemed all but inevitable. Many industries and professions shifted to a remote environment to protect workers from infection and curtail the spread of the virus. Sports were played to empty stadiums, businesses struggled to implement a 1.5m distance between patrons, and 4m<sup>2</sup> of personal space before being shut down, all in the name of social distancing. During this period of collective anxiety, the teaching workforce was forced to continue business as usual for a time<sup>ii</sup>. Apart from inadequate countermeasures in the pursuit of safety and reduced viral spread, for example, if a line needed to be formed students should be “encouraged [emphasis added] to keep 1.5 meters between each other where possible”—a measure that would result in a 36-meter line for a class of 24 students.

This paper explores the discourse surrounding this continuation and seeks to highlight the positions of the teaching<sup>iii</sup> workforce as expendable in the face of a global pandemic. During this time, the individual school and teacher has become the bearer of responsibility for their own direction and for keeping the 'essential worker' in the workforce, via childminding, at the risk and expense of their physical and mental health. Although Biesta (2013) states, “education always involves a *risk*” (p. 1), the question arises as to whether these ‘risks’ should be inclusive of infection, trauma, hospitalization, or death? This paper seeks to highlight a shift in risk-related discourse in Victorian schools from a position of teachers as risk managers, where input matches output and where the teacher is prevented from doing anything “unless there is positive evidence that

their interventions will work” (Biesta 2017a, p. 322), to the current situation where risk is felt and seen in pedagogically and bodied way.

Three themes are identified through our engagement with artifacts that point to a reconfiguration of risk discourse and shifts in modes of governance during this time. These themes are magnified by teachers’ affective and practical responses to the uncertainty of the situation. They are: (1) Collective teacher response to overt policy decisions that compel the teacher to embrace risk; (2) contradictions in expectations for schools to continue as usual; and (3) an explicit shift away from instrumental evidence-based pedagogies toward new purposes, pedagogies, and community engagement with little guidance.

### **COVID-19 and education**

Although this paper shares some similarities with some pre-existing work exploring governmentality and COVID-19, and education and COVID-19, we note that our work is temporally, conceptually, and methodologically distinct.

Our paper was initially composed in-situ, seeking to illuminate problems of policy communication, translation, and enactment during the first wave of the virus in Victoria. Examples of papers written in-situ during the early emergence of the virus are uncommon (our search does not reveal any of a similar nature to this paper). Instead, they are often written post-emergence, focusing on issues of impact and efficacy (Engzell, Frey & Verhagen, 2020); uptake of digital technologies (Kerres, 2020); and more democratic pedagogical directions (Suoranta, 2020; Mindzak, 2020). This temporal distinction is important as it positions our paper as uniquely capable of offering a critique of policy communication and teacher’s encounters with these communications *during* the school-closure process. We hope that schools and/or systems choose to take up these critiques in the event of further school closures.

Given that concepts of governmentality and its neoliberal form are taken up throughout this paper to problematize policy communication, translation, and enactment, it is crucial to note our contribution to the COVID-19 and governmentality space. Current literature relevant to this paper explores issues of state expansion and intervention in the management of the population (Peters 2020), and the diminished rights of the population due to extended mechanisms of surveillance by the self and others that transform expectations of living (Couch, Robinson, Komesaroff, 2020). Papers explicitly concerned with governmentality, COVID-19 and education are difficult to come by. As such, we argue that this paper provides a substantial contribution to the uptake of governmentality as a way of thinking about policy communication, enactment, and translation in the school context during the early emergence of COVID-19.

Finally, outside of Lahman et al. (2020) who also employ participant voiced poetry to articulate experiences of COVID-19, our approach to meaning-making (redacted policy poetry alongside participant voiced poetry) is unique in both the COVID-19 and wider educational research literature. As such, this paper offers a significant contribution to poetic inquiry as a methodological space, particularly as it challenges the perceived stability of policy communication in schools. We hope that our presentation of these dual methods helps other researchers to challenge notions of policy translation and enactment in different school settings.

### **Neoliberalism**

*Neoliberalism*<sup>iv</sup> is invoked cautiously to frame this critique as it has come to be a nebulous term. It is acknowledged that neoliberalism as a contested concept “assumes multiple manifestations as an economic theory, an ideology, a policy assemblage, a political discourse, and a mode of governance” (Blackmore 2019, p. 176). While seemingly a global phenomenon, neoliberalism is a loose

signifier that captures policy frames, material practices (procedures, reflections, calculations, and tactics), and discursive formulations that differ across time and place (Brown 2015). To compound this ambiguity, the term ‘neoliberal’ is scarcely used as a term of self-identification (Ertas & McKnight 2019), and therefore its actual existence is debatable (Brown 2015). On the contrary, the term is used almost exclusively by scholars, often invoked to dismiss a wide range of political and economic programs across diverse settings (Ertas & McKnight 2019). Recent critics argue that the concept has taken on so vast and diverse a meaning that it can be taken up with little precision, mutating into a theory of everything within educational research—an academic ‘catch-all’ (Rowe, Lubienski, Skourdoumbis, Gerrard & Hursh 2019). Misuse of ‘neoliberalism’ as a catch-all risk entrenching the discourse rather than disrupting it (Ertas & Mcknight 2019), giving the term a ‘key word’ status that escapes critical scrutiny and powerfully influences discourse (Rowe et, al. 2019). The result of such uncritical engagement is the supplanting of the concept as a stable presence—a center point to which everything refers for its meaning.

The term is used in this paper to highlight a deferral of responsibility to schools that, until now, has been a responsibility to provide risk-managed education via ‘evidence-based’ practices (Sandler & Apple 2010). Following Foucault (2007, 2008) and Brown (2015), this paper is written from within political rationality that makes neoliberalism a possible form of reason whereby specific kinds of subjects are born and compelled to relate to each other through modes of government. Government is considered as an administrative form in schools, an assemblage of objectives, best practices, benchmarking systems, audit processes, timetables, and architectural arrangements, among other technologies, that guide the conduct of subjects (Foucault, 2007). This paper

aims to note the contradictions in modes of government that have emerged in school discourse during the COVID –19 crisis.

### **Governmentality**

Foucault’s concept of *governmentality* (1997, 2000, 2007) frames the way that we think about the practices that actualize neoliberal government in schools and what that style of government does to teachers. Yet, like neoliberalism, governmentality is a somewhat vague term, invoked frequently to discuss the way that others direct and control the conduct of subjects, or how one might conduct themselves and speak about their conduct correctly. The concept itself holds a range of meanings for Foucault, and uncritical use runs the danger of becoming another catch-all concept for the analysis of power relations and techniques of subjectification.

Foucault’s (2007) often cited ‘definition’ of governmentality gives us a starting point for thinking with the concept:

... by ‘governmentality’ I understand the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and dispositif of security as its essential technical instrument (p. 108).

But, as Walter (2012) notes, one needs to be careful of taking this statement for granted or reading it in isolation. For one, Foucault mobilizes the concept in a range of ways, both specifically pertaining to liberalism and its neoliberal form, and more generally as a heading for a wider inquiry into the different ways power “conducts the conduct” of people in different ways throughout history in response to different problems of government (Foucault 2008, p. 186).

Here it is crucial to outline the ‘problem’ of (neo)liberal government as it is the defining aspect of modern government and important to understanding the issues laid out in this paper. The problem that a (neo)liberal government is directed toward is the management of the freedom of the *population* through mechanisms of *security*: probability, risk-management, calculation, and the management of variation (Foucault, 2008). This is an innovation on, not a complete jettisoning of, disciplinary technologies directed at the individual conceived of in Foucault’s earlier work. A good liberal government requires the production and organization of freedom so it can be consumed (Foucault, 2008, p. 63). Though this freedom is not “in the sense of the imperative: “be free,” with the immediate contradiction that this imperative may contain”, but rather the “management and organization of the conditions in which one can be free” (p. 63). In effect, contemporary (neo)liberal government sees as its problem the relationship between producing the possibility of freedom but also the “establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etcetera” (p. 64). Here we follow Brown (2015) in conceiving of ‘freedom’ in a neoliberal context as the production of the “responsible self-investor and self-provider” who engages “in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with the morality of the state and the health of the economy” (p. 84). To deviate from such a conception is to risk professional and social alienation. As such, the management of the freedom of the population and an understanding of a (neo)liberal variant of freedom is crucial to the way that we conceive of teacher management in a school setting during the pandemic.

It is also apparent that Foucault saw governmentality as an “encounter between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self...” (Foucault 2020, p. 225). Technologies of the self refer to the way that human beings come to relate to themselves through techniques derived from specific sets of knowledge, or “truth games” (p. 224). In education, Ball (2012) refers to these

truth games as policy reform technologies (judgements, comparisons, displays). These technologies are two-fold: on the one hand moving away from juridical command and control policy technologies (“thou shalt”), toward a delegated policy platform that calls on the entrepreneurial subject to be responsible for personal and organizational success via constant self-improvement and investment. While on the other hand the increasing use of performative technologies of appraisal, goal setting, comparisons, observations, and so on, instill a sense of distributed surveillance by others (colleagues, students, parents, government, etc.) and by oneself. Walter (2012) notes that these technologies are not limited to occasions of hierarchical governance but are active wherever people and groups are working on the conduct of themselves and others. In effect, as Perryman, Ball, Braun, and Maguire (2017) note, these technologies compel the subject to understand themselves in line with expertise and claims to the truth within an institution.

It is also important to point out that the objects which Foucault studies, the particular rationalities, arts, techniques, and practices that emerge in the conduct of conduct, challenge the universality and transcendence of totalizing images of power. Take, for example, Foucault’s later inquiries into the emergence of the modern state. Here he argues that the image of the state as the cold ever-expanding monster is seen to be founded on a circular ontology (Foucault 2007, p. 354) that posits an essence of the state as the stable site to which specific practices refer. In this way, governmentality helps us to think of things like the state—of stable categories—as “mythicized abstractions” (p. 109) that are stabilized and become true through “linking, aligning and homogenizing particular features, placing them in series and making them converge” (Deleuze 1986, p. 63).



Translation and enactment of policy technologies by actors (teachers and administrators) speaks to this apparent stability and truth-telling, and by extension to the making real of a neoliberal rationality. But, inversely, it also helps to think about where resistances to conduct management might emerge from. Ball's (1993) notion of *policy as discourse* helps us to conceptualize how collections of policies “exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourse... [that] systematically form the objects of which they speak” (p. 14). Policy is one of those technologies that form a contingent multiplicity directed toward problems of government and that make certain statements sayable. Policy has a say, but not the only say, in what can and cannot be thought, said, and done—which statements are deemed true and which are false. As Ball notes, “... we are spoken by policies, we take up positions constructed for us within policies” (p. 14). In this way, we are subjectified and perform what is made sayable by policy ensembles. But this in no way suggests that as actors within institutions policy ensembles can be equated to determinism, or that the governmental context that policy decoding occurs within is all-pervasive and inescapable. Such a conception would deny the multiplicity that policy becomes a part of. Instead, it should be noted that “a variety of discordant, incoherent and contradictory discourses, and ‘subjugated knowledges’ cannot be totally excluded from arenas of policy implementation” (p. 15) - hence policy's contingent, ‘becoming’ materialization. As will be seen, the contingency of policy translation and enactment is important to this paper as it frames the way that we position redacted policy documentation alongside participant voiced poetry to disrupt the claimed stability of policy communications and make new meaning out of these communications during the pandemic.

### **Neoliberal rationality in Victorian schools**

The current governmental rationality sees that the school, no longer a place of deliberation over the purpose of education and its enactment, is increasingly configured by security and disciplinary technologies aimed at reducing risk and achieving ends. Evidence-based practice, peer observation, professional development plans for all staff, and mandated reflection, define a rationality where command and control are replaced by negotiation and persuasion, or as Brown (2015) suggests, "order with orchestration, enforcement with benchmarks and inspection, and mandates with mobilization and activation" (p. 127). The school and teacher are reduced to identifying treatments for problems of practice, where participation is reduced to 'buy-in' and supposedly 'risk-free' evidence-based practices, at the expense of deliberation about purposes.

The presence of a neoliberal rationality in Victorian schools can also be read through school/teacher as a risk-manager discourse that permeates the Department of Education and Training (DET) resources. A result of this is the school/teacher that strives to make learning more visible and measurable and is forced to adopt a singular view of themselves (Maguire 2010, p. 60). Here, performative cultures in public schooling emerge through a discourse of risk management, where a stable and coherent image of the teacher is articulated by technologies of security and discipline such as standardized testing, performance indicators, league tables, self and peer reflections, and the like (Liasidou and Symeou 2018). In the Victorian policy setting, an expectation to manage the risk of learning can be read through the statement: "Student outcomes will be lifted when we implement the Improvement Model through the use of the Improvement Cycle. We will know our level of success by using the Improvement Measures" (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020a). This discourse, as Ball (2013) suggests, is "misleadingly objective and hyper-rational" (p. 217) and reifies the complexity (riskiness) of the school into

concrete practices of input and output. This discourse brings about new practices for the enactment of education. But beyond this, it calls forth a subject who, according to Butler (1996), seeks “recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making... [seeking] the sign of its own existence in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent” (p. 20)—interpreted as the risk-managing teacher subject, responsible *only* for the improvement in outcomes at the expense of deliberation about purposes of schooling.

It is here that the issue arises. COVID-19 response management effectively reinstates a mode of order, enforcement, and mandate governance, where blanket policy decision overrides the safety of the teaching workforce and invites substantial risk into school decision making. Yet neoliberal devolution and responsabilization (see: Brown 2015) of the school remains firmly intact as policy decisions are disseminated slowly and without clarity. In effect, decision making and resource provision, human and material, are at once commanded by blanket policy announcements (such as, schools must remain open) and passed down the pipeline of power and authority for schools to navigate as discrete entities. The school is faced with a new moral and technical responsibility for society’s economic survival through a commanded pedagogical shift.

Following this further, one can note that policy expectations for the provision of continuous remote learning became *overnight* a moral and technical burden for the individual school and teacher. Deferral of responsibility for the design (theoretical and practical) of a new pedagogy<sup>v</sup> introduced a new responsibility for deliberation about purposes and ways forward in a digital environment. Where previously the school and teacher were expected to manage pedagogical risk via best practices and homogeneity, they are quickly asked to do the opposite, introducing risk via inequality of resourcing, teacher professional

knowledge, and technical capacity. The risk is that some schools and teachers, under the guise of autonomy and self-development, will assume responsibility for the burden of continuation in a new environment and thrive, while others will be cast off and maligned – nobody knows which schools and individuals will meet which fate.

The school must respond flexibly and accountability, commanded to provide for themselves and their community while being severely limited in their ability to do so. It is through these mechanisms of neoliberal governance that this paper argues that schools, as levers of the government, are observed and continue to be observed as exposing all teachers regardless of age or health to the risks, pedagogically and bodily of COVID-19.

### **The Victorian government school policy context**

Before presenting artifacts that emerge from a Victorian government school context, it is important to outline for the non-Victorian reader some of the key policy features of the context pre-COVID-19.

Victorian government primary schools serve the needs of the majority of 5- to 12-year-old students in the state (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020d). Individual schools are mandated to use the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) to guide continuous improvement (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020e). The department claims that the FISO is an “evidence-based framework designed to focus schools’ improvement efforts on priorities proven to have the greatest impact on student outcomes” improvement (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020e). The FISO continua of practice provides schools with 29 components that guide self-evaluation, allocation of roles and responsibilities, identification of areas for improvement, and so on. The continua include significant reference

and expectation of use of the department's High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) improvement (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020f) as a likely way to bring about student learning growth. As part of their improvement cycle, schools are expected to complete a school review every 5 years<sup>vi</sup>.

As can be read here, the Victorian government primary school setting is one of governance at a distance (Connell 2013). Command and control techniques are few and far between, with school and teacher conduct instead shaped by a diverse set of technologies that manage variation in outcomes. The FISO > SSP > AIP > PDP system gives the illusion of school and teacher autonomy yet acts as a frame for audit and surveillance for both the school and teachers.

### **Experimenting with possibilities of text and words**

Our presentation of artifacts is derived from our articulation of governmentality and policy translation and enactment within a neoliberal form of government. During the early emergence of COVID-19, government policy communication was overtly command-driven (“thou shalt”) and therefore claimed an inherent stability that could only be translated and enacted in one way in schools—business as usual. As such, the specific way that we present our artifacts is intended to critically examine this stability from within and seek alternative meanings that are always already present in policy communication.

We take up our pens and highlighters (literally and figuratively) to compose our own resistance to stable discourses that structures our teaching lives. In this way, our critical *re-presentation* of COVID-19 policy documents, and other relevant Department policy documents, aims to interrupt this stability and open up possibilities of alternative dialogues (Finley 2011).

We aim to "parody the notion of an original" (Butler 1999, p. 188) where *original* refers to a stable meaning contained in department documentation. Through recontextualization of documentation, we seek to foster subversive confusions and deprive these documents of their original meaning. To achieve this, we follow Eisner (2001), highlighting contradictions in risk management discourse via a commitment to visual parody, to "invent new ways to show us aspects of the world we had not noticed; [to] release us from the stupor of the familiar" (p. 136).

We argue that our redacted poetry (sometimes referred to as found poetry) represents an experimental method in which one might critique claims to stability. It is a method that spawns unexpected results that do not follow from a coherent meaning contained within data (St. Pierre 2019). These permutations, or discursive possibilities, as Butler (1999) argues signify "an open future of cultural possibilities" (p. 127).

We position this methodological work and thinking within poetic inquiry as an emerging field of inquiry (see: Owton 2017; Prendergast 2009). It is through a redacting of the DET policy advice around COVID-19 on 21 March 2020 (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020b) that we aim to explore, expose and highlight the messages and directives given to teachers during this time of crisis. We also present redacted poetry based on the *Practice Principles for Excellent in Teaching and Learning* (Department of Education and Training Victorian 2018), as a mechanism of demonstrating that our observations are not limited to the COVID-19 crisis but are present within the wider DET policy landscape. In doing so we search for alternative ways of thinking about these directives that might emerge when the policy is critiqued from within. In this way, redacted poetry seeks that which does not yet exist through an open process of play with text.

We see these poetic works as an artful way of working with artifacts to present a collection of texts that resemble and draw on similar functions of poetry, without following explicit literary convention (Lahman, Richard, & Teman 2019). In doing so, we follow other recent methodological explorations of research poetry (see: Schoone 2020) and have created our own unique process that consists of *redacting, reading, redacting, re-reading, reading aloud, redacting, and re-reading again*. This method is adopted to strip back text from government policy into *poem-ish* (Lahman et al. 2019) forms, a process that sees a unique representation of the texts that are inherently tied to us and our process (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul 1997).

We also include the words of Adrian as participant-voiced poetry or poetry from the “*vox participare*” tradition (Prendergast 2009, p. xxii). Adrian is a Grade 5/6 teacher working in a Victorian school during this time. His words are excerpts from a recorded conversation that emerged as part of participation in one of our PhD<sup>vii</sup> research projects. Adrian was asked to speak about his experience of being in a school during this time and short excerpts were extracted that spoke of the themes subsequently outlined in this paper. Adrian’s words are presented mostly verbatim, only smoothed in some cases for readability (for example, conjunctions such as ‘and’ and ‘but’ are added to connect some phrases).

Like Connelly (2010), our inclusion of Adrian’s words attempts to form “a connection between reader and story and ...between lived experiences and the social policy that directly affected those experiences” (p. 32). The affective experience of Adrian, including his emotional response, is presented alongside redacted policy to highlight and contrast Department discourse. In this way, the inclusion of Adrian’s voice is seen to mirror van Luyn, Gair, and Saunders (2017) who discuss the possibility of poetry forming bonds between seemingly disparate things. By positioning Adrian's words both in sequence with, and

parallel to excerpts from the redacted poetry collection we aim to illuminate those contradictions in discourses that emerged during the period being critiqued.

We do not seek a *truth* or *essence* in the artifacts that we redact or offer some stable alternative discourse to the one seemingly intended. For us, redacted poetry is not a process of reduction, but is a way of reading critically, seeking the occasion in which the text shows itself as something new and unstable.

We present excerpts of these redacted texts alongside Adrian's words to draw out and highlight three themes of risk reconfiguration and shifts in modes of government during this time. These themes are magnified through Adrian's words as they signify effective and practical responses to the situation.



## The poems

### **Theme 1: Group assembly as response precarity - notice us!**

#### *Closures*

##### Closures



Figure 1. (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020b)

A clear policy directive: “schools will continue” in a state of emergency. But Adrian puts it more poetically:

#### *Sinking*

*Like the band playing  
while the Titanic sunk  
We continued on...*

Adrian’s words, we argue, signify an alternative meaning of policy directives at the time. Schools were clearly heading toward closure at this point, all could

feel it, but the school and teacher were told to continue. Adrian tells of the anxiety of the situation:

***Taking bets***

*I walked into the staffroom early last week  
expecting nobody to be there  
after announcements about 'social distancing'.*

*It was packed,  
more people than I had ever seen.  
Usually it's a come and go type space  
- teachers are busy people and lunchtime is a busy time –  
but the staff were clearly there to stay.*

*One of the guys was taking bets on when we'd close.  
Next Monday was the favourite.*

*The older teachers weren't so jovial,  
Their lives were literally at stake...  
A close colleague of mine has underlying health conditions.  
(Adrian's voice is shaking at this point)  
They know what the numbers look like for them.*

*And someone else makes the case,  
- I agree –  
That we're all here out of protest:  
"You want us to stay at work?  
Well then you can't keep us apart...  
  
Let's go for drinks this Friday".*

The words of Adrian capture the uncertainty and precarity which is evident through his encounter with teachers in the staff room. They work through it by coming together, and Adrian speaks of teachers at other schools that he knows

are doing the same thing. They put themselves at risk *because* they have been explicitly asked to do so.

We note that the perceived precarity of the teacher is magnified by blanket policy directives. We employ Butler’s (2015) use of precarity as it emerges from a neoliberal structuring of society in which “we are faced in a new way with the idea that some populations are considered disposable” (p. 11). The teaching workforce in Victoria has typically not been among these disposable populations (in a physical sense, at least), yet Adrian's colleagues articulate a fear, communicated via blanket policy directive from the Department, of being disposable in the face of a pandemic. The coming together to a communal space represents a possible acting in concert against being made responsible for the reduction of 'serious risk'. It is through assembly as a form of "popular sovereignty" (Butler 2015, p. 16) that the teaching workforce seeks legitimation for their perceived precarity.

But normal teaching and learning must and should continue.

## **Theme 2: Business as usual, but what is our purpose?**

### ***Gatherings***

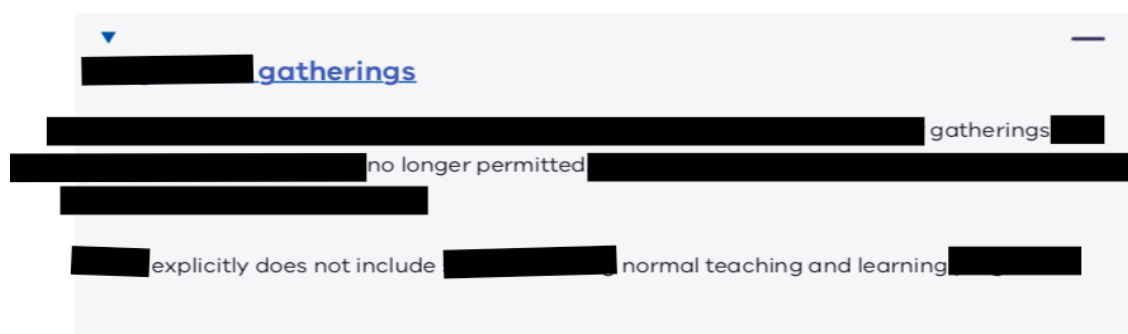


Figure 2. (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020b)

Here we explicitly note a contradiction: In a “state of emergency” the school and teacher must “act now to reduce serious risk” but continue with “normal teaching and learning”. On the one hand, the school must continue to provide

the best conditions for learning, a sentiment reinforced in Department communications.

### *Attendance*

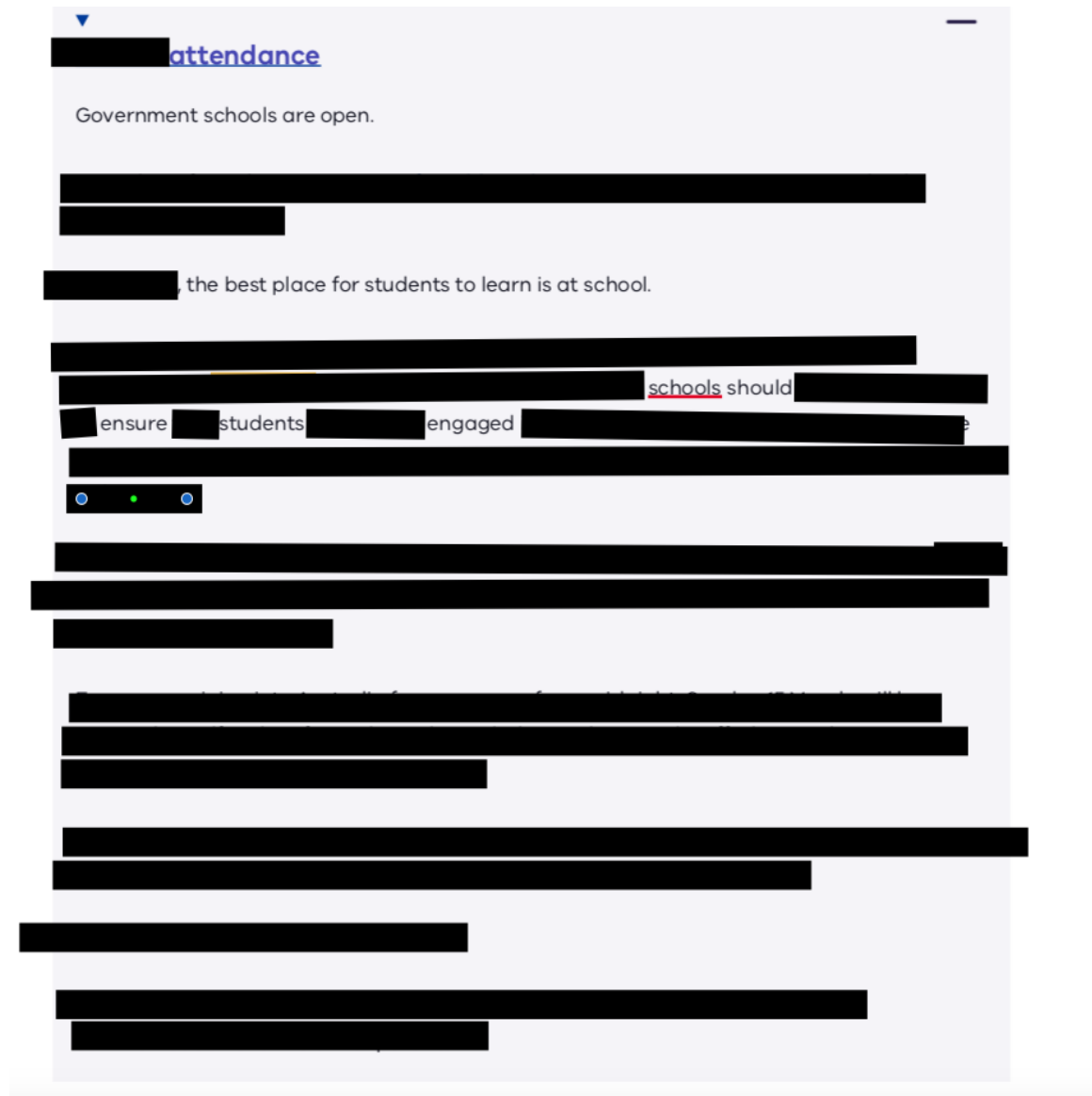


Figure 3. (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020b)

On the other hand, the school must contend with social distancing advice that would make such an environment impossible.

***Protect your health, only if practical...***

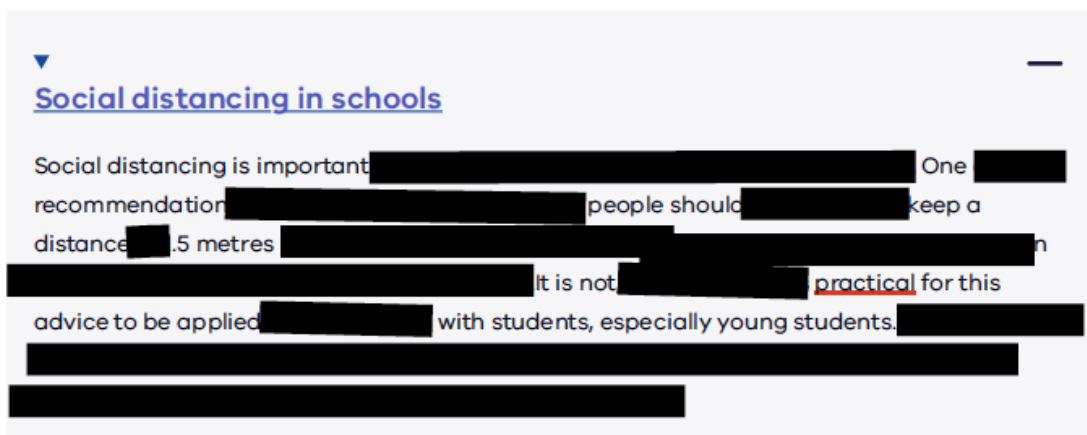


Figure 4. (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020b)

Such a contradiction of what the school *should* be during this time introduces uncertainty into the profession. Here we seek to highlight a governance turn that itself seems unsure of the environment, structural constraints, and conduct of subjects sought. We offer two poems in parallel, one a redaction from the policy document *Practice Principles for Excellence in Teaching and Learning* (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2018, p. 6) that portrays intended school/teacher conduct, the other an anecdote from Adrian that highlights a feeling of uncertainty of purpose:

***Be clear***

[redacted] committed [redacted]  
[redacted] and transforming [redacted]  
[redacted] shared  
outcomes [redacted] continuity of learning. [redacted]  
[redacted] commitment [redacted]  
excellence [redacted] frames our work [redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted]

together  
a Vision for Learning  
a shared moral purpose  
coherent and unifying  
are we achieving  
how well  
?  
improve  
provide powerful evidence-based  
teaching practice.  
'fundamentals'  
articulate a cohesive view of effective teaching and learning  
curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.  
effectively deliver  
measure impact  
be clear.

Figure 5. (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2018b, p. 6)

### ***Lost***

*He's (the toilet paper delivery driver) delivering  
toilet paper to a school*

*who have been told that they must stay open  
as 'essential care'*

*- and I use that term in inverted commas –  
and that means care for children  
of families of the essential workforce.*

*Which depending on which country you go to*

*is comically different: hairdressers, elevator technicians, you get the  
point.*

*The community side of me says:*

*“Yeh sure  
if this is why I'm at work  
to help my community...”*

*then absolutely.  
No question about it  
I'm here to help my community.*

*However...  
I do feel like I'm a risk  
to my own community,  
and my tighter community,  
like my family and my friends.  
And, I do have a fear of being ostracized  
by people outside of the education system,  
because there is a pressure  
to be strictly social distancing or self-isolating.  
Whereas I wander into the petri dish  
that is a school of 400 humans every day.*

*My point is that:  
We...  
as teachers  
- and this is indicative of lots of the staff I work with –  
feel left behind...  
voiceless.  
And if you think about Glaser's survival needs  
you can pretty much scrap  
every single one of those needs at the moment.  
And when they're gone...  
we lose power,  
a sense of fun and adventure,  
and we over-compensate in the other direction.  
How does that translate  
to the way we treat the children of essential workers?*

The two poems are difficult to reconcile. The first poem speaks overtly of a purpose of education built on a foundation of evidence-based practices and a moral obligation to build consensus and buy-in to a coherent image of the school as impactful. It signifies a discursive space that renders the purpose of

the school in economic terms of best-practice and measurement. Within these terms, the school and teacher are responsabilized (nominated as responsible) through an ascribed freedom and autonomy to define practices, but should failure occur then ultimate responsibility lies with the school/teacher.

Adrian's words suggest an intensified responsabilization via deferral of the moral burden to the school/teacher of society's economic survival and the provision of childminding to enable key workers to continue their role in society. Adrian articulates a shift in governance away from freedom and autonomy to achieve given ends, and toward a mode of governance that sees blanket directives given with no guidance as to how these directives might be achieved. The result is, as Adrian notes, a teaching profession that has been "left behind" and "voiceless", grappling with a moral obligation to continue as normal, but with their survival needs to be taken away.

We ask whether the contradiction we have highlighted (In a "state of emergency" the school and teacher must "act now to reduce serious risk" but continue with "normal teaching and learning") is viable for teachers given the irreconcilable images of school purpose and enactment presented in the excerpts.

### **Theme 3: Purpose, continuity of learning, and community**

Victorian public schools received little communication as to how to manage their schools during this time. Purposes, approaches, technical implementation were ambiguously communicated, if at all. Schools and teachers became responsible, seemingly overnight, for direction, implementation, and community support.



## Continuity

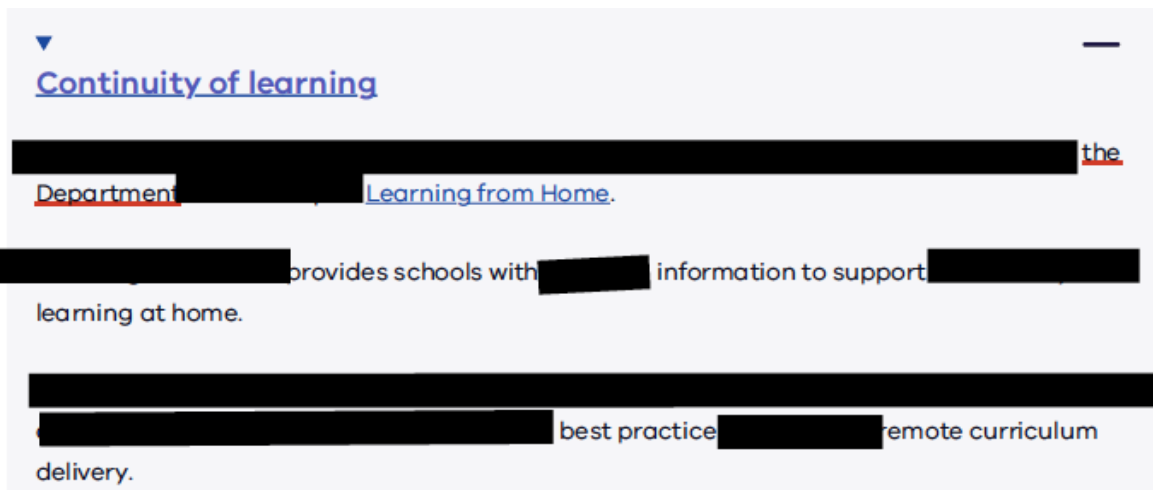


Figure 6. (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020b)

### **How?**

*We've been working on a remote learning plan for 3 weeks  
because we knew we would have to...*

*just didn't know when.*

*We still don't know what to do about it  
and it's been fascinating to work in a school at the moment.*

*While the education system and our school  
have been going through a period of...*

*uncertainty.*

*Where we have no idea what we're doing,  
the government has no idea what they're doing,  
And it appears to us*

*from within schools*

*that every single industry is taking extreme measures  
to protect their workers...*

*except schools,*

*who are being asked to continue*

*- I quote I suppose –*

*“Business as usual” ...*

*But it's not.*

*Today I had 5 students,  
the rest are escaping.*

*So, we're currently working physically and digitally...  
which is quote stressful for everybody involved.  
Not something we've had to do before,  
maybe not something we'll have to do again.  
I suppose we're prepping for mass closure  
but we have no idea if that's going to happen.*

*But what's really interesting,  
is how in the face of a pandemic,  
schools have become this community beacon...  
A place where info is coming from to the community.  
Where people are going to for information.  
Where people are congregating to feel a sense of safety.  
And teachers seem to be taking it in their stride.*

*But a reflection of teachers right now,  
as those that need to sacrifice themselves  
for the continuity of the nation.  
This front-line type thinking.  
Keeping things rolling for the rest of society.*

*It's also been a time where  
schools are really talking about the purpose of education.  
How is it enacted?  
We've really deeply and genuinely spoken  
about the purpose of schools.  
And the purpose of school over this time has really shifted:  
From a place of academic outcomes  
to a place of engaging with students from a position  
of being in the world and experiencing something in the world.  
It seems widespread across the school.  
Teachers are thinking about their role  
as somebody who does critically engage  
with what is happening in the world.  
Who talks about a need to feel safe,  
and to feel a sense of mattering.*

*And outcome-based education  
Has almost entirely gone out the window at this point  
- nobody seems to care -  
In favour of an education about supporting young people  
as they navigate this complex world  
made increasingly complex by a pandemic.*

Adrian sees themselves as “on the front line”, an actor propping up society by continuing on with "business as usual". But as in theme 2, Adrian is not certain about what this means or how it might work. There is deep uncertainty in his school’s move to digital learning; the staff has not been told at this point if that is the planned direction – they can only speculate.

Speculation and deliberation about the direction of a school have not been a prominent discursive possibility for some time, not since 2010, at least, when high stakes testing and its communication via public reporting became the prime steering mechanism for Australian schools (Lingard 2010). Through these technologies, the dominant rationality positions schools and teachers as risk-manager, technical and instrumental problem solvers, seeking the most appropriate (evidence-based) solution to problems of practice. The teacher is the designer of means (that are claimed to work) to be applied to given ends (that are typically outcome focused). Adrian speaks of a different image emerging here: a designer working with uncertain ends, untested and unknown tools, and a need (opportunity) to think and engage critically with the situation. Adrian articulates a shift in thinking about schools in general: “An outcomes-based education has almost entirely gone out the window at this point – nobody seems to care...”. Here a possibility emerges for Adrian that may not have been obvious or possible prior, noting that “teachers are thinking about their role as somebody who does critically engage with what is happening in the world” and that this mindset seems “widespread across the school”. Where the theoretical

frame of this paper noted that “to some extent, any competing versions of the teacher have been erased” (Maguire 2010, p. 60), Adrian’s words highlight an emergent teacher subject that competes with the risk-managing image, one that, drawing from Biesta’s (2017b) work on educational purposes, has “(re)connected with the emancipatory ambitions of education” (p. 3). Adrian and his colleagues’ perceived loss of certainty in their role (“We have no idea what we’re doing... “Front line”... “The government has no idea what they're doing”) and subsequent move to a new image are neither emotionless nor politically neutral.

Critical engagement with the political and ideological dimensions of education always involves risk (Farahmandpur 2009) and emotion (Youdell 2011). Adrian’s words suggest emotion pushed him and his colleagues toward a more critical approach during this time. Political commitments, in this case to apparent feelings of representation and a need for safety, suggest an emotional investment in the critical work they are doing. Indeed, as Adrian reflects (“schools have become this community beacon...”) on how the school takes on a renewed purpose as a community hub, where outcomes matter less (if at all), and embracing being otherwise to the risk-managing teacher becomes necessarily risky.

### ***To finish***

Victorian schools sit within political rationality that ties them to systems of governance at a distance, or *remote* control (Connell 2013). Command and control techniques are largely replaced by instruments, procedures, tactics, technologies, and discourses that shape the conduct of schools and the teachers within them. Schools are seemingly free to decide on the direction through a School Strategic Plan system, yet, as Connell (2013) notes, systems such as these are woven into school funding mechanisms, measured through

standardized testing, certified via school review, and act as a frame for audit and surveillance mechanisms for both the school and teachers (such as the annual Professional Development Plan for teachers that are tied to wage increases). Such an assemblage of techniques leaves little room for deliberation about the purpose of education beyond the implementation of evidence-based practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented event for schools and society. As such, we recognize that neoliberalism as a form of governmentality is not monolithic and inevitably changes when a pandemic enters the interplay of power relations (Foucault 2007, p. 297). The apparent stability of arts and techniques of governance before COVID-19 are drawn into a new focus, a field of causality, one that sees new approaches to governance emerge and others fade. Foucault wrote of arts and techniques of government during a plague as “the political dream of an exhaustive, unobstructed power that is completely transparent to its object and exercised in full” (Foucault 2003, p. 47). We do not claim a shift in government that is this extreme, but this paper has sought to show that practices of government at a distance have not retained the same importance as they held prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, government praxis has taken on a new form that sees schools repositioned through overt policy expectations that open the school and teacher up to risk.

Adrian’s words and our redacted policy poetry offer parallel and asymmetrical articulation of this shifting positioning of schools and teachers. When presented in tandem, the two modes of poetry communicate tensions between government policy and policy translation and enactment. We take obvious liberties in our interpretation of Department communications, recontextualizing the documents through visual parody. We aim however to challenge these communications through the creation of unexpected ways of reading. Alone the redacted poetry tells a story of how the school *must* function during the COVID-19 crisis. The

school must continue, as usual, providing a *normal* experience for students adopting the process of *social distancing where practical*, a contradiction of advice and direction. Yet where there is no punishment connected to these directives, there is an implied binary division between behaviors permitted and those prohibited (Foucault 2007, p. 5). Prior to COVID-19, directives about physical action were scarcely present. Instead, they were tied to evidence-based practices such as *Collaborative Learning*, and the Learning Specialist as a knowledgeable other who would assist teachers in building capacity in classrooms designed around this expertise (Sharratt 2018; Department of Education and Training Victoria 2020c). What is illustrated here is a shift in governance style, emerging out of COVID-19 as a causal addition to the assemblage that is Victorian schools are visible. Command and control have taken precedence over governing at a distance.

The key contribution of this article lies in the use of participant-voiced poetry alongside redacted policy poetry to highlight teacher response to shifts in governance, and by extension risk-management discourse, during the COVID-19 crisis. The inclusion of Adrian's words translating these directives offers tensions not apparent in the redacted poetry. For example, Adrian's words articulate resistance to a perceived directive to embrace physical risk. Theme 1 told of Adrian and his colleagues' sense that they were a disposable population. His words when juxtaposed against the redacted poetry magnifies this feeling. The directive that "schools will continue" against Adrian's analogy "while the Titanic sunk" illustrates the degree to which the health and wellbeing of Adrian and his colleagues were at stake. Combining the two modes of poetry allows contradictions in policy and policy translation to emerge through physical attempts at legitimation (Butler, 2015).

Before COVID-19 teachers were governed at a distance, where the teacher subject was configured as autonomous, choosing and free to act (Rose 1998). Now, Adrian expresses a new feeling of voicelessness (Theme 2) in response to command and control techniques. Department communication calls for best practice remote curriculum delivery, but Adrian articulates a new period of uncertainty for himself, which emerges out of a feeling of responsibility for the direction of the school with little guidance or resourcing. Drawing from Brown (2015) to frame this feeling, Adrian articulates the effect of devolved responsibility for school and society's continuation, where a large-scale problem is seemingly handed onto the school that is unable to cope due to lack of resources. The school and teacher are compelled to become the decision-making unit – both pedagogically and physically – while guessing about how this autonomy might be exercised. Beyond this, there is a moral burden for the school and teacher to design and implement the path forward. This reconfiguration of the school and teacher as responsible for the continuation of the school is inherently risky, and a significant shift, through command, away from the risk-managing subjectivity of pre-pandemic governance.

A further shift emerges out of this reconfiguration of risk. Adrian articulates a shift away from a means-end education toward the school as a community hub. Outcomes were less important than being a beacon for the community and engaging with students as in the world. Here we note the importance of paralleling the two forms of poems. Adrian's words forge a link between policy and experience that shows them in striking contrast with each other. His anecdotes communicate an emotional response to a risk-laden situation that results in observable shifts imposed on and by the school. The contrasting relationship between Adrian and policy poetry suggests the possibility for release from repeated behaviors when dominant rationality is disrupted. With this in mind, we ask what images of the teacher might be sustained in a post-

COVID-19 rationality? Further, what new roles forced upon the school will remain their responsibility as we emerge into the *new work order*?

This paper aimed to explore the impact on teachers and schools of the approach adopted by the Victorian government during the initial escalation of the COVID-19 crisis. Through two forms of research poetry, we presented artifacts that offered varying but converging accounts of the event to explore the impact of the rapidly changing shift in governmental practices. This paper shows that the apparent stability of dominant rationalities can be drawn into new fields of causality and that the changes in governance that emerge through this rearrangement can also give rise to subtle and overt reactions from teachers that reveal new possibilities of what the teacher and school might be. The temporality or permanence of this shift remains to be seen and will be something we, together with you, will watch closely over months and years to come.



## Example redaction

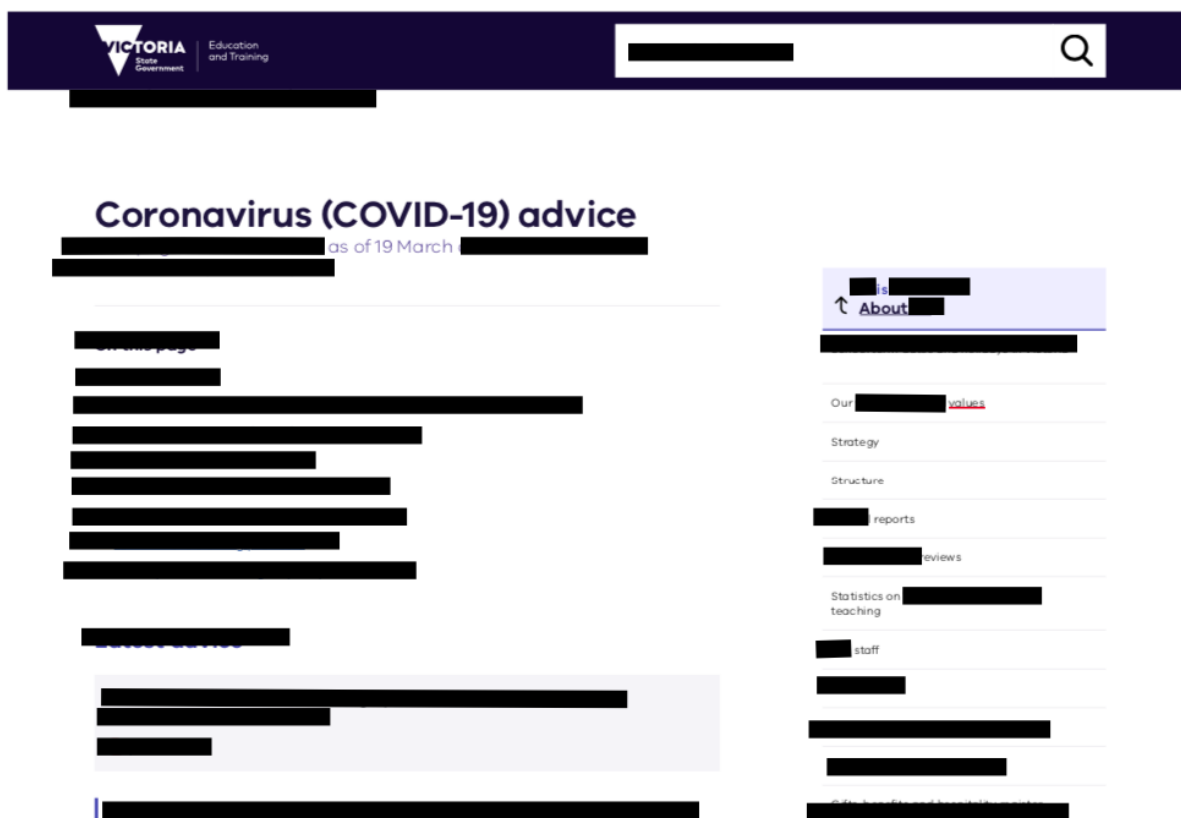


Figure 7. ‘is about’. Is an example of the original redacted poetry created from the advice of The Department of Education and Training Victoria (2020b). The full collection can be found at URL to be supplied

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> This paper was originally composed in the lead up to Victoria’s first round of school closures
- <sup>ii</sup> This time is defined as being the period between 16 March 2020 when Victoria declared a state of emergency and introduced restrictions until Tuesday 24 March 2020 when school holidays started early. During this time, teachers were forced to continue a business as usual approach despite rapidly escalating cases of COVID-19 in Victoria. An increase from 71-411 cases over a six day period.
- <sup>iii</sup> Teachers are understood as working across a range of contexts (including early childhood, primary, secondary and vocational settings) but for the purposes of this paper we focus specifically on the experience of teachers in a Victorian government primary school setting.
- <sup>iv</sup> To support the discussions of neoliberalism and governmentality, literature is used from both Australia and other like contexts, specifically the United Kingdom. The overseas contexts are seen as relevant due to the similarities between contexts such as government structure and level of development, and more specifically, an observable shift towards of responsabilization from the government to the private sector, schools, teachers and individuals.

<sup>v</sup> We take pedagogy in this context to refer to the encompassing practice of teachers which extends beyond instruction.

<sup>vi</sup> This review process supports schools in developing “a self-sustaining cycle of continuous improvement, where schools are supported to improve student outcomes” through the development of a 5-year School Strategic Plan (SSP) as well as an Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) for each of the 5 years. These plans are developed in collaboration with a community elected School Council and are ratified yearly by the elected group. Teachers are expected to complete their own Professional Development Plan (PDP) that explicitly reflects the SSP and AIP. Teachers are expected to engage in regular peer observation and self-reflection (with four professional practice days provided each year to do so) against their PDP, as well as present evidence of progress each year to ensure movement up the pay scale.

<sup>vii</sup> This study has received Deakin University ethics approval (reference number: 2019-104). The conversation also took place prior to the temporary embargo on research in schools.

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