

**How do School Educators Experience High-Stakes Testing? A Case Study of the
Australian New South Wales Higher School Certificate in Two Independent Schools.**

Submitted by

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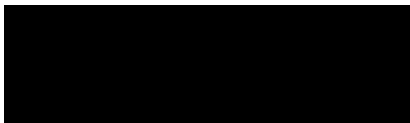
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Abstract

In recent decades, neoliberal principles of managerialism and performativity have become identifiable features of education, especially in Anglophone countries. The rise of neoliberal-informed practices in education has been based on the belief that students perform better academically when they are exposed to accountability, competition and scrutiny. One manifestation of this approach to education has been the increasing prevalence of high-stakes testing. Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the effects of high-stakes testing on students, curricula, and education outcomes. However, most of this research has been done in the United States. In addition, most researchers to date have focused on the effects of high-stakes testing on students who are in their junior and middle years of schooling.

In this study, the researcher examined the Australian experience of high-stakes testing, with a particular focus on the New South Wales Higher (NSW) School Certificate (HSC), which students in that state sit in their final year of schooling. In the process, the researcher has contributed to filling a gap in the existing literature on high-stakes testing. Specifically, the researcher examined how the Higher School Certificate (HSC) results in a programmatic approach to learning in secondary schools in New South Wales. In addition, the researcher examined how educators at schools in New South Wales (NSW) experience this approach to learning.

The theoretical framework used in this study was hermeneutic phenomenology, which the researcher deemed the best way to access the experiences of school educators. Through a case study conducted in two school settings, the researcher probed the experiences of school educators in secondary schools in NSW. In the process, the researcher identified how these experiences affected educators' understanding of the purpose, principles and practices associated with the Higher School Certificate (HSC) as a form of high-stakes testing.

Background knowledge of the high-stakes nature of the HSC was gathered through an analysis of relevant documents, preliminary interviews with senior representatives of the three education sectors in NSW (i.e., state, Catholic and independent schools), and an indicative survey conducted with staff at both school sites. Data were generated from focus group interviews with school leaders and middle managers, along with semi-structured interviews with teachers. Data were analysed through a double hermeneutic process in order to interpret participant experiences of the HSC as an example of high-stakes testing.

Based on findings from this research, it appears that the high-stakes nature of the HSC has profound effects on teaching and learning in secondary schools in NSW. Specifically, the HSC affects what teachers in these schools do, how they do it, and their rationale for their approach to teaching. Many teachers in secondary schools in NSW seek to counter the effects of the HSC, adopting a more holistic approach to student learning. Even so, high-stakes testing in NSW secondary schools has resulted in a distorted curriculum, whereby the HSC has become the defining feature of senior secondary schooling in NSW.

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1.0 The Nature and Context of this Study

Biesta (2010, p. vii) has argued that, within the contemporary landscape of education in English-speaking countries, “the language that has become so dominant in recent times has actually made it more difficult to ask questions about what good education would look like”. In recent decades, education outcomes and quality have been defined increasingly in terms of student scores on international, national and state-based tests (Abrams & Madaus, 2003). Indeed, standardised tests have become the metric used to judge the effectiveness of school systems, schools and teachers. Good education has been conceived along economic lines, in terms of inputs and outputs, key performance indicators, goal setting and strategic planning (Lingard & Lewis 2016; Thompson et al., 2016; Thompson & Cook, 2014). Many advocates of neoliberal accountability support the use of these tests, arguing that competition between schools to improve student performance in standardised testing will result in better academic achievement overall (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Plank & Condliffe, 2013).

The publishing of test scores and league tables has become a widespread practice in many countries. This approach is intended to facilitate or inevitably leads to comparison between schools, with education policymakers arguing for greater transparency regarding student (and school) academic achievement (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011; Thrupp, 2013). In this thesis, it is argued that high-stakes testing has a significant impact on many aspects of education, resulting in curricula, pedagogical approaches and school cultures in which the defining feature is the high-stakes test in question. Policymakers, educators, parents and other stakeholders have prioritised high-stakes testing in the educational landscape. In this study, the researcher sought to understand how educator experiences of high-stakes testing in schools affect how educators understand the rationale for their approach to teaching. In addition, the researcher sought to understand how educators derive pedagogical principles from their

experiences of high-stakes testing, and how the effects of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning are revealed in their practice.

In this thesis, high-stakes tests are defined as tests with publicly-reported results that allow comparisons to be made between schools, affect student access to future education and employment opportunities, are accompanied by a range of procedures and accountabilities, and affect where parents and guardians choose to send their children to school, along with decision making by leaders of school systems. School and/or student results in such tests are available to the public, with league tables created to allow comparison between schools. In addition, policymakers and parents use student achievement in these tests as an indicator of school and teacher effectiveness. In sum, tests of the kind discussed in this thesis are high-stakes for students, teachers, schools and school systems. In Australia, national standardised testing was introduced in 2008 through the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy, whereby Australian students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed in literacy and numeracy using the same instrument.

In response to the introduction of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy, Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority representatives said, “by locating all students on a single national scale, which maps the skills and understandings assessed, each scale provides significantly more information about the literacy and numeracy achievement of students than was previously available” (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2008). The stakes involved in National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing were raised in 2010, when the Australian Government introduced the *MySchool* website. On *MySchool*, information is available regarding school attendance rates, student performance in NAPLAN, school financial data, and the number of teachers in each school. Policymakers have argued that making this data public results in greater transparency for parents and other education stakeholders, allowing meaningful comparisons to be made

between schools (ACARA, 2010). This argument—i.e., that accountability results in school improvement—aligns with tenets of neoliberalism. Indeed, there is evidence that accountability measures correlate with better student academic outcomes and school performance (Carnoy and Loeb, 2002). However, the question is whether high-stakes testing is an effective accountability measure to this end.

Increasingly, an economic model of school education has been adopted in English-speaking countries (Williams and Engel, 2012). This model is one based on measurable inputs and outputs, with school funding models and returns on investment becoming overriding features of education. At the same time, education in English-speaking countries has become corporatised, with key performance indicators, goal setting, strategic planning, and the growing influence of human resources units featuring prominently in stakeholder discussions about education and learning (Lingard & Lewis 2016; Thompson et al., 2016; Thompson & Cook, 2014). In this setting, NAPLAN has become a high-stakes test as a result of the publication of NAPLAN data and other data available at *MySchool*. Politicians and journalists present performance in NAPLAN as becoming an important barometer of school performance and a measure of the effectiveness of learning by Australian students (Hennerby, 2015; James, 2015; Smith, 2015), raising the stakes associated with the test further. Researchers have characterised high-stakes testing as standardised testing that results in sanctions for schools whose students perform poorly, positive publicity and other dividends for schools whose students perform well, and is related to student progress (Concepts, 2013). These are identifiable features of NAPLAN (Lingard and Rawolle, 2011; Thompson et al., 2016). They are also identifiable features of the New South Wales Higher School Certificate, in which students follow a prescribed syllabus, sit an exit examination, and receive an end-of-school credential. NAPLAN is intended to function as a point-in-time measure of students' literacy and numeracy. In contrast, the Higher School Certificate is a teaching and learning regime in which a student's

transition from schooling is the end result. In this respect the stakes associated with the Higher School Certificate (HSC) are higher than those associated with NAPLAN.

The researcher of the current work has worked for more than 32 years as a leader in Kindergarten to Year 12, coeducational and single-sex schools in the Sydney metropolitan area, and has held roles involving administrative and policy leadership for schools across New South Wales. In the process, the researcher has developed an understanding of the context and dynamics of education in New South Wales. In this time, the researcher has experienced changes including the implementation of significant reforms in the education sector, the introduction of novel pedagogical practices, redesign of learning spaces, and increased use of data. In addition, the researcher has witnessed a significant increase in the stakes associated with student learning. Over this time, the researcher has observed the ascendance of a culture of accountability in Australia, informed by neoliberal principles, as a result of NAPLAN. In turn, this development has resulted in increased scrutiny on school performance in the HSC. Through an investigation of the experiences of school leaders, school middle managers and teachers (referred to throughout the study as “school educators”), this researcher sought to explore these observations further. In the process, the researcher has provided insight into the influence on the HSC of the culture of accountability in education. Through investigating school educator experiences of the high-stakes HSC, this researcher has contributed to the existing literature regarding the influence of high-stakes testing in an Australian context in the final years of schooling. The study demonstrates how high-stakes testing in the senior years of schooling influences what school educators do, how they see their role, and how it might influence their understanding of the purpose of school education.

1.1 Context of the Study

The study was situated in two independent secondary schools in the metropolitan area of Sydney. Both schools had enrolments of more than 1,000 students at the time of writing.

Independent schools were selected for the study. This decision was made because in Australia, independent schools are self-governing and do not have to implement decisions that are made at a school system level, unlike schools that operate within the state or Catholic educational sectors. Both schools were situated in locations with a socio-educational status above the national average. At the time of writing, both schools had stable enrolments, including waiting lists for prospective students. Both schools had strong reputations within their local communities. The HSC was taught at both schools, giving educators at both schools direct experience of the HSC and how it functions within the broader context of education in Australia. Similarly, educators at both schools possess knowledge and experience of the increased focus on accountability in Australian education, along with comparisons between schools that have become the reason for (and an outcome of) the growing prominence of high-stakes testing.

1.2 The Neoliberal Agenda

For more than two decades, neoliberalism has been a dominating influence in education policy in English-speaking countries (Polesel et al., 2013). In this time, market principles and metrics have been applied to education. As a consequence education, has become highly politicised, both in Australia and worldwide (Hardy, 2008; Lingard & Rawolle, 2011). In the process, policymakers and other stakeholders have emphasised the need to improve school performance through comparison and competition (Harris, 2012; Mourshed et al., 2010). Underlying the drive for educational improvement is the view that teacher and student performance can be improved through accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing (Dulude et al., 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2017). In education, one approach associated with neoliberalism is the view that centralisation and standardisation of school curricula is a way to raise student performance (Au, 2013; Gerard & Farrell, 2013).

The prominence of neoliberalism in education is evident in the attention given to accountabilities based on student performance in high-stakes testing at the system and school levels (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2012; Biesta, 2010; Blackmore, 2010). Performativity may facilitate standardisation, insofar as it develops as school leaders and teachers direct their activity in response to the need to meet key performance indicators (KPIs), targets, and evaluation processes, facilitating judgements of school and teacher performance. The neoliberal focus on performativity has been accompanied by a rise in managerialism, in which corporate practices more closely associated with markets are applied to education. In response to managerialism, teachers have been directed to focus on outputs of student achievement rather than inputs of learning (Biesta, 2004; Stevenson & Wood, 2013). In turn, this pedagogical approach may result in education stakeholders focusing on goals associated with achievement rather than learning. In the process, students are prepared for tests rather than guided to pursue larger learning goals in the curriculum (Suppovitz, 2009). One result of the predominance of performativity and managerialism in education has been a rise in the prevalence of high-stakes testing, as well as the importance of high-stakes testing across the education landscape. As an example, Croft et al. (2016) conducted a case study of the relationship between high-stakes testing and teacher evaluation in Georgia in the United States. By exploring the political climate, the establishment of high-stakes testing, and the accompanying mesoscale evaluation of performance in Georgia, the authors found that market forces had become the measure of school and teacher effectiveness. They concluded that these aspects of a neoliberal approach to education had undermined confidence in teachers and schools, eroding the quality of education.

1.2.1 The rise of high-stakes testing.

A direct consequence of neoliberalism in education has been the rise to prominence and authority of high-stakes testing in English speaking countries. High-stakes testing is a

prominent feature of education systems in the United Kingdom, United States, South Africa and Australia (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Howie, 2012; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Reay & William, 1999). The authority given to high-stakes testing in these Anglophone countries is less prevalent in the education systems of non-English speaking countries (Williams & Engel, 2012). The effects of neoliberalism are clear in the adoption of NAPLAN in Australia and the way in which it is used to drive education narratives, with high-stakes testing becoming the focus of system, school and teacher activity (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011). High-stakes testing has come to permeate the global education landscape (Stevenson & Wood, 2013), predominating education discourse in Australia (Thompson et al., 2016). The role of high-stakes testing in Australian education raises questions as to how high-stakes testing is experienced at school and classroom levels, and what this means for the nature of education in Australia. In light of these questions, there is a need to consider whether school leaders and teachers change their activities as a result of high-stakes testing, and whether high-stakes testing affects teaching and learning priorities in schools. In this study, the researcher examined how school leaders and teachers experience and respond to high-stakes testing in their thinking and practice. In the process, the researcher aimed to provide insight into how the prevailing culture of high-stakes testing influences educator experiences of teaching and learning.

1.3 Defining the Research Problem

The research problem that was examined in this study was identified from the rise of high-stakes testing over the past two decades. In part, this development was a result of neoliberalism, which has become ubiquitous in education discourse and practice in Anglophone countries (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Stevenson & Wood, 2013). High-stakes testing has been the manifestation of the move towards accountability in education, which stakeholders began to promote in the 1970s (Richburg, 1971). Underlying neoliberal principles of social efficiency, based on ideas from scientific management, have

come to direct and dominate education policy (Kim, 2018). This approach to education has been adopted based on the belief that students will perform better academically if the inputs and outputs of successful education systems are replicated universally (Mourshed et al., 2010). However, even as high-stakes testing has featured prominently in education discourse, a parallel discourse has developed, with stakeholders emphasising pedagogical practice and quality teaching and learning, based on principles inconsistent with an inputs/outputs approach to education (Duignan, 2012).

There is an irreconcilable difference between productivity-focused approaches to education, through which inputs and outputs become the measure of educational success (Biesta, 2004), and the view that educational success is best measured by good learning and positive outcomes for students (Resnick & Schantz, 2007). School leaders and teachers must navigate these contrasting positions on a day-to-day basis as they undertake the business of teaching. In this setting, tension is evident regarding the fundamental purpose of learning and education. The accountabilities that have become a feature of contemporary education have resulted in a situation in which learning has become decontextualised (Hardy & Boyle, 2011), with a greater focus on predetermined measurable outcomes, rather than student learning outcomes (Supovitz, 2009). As a result, school leaders and teachers may feel torn between performing against the external accountabilities and measures that accompany high-stakes testing and what they see as their professional responsibilities to ensure that learning meets the needs of students and provides positive outcomes for students. In examining school leader and teacher experiences of high-stakes testing, it may be possible to understand whether the demands of accountabilities can be reconciled with the aim of providing good learning and if so, how this could be done.

1.4 The Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this research was for the researcher to understand school educator experiences of high-stakes testing, as well as the dynamics of these experiences and their impact in school settings. Through this research, an attempt was made to understand how school educators interpreted their experience of the HSC and how they made meaning of this experience. In this way, the researcher sought to understand if and how school educators reconcile two factors: On the one hand, the push for accountability that accompanies high-stakes testing, and on the other, the capacity to provide good teaching and learning that provides quality outcomes for students. At the outset of this research, it was intended that the researcher would investigate how school educators experienced high-stakes testing at their school. This required the researcher to consider how the high-stakes HSC was experienced by school educators, understood, and interpreted through their reports of daily practice. In the context of this study, the term “mediation” is used to denote explicit and implicit ways in which understanding of the high-stakes HSC is communicated. Mediation regarding the HSC is evident vertically, in decisions, policies and cultural practices adopted in schools, as well as horizontally, through the ways peers, school leaders, and the wider community influence understandings of the HSC through their interactions with each other. Throughout this study, the researcher focused on how participants understood and interpreted their experience of the HSC in terms of what they saw as the reason for their practice, principles with which they guided their activity, and how they modified their practice as a result of their experience of the high-stakes HSC.

1.5 Research Questions

The researcher sought to answer the following primary question in this study:

Research Question 1: How do their experiences of the requirements, expectations and culture of the NSW Higher School Certificate influence school educators in their approach to teaching and learning and how they understand their role as educators?

Through Research Question 1, the researcher sought to identify how three significant groups relevant to the topic of this study experienced high-stakes testing—namely, school leaders, middle managers, and teachers. Considering the dynamic interrelationships that occur between school educators, the first subsidiary research question was:

Research Question 1a: How is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators?

Through Research Question 1a, the researcher considered dynamics of power, relationships and roles in the secondary education sector in NSW. In the process, the researcher recognised that members of different groups with responsibility for teaching and learning within the two schools in this study (i.e., school leaders, middle managers or teachers) experienced the HSC differently. Through Research Question 1a, the researcher gained insight into how school educators interpret vertical and horizontal mediation of the HSC through decision making, policy making, culture and interactions, informing their understanding of the HSC. In addition, the researcher explored how aspects of the high-stakes HSC are experienced by school educators through the expectations of government, school systems, the media and the wider community. In sum, through Research Question 1a, the researcher explored how experiences of the HSC are interpreted by school educators based on their own experience and understanding of the purpose, principles, and practice of the HSC. This relationship is depicted in Figure 1.1.

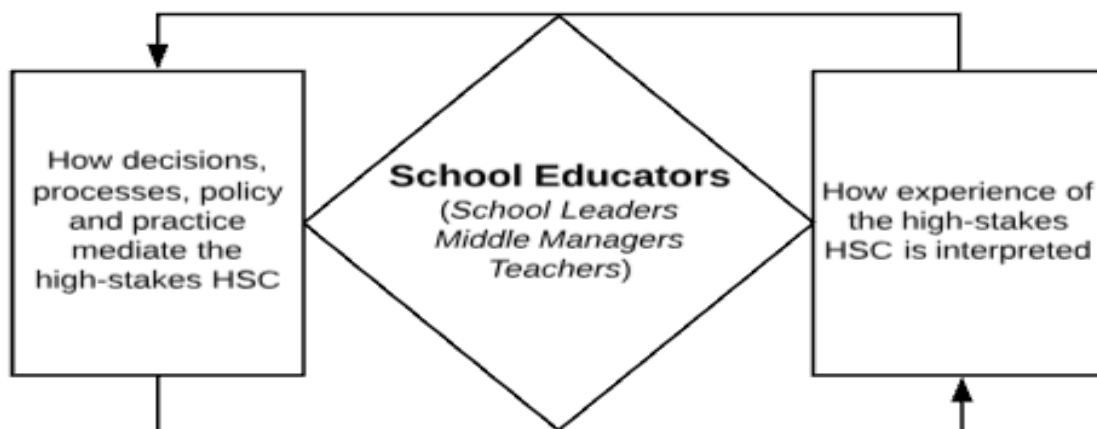


Figure 1.1. The interplay between mediation and interpretation by school educators in schools.

School educators who provided data for this study both mediate the experience of the high-stakes HSC and interpret the experience. In schools, educators make decisions and enact elements of the HSC based on the meanings they have created for the HSC, which they have developed via their experiences with the HSC. In turn, the decisions made in each school (and the way in which each school enact the HSC) affect how school educators experience the HSC and as a result how school educators make meaning of the HSC within their school context. To understand how school educators experience the HSC, it is important to acknowledge the dynamic interplay between how the HSC is experienced and how the HSC is interpreted.

The researcher devised Research Question 1b while reviewing the existing literature regarding the school accountability movement, noting the growing emphasis on performance in high-stakes tests as a measure of school and teacher effectiveness. Through this question, the researcher sought to fill a gap in the literature on this topic—specifically, by exploring how school educator experiences of high-stakes testing affect approaches to teaching and learning throughout schools. In order to explore whether and how the high-stakes HSC affects school educators, the second subsidiary question devised was:

Research Question 1b: In what ways do results in the high-stakes HSC examination influence approaches to teaching and learning at school and classroom levels?

In considering this subsidiary question, the researcher explored in more detail themes that were identified through the literature review—i.e., performativity and managerialism associated with high-stakes testing. In exploring this question, the researcher also considered how school leaders, middle managers and teachers experience performance in the high-stakes HSC in the context of their school. In the process, the researcher developed an understanding of how dynamics within and outside of schools affect performance in high-stakes testing. The effects of performance in the high-stakes HSC in this respect are illustrated in Figure 1.2.

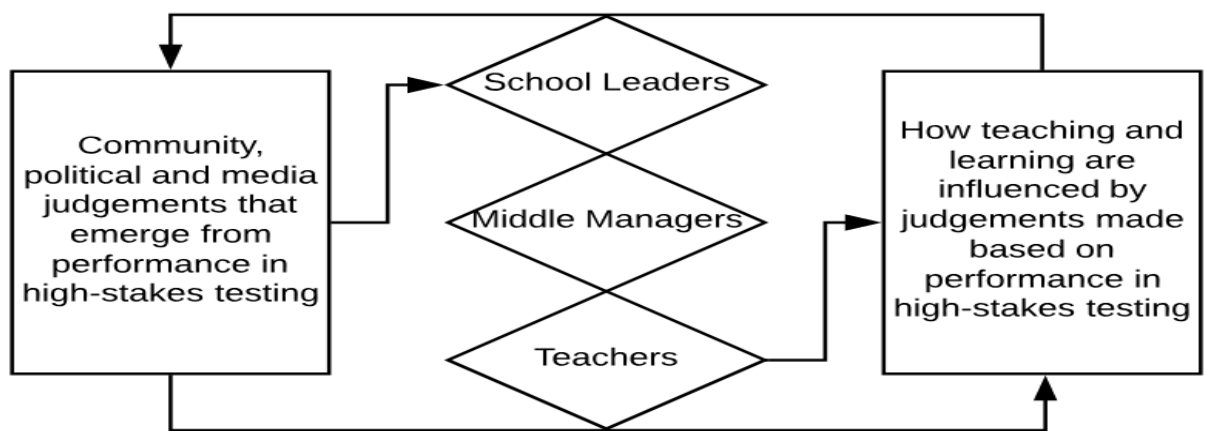


Figure 1.2. The dynamic way in which judgments made about student and school performance in the high-stakes HSC affect teaching and learning.

In Figure 1.2, an illustration is shown of how external expectations generated in the community, by politicians and through the media are filtered to school educators, affecting their understandings of and approaches to teaching and learning. These external expectations feed into the decisions, policies and practice that are applied by leaders and middle managers at each school, impacting what teachers do. As a consequence, expectations affect the extent to which school educators direct teaching and learning towards performance. In the process, school educators may validate the expectation that performance is integral to the purpose and nature of teaching and learning. Through the third subsidiary question in this research, the researcher sought to explore the nature of these effects in more detail—in particular, in the two

schools included in this study. With the researcher's central focus in this study on school educator experiences of the high-stakes HSC, the effects of this experience on the being of school educators was an important area for investigation. Through the third subsidiary question, the researcher sought to explore the relationship between the high-stakes HSC and being:

Research Question 1c: In what ways do expectations regarding the HSC influence school leaders and teachers' practice?

At the heart of this subsidiary question was an attempt to understand how educators in the two schools in this study understood their role through the way in which they made sense of their experience with the HSC. By understanding how the high-stakes HSC affects how school educators understand their role, the researcher has built on previous research into high-stakes testing. In this question, specific attention is given to how school educators understand who they are and what they are required to do within their role. In Figure 1.3, the relationship between the high-stakes HSC and its influence on how educators understand their role is illustrated.

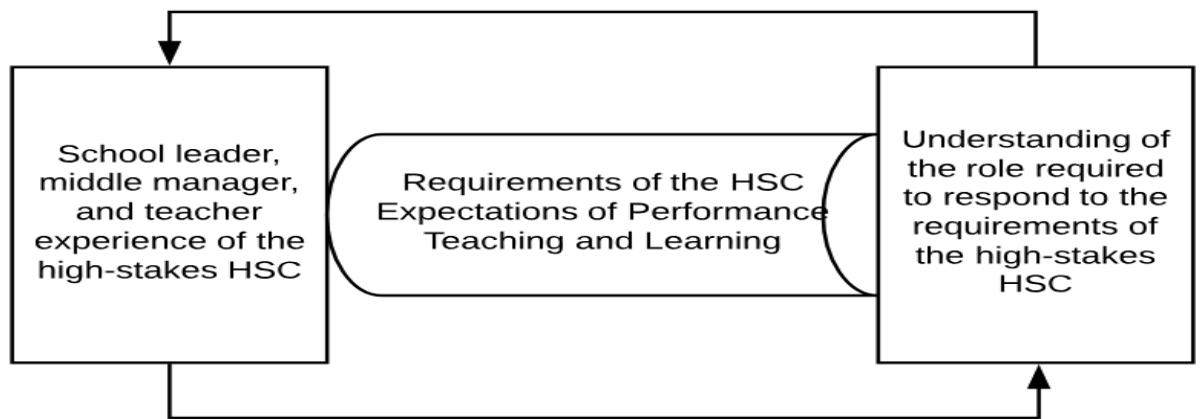


Figure 1.3. The interplay between how school leaders, middle managers and teachers experience the high-stakes HSC and understand their roles.

1.6 Significance and Limitations of this Research

While testing is not new, the stakes associated with student and school performance in testing have risen in recent decades (Amrein & Berliner, 2002), with high-stakes testing becoming a ubiquitous feature of education in Anglophone countries (Stevenson & Wood, 2013). Researchers have found that high-stakes testing results in “teaching to the test”, rather than teaching with a view to providing students with depth and breadth in learning (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Caldwell, 2005; Duignan, 2004; Hargreaves, 2003). In addition, researchers have argued that high-stakes testing results in narrow curricula, distorted pedagogical practices, and is detrimental to student and teacher wellbeing (Berliner, 2011; Hopfenbeck, 2017b; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Walker, 2014).

The effects of high-stakes testing on pedagogy and curricula have been researched extensively. However, less is known about how educators experience high-stakes testing, and what these experiences mean for their day-to-day practice in their school. In this study, the researcher focused on how school educators interpret their experience of the HSC. Through this approach, the researcher contributed to knowledge regarding the impact of high-stakes testing in schools at the micro-level, as well as effects on day-to-day activities in schools. This research is significant as the study was conducted at the same time as a review into the school

curriculum in NSW, with the role of the HSC specifically identified within the Terms of Reference for the review (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2018). The review has been undertaken in response to stakeholder concerns regarding crowding in the school curriculum in NSW, and including the impact of the HSC on curriculum delivery in NSW. In light of this timing, findings of this study are relevant to the findings of the review, including in terms of future directions for the HSC and standardised testing in NSW.

Through this study, the researcher sought to contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding the effects of high-stakes testing in the senior years of schooling in Australia. As will be identified in the literature review in Chapter 2, researchers in the United States have examined the impact of high-stakes testing on the middle years of schooling. Most of these researchers have focused on the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Buck et al., 2010; Hout & Elliot, 2011; Nichols et al., 2012; Supovitz, 2015). In Australia, researchers have considered the impact of high-stakes testing, with most authors focusing on the effects of NAPLAN in years 3, 5, 7 or 9 (Cormack & Comber, 2013; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Lewis & Hardy, 2015; Thompson et al., 2016). In NSW, researchers have examined how school principals respond to accountabilities associated with NAPLAN and the HSC (Norris, 2017). Other researchers have focused on stress associated with the HSC (Smith & Sinclair, 1998), as well as how school culture (Mok & Flynn, 1998) or quality of teaching (Ayres et al., 1999, 2000, 2004) affect student achievement in the HSC.

However, there is a gap in the existing literature in terms of how school educators in NSW experience features associated with the high-stakes HSC, and what these experiences mean for educators in their day-to-day practice in schools. Through this study, the researcher has contributed to addressing this gap in the literature, examining how experiences of the high-stakes HSC in the final years of schooling affect the approaches, attitudes and practices enacted by school educators. For this reason, the scope of this study is limited to considering the

interplay between the experience of the HSC among school leaders, middle managers, and teachers, and how this interplay functions in schools. The experiences of other school stakeholders such as parents and students were outside the scope of this study. It is recognised that the scope of this study is limited insofar as the case study was conducted in two independent schools. In NSW, independent schools are self-governing (i.e., they have no association with state or Catholic educational systems) and represent about 11% of schools in NSW. For this reason, the researcher did not collect data on policies and practices regarding the HSC in the state or Catholic education sectors in NSW. The researcher adopted the methodology that was selected for this study with a view to understanding the experience of participants. As such, claims cannot be drawn from this research regarding the experiences of educators in other schools.

1.7 Overview of this Study

The context and purpose of this study have been described above, as well as the research questions that were examined through this study. In addition, the research problem that was the researcher's focus in this study was identified, along with the significance of this research within the existing literature. In Chapter 2, a review of the existing literature on high-stakes testing is provided. The literature review is structured around the rise to prominence of high-stakes testing and the main features of high-stakes testing. It is also framed to consider the relationship between high-stakes testing and understandings of what achievement means in teaching and learning. Research on the effects of high-stakes testing on student and teacher wellbeing is reviewed, and analysis provided of how performativity and managerialism underpin high-stakes testing. In Chapter 3, the character and nature of the HSC and its development over time are outlined in order to provide background information regarding the intended purpose of the HSC. Additional understanding of the HSC is provided in this chapter in the form of perspectives on the HSC from leaders from each of the three education sectors

in NSW. Through these perspectives, an understanding of the purpose, principles and practice of the HSC is developed. In Chapter 4, the researcher's use of hermeneutic phenomenology as a framework to access the experience of participants is outlined. In addition, the researcher's use in this study of social domains of situated experience, situated activity, social setting and contextual resources to help interpret participant experiences of the high-stakes HSC is explained.

In Chapter 5, the qualitative nature of the study and the researcher's rationale for selecting a case study methodology are explained. Study participants are described, along with the approach used to interpret data generated in the study. In Chapter 6, data generated from a whole-school indicative survey and from focus groups conducted with school leaders and middle managers are described. In addition, the researcher's choice of social domain theory as a lens to interpret data gathered is explained. In Chapter 7, data generated from semi-structured interviews with teachers are analysed, including themes identified by the researcher in participants' self-reported experiences of the high-stakes HSC. These themes were similar to many themes identified in the literature review for this research. However, the main themes in this study were more relevant to how teachers in particular experience the high-stakes HSC, and what these experiences meant for study participants. In Chapter 8, findings are synthesised and conclusions from the study are presented—specifically, regarding participant experiences of the HSC and what those experiences mean for participants, how these experiences are affected by prevailing cultures in secondary education in NSW, and the implications of these experiences for school educators.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank provides a ranking of students' academic achievement. This ranking is the basis for students' eligibility to attend university, and determines which tertiary courses

	students are eligible to access. For students in NSW, Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks are generated based on performance in the HSC.
Contextual resources	Contextual resources refer to the nature of authority, ethos, mores, and levels of social, educational, and cultural capital that exist in a particular context.
Hermeneutic phenomenology	In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, researchers focus on lived human experiences and how individuals develop and understand meaning through a back-and-forth process of interpretation to make sense of their being in the world.
Higher School Certificate (HSC)	The New South Wales (NSW) Higher School Certificate (HSC) is the highest educational award in schools in New South Wales. It is awarded to students who successfully complete years 11 and 12 in New South Wales. Successful completion of the HSC requires students to satisfactorily complete a prescribed course of study, a range of assessment activities and a final examination. Successful completion of the HSC leads to a credential that reports achievement in three documents, a testamur, a record of school achievement and a course report.
High-stakes testing	High-stakes testing denotes publicly-reported test results that allow comparisons between schools, have implications for future opportunities available to students, are accompanied by a range of procedures and accountabilities, affect school choice by parents and influence decisions made by leaders in school systems.

Managerialism	In the context of education, managerialism relates to marketisation of education via establishing standards that enable target setting and use of performance data to measure school and teacher effectiveness, seeking to drive school and teacher activity through applying corporate management practice and beliefs to education.
Mediate	In the context of this study, mediation denotes explicit and implicit transmission of understanding vertically (e.g., through decisions, policy, and culture) and the development of this understanding horizontally (e.g., through formal and informal interactions).
Performativity	Performativity denotes a focus among education policymakers and practitioners on data, statistics, testing, grades and targets at the expense of features of education that cannot be measured quantitatively, whereby productivity based on narrow definitions of learning drive the activities of schools and teachers.
School educators	School educators are school leaders, school middle managers and teachers.
Situated activity	Situated activities are the experiences a person encounters through their social life. Situated activities are structured through the physical and social context in which social activities and social practices are undertaken.
Situated experience	Situated experience refers to an individual's interpretation of experience within their context—that is, how the individual directly interprets their experiences within their context.
Social domains	Social domains frame an understanding of the individual's experience of social integration and how the interpretation is represented in

activities of social reproduction or production by the individual in question.

Social setting Social settings are the organisational shapes and forms in which individuals operate, which are accompanied by bureaucratic arrangements that prescribe roles, practices, positions, and relationships.

Syllabus dot points Syllabus dot points are the representation of the prescribed elements of the HSC syllabuses, determining what is taught and the sequence in which it is taught. Syllabus dot points form the basis for what can be tested in the HSC examination.

2.0 Literature Review

In this chapter, the existing literature relevant to the topic of this study is reviewed. In this study, the researcher considered the following question: How do school educator experiences of the requirements, expectations and culture of the NSW HSC influence educators in their approach to teaching, learning, and how they understand their role in schools? In addition, the researcher investigated the relationship between two factors—on the one hand, the lived experience of teachers in terms of high-stakes testing, and on the other, their state of being as teachers. In this literature review, the effects of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning are outlined. Consideration is given to how high-stakes testing is used as a measure of school and teacher effectiveness. Further, evidence is outlined regarding the negative impact of high-stakes testing on instructional practice, as well as teacher and student wellbeing. Finally, the consensus within the existing literature regarding the role of high-stakes testing in performativity, policy, and managerialism in education is discussed.

First, an overview of the relevant literature in general is provided, including different understandings of high-stakes testing and the rise in prominence of high-stakes testing in English-speaking countries in recent decades. Next, an overview is given of existing research regarding the advantages and disadvantages of high-stakes testing. Consideration is given to evidence regarding the effects of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning in four key areas: achievement, student learning, teaching, and wellbeing. Throughout the relevant literature, there is evidence that each of these four areas is intertwined in the relationship between high-stakes testing and performativity. Finally, consideration is given to evidence regarding the role of education policymaking in relation to high-stakes testing, as well as the rise of managerialism in education in conjunction with the rise of high-stakes testing.

2.1 Defining High-Takes Testing

Assessment in schools is used for diagnostic, formative or summative purposes (Masters, 2013). Testing has always played a predominant role in assessment. Educators tend to see the purpose of assessment as identifying student progress in meeting learning objectives, and to inform their decision making around the next steps that are required to improve student learning (Masters, 2011). Increasingly, assessing student learning and achievement has become high-stakes, distorting the way in which assessment has been used. High-stakes assessment has resulted in greater competition between schools through public reporting of test results, magnifying the implications of assessment for students and teachers. In the process, education policymakers and other stakeholders have come to focus on assessment in their decision making, and expectations around accountability for performance have risen (Ball, 2003; Lewis & Hardy, 2015; Ritt, 2016). High-stakes testing is narrowly focused as a summative assessment measure. Ball (2003, p. 215) has argued that high-stakes testing “does not simply change what people as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are”. In a qualitative study, Crocco and Costigan (2007) interviewed 200 teachers working in New York state. Participants had less than five years’ teaching experience. The authors found that high-stakes testing, by nature, is focused on areas of content and skills that require particular pedagogical practices:

Highly qualified new teachers chafe at the diminished control they have over their classrooms, which erodes one of the only arenas in which they experience opportunities for decision making in a field in which teachers have little control (Ingersoll, 2003). Those who face mandated curriculum and narrowed pedagogical options become most frustrated by their lack of control, especially when they work in schools with high degrees of failure. (Crocco & Costigan, 2007, p. 530).

In determining which forms of assessment are “high-stakes”, Amrein and Beliner (2002) have noted that one feature of high-stakes testing is the impact of testing in question on students’ future education and employment opportunities. Hahs-Vaughan and Scherff (2008) have identified additional features of high-stakes testing, including procedures and accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing. Lewis and Hardy (2015) have argued that results of high-stakes tests are used to make comparisons across schools and impact decisions by consumers in the education marketplace. In a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with eight educational leaders in Minnesota, Ritt (2016) demonstrated that high-stakes testing impacts decision making by education system officials, school leaders, teachers and students due to the consequences experienced by members of each of these groups that result from high-stakes testing.

In addition to formal accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing, Ball (2008) has noted that testing becomes “high-stakes” as a result of reputational issues associated with community perceptions of school and teacher effectiveness. These perceptions exist in the context of an increased focus on school accountability. As McNeil (2000) indicates, high-stakes testing occurs when results are reported publicly, with judgements being made about the effectiveness of schools and teachers based on school rankings. There are formal and informal aspects of high-stakes education activities, in terms of formal requirements and informal reputational issues and community expectations. Marchant (2004) has stated that high-stakes testing results in formal and informal consequences for school systems, schools, teachers and students. Thrupp (2013) commented that the high-stakes use of data “is almost comical – if it weren’t so serious – that data from such schools has been put into the public domain and made available for comparative purposes when there are such important [contextual] differences in what it actually represents” (p. 108). Further he identified that the stakes associated with testing rise when performance data is compared across schools and student performance is

benchmarked to standards. Gonzalez et al. (2017) have identified underpinning features of high-stakes testing as accountabilities associated with such testing, as well as the role that testing is intended to play in improving teacher and student performance. High-stakes testing has formal and informal effects on education policy and practice, shaping the nature of learning and student and teacher behaviour.

2.2 The Rising Prominence of High-Stakes Testing

Morgan (2016) has noted that neoliberal education policies in the United States, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the 2009 Race to the Top initiative, were developed in response to perceptions that declining scores in standardised tests were evidence of lower education standards in the United States. No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top were intended to raise teaching and learning standards through greater accountability. However, Morgan (2016) has contended that these policies resulted in unintended negative consequences—for example, gaming of the education system by teachers and schools, malpractice, and unfair treatment of teachers. The rise in prominence of high-stakes testing, the consequences of high-stakes testing, and the widespread implementation of high-stakes testing in a time of performativity and managerialism are striking features of the literature on high-stakes testing. Testing in some form has always been integral to teaching and learning. However, as Lewis and Hardy (2015) have noted, in recent decades, proponents of high-stakes testing have begun to conflate the educational purpose of testing with measures that evaluate education practices.

Based on the *Studying the Effectiveness of Teacher Education* project Kostogriz (2019) observed that the relatively recent policy focus in Australia on performance indicators for teachers has given rise to accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing. He argues that such indicators of performance have been given prominence in teacher education programs at the expense of a focus on the relational and ethical dimensions of teaching. Lingard and

Rawolle (2011) have argued that high-stakes testing became a focus in Australia with the establishment of NAPLAN in 2008, with this testing regime resulting in widespread national comparisons of student achievement. Consequently, greater attention has been given in Australia to measures of performance between sectors, schools and students. Klenowski (2011) has suggested that the prominence of high-stakes testing has resulted in a focus on “teaching to the test” (Au, 2011, p. 258). Since the introduction of the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority’s My School website in 2010, NAPLAN results have been reported publicly, including school-level comparisons of literacy and numeracy scores for students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Lewis & Hardy, 2015). My School does not provide comparisons of performance across the senior years of schooling. However, it has resulted in an increased focus on the publication of more detailed league tables regarding senior students’ performance in the NSW HSC.

Internationally, a focus on high-stakes testing has been associated closely with standardised testing. Dulude et al. (2017) have indicated that education stakeholders value standardised tests because of the impetus and credibility they are seen to confer to curriculum reform and accountability agendas. Gerrard and Farrell (2013) have noted that “standardisation” in this context goes beyond the test itself, denoting a centralisation and standardisation of teaching, especially regarding the nature of curricula. Au (2013) has identified the negative effects of this standardisation of the curricula on what and how educators teach. Amrein and Berliner (2002) have noted an increase in the use of high-stakes testing over time. They have argued that the rise in high-stakes testing has occurred in tandem with the corporatisation of education, whereby business models associated with incentives and penalties are presumed to improve student and teacher performance. Berliner (2011) and Suppovitz (2009) have noted that the rise in high-stakes testing is the direct result of policy decisions. These policies reflect the view that accountabilities associated with high-stakes

testing result in better academic achievement by students, as well as more effective teaching. Goodson and Foote (2001) have noted that many proponents of high-stakes testing argue that such tests can be used to transform teacher performance and student outcomes in poorly-performing schools. Jones and Egley (2007) have identified that the emphasis on high-stakes testing is based on the view that teachers will be more effective, and students will perform better, if they are held to account. However, this view is predicated on a narrow consideration of what motivates teachers.

In their article on the rise of marketisation and managerialism in education in England, Stevenson and Wood (2013) argued that use of high-stakes testing is rising in countries across the world, citing examples from the United States, Australia and South Africa as evidence. However, Williams and Engel (2012) have identified that high-stakes testing is used less widely in countries such as Finland, Japan and Singapore compared to Anglophone countries. Polesel et al. (2013) have noted that the rising prominence of high-stakes testing in Anglophone countries has occurred in tandem with the rising prominence of neoliberalism in education policymaking. This view is supported by Rubin's (2011) observation that the rise in high-stakes testing in the United States has resulted from government mandates and regulations. Researchers have made this observation in Anglophone countries including the United States (Amrein & Berliner, 2002), the United Kingdom (Reay & William 1999), Australia (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012), and South Africa (Howie, 2012).

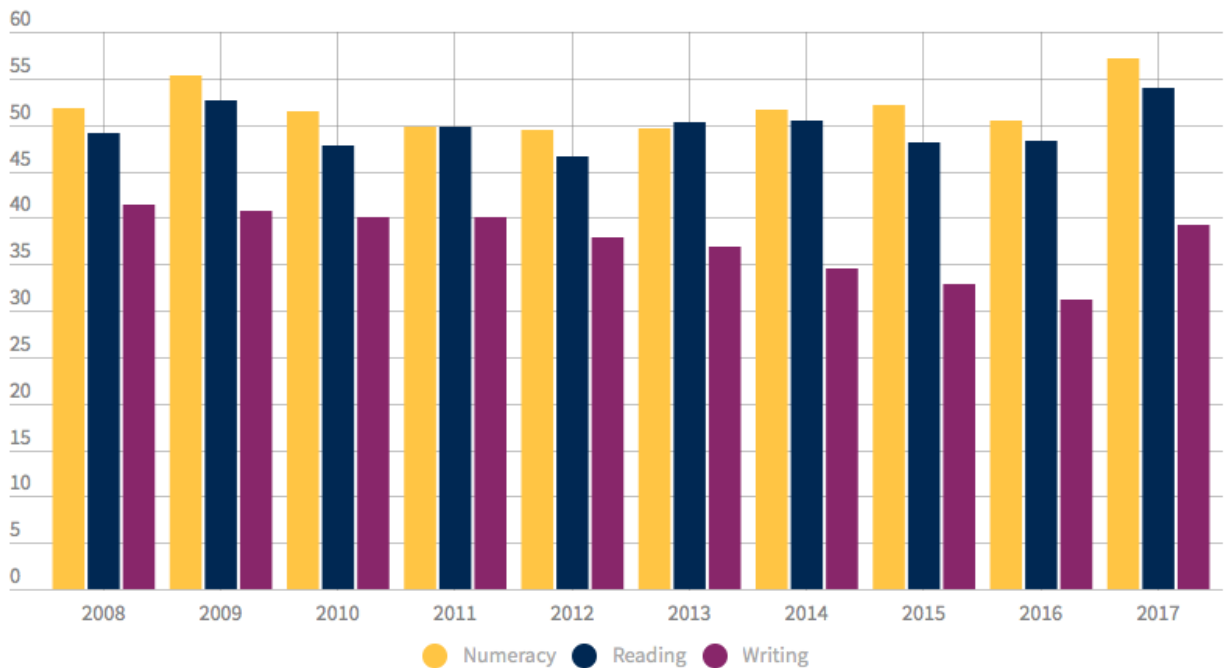
As noted by Taubman (2009), the rise in reliance on high-stakes testing over the past two decades has resulted from curriculum changes designed to measure student achievement and the effectiveness of teachers. Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (2000) have observed that public perceptions of the ineffectiveness of teachers and schools have been politicised to function as a reason for the prevalence of high-stakes testing, pointing to examples in media reporting. In sum, there is evidence within the relevant literature that testing becomes "high-

stakes” when test results are reported publicly, allowing comparisons between schools; have implications for future opportunities available to students; are accompanied by formal procedures and accountabilities; and affect where parents choose to send their children to school, as well as decisions made by leaders in school systems.

2.3 Effects of High-stakes Testing on Students

Researchers have found advantages and disadvantages associated with high-stakes testing. As Brantlinger (2004) has observed, there are winners and losers from high-stakes testing. In addition, the evidence is conflicting regarding the effectiveness of high-stakes testing. In 2017, NSW Educational Standards Authority established a prequalification standard, whereby students must meet minimum literacy and numeracy standards in order to be awarded the NSW HSC. This minimum standard was set at Band 8 or above in Year 9 NAPLAN. There are five bands for NAPLAN scores in Year 9, ranging from 5 to 10, with 10 the highest band. In 2017, 52% of students achieved at least one Band 8 score, with 32% of students achieving three Band 8 scores in the domains of numeracy, reading, and writing. In 2016, only 22% of students achieved Band 8 scores in these three domains. With a Band 8 score in Year 9 NAPLAN becoming a prequalification for attaining the NSW HSC, the already-high stakes associated with NAPLAN testing rose further. As shown in Figure 2.1, it appears that setting a minimum standard in this respect resulted in greater numbers of students achieving scores at or above Band 8 in each of the three domains tested. In this development, there is some evidence that students perform better academically in response to benchmarking. As shown in Figure 2.1, greater numbers of Year 9 students achieved Band 8 scores in the domains of numeracy, reading and writing in 2017, when the minimum requirement for being awarded the HSC was introduced, compared to 2010.

NAPLAN year 9: band 8 and above (%)



Source: ACARA

Figure 2.1. Percentage of students in NSW achieving Band 8 scores in NAPLAN domains of reading, writing and numeracy, 2008–2017 (ACARA, 2017).

In this example, student achievement was measured with a limited point-in-time assessment instrument. However, other researchers have argued that high-stakes testing in general results in better student outcomes (Buck et al., 2010; Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Jones & Egley, 2007; Muller & Schiller, 2000; Porter, 2000; Schiller & Muller, 2003). On the other hand, in more extensive and recent research, other authors have challenged the benefits of high-stakes testing, arguing that high-stakes testing results in distorted pedagogical approaches and narrow curricula, and is detrimental to student and teacher wellbeing (Au, 2007; Berliner, 2011; Hahs-Vaughan & Scherff, 2008; Hopfenbeck, 2017b; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Supovitz, 2009; Walker, 2014;). In sum, few researchers have found positive effects of high-stakes testing on student outcomes compared to negative effects of high-stakes testing regimes.

2.3.1 High-stakes testing defines student achievement.

Accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing include teaching standards designed to replicate the academic success of other countries, systems and schools (Jensen, 2012; Mourshed et al., 2010). Increasingly, educational achievement is seen through the economic framework of inputs and outputs. In this setting, high-stakes testing is presented as a method to provide standards with which to raise achievement. There is some evidence that high-stakes testing results in better academic achievement among students. However, there is no evidence that sustained growth in student achievement results from high-stakes testing (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002, 2012; Plank & Condliffe, 2013; Porter, 2000). Consequently, Nichols et al. (2012) have argued that there exists little evidence to support (and much evidence to dispute) the contention that high-stakes testing results in better student achievement.

Gunzenhauser (2003) has noted that education stakeholders overemphasise achievement in high-stakes testing at the expense of achieving wider learning goals. Carnoy and Loeb (2002) found little evidence that high-stakes testing resulted in higher student achievement. Based on student performance in high-stakes tests in 50 states in the United States between 1996 and 2000, the authors found some evidence that high-stakes testing resulted in better academic achievement across disadvantaged groups of students. On this basis, they suggested that high-stakes testing created an extrinsic motivation for academic achievement in some communities. This is consistent with Mazarno's (2007) observation that explicit expectations of students and teachers are linked to higher academic achievement. Similarly, Mundry (2005) found that students perform better academically when teachers understand academic standards clearly and teach to those standards explicitly which promotes higher levels of achievement. Proponents of high-stakes testing, Mundry notes, believe that such testing provides these standards.

Breakspear (2012) has identified that education policymakers in Australia and other countries have adopted the view that high-stakes testing, based on the economic model of inputs and outputs, improves the quality of teaching. This is consistent with Whilehelm's (2010) view that teachers can help students perform better academically by providing support and planning. Proponents of high-stakes testing have suggested that such testing is an impetus for teachers to perform better, with students performing better as a result. However, Supovitz (2009) has highlighted problems associated with this approach. Examining education trends in the United States from the early 1990's to the late 2000's, Supovitz concluded that high-stakes testing results in education stakeholders prioritising performance goals over learning goals. In addition, high-stakes testing does not measure external factors such as socio-economic status, which has long been identified as the strongest predictor of student achievement (Coleman et al., 1966; Hattie, 2003; Hattie 2008; Karmel, 1973;). In an address to the American Educational Research Association, Ladson-Billings (2006) suggested that, rather than helping students from disadvantaged groups perform better academically, high-stakes testing exacerbates the socio-economic gap in educational achievement. Similarly, Hout and Elliott (2011) found only inconsistent evidence that high-stakes testing resulted in better academic achievement in the United States.

Despite the lack of conclusive evidence that high-stakes testing improves student achievement, such tests play an important role in education policy and practice in Anglophone countries. In a questionnaire and follow-up survey administered to 68 teachers in New Zealand, Rubie-Davis et al. (2012) found that a teacher's understanding of student achievement affects their students' academic outcomes. Based on this finding, an emphasis on high-stakes testing in an education system may impact the type of outcomes teachers expect for their students. Algan et al. (2011) have suggested that transparency and accountability associated with high-stakes testing direct teachers to focus on external measures of academic success rather than

student learning outcomes. Drawing on data regarding the use and reporting of NAPLAN scores, as well as reports from the Australian Primary Principals Association, Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) have argued that the narrow education domains associated with high-stakes testing result in distortion and narrowing of approaches to teaching and learning. The impact of high-stakes tests on student learning will be addressed in the next section of this chapter.

2.3.2 High-stakes testing defines how students learn.

In the past two decades, high-stakes testing has been central to education reform movements in English-speaking countries which, Ingersoll (2003) argues, are associated with policies regarding instructional activity in classrooms. By definition, student performance in high-stakes testing has become a priority for teachers. In a two-year study of 23 second and third grade classes in the United States, Plank and Condliffe (2013) demonstrated that high-stakes testing affected teacher activity and classroom practice directly. Hannaway and Hamilton (2008) observed behavioural responses to high-stakes testing in schools and classrooms. They identified that school leaders dispute the impact of high-stakes testing on learning. Resnick and Schantz (2017) have argued that high-stakes testing and its influence on pedagogical practice are inconsistent with good learning. This view is consistent with Duignan's (2012) observation that teaching and learning activities researchers have identified as most effective are not evident in the pedagogical practices utilised in most schools in English-speaking countries.

High-stakes testing impacts teaching practice: As Fives and Buehl (2012) note, teachers refine their work-related beliefs and behaviours through interpreting, framing and filtering their knowledge and experiences. Teachers' knowledge and experience of high-stakes testing is a central feature of contemporary education systems in English-speaking countries (Stevenson & Wood, 2013). In turn, this development has affected how teachers operate. Walker (2014)

has observed the detrimental effects of high-stakes testing on the scope of curricula in schools. As a result, the creative capacity of teachers is limited, and learning becomes a less engaging and enriching experience for students. In their survey of 708 teachers from 235 schools in Florida, Jones and Egley (2007) found that many proponents of high-stakes testing argue that such tests result in greater motivation and effort among teachers and students. Indeed, high-stakes testing is intended to provide extrinsic motivation for students and teachers. However, in a survey and observational study of 84 chess players, Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) found that extrinsic motivation may be less effective than intrinsic motivation in effecting sustained engagement and improvement. On this basis, strategies to increase intrinsic motivation among students and teachers may be more effective ways to ensure sustained achievement, avoiding the unintended negative consequences of high-stakes testing.

Various terminology has been used to characterise the nature and purpose of student learning. Miller and Seller (1990) provided three modes to identify the role of the learner in the learning process. These modes were identified as being transmissive, transactional or transformational. The transmissive mode is described as traditional pedagogies where knowledge is transmitted by teachers and assimilated by students; the transactional mode is one in which students construct their learning through collaboration and experience; and the transformational mode is where students reflect upon the knowledge they have created that brings critical and creative thinking to learning (Miller, 2010). Boaler and Selling (2017) in their eight year longitudinal study of 290 mathematics students in England explored the effectiveness of what they describe as active or passive engagement in learning. They describe active engagement as occurring when students are engaged in problem solving, the discussion of ideas, and the application of methods and passive learning and passive engagement as when students are mainly required to listen to a teacher explain methods and solve problems and then reproduce the teacher's methods (p. 79). The description of active engagement is consistent

with transactional and transformational modes of learning. Passive learning as described by Boaler and Selling equates to what has been described as transmissive modes of learning.

The Redesigning Pedagogies in the North was a three year action research study situated in ten secondary schools in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. The study involved three teachers from each school and considered how teachers' work and pedagogical practice was influenced by the needs of accountability. Comber and Nixon (2009) describe that while their research focused on pedagogy they noted that explicit discussion regarding pedagogy proved to be elusive among participants which raised questions regarding how the contemporary educational discourse influences teacher identities and how they conceive their work. As they describe it, "the teachers work is reorganised and regulated around a new standardised and mediated textual template" (p. 10). Hence, they argue that conversations about pedagogy are replaced by a corporate and managerial discourse which diminishes professional autonomy, responsibility and judgment leading to transmissive teaching or passive learning. Such findings are analogous to the accountabilities associated with the neo-liberal approach to high-stakes testing.

Using Institutional Ethnography and Critical Discourse Analysis Comber and Cormack (2011) undertook an analysis of the assessments' section of the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services website that provided memos and a *Principal's Handbook* relating to the conduct of NAPLAN testing. Within the study they identify the prominent role given to NAPLAN testing within South Australia and Australia. In doing so they demonstrate the impact that this mandated high-stakes test plays in the activities of schools and the influence of learning for students as they focus on performance within the test. It also notes the tension that is at work in the interplay between the stated purpose of the test, namely to support student learning and the inconsistency that arises when the main focus is

achievement in the test. They identified that this inconsistency creates challenges for schools and impacts their autonomy in responding to the needs of students.

Dulude et al. (2017) conducted a secondary analysis of a longitudinal study of low performing schools from 1999 to 2003. They found that school leaders and teachers adopted strategies and tactics in response to the demands of high-stakes testing. Specifically, teachers in the study sought to go beyond formal requirements associated with high-stakes testing, targeting their teaching to meet the developmental needs of students. This approach reflected the teachers' desire to ensure quality learning for their students while attending to demands and accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing. The authors also identified that high-stakes testing regimes heavily impact school-based decisions that affect teaching and learning (for example, regarding resourcing). This finding is consistent with Au's (2007) and Chiang's (2009) findings that high-stakes testing affects the nature of instructional practice and curricula.

Stobart (2008) and Nichols and Berliner (2007) have also demonstrated negative effects of high-stakes testing, with Reid (2009) identifying narrowing of the curriculum as one downside of such testing. Polesel et al. (2013) found that an emphasis on teacher-centred instruction is another negative consequence of high-stakes testing. Jimerson (2005) and Lingard (2010) have noted issues of inequity associated with high-stakes testing, especially for students in remote or regional areas. Thompson and Harbaugh (2012) confirmed these negative aspects of high-stakes testing, adding that educators make their teaching less individualised to accommodate the demands of high-stakes testing, and that there is no evidence that these tests improve student performance. Similarly, Klassen et al. (2012) found that teachers homogenise their instructional practice in response to high-stakes testing, to the detriment of pursuing individual learning goals for students. Stillman (2011) conducted a qualitative case study of three Californian schools, exploring how teacher responses to accountability pressures are mediated by context. Stillman found that teachers responded to high-stakes testing by

modifying their approach in the classroom—specifically, by focusing on what was to be tested and how achievement was to be measured. Thompson and Cook (2012) have described a cycle associated with high-stakes testing, whereby such testing is implemented more widely in order to improve achievement by measuring teacher and student performance, in turn providing more extensive data gathered from tests. However, Konstantopoulos and Borman (2011) have demonstrated that data on student performance can contribute to preconceptions about a student's abilities, constraining achievement by limiting expectations of what students can achieve.

Comber (2012) conducted an institutional ethnographic case study of how the introduction of NAPLAN resulted in the reorganisation of teacher work in a school in South Australia. Comber found the emphasis placed on high-stakes testing has made performance in these tests a priority for education stakeholders, limiting student learning and narrowing the focus of teaching as a result. Thompson (2010) has argued that students suffer as a result of this dynamic, suggesting that high-stakes testing limits students' conceptual capacity, particularly in creativity and critical thinking. Broadfoot and Black (2004) have described high-stakes testing as an attempt to redefine assessment, resulting in a confused situation for teachers whereby teaching decisions are made based on multiple and inconsistent understandings of the nature, scope and purpose of high-stakes testing. Hardy and Boyle (2011) have argued that this situation amounts to a decontextualisation of learning, with learning framed in terms of accountability and transparency. Spillane (2012) has noted that standardisation of teaching in English-speaking countries (including through high-stakes testing) has gone hand-in-hand with education stakeholders increasingly demanding evidence-based teaching practice.

Au (2008b) has argued that the narrowing of curricula (e.g., in response to high-stakes testing) affects student educational experiences by restricting teachers' ability to help students develop key literacies required of 21st-century graduates. Reay and William (1999) have

observed that high-stakes testing has resulted in students participating in fewer collaborative project-based learning activities, leading to an individualistic and competitive approach to learning. Ritt (2016) highlighted anxiety among students, a reduction in the variety and creativity of learning activities, and negative impacts on teachers as effects of high-stakes testing. Hopfenbeck (2017a) has noted the implicit and explicit importance afforded to student achievement in high-stakes testing in current teaching practice. In a study of 1129 students who sat the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test, Hopfenbeck found that the test affected how teachers approached instruction and how they perceived themselves as educators.

In addition to impacting what teachers do in their classrooms, the evidence is conflicting regarding the impact of high-stakes testing on student learning. Some researchers have argued that the intent of high-stakes testing inevitably restricts students from attaining broader learning outcomes. Within the relevant literature, there is evidence that high-stakes testing limits teacher creativity—on the other hand, high-stakes testing may provide extrinsic motivation for teachers and students to perform better. As demonstrated in the literature on this topic, one consequence of this development is that high-stakes testing affects school leader and teacher decisions about learning. In turn, this effect is described in the relevant literature as narrowing school curricula, distorting the nature and outcomes of student learning. In much of the literature, this situation is seen as the result of the standardisation of learning that often accompanies high-stakes testing. As such, learning becomes decontextualised and competitive.

2.3.3 High-stakes testing and student wellbeing.

In a mixed-method case study of 12 secondary schools in Ireland, Banks and Smythe (2014) identified the quality of student interactions with teachers as an important school-related determiner of student stress levels during senior examinations. Ritt (2016) found that changes to school learning environments due to high-stakes testing, including the quality of teacher-student relationships, were linked to increasing levels of test anxiety among students. In an

analysis of pictorial representations of high-stakes testing by 225 American students in grades 3 to 6, Triplett and Barksdale (2005) found evidence that high-stakes testing leads to higher levels of anxiety among students. Robinson and Tagher (2014) conducted a mixed method study involving 235 participant responses to the Student Nurse Stress Index questionnaire and five qualitative interviews. They found that the lack of integration of high-stakes testing into wider learning objectives, as well as a lack of appropriate planning for high-stakes testing by teachers, resulted in stressful experiences for students. On this basis, school educators adopt a reactive approach to high-stakes testing. Instead, educators should consider the totality of the student learning experience and the range of factors that affect this experience.

For many students, stress associated with high-stakes testing is exacerbated by other stresses that students experience in their lives outside school. Delgado (2014) has noted that high-stakes testing regimes (and student performance in such tests) do not reflect the impact of non-school stressors many students face. In a multifaceted study involving a survey of 251 Grade 5 students and their parents, 141 teachers, seven school principals, and eight counsellors, Mulvenon et al. (2005) found that many students reported feeling overwhelmed and anxious due to the need to perform well in high-stakes testing. In a literature review, Nichols (2007) identified the detrimental effects of high-stakes testing on student wellbeing. The need to perform well in high-stakes tests and the consequences of a student's performance in such tests were major sources of stress and anxiety for students (Amrein and Berliner, 2002). Adam et al. (2017) analysed salivary cortisol levels of 93 school students, finding that, in addition to negative psychological effects on students outlined above, high-stakes testing has negative physiological effects, leading to a rise in students' cortisol levels. In sum, high-stakes testing has been proven to increase levels of anxiety for teachers and students, with psychological and physiological effects on students.

In this section of the chapter, insights from the literature regarding the effects of high-stakes testing have been discussed. High-stakes testing is a feature of the school experience for most school students in English-speaking countries. However, despite policy positions to the contrary, high-stakes testing does not improve student academic achievement substantially. In addition, high-stakes testing has a significant impact on overall student learning. High-stakes testing affects how school educators approach teaching, results in narrower curricula, and distorts teaching and learning priorities in schools. Finally, there is evidence that high-stakes testing impacts student wellbeing negatively.

2.4 The Effects of High-stakes Testing on Teachers

Through a rhetorical analysis of policy documents, Suspitsyna (2010) showed that high-stakes testing in the United States is intended to hold teachers accountable for the performance of their students. Hardy (2013) conducted 55 interviews with leaders and teachers from three primary schools in Australia, finding that requirements of student performance in high-stakes testing defined the nature of teachers' work and discussions regarding effective teaching. The pressure to ensure student performance in high-stakes testing is so strong that teachers feel they must comply, modifying their instructional approach accordingly (Stevenson & Wood, 2013). Valli and Buese (2007) have identified that teachers feel torn between mastering core professional competencies, on the one hand, while being required to meet demands created by high-stakes testing on the other. This conflict results in increased levels of teacher turnover. This finding is similar to Kohn's (2010) observation that teachers leave the profession due to pressure and low levels of job satisfaction resulting from high-stakes testing. In an analysis of Australian media reporting, Mockler (2013) found that high-stakes testing was linked to lower levels of trust in schools and teachers among parents. In response to these factors, many teachers begin to standardise their approach to instruction in order to meet the requirements of high-stakes standardised tests (Au, 2011). In a sequential mixed method study

of teacher stress and efficacy in response to high-stakes testing in Texas, Gonzalez et al. (2017) found that teachers spent less time on instructional practice due to the need to cover curriculum content in the time provided while helping students perform well in high-stakes testing.

Teacher attitudes are affected by the context, culture and community in which teachers operate (Solomon et al., 1996). For this reason, teachers experience high-stakes testing within their local context. In a theoretical model of belief systems for teaching practice, Nespor (1987) identified the connection between teacher beliefs and perceptions of learning and student capacity. In light of this finding, the effect of high-stakes testing on the perception and experience of teachers becomes important. In turn, Wang (2009) identified that teacher perceptions of their students' abilities were linked to student engagement and achievement of learning outcomes. Ball and Maroy (2009) drew on evidence from 14 case study schools in Europe, finding that achievement in high-stakes testing impacts teacher expectations of students. Gee (2004) has demonstrated that, operating within the prescriptive curricula created in response to high-stakes testing, teachers work to imposed limitations, placing limits on students in turn. In addition, mirroring the limited nature of high-stakes testing, teacher expectations of students become limited (Oblinger, 2005). This provides further evidence, as Nair and Gehling (2008) reported based on their study in a school in Melbourne, that high-stakes testing results in teachers conceptualising their role more narrowly.

In terms of impacting teacher perceptions, Christensen and Aldridge (2013) have observed that particular pedagogies and focus areas are prioritised over others within prescribed curricula. Broadfoot and Black (2004) have argued that high-stakes testing conveys political and media-driven agendas that impact teachers. It is evident that the effects of high-stakes testing occur within and beyond the classroom, impacting how teachers think about their practice and the decisions they make. This effect of high-stakes testing extends beyond the classroom, impacting advice from teachers to students regarding patterns of study and course

choice (Rothstein, 2009). As Ball and Maroy (2009) have noted, in communicating expectations to students, teachers are informed (if not driven) by the requirements of high-stakes testing. Konstantopoulos and Borman (2011) have identified that teachers are guided by their preconceptions of students in their classroom decision making and in their expectations of students. In turn, negative preconceptions of a student may result in access to fewer learning opportunities.

The effects of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning (as well as teachers and students) are summed up in Ball's (2003) comment that high-stakes-testing changes not only what teachers and schools do, but who they are. As Ball (2003, p. 223) observes,

A new kind of teacher and new kinds of knowledges are "called up" by educational reform, a teacher who can maximize performance, who can set aside irrelevant principles, or outmoded social commitments, for whom excellence and improvement are the driving force of their practice. (Ball, 2003, p. 223)

Excellence and improvement have long been tenets of effective teaching (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). However, understandings of excellence and improvement in education have been redefined amid the growing use of high-stakes testing as part of neoliberal education reforms. As a result of this development, teacher performance has come to be defined in terms of inputs and outputs. This understanding of the role of teachers has been at the expense of the wider role teachers play in developing the whole child and supporting positive student wellbeing.

2.4.1 High-stakes testing policy and control.

In a localised study in regions of the United States, Muller and Schiller (2000) found evidence for a correlation between high-stakes testing and higher graduation rates among students of lower socio-economic status. Buck et al. (2010) conducted a study of teachers in five schools in Arkansas, examining the effects of No Child Left Behind. They identified that

the advantages of high-stakes testing included explicit curriculum standards and learning expectations for teachers and students. Phelps (2006) has noted that proponents of high-stakes testing argue that educators can gather useful information regarding student performance from such tests, developing and maintaining higher academic standards. Amrein and Berliner (2002) found limited evidence for the positive effects of high-stakes testing, typically in the form of anecdote, commentary, or small studies based on limited data.

While not supportive of high-stakes testing, the authors observed that proponents of high-stakes testing consider that it functions as a framework for learning and incentive for achievement, and that data from such tests can be used as diagnostic information to improve instruction. Plank and Condliffe (2013) have argued that the use of high-stakes testing across countries and jurisdictions is evidence that high-stakes testing is considered beneficial. However, this development reflects the intention of using high-stakes testing, not necessarily the outcome. There is limited evidence that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds benefit from high-stakes testing. However, such benefits relate to expectations and aspirations regarding achievement within these groups, as well as the reputational capital of schools (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Porter, 2000). Such views reflect the view that student outcomes can be enhanced through a formulaic approach to teaching and learning. However, teacher autonomy has been diminished in the process.

Education policy affects the priority and status given to high-stakes testing by school educators as they enact performativity requirements associated with such tests (Ball et al., 2012). Lewis and Hardy (2015) have commented that some high-stakes testing policies have had unintended anti-education effects, conflating performance measurement with educational practice. Breakspear (2012) conducted a questionnaire of 37 representatives from member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, finding that education policymakers used data from high-stakes testing to develop policies, strategies, and

projects. Similarly, in an analysis of policy documents and interviews with policymakers regarding the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, Gerrard and Farrell (2013) found that high-stakes testing was associated with the standardising and centralisation of education practice in Australia.

Doecke and Kostogriz (2008) conducted a study with third and fourth year pre-service teachers in Victoria who were studying a unit in their program intended to equip them as teachers with the capacity to address the language and literacy needs of their students. Within their study they identified how the neo-liberal agenda permeates approaches and attitudes in education. They observe that,

Managerial practices, standardised literacy testing and other forms of accountability are increasingly mediating the relationships between teachers and students in government schools. Teachers' work is in danger of being reduced to a technical activity, a pre-packaged set of skills designed to produce mandated educational outcomes. (p. 69)

The situation that they describe is the result of the rise in accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing. Within their study the way in which standards, as measured by high-stakes testing, are used to benchmark student achievement in literacy narrows the repertoire and focus of teachers.

The conclusions drawn from this study were confirmed by a study consisting of group of Primary school teachers considering the impact of NAPLAN on the work of teachers (Doecke, Kostogriz & Illesca, 2010). Teachers in this study indicated that the introduction of high-stakes standardised testing not only increased the work load and changed the focus of their work, but determined their identity as teachers and the approach that they take to curriculum and pedagogy. This level of control that is generated by policies of accountability associated with high-stakes testing has a material effect on what teachers do leading to consequences that embed the neo-liberal view that effectiveness can be measured by a test

score. In a further study situated in a culturally diverse Melbourne primary school catering for 200 students demonstrated that the features described above have become part of the professional, bureaucratic and cultural experience of schools in Australia (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011).

Chiang (2009) analysed sanction measures used in Florida regarding performance in high-stakes tests, showing that education policy impacts the nature of curricula and instructional practice. Biesta (2010) has argued that the effects of education policymakers regarding high-stakes testing as a driver of performance have extended from the international domain into the classroom. In an analysis of the United Kingdom's 2010 White Paper on whole-system education reform, Morris (2012) found that international performance comparisons were driven by an economic rationale, which also underpinned education policy in Britain. In turn, this approach to education reform is enacted through policies that, as Algan et al. (2011) note in their discussion paper on teaching practice and student beliefs, are presumed to enhance transparency and accountability. On this basis, Malcolm et al. (2003) have argued that high-stakes testing-focused education policy results in defined and prescribed curricula and approaches to student assessment.

Davies and Peterson (2005) analysed neoliberal education discourses, finding that policy based on performance in high-stakes testing diminished the agency of stakeholders in education systems, including individual teachers. Ball (2003) has argued that performance and agency in terms of marketisation and managerialism are features of contemporary education policy. Ball (2003) argues that managerialism in education has reshaped how teachers work. Hanushek (2011) has noted that the economic value of quality teachers is one rationale for managing teacher performance, including through the establishment of standards, which form the basis of high-stakes testing. Walker (2012) has suggested that managerialism in contemporary education extends to students, insofar as teachers direct the goal orientation of

students. This form of managerialism has resulted in what Konstantonopoulos and Borman (2011) identified in their multilevel analysis of the 1966 *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report* as constraints on students to demonstrate and receive opportunities through which they can explore the full range of their capabilities.

Stevenson and Wood (2013) have argued that the effect of managerialism is evident in performance management targets, which are used to guide professional learning and direct the nature of professional conversation. Biesta (2004) has described managerialism in education as an extension of a business financial model of accountability, based on the assumption that inputs and outputs are auditable. He has observed that the effects of this approach have been lower levels of professionalism in assessing teacher performance, with higher levels of centralisation, standardisation and control of practice. In short, Biesta has argued that the locus of professional responsibility in education has been replaced by mechanical and technical approaches to education.

2.4.2 The negative impact of high-stakes testing.

In a meta-synthesis of 49 studies, Au (2007) found that high-stakes testing typically had negative effects on the nature and delivery of curricula. Lewis and Hardy (2015) conducted a qualitative study in 25 primary schools in Queensland. They also found that high-stakes testing, and the scrutiny of teacher and school performance that often accompanied such testing, impacted teaching and learning negatively. Nichols et al. (2012) have identified that pressure to perform in high-stakes testing has detrimental effects on students of lower socio-economic status in particular. In a secondary analysis of data gathered from a longitudinal study of low-performing schools, Dulude et al. (2017) noted that school educators prioritise subjects that feature in high-stakes testing over subjects not included in high-stakes tests. Cunningham and Sanzo (2002) indicated that creative instructional practice by teachers was limited by high-stakes testing which, by its nature, results in educators “teaching to the test” (Au, 2011, p. 258).

Walker (2014) reported that, in a survey of teachers in the United States conducted by National Education Association officials, constraints associated with high-stakes were found to limit teacher creativity. Similarly, Flannery (2015) found that high-stakes testing had negative effects on pedagogical practice. Amrein and Berliner (2002) analysed the impact of high-stakes testing in 18 states in America. They found that high-stakes testing did not result in higher levels of student achievement (despite claims to the contrary), and had unintended negative consequences.

Blackmore (2010) has identified the predominance of managerialism in education as a central feature of education accountability reforms associated with the rise in high-stakes testing in English-speaking countries. In a theoretical paper in which he proposed that school leaders should move beyond the external narrative of accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing, Eacott (2013) noted the requirements of performativity and managerialism associated with such testing. Performance in high-stakes testing has become a management tool and instrument of accountability for student performance and teacher effectiveness, constraining pedagogy. Drawing on findings from a case study regarding the link between high-stakes testing and classroom practice in eight schools in Chicago, Diamond (2007) found the managerial role of school leaders coupled with the demands of performativity in high-stakes testing impacted the nature of pedagogical practice in schools. This leads to attention on scores rather than learning, as described by Abrams and Madaus (2003) in their analysis of a nationwide survey conducted by United States National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy officials regarding mandated testing programs. Test scores have always been a measure of learning—however, high-stakes testing has resulted in an overemphasis on scores at the expense of broader learning outcomes. As a result, the impact of high-stakes testing has intensified further. Berliner (2011) has observed that this emphasis has led to instances of

malpractice, especially where performance in high-stakes tests affects students, teachers and schools materially.

In a case study analysis of how Australian government officials and government officials from three states negotiated reward payments based on performance in NAPLAN, and ramifications in Queensland for poor performance in NAPLAN, Lingard and Sellar (2013) found that features of performativity had perverse effects on learning. Carter et al. (2016) conducted a multiple case study regarding the influence of NAPLAN in three Queensland schools using semi-structured interviews, as well as observational and documentary analysis. They found that school educators bore tangible and intangible costs as a result of NAPLAN, with few benefits of participation. In a presentation of data regarding high-stakes testing from interviews with teachers and a principal at a school in rural South Australia, Cormack and Comber (2013) demonstrated that the impact of managerialism in education has resulted in new ideas about what constitutes effective teaching practice. They found that participants in their study began to doubt their professional judgement, narrowed their teaching, and redirected resources as a result of high-stakes testing. Stevenson and Wood (2013) have identified the recent emphasis on managerialism in education as having re-shaped how teachers experience their work. Thibodeaux et al. (2015) surveyed 212 Kindergarten to Grade 12 teachers in Mississippi on the impact of high-stakes testing on leadership and teacher retention. They demonstrated that teachers felt pressured to adhere to performative demands in response to pressure from administrators and policymakers regarding high-stakes testing. Similarly, in a study of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, involving in-depth interviews with five teachers, Segall (2003) identified that managerialism, which often accompanies high-stakes testing, diminishes the quality of teacher practice.

In his paper on the origins, processes and effects of performativity in education, Ball (2003) argued that performativity results in cynical compliance with external requirements—

an approach that is inauthentic and represents a form of game playing, disconnected from learning. Lee (2010) conducted a path analysis of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, using data regarding policy inputs, contexts and outcome variables in 50 states. Lee found that high-stakes testing can result in education stakeholders manipulating targets and the way in which performance is reported. For example, removing underperforming students from the testing cohort can result in distorted performance reporting (Ball, 2003). School structures have been modified in response to increased accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing, as Nichols and Griffith (2009) found in a study in which they interviewed eight elementary school principals, 24 Grade 3 teachers and 73 parents about policy-driven data collection and analysis practices in British Columbia.

Ball and Maroy (2009) examined 14 case studies from six urban areas in Budapest, Charleroi, Lille, Lisbon, London and the Creteil/Paris region, exploring the effect of external factors on educator practices within schools. They identified that changes to managerial structures mediate teacher and student expectations of performance. Reeves et al. (2010) considered these performative pressures in a theoretical paper in which they describe 10 authentic activities with which educators can create authentic learning environments. The authors noted that performative pressures direct the focus of educators and students away from learning to a focus on performance. Sources of performative pressure emerge from beyond the school, including political pressures, pressure from the wider community, and through the media (Maasik & Solomon, 1994). Reeves et al. (2010) observed that these external pressures are accompanied by power and ideology that change the nature of schooling.

These external pressures are described by Marchant (2004) as having a significant impact on public perceptions of schools, resulting in loss of reputational capital in the educational marketplace. Ball (2008) confirms that pressure to perform in high-stakes tests has detrimental effects on teachers and students, particularly in schools with higher proportions of

students from disadvantaged or lower socio-economic communities. Wrigley et al. (2012) have argued that performance in high-stakes tests is an inappropriate measure of school effectiveness, as such tests do not measure factors outside of school that affect a student's academic success. Consideration of these factors is important because, as Ball (2010) has explained, equity issues that affect student performance are beyond the control of school educators. In a study using National Educational Longitudinal Study data, Osequera et al. (2011) noted that equity issues that impact performance in high-stakes testing include socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender. In a collective case study based on analysis of interviews, focus groups, and observations from a series of school leadership programs, Vernon-Dotson and Floyd (2012) found that teacher quality had the greatest impact on student achievement. Such findings form the basis of arguments in support of high-stakes tests as measures of school and teacher effectiveness. However, as Hattie (2007) noted in a meta-analysis of effective learning, high-stakes tests can measure only factors within the scope of the school's control. High-stakes testing cannot measure the external factors that affect student performance.

In a review of 34 news articles in which authors commented on the *MySchool* website, Mockler (2013) suggested that non-school related factors that impact student performance are ignored in the reductionist approach to performance that is associated with high-stakes testing. As a result, schools are judged through a narrow and inaccurate prism. High-stakes testing cannot measure life stressors beyond the control of schools, as shown by Booher-Jennings (2005) in a case study of a school in Texas. Booher-Jennings conducted a document review and 34 interviews with teachers and school district administrators, implicating stressors outside of school in the widening achievement gap in high-stakes testing results between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Amrein and Berliner (2002) indicated that the achievement gap experienced by disadvantaged students in high-stakes testing is exacerbated by the way in

which high-stakes testing limits the breadth of learning, which is especially important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The inability to provide the breadth of learning required by disadvantaged students is the result of school educators responding to imposed expectations for learning associated with high-stakes testing. Rothon et al. (2011) analysed data from the East London Adolescents: Community Health Survey, involving 2499 Year 7 and 9 students. They identified a correlation between performance and academic aspiration. As a result, performance in high-stakes testing impacts the academic aspirations of disadvantaged students.

Hess (2006) presented results from three opinion polls in the United States, concluding that accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing are undermined because such testing cannot measure factors external to the school that impact performance. Granger (2008) reached the same conclusion in his review of school accountability reforms. The limitations of performativity associated with high-stakes tests are that such tests cover a narrow range of content and have limited utility in evaluating effectiveness. Yet, as Thomson (2009) has noted, school leaders risk consequences if they fail to make high-stakes testing a priority. As Biesta (2014) has noted, the result is that quality education is sublimated to quantifiable assessments of school and teacher performance via high-stakes tests. As Mercer et al. (2010) have found, the need for school educators to focus on continuous improvement is a further performativity-associated constraint on learning that results from requirements of high-stakes testing. If improvement is measured by a high-stakes test, it is unsurprising that educators focus on achievement in high-stakes tests. Thomson and Hall (2008) presented findings from a study of the English National curriculum, conducted in three arts programs in British schools. They indicated that this ongoing focus on performance in high-stakes testing has broader implications for education. They identified that hierarchies of subjects have been developed, with subjects considered essential to performance in high-stakes testing favoured, and subjects

considered non-essential to performance allocated less time and fewer resources. They also found that outcomes have been prioritised over the purpose of learning, at the expense of student-centred approaches to learning and prior learning of students.

2.4.3 High-stakes testing and teacher wellbeing.

In a mixed method study involving 150 teachers from 25 schools, Valli and Buese (2007) found that stress experienced by teachers was an unintended consequence of high-stakes testing. They observed that this stress had implications for teacher retention within the profession. Ehrich et al. (2015) observed that a contributor to teacher stress is the ethical and professional dilemma that emerges as teachers work within the constraints of high-stakes testing environments while attending to the broader needs of students. Both Christian (2010), in her survey of 140 teachers in Mississippi, and Fox and Peters (2013) in their survey of 288 teachers in Texas, reported that, while high-stakes testing is stressful for teachers, there is little evidence that high-stakes testing improves teacher efficacy. Christian (2010) found that teachers reported burnout and lack of support in addressing challenges that resulted from high-stakes testing. In a pilot study of eight teachers in a Colorado school district, Schaubman et al. (2011) used the Index of Teacher Stress (Abidin, et al., 2004) to demonstrate that demands associated with high-stakes testing place pressure on teachers, leading to increased levels of stress. Similarly, in a study of 100 teachers in South Carolina, Berryhill et al. (2009) found that one in five participants indicated that accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing impacted their stress levels. Along with accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing, Hahs-Vaughn and Scherff (2008) observed that preparation and processes related to high-stakes testing affect stress levels among teachers. The authors built on previous work by Smith and Ingersoll (2004), sampling responses in the Schools and Staffing Survey and Teacher Follow-Up Survey from English teachers in Delaware, Nevada, West Virginia to identify reasons for teacher attrition.

Gonzalez (2017) identified that many teachers experience stress due to expectations regarding student achievement, as well as associated judgements regarding their performance based on student achievement in high-stakes tests. In a mixed method case study based on 12 secondary schools in Ireland, Banks and Smythe (2014) identified the quality of student interactions with teachers as a major school-related factor that influenced student stress levels during senior examinations. In light of this finding, teachers may feel especially responsible for their students' wellbeing during periods of high-stakes testing. Exacerbating this situation is the pressure teachers feel to ensure that their teaching meets requirements of the high-stakes tests, to the detriment of focusing on their students' other needs (Popham, 2015). In a metaanalysis of 99 studies, Roorda et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between qualities of effective teacher-student relationships and levels of student engagement and achievement. They identified that effective relationships between students and teachers enable students to perform at their best. However, the workload associated with high-stakes testing limits the opportunities for teachers to focus on the relational aspects of learning with their students. Collie et al. (2012) studied 664 participants from 17 school districts in British Columbia and Ontario, demonstrating that teacher workloads were one reason for high-stress levels among teachers. Zernike (2015) has noted that, as a result of the demands of high-stakes testing, the capacity of teachers to build meaningful, effective relationships with students has been diminished.

In this section of the chapter, the literature regarding the effects on teachers of accountabilities associated with high-stakes testing was reviewed. It was identified that researchers have found that high-stakes testing impacts what teachers do and how they perceive their role as teachers. Literature regarding the effects of policy prescriptions on teacher autonomy was also explained in this part of the chapter. It was demonstrated that instructional activity and priorities have been shaped by the neoliberal agenda that is associated with high-

stakes testing. In addition, high-stakes testing affects the nature of pedagogy, with emphasis given to pedagogical practice with a view to raising performance—but at the expense of focusing on broader learning outcomes. Lastly, the demands, responsibility and expectations that accompany high-stakes testing are sources of stress and pressure for students.

2.5 Closing Comments

In this chapter, an overview of the existing literature on high-stakes testing was provided. It was shown that high-stakes testing is associated with accountabilities and affects decision making among school educators due to the results of high-stakes tests being publicly available. It was demonstrated that the rise in prominence of high-stakes testing has resulted in a shift in stakeholder understandings of the purpose of education. It was also shown that researchers and policymakers dispute the benefits and disadvantages of high-stakes testing—however, most researchers view high-stakes testing as having negative effects on teaching and learning overall. There is general agreement in the literature that high-stakes testing impacts the nature of student learning, especially when teachers feel they must focus their classroom instruction heavily on high-stakes teaching. The effects of high-stakes testing on teachers were demonstrated, as well as the impact of high-stakes testing on teacher and student wellbeing. Finally, views within the literature that performativity, policy and managerialism in education result in education stakeholders focusing on high-stakes testing were presented.

Consideration has been given to the overall consensus within the literature regarding the rise in prominence of high-stakes testing, along with a review of positive and negative features of high-stakes testing. Research was presented regarding the effects of high-stakes testing on student achievement, the nature of learning, teacher practice and thinking, and student and teacher wellbeing. The evidence within the existing literature is that high-stakes testing has negative impacts on teachers and students' overall education experience, as well as learning outcomes. Performativity and managerialism, ubiquitous elements of neoliberal

education policy, are at the heart of widespread use of high-stakes testing in English-speaking countries. In the next chapter, background information is provided regarding the high-stakes test that was the researcher's focus in this study—i.e., the NSW HSC.

A significant body of research exists regarding the effects of high-stakes testing. Most of these studies were conducted in the United States, typically on the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 or the Race to the Top initiative, and on students in their middle years of schooling. Some research on high-stakes testing had been conducted in the United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa. In these studies, researchers focused on students in their early years of schooling. However, few researchers to date have considered the experiences of teachers in regards to high-stakes testing, or on how teachers make meaning of their experiences of high-stakes testing. In Australia, most research on high-stakes testing has been done on NAPLAN, with a focus on students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. As a result, there is a gap in the existing literature regarding teacher experiences of high-stakes testing in the final years of schooling in Australia. In studies to date on the HSC, researchers have focused on traits associated with student performance in the HSC, or the impact of the HSC on students. Through this study, the researcher has provided new knowledge about the experiences of school educators with high-stakes testing. In addition, the researcher has contributed to knowledge of the nature of this experience, and how it is interpreted by teachers to make meaning of their role in the context of high-stakes testing. Finally, the researcher has added to knowledge on the impact of high-stakes testing in the final years of schooling in Australia. This amounts to a substantial contribution to existing research on high-stakes testing, revealing the nature and interpretation of the experience of high-stakes testing at the end point of schooling in Australia. At the outset of this research, the researcher aimed to generate new knowledge regarding the influence of the high-stakes HSC by gaining insight into the experiences of the HSC from a selection of participants.

Within the relevant literature, it was found that high-stakes testing had resulted in changes to understandings of the purpose of education, the principles behind approaches to teaching and learning, and how teachers practice in schools (Au, 2011; Ball & Maroy, 2009; Hopfenbeck, 2017a; Lingard & Sellar, 2013). In addition, comparisons between schools that are made as a result of high-stakes testing have material impacts on the reputational capital of schools (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Porter, 2000). In this study, the researcher's aim was to explore how school educators experienced high-stakes testing and how they made sense of this experience, with a view to providing an understanding of what this experience means for teaching and learning.

3.0 Background to the Character, Nature and Historical Development of the NSW HSC

In the preceding chapter, the existing literature on high-stakes testing was reviewed. The prevalence of performativity and managerialism as features of high-stakes testing was demonstrated. In this chapter, an explanation of the NSW HSC is provided. The HSC is a credential provided to school students in NSW who have completed 13 years of primary and secondary schooling and have met the requirements established by the NSW Educational Standards Authority. These requirements include completion of a prescribed curriculum, an authorised pattern of study in a range of courses (including the mandatory study of English) and, in more than 90% of cases, undertaking a final examination. This chapter consists of two parts. In the first part of the chapter, document analysis is conducted regarding the requirements of the HSC, the role of the HSC in education in NSW, and an historical overview of the development of the HSC. In the second part of the chapter, the outcome of preliminary interviews conducted with leaders from the state, Catholic and independent school sectors in NSW is described. These interviews were conducted in order for the researcher to understand attitudes to the HSC among school sector leaders. These interviews were conducted in a separate process to the main study conducted for this research. Important contextual data were gathered through these initial interviews, including regarding the background of the HSC. As such, these interviews are treated on a separate basis to the methodology adopted elsewhere in this study, with results provided in the document analysis in this chapter.

3.1 Policies and Procedures of the HSC

In this section of the chapter, formal and explicit requirements of the HSC are outlined, as per policy and procedures established by the NSW Education Standards Authority.

3.1.1 The role of the HSC.

In order to understand the high-stakes nature of the HSC, it is important to consider the intended purpose of the test. It is also important to understand the principles on which the HSC was devised. The NSW HSC is enacted under the auspices of the NSW Educational Standards Authority (NESA). The HSC functions as an exit credential for students in NSW who have completed 13 years of registered and accredited educational programs established by NESA. McGaw (1997) has outlined five purposes of the HSC:

1. To provide a curriculum structure that encourages students to complete secondary education.
2. To foster the development of students' knowledge and skills in their chosen fields of study, as well as their capacity to manage their own learning; for students to develop a desire to continue learning post-school; for students to have the capacity to work with others; and for students to develop respect for cultural diversity in Australia.
3. To provide a flexible structure that prepares students for either further education and training or employment, and full and active participation as citizens.
4. To provide formal assessment and certification of students' achievements.
5. To provide a context for schools to have opportunities to foster the physical and spiritual wellbeing of students.

It is noteworthy that information about the HSC on the NESA website does not include an explicit statement regarding the purpose of the HSC. Information provided includes an enrolment snapshot, information about HSC courses, an outline of the HSC examinations, staff associated with the HSC, an explanation of results, and merit lists of performance. The only statement regarding the role of the HSC on the NESA website is as follows: "School students in New South Wales generally work towards the... HSC in years 11 and 12. It is the highest level of attainment you can reach at school" (NESA, n.d).

The following statement appeared on the website of the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES), which was responsible for managing the HSC prior to the establishment of NESA in 2017:

The... HSC is the highest educational award in New South Wales schools. It is awarded to students who successfully complete Years 11 and 12 in New South Wales. The HSC is an internationally recognised credential that provides a foundation for students entering tertiary study, vocational training or employment (BOSTES, n.d).

Neither statement includes much information about the role of the HSC in the broader context of education in NSW. It is clear from other sources (to be discussed later in this chapter) that the HSC functions in ways beyond what is included in the descriptions above.

3.1.2 The rules and requirements of the HSC.

A more complete understanding of the role of the HSC can be ascertained through consideration of other materials associated with the test. The rules and requirements of the HSC are outlined at NESA's Assessment Certification Examination website:

The Higher School Certificate is awarded to students who satisfy requirements, generally after completing two years of study (Years 11 and 12), although [Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards] pathways provisions allow students a longer completion period. ACE sets out the rules, requirements and procedures for the Higher School Certificate (NESA, n.d).

In this statement, it is clear that the HSC is an exit credential—i.e., that the stakes associated with the test are high. On completion of the HSC, students receive three credentials documents from NESA. These consist of a Testamur, a Record of School Achievement, and a Course Report.

On the Testamur, the student's successful completion of 13 years of schooling is certified. The Record of School Achievement includes the student's HSC examination mark,

assessment mark, final moderated HSC mark and the Performance Band (ranging from level 1 to 6) they achieved in each course undertaken in the HSC. Performance Bands are described by NESAs as “levels of achievement demonstrated by students. The performance band description gives meaning to a Higher School Certificate mark by summarising the knowledge and skills typically demonstrated by students whose mark placed them in that performance band” (NESAs, n.d.). A 2 Unit course consists of 240 hours of instruction, with a 1 Unit or extension course consisting of 120 hours of instruction. The assessment mark is scored in the same way as the examination mark and is submitted by schools based on student performance in the internal assessment that adheres to the rules established by NESAs for school-based assessment. The HSC mark is derived by combining the examination mark with a moderated school-based assessment mark. The marks reported on the HSC credential documents are standards-referenced and align to a series of bands, ranging from 1 to 6. Each band aligns to a description of the typical performance by students within an identified mark range.

Table 3.1

Alignment of Band Achievement to HSC Mark

<u>Band Identifying Standards</u>	<u>HSC Marks within each Band</u>
Band 6	90–100
Band 5	80–89
Band 4	70–79
Band 3	60–69
Band 2	50–59
Band 1	0–49

In Table 3.1, the alignment of Band achievement to marks awarded in the HSC is shown. In the HSC, a standards-referenced approach to the evaluation of student performance is used, whereby a score is provided relative to each band and described relative to the requirements of each course. However, the standards expressed in Performance Band Descriptions are inconsistent—and therefore not comparable—across courses. For example, a mark of 80 and Band 5 achieved in Physics is not comparable to a mark of 80 and Band 5

achieved in Visual Arts, or in any other course. Performance Band Descriptions relate to standards expected within the course discipline and are based on the requirements of each course. As a result, it is not possible to compare marks across courses as representing performance to a similar standard. Even so, it has been commonplace to truncate reporting of performance as a mark in a way that suggests comparability across courses. For this reason, students have undertaken courses in order to receive the highest mark possible, rather than based on the rigour of learning offered in the course in question, or their genuine interest in the subject matter. At the same time, school educators sensitive to the high-stakes nature of the reported score have advised students to take certain courses to inflate levels of achievement at their school.

Universities Admission Centre staff are responsible for developing the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), a rank that forms the basis for admission to universities and programs of tertiary study. To receive an ATAR, students in NSW must have completed 10 HSC units that have an accompanying examination. The ATAR is a number between zero and 99.95 that is used to rank students according to the comparative performance of all other ATAR-eligible candidates. The ATAR is based on the two units of English and the next best eight units in which the student received the highest marks. A maximum of two units from Category B courses, such as Vocational Education and Training courses, can be included in the calculation of the ATAR (Universities Admissions Centre, n.d.). Tertiary institutions use the rank generated by the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) to rank applicants for course selection. The ATAR remains the primary pathway to tertiary studies for HSC students. Since the *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report* (Bradley et al., 2008), which resulted in uncapped numbers of enrolments in tertiary institutions in Australia, a broader range of tertiary pathways beyond the ATAR have emerged. The HSC is not a direct pathway to tertiary study. However, the HSC is the basis on which the ATAR rank of students in NSW is created.

In light of the rules and requirements outlined above, it is clear that the nature of the HSC is multi-faceted, with the test serving many purposes.

As a result, most students in NSW who wish to attend a university will undertake the HSC. While there are alternate pathways to tertiary study, the HSC is the most direct. As a result, the stakes associated with the HSC are high, with school leaders seeking to maximise positive publicity for their school through strong performance in aspects of the HSC that are reported publicly. These figures are reported as measures of school success, impacting school enrolments and, in turn, revenue and prestige. Consequently, the HSC has become the measure and currency of success for students, schools and school systems in NSW. Au (2011) has argued that, from a neoliberal perspective, teachers' labour is controlled and directed by the requirements of high-stakes testing, delivered in what he describes as pre-packaged corporate curricula directed towards "teaching to the test":

A test is high-stakes when its results are used to make important decisions that affect students, teachers, administrators, communities, schools, and districts (Madaus, 1988). In very specific terms, high-stakes tests are a part of a *policy design* (Schneider & Ingram, 1997) that "links the score on one set of standardized tests to grade promotion, high school graduation and, in some cases, teacher and principal salaries and tenure decisions" (Orfield & Wald, 2000, p. 38). As part of the accountability movement, stakes are also deemed high because the results of tests, as well as the ranking and categorization of schools, teachers, and children that extend from those results, are reported to the public (McNeil, 2000). (Au, 2017, p. 258)

In sum, the HSC functions as a high-stakes test in practice. The high-stakes nature of the HSC will be discussed further in Section 3.4 of this chapter.

3.1.3 The relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the HSC.

No pedagogical approaches are mandated in the HSC—however, there is an indication in HSC documentation that certain pedagogical practices are preferred. Each HSC syllabus contains statements on the purpose of the HSC, the rationale for the course and the aims of the course. In HSC syllabus documents, the learning of senior students is positioned within the broader Kindergarten to Year 12 learning continuum. The syllabuses include an overview of the structure for each HSC course and are linked to support documents in which components of and weightings for school-based assessment are outlined. The syllabus and support documents include information regarding HSC examination specifications, as well as the format of the external examination. Syllabus support documents (NESA, n.d.) include advice on school-based assessment for learning, including the expectation that students should be involved in setting their own learning goals. The support materials also include advice regarding expectations and standards for students in each course. The importance of feedback to support student learning is emphasised. In this way, the requirements of the HSC impact not only what is taught in NSW schools, but how it is taught.

Based on analysis of the syllabuses and the accompanying syllabus support materials for the HSC, it appears that the HSC is considered more than a credential—it is seen as a course of learning and development for students. In these documents, learning targets for each HSC course are identified, along with advice on how HSC courses should be taught. A key feature of these syllabuses and support materials is their emphasis on assessment, including the examination component of each syllabus. Importantly, while multiple purposes are described for the HSC, the emphasis in NESA documents is on how students are assessed throughout the course and how student achievement in the HSC is measured through the final examination. These are the elements of the HSC that are mandated for teachers and, as such, are major components of how teachers experience the HSC. The formal requirements of the HSC are

central contextual realities for teachers as they experience the HSC and the emphasis given to the examination.

3.2 The Historical Development of the HSC

In this part of the chapter, consideration is given to the historical development of the HSC and an overview is provided of three main periods of reform to secondary education in NSW. As public discourse around the HSC has changed in recent decades, the stakes associated with the test have increased. At the same time, the development of the HSC has affected the nature of this discourse. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that the stakes associated with the HSC have risen as a result of an ever-increasing focus among education stakeholders in NSW on raising standards, along with the deepening of the relationship between the HSC and university admissions. Initially, in this section of the chapter, consideration is given to the 1962 Wyndham Scheme, which resulted in the introduction of the HSC in 1967. The second series of reforms to the HSC outlined in this chapter are those established by Professor Barry McGaw in 1997, which were followed by changes to the test in 2000. Finally, consideration is given to the *Stronger HSC Standards* (BOSTES, 2016a, 2016b) reforms, which were introduced in 2016. Students will complete this latest iteration of the HSC for the first time in 2019. This review of the three reforms to the HSC is an opportunity to understand legacy practices and thinking that continue to resonate in contemporary understandings of the HSC. As HSC reforms have been undertaken, their cumulative effect has been an increase in the stakes associated with the test

3.2.1 The Wyndham Scheme.

In 1953, NSW Government officials established a “Committee Appointed to Survey Secondary Education”. Chaired by Harold Wyndham, the Committee was charged with developing recommendations for reform of secondary education in NSW. The Committee presented what became known as the *Wyndham Report* to the Government in 1957. As a result

of the report, the Public Education Act was enacted in 1961. Consequently, the scope of the senior curriculum in NSW was broadened to include the study of visual arts, music, drama and languages. The Wyndham Scheme also led to the abolition of entry examinations for high schools, the extension of secondary schooling from five to six years duration, the establishment of the Secondary Schools Board, and the introduction of the School Certificate examination for the period of compulsory education and the HSC as the leaving credential for the period of post-compulsory school education (Hughes, 2002).

The report's authors had envisaged that the first four years of secondary education would be compulsory, concluding with an external examination that would lead to the awarding of a School Certificate. The Wyndham Scheme was based on the proposition that most students would discontinue formal education at the end of their fourth year of secondary schooling. It was determined that the two years of post-compulsory schooling would include a liberal education. However, at its core, this period of schooling would lead to an examination that would provide university matriculation (Wyndham, 1957). In this regard, the HSC was intended to be elitist, providing education for the ablest students with the intention of preparing them for admission to university (Hughes, 2002). By creating the School Certificate and the HSC, Wyndham sought to challenge the view that secondary education was for the privileged, creating a paradigm in which completion of the first four years of secondary education would become the norm. However, it was assumed that students of average or lower ability would engage in employment or vocational training following four years of secondary schooling.

Wyndham had distinguished the purpose of the first four years of secondary education from the final two years of schooling. The pattern of study provided in the first four years of schooling was intended to be broad in nature, directed to students of average ability. Years five and six of secondary education were directed to the HSC examination, in order to provide a score that is used for matriculation to university. The two distinct purposes of learning in the

first four years of secondary and those in the final two years of secondary education were recognised in the Wyndham Scheme's recommendation to establish two separate school boards with distinct responsibilities. Board of Secondary Education staff would have responsibility for the years leading to the School Certificate and Board of Senior School Studies staff would have responsibility for the senior years leading to the Higher School Certificate. This decision was prompted by concerns that without such a structure, the requirements of university entry could drive learning in the first four years of secondary schooling—even though many students completing their compulsory secondary schooling might not attend university. As Wyndham asserted ,

had it not been for the fear, well-justified under the conditions of the time, that there would be pressure upon that Board [i.e. if a single Board for secondary schools had been established] to have the final secondary school examination meet the requirements of university matriculation and that the consequent requirements of that examination would be reflected far back in the activities of the early years of the secondary school. (Hughes, 2002, p. 156).

Each iteration of the HSC has been designed around the requirements of admission to university, making the HSC a high-stakes test since its inception. As a consequence, teachers in NSW have also experienced the HSC as a high-stakes testing regime.

3.2.2 The McGaw reforms: “Shaping Their Future”.

In 1995, the NSW Government commissioned Professor Barry McGaw to develop a green paper regarding potential reforms to the HSC. This review was initiated in response to a perception that the standards of the HSC had fallen and that there was a need to increase rigour in the test. In light of public discussions about raising standards in the HSC, the stakes associated with the HSC rose further, resulting in a new public discourse about the test—with the test becoming even more high-stakes as a consequence. The green paper, titled *Their*

Future: Options for Reform of the Higher School Certificate, was published in 1996. In the paper, the curriculum provided in the final two years of secondary schooling was examined, along with how students could be best positioned via the curriculum to take their role in society. Assessment and reporting practices relating to student achievement in the HSC were also considered, in addition to the role of the HSC in the transition from school to training, higher education or employment. In March 1997, *Shaping Their Future: Recommendations for Reform of the Higher School Certificate* (McGaw, 1997), also referred to as the McGaw Report, was released. This was followed in August 1997 with *Securing Their Future: The New South Wales Government's reforms for the Higher School Certificate* (McGaw, 1997), in which implementation of reforms proposed in the McGaw Report was outlined. In *Securing Their Future* (McGaw, 1997), the HSC was described as “more than an examination”—“a nationally and internationally recognised program of study by which the achievements of students are measured and reported through both school-based assessments and formal external examinations” (NSW Government, 1997, p. 6).

The McGaw reforms were prompted by the expanded purpose of the HSC, including a desire to increase standards in the test and perceptions regarding the rigour of these standards. Within the recommendations was an acknowledgement that the HSC needed to be sufficiently broad to provide a pathway to university, while also providing vocational and other pathways. As a result, McGaw identified multiple purposes for the HSC beyond a matriculation pathway. However, with this development, the stakes associated with the HSC were increased further. No longer was the test a pathway to matriculation for students who desired to attend university—it had become a judgment about learning for all students. As the threshold for success in the HSC changed, from a university pathway for a minority of students to a judgment based on a mark and band, the high-stakes nature of the test escalated. In describing the purpose of the HSC, McGaw identified a number of aims that extended the HSC beyond its original

role as a pathway. One important addition to the purpose of the HSC was to prepare students to become active citizens. This broadening of the understanding of the purpose of the HSC was in recognition of increased participation rates in the senior years of schooling that were not envisaged at the time of the Wyndham Scheme. In response to the broadening purposes of the HSC, significant changes occurred in assessment and reporting, moving from a norm-referenced model to a standards-referenced approach.

The standards established in McGaw's reforms were based on descriptive bands of high to low performance. These standards formed the basis for the development of school-based assessment tasks, as well as HSC examination questions used to evaluate student performance. With the adoption of a standards-referenced approach, greater emphasis was given to assessing student achievement of learning outcomes. These standards were made explicit in syllabus documents, through examination specifications, and in the provision of exemplars of the standards established for the HSC. In adopting a standards-referenced approach, achievement was described in terms of the level of achievement, as opposed to a pass or fail. McGaw also identified the relationship between the HSC and the university entrance score as problematic and confusing. McGaw (1997, p. 101) observed that this score

Has become a label for students and a means for easy comparison, whether fair or not, among students and schools. It dominates post-[HSC] discussions. In fact, discussion of virtually any aspect of senior secondary education in [NSW] often quickly becomes a discussion of the Tertiary Entrance Rank rather than the [HSC].

Following the first HSC examination conducted under the changes instigated by McGaw in 2001, Professor Geoff Masters was commissioned to conduct a review and provide advice on the standards-referenced examination. In his report, *Fair and Meaningful Measures: A Review of Examination Procedures in the NSW Higher School Certificate*, Masters (2002) focused on the quality and effectiveness of processes for setting the examination and the accompanying

marking guidelines; marking procedures for the examination and processes for determining standards of achievement for the examination; and, finally, quality assurance processes for the development, marking and validation of student achievement in the HSC examination. In his report, Masters (2002) affirmed that an important purpose of the HSC was to provide a score for university entrance.

3.2.3 HSC reforms in 2016: *Stronger HSC Standards*.

Each successive reform to the HSC has been built on increasing standards and rigour within the HSC, resulting in a concomitant increase in the stakes associated with the test. This development has occurred due to the influence of these reforms on the nature of the HSC and the nature of the public discourse associated with the HSC. In 2017, NESA was established to replace the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES). This change was made based on findings of the *Review of the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards: Report of the Independent Panel* (Louden et al., 2016). The *Review of the Board of Studies* occurred in parallel to a BOSTES review of the HSC, and resulted in the publication of *Stronger HSC Standards: Blueprint* (BOSTES, 2016a). Along with this report, BOSTES (2016b) released *Stronger HSC Standards: Overview of the Evidence*, which included the research on which HSC reforms proposed in *Stronger HSC Standards: Blueprint* (BOSTES, 2016a) had been based. The authors of the reviews indicated that approaches to school-based assessment in the HSC required improvement, with a greater focus on formative assessment. A need to give greater attention to alternative approaches to curriculum, assessment and reporting in the HSC was also noted in *Stronger HSC Standards*. Particular note was made in *Stronger HSC Standards* of demands placed on teachers and students involved in the HSC due to syllabus coverage, syllabus dot points and the currency of syllabuses. Also identified was the need to reform HSC examinations to better assess students' depth of knowledge and application of skills.

In the *Report of the Independent Panel*, Louden et al. (2016) referenced parallel work being done by BOSTES staff to prepare reforms to the HSC, which were reported in *Stronger HSC Standards: Blueprint* (BOSTES, 2016a). Seven reforms to the HSC were proposed, including the establishment of minimum standards for literacy and numeracy and changes to the curriculum and to assessment. In *Stronger HSC Standards*, the purpose of the HSC was expanded further:

The HSC is not the end of learning for NSW school students. It prepares students for the next stage in their life—whether academic study, vocational training, or employment—and to take their place as adult members of society. Primarily, it records school completion and achievement for students, parents, employers and the community. For many students, completing the HSC is a significant achievement. (BOSTES, 2016b, p. 5)

The authors noted that the HSC was a means of reporting student achievement against defined standards of performance, as well as being used by UAC staff to produce a university entrance rank. In sum, the stakes associated with the HSC rose higher still amid the rhetoric around this tranche of reforms. In the process, the HSC was maintained as a narrow yardstick with which to measure academic success.

In the *Stronger HSC Standards* (BOSTES, 2016a) reforms, the standards-referenced approach used in the previous version of the HSC was retained. In addition, the 2 Unit structure for courses, moderated school-based assessment, and the examination would continue to be the basis for the final HSC mark. These reforms to the HSC were underpinned by three themes: Minimum standards, flexibility and versatility, and maximising student achievement (BOSTES, 2016a). Amid public focus on each of these themes (particularly attention to minimum standards), the stakes associated with the HSC rose further. This was despite the reforms' authors stating that "school-based assessment is used as a way to motivate students

or to ensure students attempt work. An endless cycle of assessments through Years 11 and 12 unnecessarily adds to the pressure and stress of senior study” (BOSTES, 2016a). Stress to students who attempt the HSC is clearly named as a concern in *Stronger HSC Standards*. Even so, it is likely that, by the reforms’ very nature, the stakes associated with the HSC will continue to rise as the reforms are implemented. Reforms to the HSC examination itself were introduced along with reforms to school-based assessment. The first cohort of students will sit the new exam in 2019. The intention is that knowledge and skills will be tested in the new examination, rather than aspects of recall. However, the stakes associated with the test may rise further as a result of this change, particularly in regards to the need of students to meet minimum standards and that lack of predictability in the nature, form and structure of the final examination.

3.3 The HSC is a High-Stakes Testing Regime

In examining the history of reforms to the test, it becomes clear that the HSC is a high-stakes testing regime. In the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, evidence was provided that high-stakes testing results in managerialism and performativity in schools (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2014). These effects of the HSC as a high-stakes test are consistent with features of described by Lewis and Hardy (2015, p. 258), who have noted that “the intense focus upon data and improvement targets served to highlight how highly visible, high-stakes assessment, such as NAPLAN, constitute schools and teachers alike”, rendering “resultant teacher subjectivity... potentially amenable to change”. As Lingard and Sellar (2013, p. 634) have explained:

There is a considerable body of research literature (e.g. Nichols and Berliner 2007; Stobart 2008; Taubman 2009; Darling-Hammond 2010) [*sic*] demonstrating the perverse effects of high stakes testing upon teachers’ pedagogical practices and upon students (Jones et al. 1999) [*sic*]. We use the term “perverse”, following its use in that literature and by our research interviewees. Both usages refer to the anti-educational effects which result when performance measures become targets for systems and

schools.

In the next part of the chapter, an explanation is provided of the characteristics of the HSC that are consistent with other high-stakes tests. Two significant examples are provided as evidence of the high-stakes nature of the HSC. Finally, examples from media reporting are presented in order to demonstrate the high stakes associated with the public discourse around the HSC.

3.3.1 What makes the HSC a high-stakes test?

References to high-stakes testing in Australia in the relevant literature are limited, with most researchers to date focusing on NAPLAN (Wyn et al., 2014). There is a paucity of research in terms of the HSC as a form of high-stakes testing. In light of the HSC's many purposes, as well as the methodology used to determine HSC marks, high-stakes characteristics of the test may not be easily recognisable. However, the HSC is high-stakes as a result of several features of the test: accountabilities required by NESA, the structure of the HSC itself, and public discourse around the HSC. Another formal feature of the HSC that results in high stakes associated with the test is its role as a requirement for students to enter university, vocational training or the workplace. Beyond the formal accountabilities associated with the HSC, the test has become high-stakes in the public domain in NSW because of the way in which HSC results are used to compare academic performance across schools. As Lewis and Hardy (2015) have indicated, comparisons of school performance become high-stakes in the context of a competitive education market.

Media reporting on performance in the HSC raises the stakes associated with the HSC, in particular through the impact of this reporting on the reputational capital of schools. Lingard and Rawolle (2011) have shown that publication of results, which are based on defined standards, leads to comparisons of performance across schools, with the stakes associated with the test rising as a result. Comparisons between schools are published annually by the print media in league tables, heightening the high-stakes nature of the HSC. In *Stronger HSC*

Standards (BOSTES, 2016a), the authors argued for the need to reform the HSC due to the detrimental impact of school-based assessment and public reporting of examination results. The impact of these elements of the HSC on student wellbeing and teaching and learning were identified by Wyn et al. (2014) as features of high-stakes testing regimes. Lingard and Sellar (2013) have explained that high-stakes testing is characterised by an emphasis on performance data by education systems and schools, distorting the nature of learning. These are features of the HSC.

3.3.2 Reports on the HSC by ICAC and the NSW Ombudsman.

Evidence of the high-stakes nature of the HSC is clear in two reports from the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (2007) and the NSW Ombudsman (2013). The authors of both reports noted the high-stakes attached to the HSC by the NSW Government. In 2007, the Independent Commission Against Corruption presented the NSW Parliament with the *Report on an investigation and systems review of corruption risks associated with HSC take-home assessment tasks*. This report was produced in response to allegations made to the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) that a tutoring business, Acclaim Education, had provided improper assistance to students on school-based assessment tasks. This was seen as an issue of equity because marks from at-home assessment tasks form part of a student's final HSC mark. While evidence was insufficient to bring a prosecution for corruption or fraud, ICAC staff identified corruption risks associated with malpractice in take-home assessment tasks. The report's authors noted that societal expectations associated with the HSC were increasing, which could give rise to malpractice and corruption. They found that the increasing importance of the HSC (particularly as a pathway to further education, training, or employment), along with the competitive pressures that this situation created for students, could lead to cases of fraud. The authors argued that these risks had emerged because the HSC was seen as a means to an end, and not an end in itself—indicating the high stakes associated

with the test. Further evidence of ICAC’s view of the HSC as a high-stakes test was evident in the 20 binding recommendations made in the ICAC report (ICAC, 2007).

There is further evidence of the high-stakes nature of the HSC in the NSW Ombudsman’s report into special provisions in the HSC provided to students with a disability. In 2013, the NSW Ombudsman released a report entitled *A level playing field? HSC Disability provisions: A special report to Parliament under s.31 of the Ombudsman Act 1974*. This report was commissioned in response to concerns raised by news journalists that students from independent schools were accessing special examination provisions in the HSC for students with a disability at twice the rate of students from state schools. The implication was that students from affluent backgrounds were gaining an unfair advantage over less well-off students. The Ombudsman found no evidence of educators or students at independent schools “gaming the system”. However, inequities associated with some processes for obtaining special provisions in the HSC were identified through the investigation. The fact that the NSW Ombudsman produced a high-level report reviewing the risks of students accessing an unfair advantage in the HSC examination is further evidence of the high-stakes nature of the test.

3.3.3 The HSC is described as a high-stakes testing regime in media reporting.

The authors of ICAC (2007) and the Ombudsman’s (2013) reports alluded to the impact of media reporting on community expectations surrounding performance in the HSC. Lingard and Rawolle (2004) have argued that reductive media reporting on complex issues in education results in higher stakes for educators. Further, Lingard and Rawolle (2011) have identified that reporting student achievement has become a media event. Many journalists are reductive, simplistic and comparative in their media reporting of the HSC. In response to widespread, media reporting on education issues, school educators may focus on performance rather than on student learning. This concern is consistent with a continuing focus among education stakeholders on academic achievement (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000) —an agenda with

which members of the news media are fully engaged. In December each year, NESAs staff provide a media release that includes students who have placed first in each course of study; a list of top achievers who have achieved a high placing in their course; a list of all-round achievers, or students who have achieved Band 6, the highest band possible, in 10 or more units; and numbers of top achievers, listing the number of students who have achieved Band 6. From this data, league tables ranking the comparative performance of schools based on students' Band 6 achievement are published in the two daily Sydney newspapers (*The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph*).

As the print media has moved to digital platforms, more detailed league tables have been developed. From 2015, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Vo, Ha & Howard Dec 16, 2015) has provided a digital tool that ranks all schools, reflecting the increasingly high-stakes nature of the HSC. The role of the HSC as a pathway to university features prominently in media reporting of achievement in the test. In some cases, the HSC is conflated with the ATAR in the process. An example of this mistake occurred in a *Daily Telegraph* article ("The Class We Failed") that was published in 1997 regarding student achievement in the HSC at Mt Druitt High School (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 January, 1997). The author suggested that students at the school had failed the HSC based on reference to ATAR scores. The error in conflating the HSC with the ATAR was identified in the successful defamation case brought by students from Mt Druitt High School against the *Daily Telegraph* in 2000 (Carr, November, 2000). As part of the settlement, the *Daily Telegraph* was required to publish a statement that

the students in the HSC class of 1996 successfully completed their HSC and contrary to the suggestions in the original article many of those students performed very well scoring marks in the HSC. The *Daily Telegraph* apologises to each student in the class of 1996 at Mt Druitt. It also apologises to their parents and friends for all the hurt, harm and suffering it has caused them (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 November, 2000).

3.4 Current Education System Understandings of the HSC

In this section, further background on the HSC is provided through consideration of perspectives of leaders from the state, Catholic and independent education sectors in NSW. As has been explained earlier, data from each sector leader was gathered as background for this research, separate to the data collected for the main study. For this reason, that data is presented here rather than in Chapter 5, where an explanation of the methodology used in this study is provided. As such, this data should be considered in the same way as the other document review presented in this chapter, in which background knowledge about the HSC was provided. Insights from the sector leaders were gathered through introductory individual interviews with leaders from each sector. Three general aspects of the HSC were canvassed with the leaders: Their perception of the purpose of the HSC, the impact of the HSC on policy and practice in schools, and whether the HSC was used as a measure of school and teacher effectiveness. Each of these areas was explored in order to understand sector leader perceptions of the stakes accompanying the HSC. Three senior leaders (SL1, SL2, SL3) with expertise in senior secondary education, one from the Catholic Education Commission, one from the Department of Education, and one from the Association of Independent Schools, were interviewed. One sector leader expressed a concern that there may be differing views expressed by the sectors and requested that comments from their sector be deidentified. To meet this request it was necessary to deidentify each of the sectors and as a result the various sector leaders are identified in the study as SL1, SL2 and SL3. Through these interviews, the researcher enhanced his ability to interpret educator experiences of the HSC.

3.4.1 Sector leader understandings of the purpose of the HSC.

Sector leaders agreed that the HSC serves multiple purposes. However, there were differences of nuance in their opinions. Overall, the three sector leaders viewed the HSC as a credible and valued credential, considered that the HSC functioned as a matriculation pathway

for students, and saw the HSC as a program of learning with the breadth and depth to meet students' diverse needs. Each sector leader identified the importance of the HSC as an exit credential for students. One sector leader, in particular, described the purpose of the HSC in its most basic form:

The credential that summarises two years of schooling. It is highly regarded. Yes it is a credential and it's important that we send students out with a recognised credential that employers trust and recognise, but the fundamental part of what we're doing is about quality teaching and learning. (SL2)

This view was shared by the three sector leaders. There were, however, nuances in the emphasis given to the importance of the role the HSC plays in matriculation to university. As one sector leader indicated: "The initial purpose of the HSC was, of course, almost entirely matriculation although the HSC is not a fixed entity. It is something, which has, if you like, changed over time" (SL1). The reforms to the HSC discussed earlier in the chapter indicated how the HSC has changed over time. Yet, there is a residual connection between the HSC and university entry. As one sector leader observed,

I think most schools would look at the HSC as having one or two main purposes. The first one would certainly be, I suppose a passageway, a rite of passage, a rite to gain tertiary entrance. It's that pathway to tertiary education that would be the first thing. But I think its main purpose is to provide a holistic education for the children of NSW and I think it does that quite well. (SL3)

The purpose of the HSC to provide a rigorous and relevant education to meet the needs of senior students was generally agreed upon among the three sector leaders. One sector leader said, "a more recent development has been concern expressed about the quality of the HSC by universities and employers, but that is a matter that's still being resolved" (SL1). This

observation was predictive of the reforms to the HSC introduced in 2016, which were discussed earlier in this chapter. Notwithstanding this observation, the same sector leader said,

[It is the] uncontestably rigorous and reliable way in which the HSC assesses, and if you like, certifies students when a student has a testamur from [BOSTES] about their HSC performance that is accepted as not just high-stakes, but a highly reliable instrument. (SL1)

These comments indicate concerns about the quality of the HSC. Another sector leader contextualised the concerns expressed regarding the quality teaching and learning in the HSC, observing that

There is an interplay between quality syllabuses, a framework in which schools offer curriculum but at the local level it really has to be about schools choosing a broad range of curriculum and focusing on quality teaching and learning. (SL2)

These observations indicate the complexities faced by schools in each system in providing quality learning while delivering the HSC.

3.4.2 System policies and practice for the HSC.

The importance of performance in the HSC for the reputational capital of schools was recognised by each of the sector leaders. The sector leaders reported that school and teacher performance in the HSC were important factors that drove teaching and learning in their systems. Sector leaders identified that school resourcing was influenced by performance in the HSC. The notion of resourcing was expressed in terms of the importance of school reputation to attract enrolments which was particularly important to the Catholic and Independent school sectors. Higher enrolments provide higher resources to schools. While one sector leader spoke of the direct relationship between teaching and learning and achievement in the HSC, the other two sector leaders suggested that achievement in the HSC was somewhat disconnected from teaching and learning. Sector leaders indicated a strong awareness of the high-stakes nature of

the HSC in terms of performance and in teaching and learning outcomes for students. In relation to the high-stakes aspects of performance, one sector leader said, “I think schools see it as a really important way of demonstrating to their community that they’re meeting their charter to provide quality education” (SL3).

This sector leader considered that the link between the HSC and university entrance through the ATAR made the HSC high-stakes. All the sector leaders tended to see achievement in the HSC as somewhat dichotomous to quality teaching and learning. As one sector leader said,

So you’re coaching I guess for maximum success with an eye on the ATAR. If the ATAR isn’t the goal, it’s students going out with a credential that equips students with the skills they need. (SL2)

Yet, meeting the learning needs of students beyond an HSC score or ATAR rank is considered as also being high-stakes. As one sector leader said,

It’s about giving kids a rich, the richest possible experience and the best chance of success providing the most options you can. Commitment to kids, knowing the syllabus and set students up for success in the broadest sense. (SL2)

3.4.3 System thinking on the HSC as a measure of school and teacher effectiveness.

A number of comments from the sector leaders regarding the use of achievement data from the HSC to improve practice reflected attitudes of managerialism and performativity. Comments made by sector leaders were consistent with the language of performativity. As one sector leader commented,

“Our schools should be data rich and they should use a wide range of data of which NAPLAN and the HSC are part of it and it’s important that schools look at the data and reflect on their practice for improvement (SL1).

While the sector leaders indicated that HSC achievement data played a role in informing school activities, they identified that the HSC consisted of more than achievement data. They identified that schools needed to rely on a range of data associated with the HSC to guide decisions and actions.

To varying degrees, the sector leaders were disapproving of the way in which HSC achievement data was used. They also commented that the type of achievement data used was inadequate to describe the outcomes of learning in the HSC. As one sector leader observed,

To measure a teacher's performance without looking at the capacity of the students I think is unreasonable. There are some schools that do exceptionally well with the population of students they draw. There are other schools that have what appear to be excellent results, but arguably should be a great deal better, given their drawing population. (SL1)

Another sector leader supported this opinion, saying, "I don't know if the HSC is a great measure. To me, the best measure is the value add that a school provides because it depends on, as I said, the quality of the students when they come in and the value add that is provided" (SL3). While sector leaders held the view that data relating to the HSC was important to drive school and teacher improvement, they also held the view that the HSC alone was too narrow a source of data to make judgements about school or teacher performance.

Through their comments, the sector leaders identified a series of judgements made by the community, the media, and engaged with by schools based on the HSC. All agreed that there were flaws in this approach. Given their comments regarding the importance of value adding to student outcomes, the sector leaders interviewed did not think the HSC contributed to adding value. As one sector leader commented regarding performance league tables,

When the *Herald* puts out its league table people believe it. It's an absolutely pathetic measure because it's done so poorly" (SL3).

One sector leader raised concerns regarding problems associated with taking an unsophisticated approach to interpreting HSC performance data and indicated that,

The problem comes down to how they look at the school and whether their interpretation of the results is actually reasonable. (SL1)

The sector leaders found value in using data to drive improvement, but did not believe the publicly available data and the way in which it was presented for the HSC were valuable.

They recognised that schools played a role in distorting the use of HSC data:

Schools enter into it too. Even locally they publish, as I said earlier, their success stories and how many Band 6s they got or how many ATARS. So schools are part of that culture of promoting. (SL2)

Sector leaders identified that appropriate, well-understood and broad data were useful in driving improvement. Yet, in terms of the way in which HSC data was presented and used, there was a consensus that data provided minimal value-add for learning.

In summary, comments from the three sector leaders indicated that the high-stakes of the HSC led to a focus on performativity by schools and teachers. Emphasis was given to the importance of data produced from the HSC to inform strategies that would lead to improvement in practice. However, sector leaders also noted that data generated from the HSC were only one measure of academic achievement among many others. Importantly, they noted that the narrow use of HSC data in isolation was inadequate in providing a true indication of school or teacher effectiveness. Inherent in these observations were concerns that the emphasis given to performance in the HSC meant that the data were often misused, and in many ways were inadequate as measures of effectiveness. Nonetheless, there was recognition among the sector leaders that the way in which the data were used publicly was inappropriate. Similarly, they indicated that the ways in which schools promoted performance in the HSC had made them complicit in the inappropriate use of this data.

3.5 Closing Comments

In this chapter, an explanation of the characteristics of the HSC and how the HSC operates in NSW was provided. The historical development of the HSC from its inception was outlined, as were the various reforms to the HSC over time. It was shown that the purpose of the HSC has been expanded beyond what was originally intended. At present, the HSC is intended to serve many purposes. Characteristics of the HSC that make it a high-stakes test were also reviewed in this chapter. Consideration was given to the role of media reporting in raising the stakes associated with the HSC. Finally, views on the HSC from leaders of three education sectors in NSW were described. Through analysing this background information, the researcher developed a deeper contextual understanding of the HSC. In the next chapter, the philosophical and theoretical approaches utilised in this research will be discussed. In Chapter 5, the research design and methodology used in this study will be described.

4.0 Philosophical and Theoretical Framework for this Study

In this chapter, the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of this study are presented, including an initial overview of hermeneutic phenomenology and its relevance to the researcher's objective in this study—that is, to access educator experiences of the NSW HSC. Following this overview, the roles of phenomena and interpretation in hermeneutic phenomenology are explained. Next, an explanation of the hermeneutic process is given. This is followed by an outline of how interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to develop the theoretical and philosophical approaches used in this study. In addition, Layder's theory of social domains (which the researcher used as an additional theoretical lens in this study) is described. This includes an explanation of how notions of situated experience, situated activity, social settings and contextual resources have been applied in this study. Finally, the relationship between social domains to hermeneutics is outlined, followed by an explanation of the nature and purpose of this study.

In the review of the literature on high-stakes testing presented in Chapter 2, three areas of relevance to studying educator experiences of the high-stakes HSC were identified—i.e., the purpose, principles and practice of the test. In each area, the effects of high-stakes testing on school and teacher experiences are evident. In this study, the researcher investigated educator interpretations of their experience of the HSC within specific contexts. Thus, the researcher's starting point was to explore participant experiences in terms of the purpose, principles and practice of the HSC. The philosophy of phenomenology, which researchers use to access people's experiences to understand their existential realities, was deemed well-suited for this purpose (that is, understanding participant experiences of the HSC).

The theoretical perspective for this study is based on interpreting phenomena experienced by participants. Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology is based on Heideggerian phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962). In this approach, interpretation of

experience is emphasised, in contrast to Husserl's (1963) phenomenology, where the experience itself is the focus. In this study, relevant phenomena were the objects, symbols, language and concepts related to educator experiences of the high-stakes HSC. This thesis explored how secondary school teachers interpreted their experience of phenomena associated with the high-stakes HSC. The study recognised that such experiences cannot be objectively known but require interpretation within each particular contexts.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is based on the notion that knowledge is generated through the interpretation of interactions and interplays of the experience of participants. The interactions and interplays that constitute experience manifest themselves in their situated experience, social setting and contextual resources. Within the theoretical framework of this study, an adaptation of social domains as presented by Layder (1997) was used as an overlay on Heideggerian phenomenology to frame the interpretation of participant experiences. These modified elements of social domains provided a lens for the interpretation of experience through the hermeneutic process. Layder (1997, 2006) identified that the social domains relate to concepts of power, agency, structures and time. Within this study, these concepts informed the interpretation of teacher experiences with high-stakes testing.

4.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenology and the HSC

Woodruff-Smith (2018, p. 3) has noted that:

Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling.

In other words, phenomenology is a philosophical approach which aims to gain knowledge of experience. It recognises that experience is not something of itself, but rather relates to the way

in which individuals interact with and respond to the experience that they have. Phenomenology holds that experience is interpreted and that this interpretation is what makes meaning of the experience.

The views of Husserl and Heidegger give rise to phenomenology focused on lived experience (Cohen, 2000). Hermeneutic phenomenology as it was used in this study is influenced more by Heidegger than by Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (Lavery, 2003). Husserl's approach to phenomenology relies on description, whereas Heidegger's hermeneutic approach allows interpretation of teachers' experience, and considers how this experience is mediated through instructional thinking and practice (Paley, 1997). Polkinghorne (1989) indicates that Husserl emphasised that engagement with phenomena is an intended and active interaction. In contrast, Heidegger (1962) indicates that experience is interpreted by being within space and time.

Hermeneutic phenomenology as proposed by Heidegger (1962) has its focus on experience as it is lived. As Lavery (2003) has explained, "Heidegger focused on 'dasein' that is translated as 'the mode of being human' or 'the situated meaning of a human in the world'" (p. 24). Polkinghorne (1983) noted that knowledge of this situated meaning is developed through repetitive back and forth consideration that is in dialogue with the various parts of the experience. This process of the hermeneutic circle was described by Kvale (1996) as a spiral process leading to the ability to make sensible meaning from experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology enables the capacity to go beyond the description of an experience and engage with the existential reality of experience. It comes from the viewpoint that to understand experience requires interpretation. This philosophical base requires the interrogation of experience through a heuristic process that informs questions as answers emerge. This process involves exploration of constituent parts of experience by individuals and consideration of how these constituent parts of experience inform the totality of experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenology informs the development of methods that are able to access experience and recognises Heidegger's view that experience is rooted within historical, social and cultural contexts (Munhall, 1989). As Osborne (1994) has explained, some branches of phenomenology seek to understand phenomena. However, the hermeneutic phenomenology that informed this study explores the phenomena associated with experience to be able to know the experience itself. As Kvale (1996) has explained, hermeneutic phenomenology considers experience within the phenomena of the cultural context through which the meaning of experience is interpreted. In this study, exploration of educator experiences of the high-stakes HSC was undertaken through consideration of phenomena associated with the HSC, and contextual factors that are the filter through which schools and teachers interpret their experience. Knowledge of these factors of experience are critical components to adequately interpret the experience of participants through the hermeneutic process.

The various phenomena associated with the HSC influence how school educators interpret their experience of the test, contributing to an existential understanding of notions such as academic success, achievement and learning. The existentialist focus of this study sits comfortably within the hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy that guided the development of the study. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on the interpretation of experience that has historical meaning within the social and individual's context (Polkinghorne, 1983). As Annells (1996) describes, Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology is capable of making sense of the phenomena of experience through the language in which it is explained. Unlike Husserl's descriptive approach to phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to interpret phenomena associated with experience. Husserl's phenomenology seeks to reduce the essential phenomena of an experience. In contrast, Heidegger's phenomenology understands that there can be various interpretations of phenomena based on a variety of experiences. Through exploration of the existential realities

of teacher experiences, the researcher sought to consider temporal and spatial contexts through which teachers in NSW experienced the HSC.

Within the tradition of phenomenology experience relates to “the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others, as these things arise and are experienced in our ‘life-world’ (Woodruff-Smith, 2018 p. 2). Experience extends beyond mere sensation and includes aspects of perception, thought, social activity and linguistic activity. The interpretation of experience is the essence of hermeneutic phenomenology (Mapp, 2008). Consequently, at its heart is to create meaning from the experiences of others and to learn from those experiences. In hermeneutic phenomenology it is through language that individuals are able to communicate their experiences to others (Todres & Holloway, 2004). In searching for meaning within these experiences, interpretation of first person accounts occurs which become the text for analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). The approach to this analysis recognises that the researcher undertakes this process in terms of their own experience and brings to the interpretation their own understandings. By doing so the *dasein* (Heidegger, 1962) or situated experience of the individual within the world can be known.

It is important to note that Heidegger does not consider experience as simply the way in which individuals know the world, but rather it is the way they are within the world. It is for this reason that the experience of individuals in the world cannot be divorced from their cultural, social and historical context (Munhall, 1989). So the experience that individuals have of the world is based upon the way in which they are situated within the world. In this regard, individuals interpret their experience through the lens of their *lifeworld*, which is the basis of the narrative of their being in the world, and it is this narrative that is interpreted by the researcher. The process of the researcher interpreting the interpretations of participants forms the basis of the *double-hermeneutic* discussed later in this chapter. This recognises the central tenet of hermeneutic phenomenology that individuals cannot experience phenomenon without

referring to their background understanding based on their cultural, social and historical context.

By virtue of this philosophical approach, issues of power, agency and structure emerged through consideration of teacher experiences. Consideration of these aspects of experience provided the opportunity to develop knowledge of how teachers experienced their sense of being through their association with the phenomena of the HSC. The philosophical underpinnings of the study allowed the researcher to develop knowledge of teacher experiences through consideration of phenomena, interpretation and hermeneutic analysis. Hermeneutic phenomenology is attentive to the idiographic nature of individual experience. Individual experience is the part of the hermeneutic circle that forms the whole (Mackey, 2005). Interrogation and interpretation of the experiences of teachers are important, providing the opportunity to understand various facets of experience. These facets are exhibited through the interactions and interrelationships of the structural, social and symbolic phenomena that arise from teacher experiences of high-stakes testing. These are the features that contribute to knowledge of the whole. In this way, the hermeneutic circle established between the individual part of the experience of the whole experience of the HSC gives intelligible meaning to experience (Kvale, 1996).

Figure 4.1 identifies how the interpretation of phenomena, as well as the overlay of adapted social domains, informed the hermeneutic process undertaken in the study. It also represents the process through which the context and phenomena of the experience were interpreted both by participants and by the researcher.

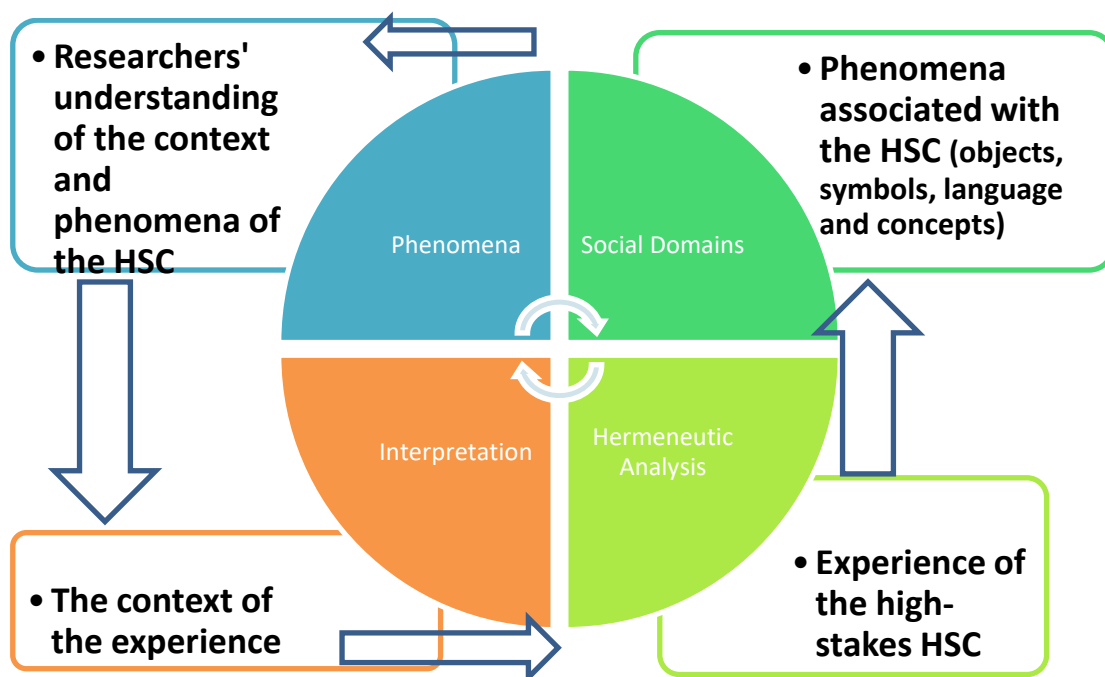


Figure 4.1. Understanding the elements of experience and a process for interpreting experiences.

4.1.1 Phenomena.

In this section, consideration is given to the interactions and interrelationships of the structural, social and symbolic features that related to this study. These relate to the vertical and horizontal transmission of decisions, policy, culture and interactions described earlier in the thesis. These are manifest through the objects, symbols, language and concepts that create the cultural context in which experience occurs. As Creswell et al. (2007) have noted, phenomenology allows the researcher to gain insight into the experience of the phenomenon. Moran (2005) has argued that phenomena are mediated and functional—factors that make experience intelligible. As this study sought to understand how teachers made sense of their experience in their context, the study extended beyond a description of teacher experiences to an *interpretation* of that experience. This approach moved beyond the transactional day-to-day experience of teachers to the broader meaning of the phenomena in question (i.e., the HSC) for teachers and their sense of being (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009). An

understanding of experience requires interpretation of the phenomena experienced within context (Hein et al., 2001).

Prejudices, preconceptions, and beliefs influence the interpretation of experience. For these reasons, Dowling (2007) has emphasised the importance of understanding the context in which experience takes place in order to interpret and understand that experience. This approach is captured by van Manen's (2007) description of the "phenomenology of practice" (p. 26). Phenomenology of practice asserts that the nature of experience can be understood by interpreting how the experience manifests through action, thinking and being. While consideration of phenomena leads to an understanding of experience, Caelli (2000) indicates that it is important not to allow the consideration of phenomena to distract from the experience itself. Understanding phenomena provides knowledge of experience, which was the aim of this study.

The conscious engagement with experience represented in hermeneutic phenomenology refers to the acts of the individual as they perceive, recall, and reflect upon their experience and develop their understanding of the world (Lavery, 2003). This approach focuses on describing the phenomena themselves as they operate in dialogue with the individual and within the individuals' context. Each experience and phenomenon requires particular interpretation, and the nature of the interpretation comes from the background, culture, and history of each individual (Heidegger, 1962). As Heidegger (1962, p. 150) said:

The question of the "who", answers itself in terms of the "I" itself, the "subject", the "self". The "who" is what maintains itself as something identical throughout changes in its experiences and ways of behaviour, and which relates itself to this changing multiplicity in so doing.

The focus of this study was the existential experience of teachers within their context, and the way in which they continually re-interpret and bring new understanding to their being as a

teacher. That is, the study was concerned with the relationship between participant experiences and their existence as teachers. Interaction with phenomena is the subjective reality determined by each individual interpretation of experience—something that is beyond eidetic reduction. For this reason, the interpretation of experience undertaken in this study looked at the totality of experience and not simply the basic components of the phenomena experienced. In other words, teachers interact with the world not as it is, but as they see it. Guignon (2012) observed that all phenomena carry with them their own meaning. The capacity of this study to empathise with, and to understand the existential experience of teachers, reflected a core feature of hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer, 1997).

4.1.2 Interpretation.

Interpretation was central to this study, as the research explored the lived experience of teachers and relied on direct responses from participants. The interpretation undertaken in the study provided knowledge regarding the meaning that participants derived from their experience (Lavery, 2003)—which is described in this study as ‘situated experience’. The process of interpretation considers the cultural, social and structural artefacts and contexts in which experiences occur (Munhall, 1989; Kvale, 1996). Through the focus on interpretation in this study, there was an openness to the diverse nature of the way in which objects and concepts are experienced. In this study, this dynamic related to the decisions, policy, culture and interactions associated with experiences of the HSC. There was an appreciation in this study that interpretation is a dynamic heuristic, providing insight and understanding. Interpretation was used in this study based on the understanding that interpretation is built upon categorisation, inferences, and explanation of experience as it is reported and understood. In this way, interpretation within this study provided a designation of meaning relating to symbols, objects and concepts experienced, and interpretation of how these phenomena are experienced.

The philosophical and theoretical framework applied in this study was cognisant that experiences accord with a variety of interactions related to the experience of the HSC. The study considered the interactions that occur across and in teachers' experiences of high-stakes testing. In doing so, the study adhered to Blumer's (1969) recognition that experience emerges from interactions with various phenomena, and these experiences influence attitudes and understanding. Following Lewis-Beck et al. (2004), the study recognised that individual meaning is produced and reproduced by experience within a social context and from everyday human activities and interactions.

Similarly, Crotty (1998) has emphasised the importance of interpreting social processes and the way in which phenomena are experienced in particular contexts. For this reason, this study was conscious of the need to attend to the language and artefacts that mediate phenomena, as argued by Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton (1991). Importantly, the study also considered how meaning is experienced across the school context, such as through the overt and covert messages that can occur. As Edvardsson et al. (2011) have noted, these considerations are important as they influence the way in which experience translates into thinking and practice. Interpretation of teacher responses to phenomena associated with the HSC required an understanding that the phenomena experienced emerge from within social, cultural, structural and personal contexts. These experiences were made intelligible through teachers' self-described experience of high-stakes testing through the HSC.

The various phenomena experienced by teachers are manifest through education policy, curriculum prescription, and the associated accountabilities teacher must meet (O'Donoghue, 2007). Increasingly, these accountability measures are themselves becoming high-stakes, given the explicit and implicit expectations created by the media, community, and politics. Through exploration of teachers' lived experience within their social, personal, and professional contexts, convergent and divergent patterns emerge, and were identified across this case study.

The interpretation adopted in this study relied on gaining knowledge from the range of participant experiences. The thesis acknowledged there are limitations to making generalised assertions based on the experience of individual teachers. Limitations regarding the ability to make generalisations from each individual's experience arise due to the nuances that occur in each experience that make them unique. Recognising the commonalities and anomalies of experience is important in the process of interpreting experience. In the process, there emerges a common language of experience that extends beyond the private language of individual experience (Wittgenstein, 1953). As the HSC is the object of teachers' experience, there is a language, culture and structure associated with the test, which means that teacher experiences of the HSC are not simply personal—they are observable and open to interpretation.

4.1.3 Hermeneutics.

The hermeneutic circle described by Heidegger (1962) represents the dynamic that is associated with human knowing and being. Through the hermeneutic circle, it is possible to gain insight into lived experience by considering the cultural, historical, and particular context in which they operate. This focuses on the importance of the interpreter understanding the experience as a necessary stage for its interpretation. The approach undertaken by this study recognised that the reality of experience changes according to the context and phenomena that are encountered and the way in which the experience is interpreted (Heidegger, 1962).

The hermeneutic adopted for the analysis of data in this study met the objective of Smythe et al. (2008), situating both the researcher and the participants within their own time, place, culture, and experience. The hermeneutic process undertaken in the study moved dialectically from a partial understanding to a more complete understanding of teachers' lived experience (Mackey, 2005). Experiences are clarified and perspective is given to these experiences through hermeneutic interpretation (van Manen, 1990; Wilson, 2014). The researcher in this study was not detached from participant's experiences as an interpreter, and

engaged meaningfully with the experience of participants, building a more complete understanding of experience (Higgs & Trede, 2010). Acknowledging pre-understandings and openness to the lived experience of others and applying the hermeneutic circle are key components in developing a phenomenological understanding of lived experience (Johansson et al., 2015).

Because of this, the study adopted the dialectic nature of hermeneutics. A key point of hermeneutic understanding is an appreciation that it is built in the relationship between the self and the other, and that experience within context is mediated through language, culture, and tradition, as Vessey (2012) explains. It is this hermeneutic understanding that shapes behaviour. Sensitivity to the other is important in enabling the capacity of the researcher to be open to things that may be different or alien, and enabling dialogue—which is the essence of hermeneutical understanding (Gadamer, 1997). It is through open dialogue that the intersubjective nature of lived experience is understood. A key component of the openness required for hermeneutics is appreciating that both the other and the self are situated within a particular context that is framed and conditioned by history, tradition, and culture (Gill, 2015). Hermeneutics enables the researcher to be able to identify things that may distort understanding of the lived experience through interpretation, which may distinguish the experience of one to another (Taylor, 2002). Nystom and Dahlberg (2001) have identified the importance of the language, symbols and interactions of phenomena and the need to be cognisant of these factors when interpreting experience.

4.2 Insights from Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

As the aim of the study was to build knowledge of the experience of the high-stakes HSC, interpretive phenomenological analysis was useful in initially informing the philosophical perspective that guided this study. According to Smith and Osborn (2007, p. 53), “the aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis... is to explore in detail how participants

are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an [interpretative phenomenological analysis] study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants”. In the process of developing a philosophical framework, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was influential, and its approach is consistent with the phenomenological underpinnings of the study. Through the process of refining the philosophical foundation, it became evident that the methodological approach inherent in IPA did not fit the purposes of the study. While IPA provided insight into the application, the forensic specificity that focused on the nature of individual experience tended to lend itself more to a psychological analysis of experience, rather than a philosophical one. Nonetheless, aspects of IPA gave direction to the design of the study. An important aspect of IPA that was incorporated related to IPA’s recognition that there are two processes undertaken in the interpretation. This relates to participants interpreting their own experience within their context and the researcher interpreting this meaning in the broader sense. These two areas of interpretation provide insight into how interactions with the phenomena of high-stakes testing inform teacher experience and consequently the existential reality that teachers experience within their role.

Smith (2004, p. 40) names the processes employed through IPA as a “double hermeneutic”, in which “the participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world”. An advantage of the “double hermeneutic” provides the mechanism to interrogate the symbolic, social, and cultural interactions that school educators experience within their own context. IPA provided the notion of a double hermeneutic approach taken by the study, enabling interpretation of experiences of the HSC as a form of high-stakes testing. As a result, IPA provided insight into the dynamic nature of this hermeneutical circle. These insights provided tools for the researcher to access the dynamic nature of experience, allowing

a deeper understanding of teacher experience within their particular context and in relation to their particular experience.

At the heart of interpretation is an understanding of the relationship between the interpreter and the object of interpretation (Smith, 2007), which, in this study, was the experience of teachers with the HSC. IPA shows that there is a subjective dimension of interpretation, which is critical in understanding the experience of school educators with high-stakes testing. IPA also informed the study's understanding that interpretation of experience relates to the way in which individuals engage consciously with their experience and how teachers make meaning from within their own context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

IPA is consistent with the phenomenological approach undertaken in the study, as the study sought to develop an understanding of experience as a whole through the exploration of individual experience. The study did not generalise from individual experience. Rather, it presented convergent and divergent patterns that emerged from individual experiences of participants in a way that is credible, enabling an authentic representation of teachers' lived experience (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Insights from IPA were particularly well suited to this study, accounting for the subjective nature of individual experience, how teachers make sense of this experience, and the role of experience in developing teachers' sense of their being as an educator (Smith, 2004). Exploration of school educators' experiences in this study recognised that the interpretation of experience is dependent upon individual and subjective reporting. Brocki and Wearden (2006) indicated the importance of interpreting the dynamic interplay between the range of phenomena that are present within the contextual realities. As Larkin et al. (2006, p. 110) indicated, "in an IPA context, this means we must inevitably accept a third-person view of a "first person" account". This study recognised that a variety of realities exist across contexts. As Bailey (1997) identifies, there may be one reality for an individual, but no single reality for all individuals. While the study applied a lens to frame teacher experiences of

the HSC, it utilises IPA in that it undertakes an inductive approach that is cognisant of the contextual nature of experience (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2004).

4.3 Interpreting Experience Through the Social Domains

Layder (1997) has developed a framework of social domains based on structure and agency. The social domains provide a useful lens through which the vertical and horizontal aspects of decisions, policy, culture and interactions can be understood. Layder presents an understanding that social experience is made up of inter-related, inter-dependent and fluid elements, a view consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenology that underpinned this study. The social domains frame an understanding of individual experiences of social integration and how that interpretation is represented in social reproduction or production created by the individual. In this way, use of the social domains in this study illuminated “the experience of people and groups as they engage in, and are engaged by, the social processes that constitute society” (Layder, 1997. p. 100). Exploration of the lived experience of teachers necessitated a focus on the existential realities of teachers’ experiences. The combination of phenomenology and social domains provided the necessary focus to achieve this objective. Houston (2015) has described each of Layder’s social domains as:

- Psychobiography: The individual’s unique journey that considers life events that build identity, values and attitudes and focuses on the biographical narrative of the individual.
- Situated activity: The role taken by the teacher in terms of relational power, communication, and the reciprocal nature of interactions.
- Social setting: The formal and informal, implicit and explicit rules that operate in the school context.
- Contextual resources: The structural power operating at the school in question, including the level of social and other capital, and the nature of authority as exercised or shared in the context.

For the purposes of this study, elements of the social domains, namely situated activity, social settings and contextual resources were used as a lens through which the hermeneutic process was undertaken.

As outlined in this chapter, IPA was influential in the development of a philosophical and theoretical framework for the study. However, elements of IPA, such as the granular focus on individual experience, were not suited to the purposes of this study. This being the case, the element of psychobiography described by Layder (1997) in his social domains was too forensic in its consideration of the individual to be useful for this study. As the hermeneutic phenomenology adopted in this study explores experience within context, it was deemed useful to replace the notion of psychobiography with the notion of *situated experience*. In this study, situated experience was considered as relating to the individual's interpretation of experience within their context. This differs from situated activity as it focuses on how the individual interprets experience rather than the interactions associated with that experience. Similarly, situated experience differs from social settings as it looks at the experience as it occurs within a context that is more comprehensive than simply considering the operational rules that exist within the school context. This adaptation of social domains provided the study with a theoretical frame to explore power as it exists in structures and relationships, and how individuals interpret and experience these interdependent and dynamic as their individual reality. Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasises the importance of space and time in interpreting the nature of experience. The framework provided by the adapted social domains assisted the hermeneutic analysis undertaken in the study.

Layder's theory of social domains (1997, 2006) complements hermeneutic phenomenology, and together they provided a useful framework to interpret teachers' lived experiences of the high-stakes HSC. In determining that hermeneutic phenomenology and social domains were appropriate tools for the study, it was assessed that social domains fit the

purpose of the study. Social domains provided the opportunity to appreciate the interplay of the objective and subjective components of school educators' experience, enabling the opportunity to interpret how teachers made sense of their experiences, and how the phenomena experienced by teachers became manifest (Carter & Sealey, 2000). Layder's understanding of the nature of power not only connects strongly to the literature relating to high-stakes testing, but also to the way in which teachers experience subjective and objective aspects of the HSC. Layder (1997) expressed this in terms of considering the power of structure and the power of agency, which he says are phenomena that are empirically related although ontologically separable.

The ability to interpret the experience of each participant in the study is provided through Layder's (2006) concept of the power of structure. Power of structure provides for equal consideration of the power of agency and also recognises the influence of local context. Through social domains, Layder (1985, p. 132) indicates, "the concept of structure may also refer to localised sets of reproduced social relationships". Through an adaptation of the social domains via hermeneutic phenomenology, the interplay between the structural nature of the HSC and how the HSC is enacted in local contexts were recognised for their influence on the experiences of participants. Importantly, the lens of social domains acknowledges that there are levels of conformity that are required through the various objective and subjective interactions with the phenomena (Layder, 1982). By using the lens of the adapted social domains, it becomes possible to account for the agency of the individual participants as they make sense of their experience, and to understand the influence of social setting on experience (Layder, 1997).

Figure 4.2 is adapted from Houston and Mullens-Jenkins (2011). It represents how the social domains, as adapted for this study, provide a useful lens through which the hermeneutic is undertaken. Elements such as time and space, power structure and agency are presented in

the diagram as the contextual realities in which experience occurs. It is within this framework that the situated activity, the social settings, the contextual resources and situated experience provide insight into the experience of participants. The interplay of the adapted social domains outlined in the diagram informed the process of hermeneutic analysis in this study, along with the contextual knowledge gathered by the researcher.

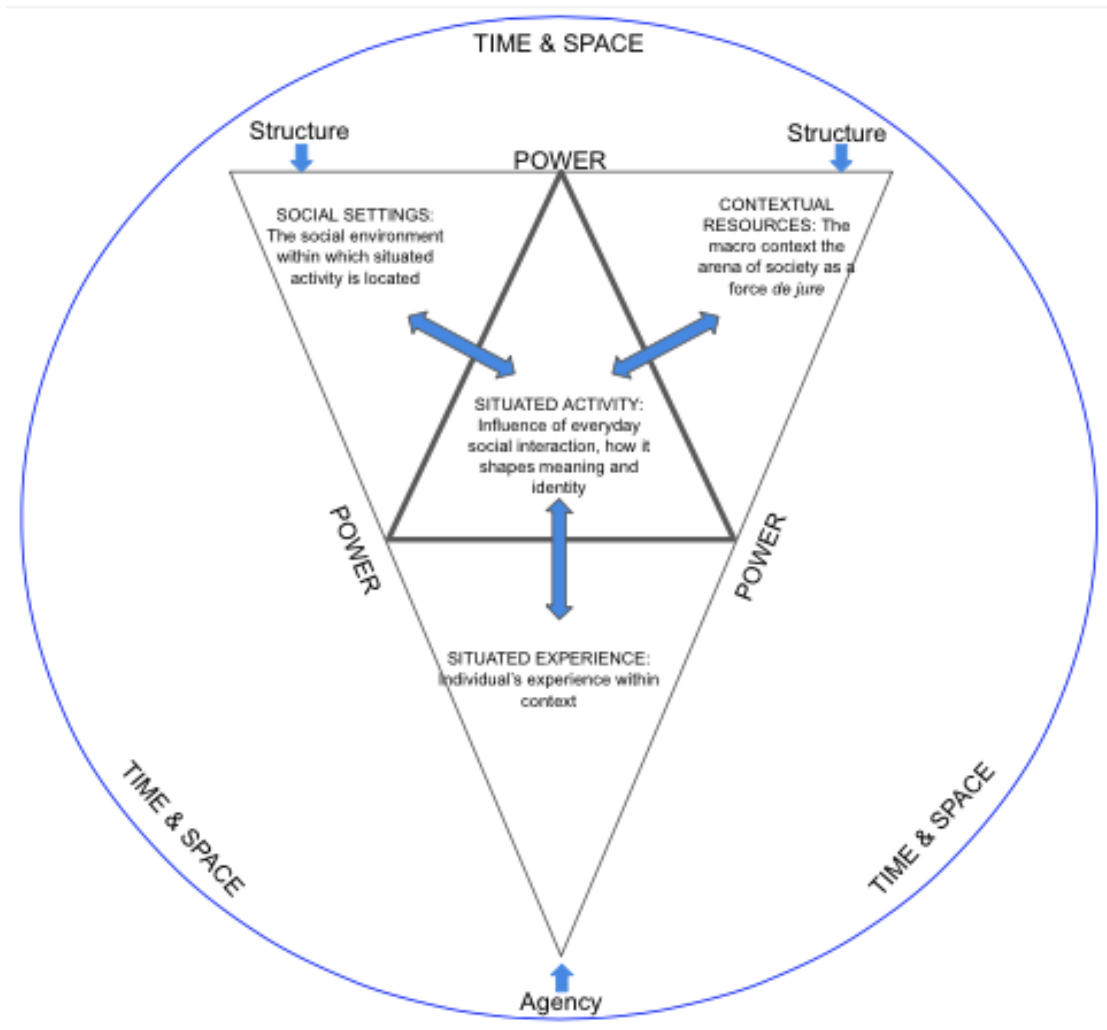


Figure 4.2. The frame of the adapted social domains (adapted from Houston & Mullens-Jensen, 2011).

Layder (1985, 2006) highlighted the roles of agency, structure, authority and power in interactions within social domains. These were manifested in this study through four phenomena experienced, relating to accountabilities, expectations, the manifestation of the

high-stakes of the HSC, and approaches to teaching and learning within the school context. While these categories are consistent with the findings in the review of the literature discussed in Chapter 2, they are neither exhaustive nor definitive. Rather, these four categories operated as a starting point through which experiences of the high-stakes HSC were explored and interpreted. From this starting point, a frame of reference was commenced through which knowledge of teachers' being in the world was developed. Heidegger's (1962) concept of "dasein", or the notion of being within the context of space and time, was relevant in this respect. By commencing a focus on these four manifestations of phenomena, points of connection for the data generation process were identified. By exploring the interpretation of these aspects of the HSC, it became possible to develop a hermeneutical frame, which enhanced interpretation of the experience of school leaders, managers and teachers.

4.3.1 Teacher experiences of the HSC in social domains.

In this part of the chapter, attention is given to how adapted social domains of situated experience, situated activity, social setting and contextual resources relate to teacher experience of the high-stakes HSC. This involves consideration of the role of structure, power, agency, time and space in the experience of teachers within their own context. Each of these elements is a central element of how teachers interpret their experience within their context.

4.3.2 Situated experience.

Situated experience has substituted the place of psychobiography in the social domains developed by Layder (1997). Whereas the notion of psychobiography is well suited to an IPA approach, it provides too great a focus on the nature of individual experience—a level of depth and granularity not suited to the aims of this study. Houston (2015) has indicated that psychobiography provides consideration of unique experiences includes matters of identity (i.e., one's individual narrative, emotional, and developmental experiences). However, these aims were beyond the scope of this study. Rather than considering broader issues such as

career, professional identity, and role attachment (Layder, 1997), the situated experience of teachers directly concerns teacher experiences with the HSC. Through developing the lens of situated experience, the researcher gained insight into the context of the experience of individual teachers. Insight into the situated experience of individuals provided the opportunity to delineate various aspects of the interactions with structures and other agents that teachers experience across social domains (Luke & Bates, 2015). In this regard, the situated experience of each teacher provided a category through which the *mélange* of individual contextual experiences could be identified and explored.

4.3.3 Situated activity.

Situated activity is the lens through which social interactions are explored—the relationships that contribute to the meaning and identity of teachers, shaping the way in which participants in this study interpreted their experiences (Houston, 2015). The way in which teachers interpret their interactions relating to the HSC is informed and made sense of through the activity that occurs within their situation. This includes the explicit and implicit messages regarding priorities and values expressed through power relationships, language, and social and cultural artefacts that occur at school and faculty level. It is through situated activity that the importance of context to the way in which teachers makes sense of their experience can be best understood. Layder et al. (1991, p. 448) indicated that “action and structure cease to be separate domains of social reality independently confronting each other, and become indissolubly fused aspects of a ‘duality of structure’ whose existence is co-terminous with the continuity of social praxis”. In essence, these are the experiences of social life, which are structured through the physical and social context in which social activities and social practices are undertaken (Layder, 1997). For teachers involved in the HSC, this context is the school in which they teach—i.e., their workplace and professional context.

4.3.4 Social setting.

Layder (2006) indicates that social settings create the organisational shape and form in which teachers operate, which are accompanied by a range of bureaucratic arrangements that prescribe roles, practices, position, and relationship. Bourdieu's (Wacquant, 2016) notion of habitus guided this study, to the extent that Bourdieu provides a concept through which social reproduction can be understood as being fostered within the social setting in which teachers operate (Inghilleri, 2003). Underlying organisational beliefs, attitudes, and values are manifest, either overtly or covertly, through the language, customs, and mores that exist within school settings (Carter & Sealey, 2000). It is through these activities within the social setting that implicit and explicit expectation can be understood (Layder, 2006).

4.3.5 Contextual resources.

Houston (2015) has indicated that contextual resources refer to the nature of authority, ethos, mores, and levels of social, educational, and cultural capital. Contextual resources within the social domains are represented through the symbols and priorities that are central to each school's projected and core identities (Houston & Mullan-Jensen, 2011). These resources are manifest in the context at hand through history, culture, attitudes, and values (Layder, 2006). The systemic power present in contextual resources presents itself in the language and culture of the school context in which teachers operate (Carter & Sealey, 2000). As a result, the teacher has no control over the contextual resources in their school, and contextual resources influence the way in which teachers experience the HSC as a form of high-stakes testing within their school context. As indicated in Figure 4.3, the application of adapted social domains in this phenomenological study required an appreciation of the interaction, interplay, and inter-relationship across the social domains of situated experience, situated activity, social setting, and contextual resources. Recognising the relationship between these elements provided a framework for the hermeneutic circle undertaken in analysing the data generated in this study.

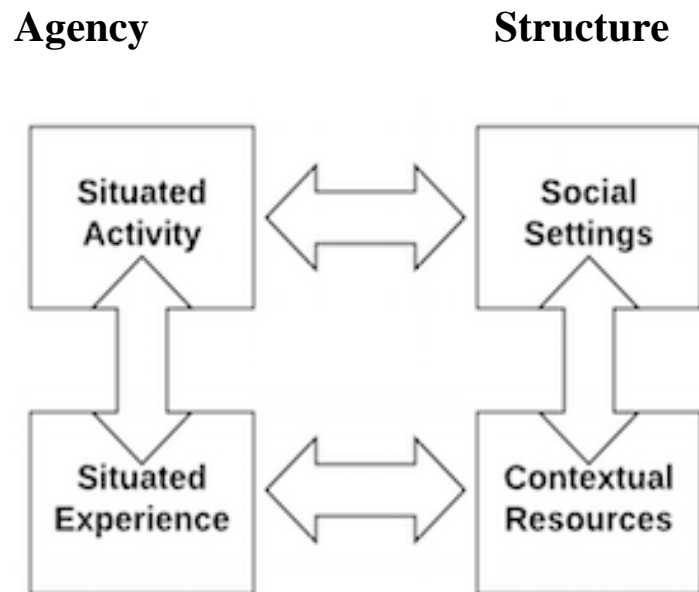


Figure 4.3. Social domains: Agency and structure (Carter & Sealey, 2000).

4.4 The Social Domains and Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Through phenomenology and the lens of the social domains, the researcher was equipped with the tools necessary to provide an authentic interpretation of the way in which participants interpreted their experience. Phenomenology provided a depth of understanding of the experience of participants, and the social domains provided the frame through which the experience of participants was contextualised. In this section of the chapter, an explanation is provided of how this study accessed the authentic experiences of teachers by understanding how teachers' experiences are mediated. This involved consideration of the linguistic, cultural, situational and individual circumstances. For this reason, the researcher looked at each experience on a case-by-case basis. In this regard, the approach taken appropriated elements of Bourdieu's (1989) habitus, recognising that culture, symbols and language are means of social production and reproduction, and viewing structure and agency as key components of experience.

Application of the lens of the social domains allows the study to identify and categorise

the divergent and convergent patterns of experience across school educators. Houston and Mullen-Jenson (2011) suggest that the combination of a phenomenological and the frame of the social domains account for the personal, sociological, and contextual dimension dimensions of experience that provides ontological depth and breadth. Exploration of the experience of school educators provides the opportunity to identify what Smith et al. (2009) describe as the multi-dimensional nature of experience. At the same time, the lens of the social domains provides this study with the opportunity to understand the socially embedded nature of individual human experience (Smith, 2011), which recognises the interrelationship between context, social experiences, and individual experience.

Houston and Mullen-Jensen (2011, p. 274) have observed that the lens of the social domains enhances the phenomenological approach taken in the study because it helps to capture the objective and subjective aspects of teacher experience:

To be more clear on this theme, what the Theory of Social Domains adds to the social phenomenology of Heidegger, Schutz and Sartre, is a nuanced, differentiated account of the social context; that is, one that sees the constituent features of social life as an amalgam of subjectivist influences and objectivist elements.

Through the alignment of hermeneutic phenomenology with the adapted social domains, the opportunity arises for the study to develop insight into teachers' lived experience. Thus, the study is cognisant that to access, understand, and interpret the lived experience of teachers in doing so Smith et al. (2009) identify the importance of appreciating the objective and subjective realities of interactions and their influence on the nature of experience. Houston and Mullen-Jensen (2011) describe this as the "process of linking the perceiver with the perceived" (p. 268). As a result, the mediation of experience is situational, social, cultural and personal. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2, especially the work of Ball (2009) indicate that

high-stakes testing acts as a fulcrum for the societal and structural demands of performativity on schools and teachers. Much of the literature reviewed also demonstrated the relationship of performativity to structures of power and agency that prioritise the learning agenda for teachers, schools, and educational systems.

While this study does not address in depth the notions of agency and structure as understood by Bourdieu, the study does appropriate Bourdieu's (1989) notion of "habitus" insofar as it recognises the importance of culture, symbols, and language as they interact and mediate the structures and agency of power. In doing so, the study recognises that experiences are guided within contextual norms, which situate the experience of the individual teacher. As Wacquant (2016) suggests, contextual norms have a bearing on the way in which one acts, feels, and thinks that can lead to conformity or non-conformity. Through an appreciation of the interplay between the individual experience and the objective reality of high-stakes testing, the study is cognisant that individual experience is governed by what King (2000) describes as the socially and culturally-agreed rules through which the meaning of experience is constructed. Bourdieu (1989) asserts that there is dialectic in operation between social structures and the practice and experience of individuals. Bourdieu (1984) asserts that social agency, structures, and organisation can be either internalised or resisted by individuals and in doing so they create their own cognitive structures.

A strong emphasis in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 was that the phenomena of high-stakes testing brings with it a range of expectations, pressures, policies, and practice centred on performativity. Accompanying these areas are a range of issues relating to power, especially in terms of its expression, the way power is exercised or operates, and the influence that performativity has upon teacher thinking and practice. Consideration of Bourdieu's (1993) notions of fields and structures of power helped to form aspects of this study, especially in regard to understanding power within positional and situational relationships. In this study,

these relationships were captured by focusing on context and the interplay of context with experience. The study did not apply Bourdieu's (1989) concept of habitus but, rather, appropriated it in a way consistent with the framework provided by hermeneutic phenomenology and the social domains.

Pilario's (2005) explanation of habitus helps to illustrate how Bourdieu's (1989) concept was appropriated in this study. The appropriated concept of habitus was used to provide a conceptual bridge between teacher experiences of the objective elements of the HSC while interpreting how teachers made sense of these elements and the various interactions related to this process. As Pilario (2005, p. 174) has noted, "for Bourdieu, practices are not direct products of structures or fields. He employs a 'mediating concept' of *habitus*, which is a product of the prevailing structures but also a principle of invention and creative response to actual historical circumstance." In this way, Bourdieu's notion of habitus provided conceptual guidance for this study, as well as an additional means of understanding and interpreting the interplay between teachers and the objective and subjective realities they experience through participation in the HSC.

4.5 The Nature and Intent of this Study

In the previous section of this chapter, an outline was provided of how hermeneutic phenomenology and the social domains provided a suite of tools that enabled an authentic interpretation of the experiences of participants in this research. The strength of hermeneutic phenomenology in enabling the researcher to capture and interpret the experience of participants within their context relates to the interrogative and inductive nature of hermeneutic phenomenology. The approach adopted in this study enabled an appreciation of the interactions and dialectics at play as participants interpreted their experience within their context. Through purposive sampling of HSC teachers, this research focused on participants with specific connections and, therefore, interests in matters relating to the HSC. This point is discussed

further in Chapter 5. The purpose of using this approach was to allow the reader to make links between this study, the researcher's personal and professional experiences, and the existing literature (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

This illustrates the interrogative nature of the hermeneutic phenomenology used in this study. In this approach, the analysis is a constructive dialogue that illuminates existing research while ensuring that results based on participants' lived experiences do not stand on their own or in isolation (Smith, 2004). In this study, the experiences of participants were considered within the macro and micro contexts in which the high-stakes HSC operates as a form of high-stakes testing. In the process, the researcher used the lens of extant literature regarding high-stakes testing to interpret the experiences of each participant (Eatough & Smith, 2006). In this way, findings regarding the experiences of participants in this study were not analysed in isolation, but were considered as they related to the phenomena experienced by participants in their context.

In understanding these experiences, it is essential to note that each teacher operates within a world that has its own meaning for them. This meaningful experience is further contextualised within the teacher's school and faculty structure. As Frijda (2005) has explained, these experiences within context operate as a call to respond with actions that are appropriate to their context. In this study, the lived experiences of teachers were explored to consider the extent to which those experiences influence pedagogical thinking and practice. There is a degree of emotional connection to experiences within context, which "are directed outwards towards the world and the people, events and objects that make up the world" (Eatough & Smith, 2006, p. 484). Consequently, an iterative process was adopted throughout this study, revealing both divergent and convergent patterns of experience and accounting for the differing contexts in which experiences take place (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The double hermeneutic borrowed from IPA sought a holistic interpretation of the experience of HSC

teachers. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) have explained that a holistic understanding of phenomena is gathered through participants' words and actions, and through an interpretation of the context in which participants operate. As a result, interpretations in this study were inductive, being informed by the orienting framework of social domains theory, the relevant literature, the context of teacher experiences, and by the convergent and divergent elements of these experiences. The overarching purpose of this study was to understand participant experiences, acknowledging the unique nature of experience and appreciating the distinctive and complex matters that arise from experience (Breakwell et al., 2012).

4.6 Closing Comments

This chapter has provided an outline of the theoretical framework that underpinned this study. In this chapter, an explanation was given of how hermeneutic phenomenology and aspects appropriated from IPA, social domains theory, and the notion of habitus have informed the approach to and methodology adopted for the study. Consideration has also been given to how structure, agency and power influence the nature of experience. The interrelationship of individual experience, social interactions, organisational and cultural norms, and the nature of authority, ethos, mores, and levels of social, educational, and cultural capital have been considered in this chapter. These factors are understood through the social domains and their application to the interpretation of the experience of participants in the study. They also inform the methodology used to interpret the experience of teachers, as described in Chapter 5. Finally, in this chapter, an explanation was provided of the nature and purpose of this study. In the following chapter, an explanation of the methodology that was developed to meet the philosophical and theoretical aims of this study is provided.

5.0 Research Design

In this research study, the following question was addressed:

How do experiences of the requirements, expectations and culture of the NSW HSC impact school educators in their approaches to teaching and learning and how they understand their role as educators?

An interpretive phenomenological qualitative approach was used in this study to provide the researcher with a detailed understanding of how educators interpret their experience of the HSC within their school context. Through this approach, the researcher identified new insights into school educator experiences of high-stakes testing, and how school educators interpret this experience. The research was designed in two parts. Initially a document analysis and interviews with leaders from each of the school sectors in NSW was undertaken. This served the purpose of providing background knowledge to build on the researchers background knowledge and experience of the HSC. Additionally, the researcher conducted what was described as an indicative survey which gathered knowledge of the context of the two school sites in which the study was situated. Gathering knowledge of the context improved the quality of the researcher's interpretation of the data generated in the study. The study itself was based on data generated from focus groups interviews with school leaders, focus groups interviews with school middle-managers and semi structured interviews with teachers. Table 5.1 summarises the approach taken to the research and the rationale for the approach taken for the research design.

Table 5.1

Overview of the Research Design

	<i>Approach</i>	<i>Rationale For Use</i>
Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document Analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided information on the character and nature of the HSC and its development over time and the intended purpose of the HSC.
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with one senior leader from the three education sectors in NSW • Indicative School Survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional understanding of the HSC is provided from the perspectives of the HSC from leaders from each of the three education sectors in NSW. • The intent in administering this survey was to gain contextual knowledge of both schools regarding staff perceptions, attitudes and practices associated with the HSC.
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group interviews with school leadership • Focus group interviews with middle managers • Semi-structured interviews with teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with focus groups of school leaders enabled the researcher to access the experiences of educators who determine policy, procedure and practice in the case study schools. • Focus group interviews with middle managers were the vehicle through which the researcher identified the experience of the HSC within the dynamics of positional power in the case study • Semi-structured interviews with teachers gained knowledge of school educators' experiences of the HSC and to develop insight into how participants make meaning of their experience.

The researcher identified three subsidiary research questions in the relevant literature on this topic and from background interviews into the high-stakes HSC. These subsidiary questions were:

- 1a. How is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators?
- 1b. In what ways do results in the high-stakes HSC examination influence approaches to teaching and learning at a school and classroom level in NSW?
- 1c. Do expectations regarding the HSC impact the practice of school leaders and teachers?

In this chapter, the framework, methods and processes used in the collection and analysis of data for the study are outlined in order to answer these questions. First, an outline is provided of the qualitative nature of this study. This discussion is followed by an explanation of why the case study methodology was deemed the most appropriate method for this study. Then an overview is provided of the researcher's process for selecting school sites and participants for the case study. Methods of data collection utilised in this study are outlined—i.e., a survey, focus group interviews, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Next, the methods adopted for data analysis are described. Finally, the researcher's approach to addressing issues of trustworthiness, dependability and ethics is presented.

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study as this approach aligns with principles of hermeneutic phenomenology (i.e., the conceptual framework selected for this study) and is an effective way of accessing the experience of participants. The qualitative approach undertaken in the study reflected Merriam's (2009) view of qualitative studies as providing insight into how organisations and individuals make sense of their experience within their particular context. Using a qualitative multi-site case study, the researcher investigated school educator experiences of high-stakes testing in Australia. Specifically, the researcher examined the state-based NSW HSC, exploring how school leaders and teachers in NSW made sense of an examination that is sometimes viewed as a constraint on teaching and learning. Using a phenomenological perspective, the researcher examined the experiences of high-stakes testing among school educators who participated in the case study. Through this approach, the

researcher developed a deep understanding of the HSC and its impact on school educators.

Methods of data collection employed in this case study were as follows:

1. Focus group interviews with school leadership teams at case study sites, through which the researcher identified factors that impact HSC-related education policy and practice.
2. Focus group interviews with middle managers, through which the researcher identified how education policies were experienced and interpreted at case study sites.
3. Semi-structured interviews with teachers involved with the HSC, through which the researcher gained knowledge of school educators' experiences of the HSC.

Through these methods, the researcher gained access to the experiences of school educators in NSW. For the purpose of this study, "school educators" represented school leaders, middle managers, and teachers involved with the HSC. One of the most significant ways in which the HSC is experienced in schools is via school leaders, middle managers and teachers. Similarly, school educators from each of these groups interpret the HSC through filters that are external to their school, as well as through filters within their school context. In a similar way, members of these groups of school educators are best placed to represent how performance in the HSC impacts policies, procedures and practices within their school. Finally, by accessing the experience of school educators, the researcher was well-placed to gain knowledge of how schools and middle managers represent how the HSC impacts school educators' understanding of their role. At the same time, teachers who participated in this study provided a direct voice regarding their understanding of their role and how the HSC affects this understanding.

The hermeneutic process undertaken in analysing the data in this study is explained in this chapter. As was explained in Chapter 4, researchers utilise hermeneutic phenomenology as a philosophical framework to gain direct access to lived experiences. In this study, the case study methodology adopted was the vehicle through which those experiences were accessed

and understood. Stake (1995, 2004) has noted that, by utilising qualitative case study methodology, researchers can understand how meaning is developed within particular contexts. When researchers adopt a phenomenological approach, their personal interpretations of phenomena impact the creation of knowledge. For this reason, this research was designed based on the researcher's recognition that reality can have multiple meanings for individuals and groups and is based on subjective understanding. In this chapter, it is explained why a case study approach was best suited to the nature and purpose of this research. In addition, the process of selecting participants for this research is outlined. This is followed by an explanation of why the data collection tools used in this study were selected. Data analysis processes undertaken in this research are then outlined, including an explanation of how ethical risks were mitigated in the study. Finally, the limitations of this research are described.

5.1 Research Framework

Heidegger (1962) has suggested that interrogating human experiences of phenomena results in new knowledge, which is derived from the way in which those experiences are interpreted. Heidegger (1962) presented four ways in which phenomena are described—as '*sich zerge*', '*sheinen*', '*erscheinung*' or '*Bloßer Auftritt*'. '*Sich zeigen*'—which denotes the phenomenon as it makes itself known, and is focused on the notion of that which is revealed. '*Sheinen*' denotes the way things seem, and is focused on personal and subjective knowledge of phenomena. '*Erscheinung*' is something that is not explicit, but arises from implication or announces itself via something else. Finally, '*Bloßer Auftritt*' denotes how phenomena are perceived as apparent, or phenomena that are identifiable through the way they appear. Each of these categories of phenomena was used to inform the analysis in this study.

The essence of these four ways of understanding phenomena provides an authentic way of knowing phenomena and how it is experienced. Each of these categories of phenomena provide insight into how phenomena are experienced and as a consequence provide a window

into understanding the nature of experience. As a result it was necessary to select a research methodology that provided access to these experiences of phenomena with the context in which they are experienced. Using this phenomenological position, the researcher adopted a case study methodology that, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), was intended to provide an authentic window into experience within a particular context. Through the methods adopted in this case study, the researcher gained insight into social, cultural and structural phenomena experienced within a given context (Hamel et al., 1993a, 1993b).

In the hermeneutic circle (the philosophical underpinnings of which were discussed in Chapter 4) that was used in data analysis for this study, it was important that the researcher recognised the context in which participants experienced phenomena associated with the HSC. The researcher designed this study in order to develop an understanding of the cultural context of participant experiences via the bounded context of the case study (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Hammersley & Gomm, 2004; Stake, 1995, 2004). The researcher's intention was not to draw generalisations from participants' individual experiences—rather, the researcher aimed to consider particular experiences vis-a-vis to identifying divergent and convergent experiences. From the data generated in this study, patterns of differences and similarities in experience were identified. Through interpreting these divergences and convergences in the nature of participant experiences, the researcher developed an understanding of school and teacher experiences with high-stakes testing. Therefore, findings from this study were not intended to be conclusive but, instead, indicative of experience within context (Crotty, 1998).

Authentic reporting of participant experiences was achieved in this research through what Clancy (2013) has described as the process of being constantly conscious of the researcher's influence on the study. Holloway and Biley (2011) have described this as self-awareness on the part of the researcher, whereby the researcher must constantly question their attitudes and actions in relation to the research question and the subsidiary research questions.

In this study, the researcher adopted this approach in order to enhance the hermeneutic analysis undertaken as part of data interpretation. Through the hermeneutic process, a heuristic was established through a back-and-forth process of questioning, clarification and further questioning. Through this approach, the researcher recognised that knowledge of the whole could only be understood through reference to its individual parts, and vice versa. In addition, the researcher acknowledged that this circularity is required in order to build understanding. Heidegger (1962, p. 195) termed this process “the hermeneutic circle”. The researcher used their prior knowledge and experiences to enhance the hermeneutic analysis undertaken in this research.

5.1.1 The qualitative nature of the study.

Cresswell (2013, p. 42) has described qualitative research as “an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures, and various blends of material”. It is for this reason that a qualitative approach was identified as the most appropriate methodology for the purpose of this study. As Merriam (2009, p. 13) has noted, qualitative researchers are “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world”. This approach is consistent with the phenomenological philosophy that underpinned this study. A qualitative approach provides knowledge of experience in its context, as well as the opportunity to explore the meaning that groups and individuals give to their experiences of these phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

In this research, the researcher was situated within the study in order to develop a contextual understanding of schools and teachers. Situating the researcher in the research is known as reflexivity, and acknowledges the effect of the researcher on the research (Malterud, 2001). Malterud (2001, p. 483) has indicated that “qualitative research methods... use strategies for: questioning findings and interpretations, instead of taking them for granted;

assessing their internal and external validity”. Researchers use qualitative methods of data collection to access the experience of research participants and to develop insight into how participants make meaning of their experience. In this research, this objective was achieved through the use of a semi-structured interview technique. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) have indicated that semi-structured interview methods are conducive to participants and researchers reflecting on their experiences, aiding the researcher’s interpretation of experience.

In recognition of the researcher’s firsthand experience and knowledge of the HSC, it was deemed prudent to outline an appreciation of system thinking regarding the HSC. This was done in order to ensure that the researcher brought a broader perspective to the study than that of his own experience as a secondary school teacher, a secondary school leader and, more recently, as Head of Secondary Curriculum at Sydney Catholic Schools. While this experience brought with it certain insights, this was problematic insofar as the researcher brought a particular lens of experience to the study. As a result, it was important for reflexivity to ensure that, while positioned in the research, the researcher was able to bring a broad lens to his understanding of the study. To this end, a review of documents regarding formal procedures, policy and practices associated with the HSC was undertaken to broaden the researcher’s perspective of the phenomena under consideration in the study. A whole-school indicative survey was also undertaken for the researcher to develop an understanding of the context in which the research occurred. Following on from the background knowledge developed through these processes, the researcher employed three methodologies to address the research question and subsidiary research questions. The process of data analysis utilised in this research was situated in the hermeneutic circle, whereby the researcher was positioned within the research. This process also involved a heuristic through which the researcher interrogated and interpreted the data generated.

The capacity of the researcher to authentically report the experience of teachers was based on his capacity to be constantly conscious of the influence his experience with the HSC brought to the study (Clancy, 2013). The researcher's focus on self-awareness involved a clarification and questioning of the attitudes and actions of the researcher, given his own experiences with the HSC, to position him in the research (Holloway & Biley 2011). Through this experience the researcher clarified that his experience narrowed his perspective which tended to focus on the influence of high-stakes at a system focused macro level. It also made him question how his macro level experience played out at the micro level of schools and classrooms.

The background to the study gathered through the document review and the interviews with leaders from each of the school sectors in NSW assisted the researcher to understand the broader context of the HSC and his own experience with the HSC by revisiting the requirements of the HSC and its historical development and by broadening his understanding of how the HSC was understood across the various educational systems in NSW. As a result the researcher was able to consider his place and what he brings to the research, while at the same time being able to appreciate the broader educational context in which teachers experience the HSC (Sandelowski and Barroso 2002). The indicative survey that provided the researcher with an understanding of the context of the study further informed the reflexivity on his own experience that the researcher brought to the study. Through the indicative survey the researcher was able to refine his macro level understanding of the operation of the HSC through an understanding of how the HSC was understood at the micro level of the school.

5.1.2 Case study.

The approach adopted in this study was consistent with Yin's (1984, p. 23) description that case study research "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which

multiple sources of evidence are used”. A case study methodology was well-suited to the researcher’s objectives in this study—that is, considering a phenomenon (in this case, the high-stakes HSC) and how groups and individuals interpret or make meaning of their experiences of the phenomenon within their context. In devising the research design for this study, the researcher adhered to Creswell’s (2013) description that a case study is situated in real life bounded contexts and is used to generate data from multiple sources. Stake (1995) has suggested that knowledge gained through a case study can be extrapolated to understand experiences more broadly beyond the individual case. As such, using a case study approach, researchers can draw conclusions in order to develop an understanding of the phenomena being explored—in this study, high-stakes testing. Using the case study methodology adopted for this research, the researcher contributed to knowledge of experiences of high-stakes testing through exploring experiences of the HSC.

Stake (1995) has indicated that the value of case study research is based on an understanding of knowledge and reality. For this reason, it was important for the researcher to develop an understanding of the context in which this research took place. Stake also indicated that case study research is suited to a phenomenological and existential purpose. Consequently, this case study was designed to explore how school educators experience the HSC across two school case study sites. These two school sites formed the bounded context in which the experience of school educators could be interpreted and understood. By situating the case study across multiple sites it became possible to understand the nature of experience with the HSC in more than one context. Doing so helped to identify the nuances of experience that could be dependent on the context in which the experience occurred. Through this approach, the researcher gathered evidence of divergent and convergent patterns of experience—that is, similarities and differences in participant experiences of high-stakes testing within the bounded context of their school.

As Stake (2004) has indicated, the case under consideration is of interest in itself and provides insight into a specific issue (in this case, high-stakes testing). This case study was particularistic in its focus on the HSC as high-stakes. In addition, this case study was descriptive in representing the experiences of a small subset of school educators, and was heuristic based on the researcher's use of hermeneutic phenomenological analysis in the case study. Each of these features was consistent with Merriam's (2009) description of the characteristics of case study methodology. Focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews are methods commonly used in qualitative case study research.

5.2 Methods

At the heart of this study was the researcher's attempt to understand the experiences of participants regarding the phenomena of high-stakes testing. The researcher accessed these experiences through data generated from focus groups and participant interviews. Knowledge of the context in which participants operated was gained through an indicative school survey. A hermeneutic approach to data analysis was employed. Kafle (2011, p. 191) has stated that the

hermeneutic method avoids method for method's sake and does not have a step by step method or analytic requirements. The only guidelines are the recommendation for a dynamic interplay among six research activities: commitment to an abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question, investigating the experience as it is lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and consideration of parts and whole.

In selecting a methodology for their study, qualitative researchers must prioritise the need to grasp the nature of being through interpreting the experiences of participants (van Manen, 1990). In this research, an understanding of the context in which school leaders and teachers

experienced the HSC as high-stakes was critical in order to identify new knowledge of this topic. The methods adopted to achieve this end are outlined in the next part of the chapter.

5.2.1 Selection of a bounded context: Two school sites.

Two schools were selected to participate in this multi-site case study. The researcher's purpose in conducting the study (that is, to gain knowledge of participant experiences of high stakes testing) determined the selection criteria for the site schools. The first parameter for site selection was that educators at the school had an interest in and experience of the HSC as a form of high-stakes testing. The second parameter was that the schools were self-governing and independent in their implementation of NESA-mandated requirements regarding the HSC. Specifically, staff at the schools were not subject to policies and procedures that may be imposed by a system that could mediate or filter the experiences of educators at the schools. Through this second parameter, the researcher ensured that educators at the school (and not a third party) were responsible for establishing the school's policies, practices and culture associated with the requirements of the HSC.

Initially, the researcher intended to include four schools within the case study. However, school leaders declined the researcher's first round of invitations to participate in the study. As a result, invitations were extended to leaders at 18 schools who met the two criteria outlined above. These schools included co-educational schools and boys and girls single-sex schools. Invitations to participate in the study were extended to schools on the basis that their inclusion would allow the researcher to advance the research purpose, questions, propositions, and contexts identified in this study (Rowley, 2002). However, only two school leaders accepted the invitation for their school to participate in the study. As a result, the selection of two schools was a pragmatic decision. Due to the individual circumstances of schools' it is not possible to determine the precise reasons why so many schools declined to participate in the study. However, schools typically indicated that they either had other priorities, were too busy

or that Year 12 teachers needed to be in class and focused on the needs of their students. The reasons given by schools suggested to the researcher that many of schools that declined the invitation to participate in the study felt that participation in the study would distract from the attention that they would be able to give to their Year 12 students.

Including only two schools proved to be beneficial for the study and assisted in finetuning the research design. The two schools selected for the study had similar demographics and student populations. Both schools were secondary (i.e., years 7 to 12) single-sex boys schools, with enrolments of approximately 1300 students. In the Australian Government MySchool Website both schools scored more than 120 points above the average in the Index of Community and Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). This would indicate that most families of students at both schools could be described as aspirational upper-middle class. By including these two school sites, the researcher obtained the bounded contexts in which this research is situated. By their nature, both schools exist in what Stake (1978, p. 7) has described as a “bounded system of interest”.

5.2.2 Participants.

As the researcher was seeking insight into participant experiences of the HSC, purposive sampling was the most effective method of participant selection for this study. Through purposive sampling, the researcher was able to select participants based on their knowledge and experience of the HSC within the bounded context of their school. In this regard, participants in this research were a homogenous group. A choice was made to use purposive sampling—i.e., selecting participants based on their knowledge, experience and direct relationship to the topic of the study (Bernard, 2002). As Tongco (2007) has indicated, purposive sampling is useful as it ensures the quality and reliability of data, due to the capacity of participants to provide competence in reporting their experience.

Three categories of participants were identified. These categories reflected the key elements of the research design. This included the contextual knowledge gained by the indicative survey that provided background to inform the analysis undertaken by the researcher. This background knowledge was gathered by inviting all teachers in the two school sites to participate in the indicative survey. This data was important to position the researcher within the research. The other categories consisting of school leaders, middle managers and teachers were the source of the data that informed the study.

The first category of participants included all teachers at each school site, whether or not they had direct experience with the HSC. This first group of participants undertook an indicative survey. The researcher used the results of this survey to gain insight into attitudes and culture at each school in relation to the HSC. In the process, the researcher developed an understanding of the context in which the study was being undertaken. The second category consisted of school leaders and managers who expressed their attitudes and experience regarding the HSC. The third category of participants was teachers involved with the HSC. These teachers participated in semi-structured interviews regarding their experience of the HSC. The second and third category of participants were selected to generate data regarding the research question and subsidiary research questions. The first category of participants was essential to informing the researcher of the context in which the research was undertaken, while participants in the second and third categories provided the data necessary to complete the study.

Calderon et al. (2000) have noted that researchers can assure the quality of data generated through understanding participants' backgrounds and experiences, as well as the role participants play within their context. In this study, interview focus groups included each school's Principal, Deputy Principal, Head of Curriculum, and other members of the school leadership team. Interviews with focus groups of school leaders enabled the researcher to

access the experiences of educators who determine policy, procedure and practice in the case study schools. In this study, this group was referred to as “school leaders”. Heads of Department (or in some cases Year Coordinators) were included in focus groups of middle managers. Participants in these roles were referred to as “middle managers” in this study. Focus group interviews with middle managers were the vehicle through which the researcher identified the experience of the HSC within the dynamics of positional power in the case study. Drawing on knowledge of the roles of these participants, the researcher contextualised their experiences of the HSC and the perspectives that they brought to those experiences. In dynamics around participant roles, the researcher identified insights into how members of each school community as a whole experienced the HSC, and how this experience was mediated across the school community. The researcher’s objective in this study (i.e., to understand teacher experiences of the HSC) was explained to members of each focus group. Focus groups consisted of 11 school leaders and 11 middle managers from School 1 and eight school leaders and four middle managers from School 2. An open invitation was extended to school leaders and middle managers from two schools to participate in the focus groups.

Invitations to participate in semi-structured interviews were also extended to HSC teachers at both schools. Given the researcher’s focus on educator experiences of the HSC, the criterion established for participating in the study was teachers who had direct experience of teaching the HSC in the year of data collection. Due to the commonality of teacher experiences in instructing HSC students, a homogenous purposive approach to sampling was achieved, enhancing the quality of interpretation of participant experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For participants across categories 2 and 3, demographic data was gathered in order for the researcher to ensure a spread of representation according to gender, years of teaching experience, and the range of teacher experiences of the HSC (Flick, 2018). No other criteria were established to exclude participants. In total, 32 participants (a larger number of

participants than anticipated) volunteered for the study. The researcher made the erroneous assumption that some interviews may not prove relevant to the study and, as a result, could be discarded. Following reflection, it became clear that, if the case study was designed for the researcher to access the experience of participants, the experience of each participant was relevant, and no participant experience should be excluded from the study arbitrarily. As a consequence the experience of all these 32 participants were included in the study. Consistent with Polkinghorne's (2005) observation, participants were selected on the basis of their specific experience and their insights on the topic being studied. An important component of the study was that the researcher sought to consider the individual experiences of a wide variety of individuals within their context (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002).

5.3 Data Collection

5.3.1 Indicative survey.

The first stage of data collection at both schools in the case study was a survey, which all teachers at each school were invited to participate in. The researcher's intent in administering this survey was to gain contextual knowledge of both schools regarding staff perceptions, attitudes and practices associated with the HSC. For the purposes of this study, an indicative survey was used. The researcher used findings of this survey to better understand how the purpose, principles and practices of the HSC were commonly perceived by teachers at both schools. No conclusions were drawn from the data collected in the survey. Rather, it was used to inform the development of questions for the focus group and semi-structured interviews which are described later in this chapter.

Participants were selected for the indicative survey via an invitation to all teachers in the school, which was forwarded to school staff on the researcher's behalf by the school contact person. At both schools in the study, the school contact person was the school leader responsible for teaching and learning in the schools. This person was the natural point of

contact for matters such as those being canvassed in this study. Details regarding the indicative survey are included in Appendix 1. Invitations to participate in the indicative survey included written information regarding the nature of the study. It was explained that completion of the survey was voluntary and that participants and their responses would be de-identified.

There were four parts to the survey, consisting of demographic questions, questions on a six-point Likert scale, questions on a three-point scale, and a series of dichotomous questions. The indicative survey consisted of 40 questions. The first three questions were demographic in nature, including the length of teaching service, whether the responder taught HSC students, and the gender of the responder. Questions 4 to 20 were designed for the researcher to develop an understanding of the HSC as experienced by respondents at both schools. Questions 21 to 27 in the indicative survey concerned respondent perceptions regarding principles and practices that underpin the HSC. Finally, questions 28 to 40 were a series of dichotomous questions concerning the perceived purpose of the HSC. These questions are provided in Appendix A.

In School 1, which had a staff of approximately 100 teachers, 21 responses to the indicative survey were received. In School 2, which had a staff of approximately 120 teachers, 33 responses were received. Based on the indicative survey, the sample of teachers in both schools was deemed to be representative. Across both case study schools, the highest number of participants (34.9% of respondents) had been teachers for between six and 15 years. A much higher number of respondents at School 2 had been teaching for six years or more. In School 1, more than 90% of respondents taught HSC students. In contrast, in School 2, more than 27% of respondents did not teach HSC students. In School 1, approximately 52% of respondents were male, while in School 2 more than 57% of respondents were female. The indicative survey was not intended to be quantifiable or evidentiary. Rather, the researcher used the survey to understand the context of both school case study sites. The researcher was informed by data generated from the indicative survey in the developing questions for the focus group and semi-

structured interviews. By gaining a contextual understanding of dynamics regarding the HSC at both school sites, the researcher was able to identify commonalities associated with the HSC at the two schools. Using this knowledge, the researcher developed questions regarding educator experiences of topics identified in the indicative survey.

5.3.2 Interviews with focus groups.

Data was also gathered through focus group discussions with school leaders and middle managers. From these discussions, the researcher developed an understanding of how school leaders and managers experience the HSC. Interviews with these focus groups enabled the researcher to access the experiences of educators who determine policy, procedure and practice in schools. The researcher directed discussion in focus groups in order to identify school leaders and middle managers' understanding of the principles, purpose and practice of the HSC. Through exploring these three areas, the researcher developed a more in-depth understanding of the context in which the HSC is experienced—specifically, how the HSC is experienced across school cultures. In the process, the researcher considered how educators perceive performance in the HSC and how the HSC impacts the role teachers are expected to play within their school context. The researcher's objective in conducting this study (i.e., to understand school educator experiences of the HSC) was explained to focus group invitees. An explanation of the scope of the study, participant rights within the study, and informed consent was obtained from focus group participants. In School 1, the focus group of school leaders consisted of the school's eight-person leadership team. There were four participants in the focus group of middle managers. At School 2, 11 members of the leadership team participated in the focus group of leaders. There were 10 participants in the focus group of middle managers. In Table 5.3, an overview is provided of participants in the four focus groups.

Table 5.3

Focus Group Participants

<u>School 1</u>		<u>School 2</u>	
<i>Leadership Team</i>	<i>Middle Managers</i>	<i>Leadership Team</i>	<i>Middle Managers</i>
Principal	History and Legal	Headmaster	English Coordinator
Deputy Principal	Studies Coordinator	Deputy Headmaster	Assistant English
Assistant	Mathematics	Director of	Coordinator
Principal—Teaching	Coordinator	Curriculum	Human Society and
and Learning	Commerce,	Director of Identity	Its Environment
Assistant	Economics and	Director of Junior	Coordinator
Principal—Mission	Business Studies	School	Religious Education
and Identity	Coordinator	Director of Co-	Coordinator
Head of the Junior	Technology and	Curriculum	Science Coordinator
School	Applied Studies	Director of Learning	Physical
Head of Staff	Coordinator	and Innovation	Development,
Services		Director of Staff	Health and Physical
Head of Student		Services	Education
Services		Director of Pastoral	Coordinator
		Care	Languages
		Director of Business	Coordinator
		Services	Mathematics
		Director of	Coordinator
		Administration	

Eight open-ended questions were used to guide the discussion in focus group interviews. These questions were categorised loosely in terms of the principles, purpose and practice of the HSC as experienced by focus group participants. As suggested by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), interview questions ranged from questions regarding participants' generalised experience of the HSC to more specific questions relating to cultural and structural impacts of the HSC. These questions are included in the Appendix Four. The researcher trialled and refined these open-ended questions with a group of colleagues who had experience with the HSC as educators. In reviewing questions, the researcher engaged in the process of reflection and revision described by Sampson (2004) in order to ensure that the scope, focus and structure of the questions was sufficient to generate appropriate data for the study.

5.3.3 Semi-structured interviews with teachers.

Semi-structured interviews with teachers were used to address the research question and subsidiary research questions outlined at the start of this chapter. The researcher used the indicative survey and focus group interviews to refine the approach adopted in semi-structured interviews. The researcher used data from the indicative survey to inform the development of questions for focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. Questions for semi-structured interviews were refined further in response to key ideas that were identified during focus group interviews. Through this process of refinement, the researcher was able to target more directly educator experiences of aspects of the HSC that were prevalent in the schools included in this study.

As Merriam (1998) has identified, interviews are used to provide insight into the experiences of research participants. For this reason, interviews are central features of case study research. In this study, semi-structured interviews were the method chosen to explore the experience of teachers with the HSC. The open-ended nature of semi-structured interview questions means participants can respond freely while maintaining a degree of control over the

direction of the discussion (Given, 2008). As Mason (2002) has indicated, semi-structured interviews can be used to gather data from dialogue, are topic-centred, and situate participant responses within their context. In this study, the uniqueness of each participant's experience was acknowledged through semi-structured interviews with teachers (Shinebourne, 2017). Semi-structured interview questions used in this study were open-ended to allow for free responses. In this way, participants were encouraged to report on what van Manen (2017a, p. 812) has described as the "primal meaning of human existence and lived experience".

The researcher directed interview questions by framing them through the lens of the purpose, principles or practice of the HSC. These three concepts underpinned the subsidiary research questions identified at the beginning of this chapter. The interview questions were designed to provide insight into the research question and the subsidiary questions. Specifically, the questions were designed in order for the researcher to identify how educator perceptions of the way in which the HSC is experienced in schools impacts educators' interpretation of their experiences of the test. Interview questions were also designed for the researcher to identify the relationship between performance in the HSC and approaches to teaching and learning at whole-school and classroom levels. The third element considered in the interview questions was how the HSC affects educators' perceptions of their role. Three examples of questions asked in semi-structured interviews were:

1. Does the HSC have any particular priority in your work and if it does, please describe the level of priority and the reasons why it has that priority?
2. Can you think of a concrete example of a way in which the HSC has influenced your teaching?
3. Can you describe what success for your students in the HSC means?

The first of these questions was linked to Research Question 1a. In this question, the researcher sought to understand how aspects of the HSC were experienced across case study schools, and

how educators interpreted the priority given to the test in their teaching. Research Question 1b was addressed through the second example provided above. Through this question, the researcher explored how teaching is affected by the HSC at school and classroom levels. The third example provided relates to the way in which school educators in this study understood their roles, given that this understanding is closely related to educator perceptions of measures of success for their students.

As Given (2008) has identified, unstructured interviews are used most often in phenomenological studies in order to allow participants to respond completely freely. The decision to use semi-structured interviews in this study was made in order to allow free responses while ensuring that participants remained focused on the HSC. The full range of questions is provided in the Appendix Five. A deliberate strategy was adopted whereby the same questions were used in semi-structured interviews with teachers as interviews with school focus groups. The advantage of this approach was that these questions concerned specific topics regarding school educators experiences of the HSC while allowing teachers to report their experiences. The difference in the use of these questions rests with purpose. In semi-structured interviews with individual teachers, the researcher's intention in using guiding questions was to understand how teachers experience specific aspects of the HSC. In the process, the researcher developed an understanding of educators' total experience of the HSC.

Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and consisted of 14 questions regarding aspects of teacher experiences of the HSC. At School 1, 17 teachers were interviewed, with 15 teachers interviewed at School 2. Interviews consisted of 14 questions developed within the previously-mentioned framework of the purpose, principles and practice of the HSC. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher focused on how teachers engaged with their experience of the HSC in their school context, and how they made meaning from their interpretation of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Eatough & Smith, 2006).

5.3.4 Triangulation of data.

In data triangulation, researchers align different data sources to confirm the veracity of conclusions drawn from data. In this study, an indicative survey was administered via a questionnaire to provide the researcher with an overview of the case study's context. Using a whole school questionnaire was an efficient method of gaining an understanding of the culture of both schools in the study, as well as educator experiences of the HSC. Mathiyazhagan and Nandan (2010) have identified that benefits of this approach to data generation include uniformity in the nature of responses while allowing for free responses from across large samples of participants. In this study, data gathered through three methods of data collection were triangulated against each other. These methods were an indicative survey, focus group interviews, and interviews with individual HSC teachers.

Indicative surveys are not used to establish frequencies or other quantitative measures. Instead, the indicative survey used in this research was useful in providing initial insights into potential consistencies and/or inconsistencies in attitudes expressed regarding the HSC. This preliminary snapshot became useful in identifying convergent and divergent patterns of experience of the HSC across focus groups and in semi-structured interviews. As described earlier in this chapter, qualitative data regarding the context of the experience of school educators were gathered via the indicative survey. As Jansen (2010) has identified, the use of focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews is a form of qualitative surveying, albeit in a more targeted and defined fashion. In this study, the researcher used these three methods of qualitative data generation to understand school educator experiences of the HSC in more detail.

Through data generated in this study, the researcher gained direct access to each teacher's individual experience, as well as divergent and convergent patterns of teacher experiences. The latter experiences were identified through a process of coding and

categorisation (Altheide, 1996). The researcher used background knowledge gained through the literature review and data collection assists to position participant responses within their context and against responses from other participants (Easton, 2010). As Cresswell and Plano (2011) have indicated, it is important that participants are knowledgeable of the phenomena under consideration. Focus group members and teachers who participated in this study met this criterion.

5.3.5 Transcription of interviews.

Data analysis involved listening to audio recordings of focus group and teacher interviews, followed by reviewing transcribed text from interviews. Transcription of the audio recordings of interviews was not done by the researcher but was undertaken by a professional transcriber. The transcribed text was important because as Bailey (2008) has identified, researchers can analyse interview data by reading transcripts of interviews, with a view to developing notes for further analysis of the text. Stuckey (2014, p. 7) has noted that

If verbatim transcription is omitted to save time, bias can occur if the researcher reaches conclusion before the data are checked. Memory can be flawed and selective and is not a substitute for careful examination of the actual transcriptions. For this reason, it is preferable that the researcher produce full transcripts of the interviews.

Laverty (2003) has noted that exploration of experience is achieved through the researcher understanding the perceptions, memories, thoughts and actions of participants. By analysing audio recordings and transcripts of interviews, researchers can achieve the level of understanding Laverty describes. In addition, this approach is suited to the hermeneutic analysis undertaken in this study.

5.5 Analysis of Data

Each recorded interview was listened to three times. Notes were made at the time of the interview, with additional notes being made throughout the listening process. Initial themes

were identified regarding participants' conceptions, feelings, and the nature of their experiences with the HSC. Transcribed interviews became the text for the researcher's hermeneutic analysis. A close reading of the transcripts occurred without the researcher taking notes in the first instance. At the second close reading, notes were taken, and general themes were identified framed under the headings established in the subsidiary research questions of purpose, principles and practice. During the third close reading, themes were refined and descriptive elements of the HSC discarded with a focus on the meaning of experience. On the fourth close reading, themes were placed into categories and were coded for referencing purposes. On the fifth close reading, a selection of verbatim responses were chosen for reporting on the basis that they were representative of participant experiences, reflecting the nuances of participant experiences of the HSC. A final reading occurred to ensure that, through the back-and-forth of the hermeneutic, the researcher had reached a point of confidence in understanding participant experiences.

Interview responses were transcribed verbatim and interpretation was undertaken with an understanding of the context of teacher experiences of the HSC. This approach enables authentic interpretation by the researcher (Peterson et al., 1994). In this research, the analysis was undertaken by identifying themes from the indicative survey, focus group interviews, and semi-structured interviews. These themes emerged from the experience of the HSC as described in the focus group interviews and from the semi-structured interviews and these themes were interpreted through the background and contextual knowledge that the researcher brought to the study. In this interpretation, the researcher was informed by the background knowledge of the HSC gathered from the document analysis and interviews that were discussed in Chapter 3, and from the researcher's own lived experience of the HSC. Comprehensive notes were taken at each stage of data collection, as well as throughout an ongoing review that included multiple readings of the data. These notes were refined further as new data was

generated. Through refining these themes continuously, the researcher identified firm categories in which to place data from focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. An example of how data were categorised according to the main themes identified in this research is presented in Appendix 9. Questions asked in semi-structured interviews with HSC teachers accounted for the variables inherent in the unique experience of teachers and for participant experiences within their context (Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2002). Verbatim accounts that best represented the experience expressed in the interviews were selected for reporting. Responses that best captured the nuances of experience identified by the participants were also reported. Through this approach, the researcher engaged in focused consideration of the individual experiences of teachers who participated in this research.

Responses from focus group interviews and participant interviews were analysed “for fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived’ (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 17). Hermeneutic analysis requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Reflexive researchers are attentive to developing systematic understandings of the context in which data is generated and the effect of the researcher on the context in which research is undertaken. Malterud (2001) has explained that the researcher’s prior knowledge and experiences impact their approach to research design, as well as interpretation and analysis of data. For this reason, reflexivity is an important component of effective data analysis. In this research, the researcher used background data to gain knowledge of the culture, language, symbols and artefacts through which participants interpreted their experience of the HSC. In attempting to understand the context and way in which teachers made meaning of their experience of the HSC, there was an opportunity to apply an additional lens to the hermeneutic analysis—that of the “social domains” described by Layder (2006, Ch. 12).

Layder’s (2006) three social domains of social settings, situated activity and contextual resources were a useful framework with which to contextualise school educator experiences of

the HSC. In this analysis, the concept of social domains was useful in describing how participants operated independently while interacting with their social context (Layder, 2004). Research participants interact within the culture and structure of their context. Using the concept of social domains in this analysis provided insight into these aspects of participant experience. The social settings domain concerns experience as it relates to role, position and social relations. As Houston (2015) has explained, social settings are helpful in identifying significant formal, informal, implicit and explicit rules. Consideration of contextual resources provides insight into the operational and structural power that participants may experience. Secondly, awareness of the situated activities domain enables an appreciation of the influence of social, cultural and educational capital on participant experiences. Finally, the contextual resources domain concerns aspects of power and its discourse within processes and practices in the context in which it is considered.

In data analysis for this research, the lenses of Layder's social domains were used to understand the dynamics of power, relationships, constraints and enablers of social production and reproduction relating to the HSC. Each of these elements was central to the researcher's aim of identifying how school educators in both school sites experienced the HSC. Consideration of these issues flowed naturally from the three subsidiary research questions for this study, which concerned how the HSC is experienced by teachers, how performance in the HSC impacts practice, and how the HSC impacts the way in which educators understand their roles.

5.4.1 Analysis through the hermeneutic circle.

In the hermeneutic circle, the researcher is positioned in the research through the back-and-forth process that occurs between the interview text and the researcher. This process is known as the double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher interprets participant interpretations of their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In data analysis for this research, this process of

back-and-forth reflective analysis continued until coherent convergent and divergent patterns of experience were identified. These patterns were then reported. Through interpreting the interview text, the researcher gained insight into participant experiences with the HSC by comparing individual aspects of experience with the global understanding gained from the overall interview text (i.e. the content of all interviews conducted). By bringing his expertise in the field to the study and through developing an understanding of the background of the HSC, the researcher met the criterion required to conduct a hermeneutic study—i.e., in-depth knowledge of the topic at hand. The researcher used his contextual understanding of the topic, informed by background knowledge, to enhance the reflective processes built into the research method. This was done because, as Cohen et al. (2007) have identified, individuals have their subjective experience bounded by certain objective realities.

In this study, the researcher's own lived experience in relation to the phenomena being studied (the HSC) was an influence that could not be eliminated. Without this experience, the researcher's capacity to interpret would have been limited. For this reason, it was assumed that presuppositions and inferences were part of the researcher's experience. In recognising this, the researcher's reporting of other peoples' experiences is authentically heard in this study (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011). Acknowledging the researcher's background meant that the research could address stories from a range of individual experiences, interpreted through phenomena experienced by those individuals. In the process, the emerging meaning of lived experiences of the topic at hand were identified (Miles, Chapman, Francis, & Taylor, 2013).

Radnitzky's (1970) seven canons for hermeneutical interpretation of meaning, as described by Kvale (1983), were used to inform analysis processes in this study. The first canon is that interpretation is a back-and-forth, ongoing process, reflecting the circularity of hermeneutics. The ongoing nature of the hermeneutic circle—that is, the interpretation of

meaning—is ended when sensible patterns are identified. This is Radnitzky’s second canon: The interpretation of meaning comes to an end, the inner unity of meaning is free from logical contradictions, and sensible patterns of understanding are identified. Kvale (1983, p. 186) described Radnitzky’s third canon as “interpretation of interviews”, which “implies a comparison of interpretation between the different statements and the global meaning of the interview”. Textual autonomy is the fourth canon, and relates to the idiographic nature of the exploration of experience. The fifth canon is the need for in-depth knowledge regarding the themes identified from experiences discussed in interviews. Radnitzky also described positioning the researcher in the research as a feature of hermeneutic analysis. Finally, hermeneutic analysis can be used to interpret interview texts in order to identify nuances through which the meaning of the analysis is deepened and extended.

In this research, the back-and-forth process described in Canon 1 was achieved through the researcher’s multiple readings of data generated from focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. This process continued until the ‘good gestalt’—that is, an inner unity of meaning—was identified (Kvale, 1983). Throughout this process, Radnitzky’s (1970) third canon was achieved by the researcher generating global meaning from experiences referenced in focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. The researcher recorded these meanings in an iterative fashion. In doing so, the researcher adhered to the fourth canon by respecting the individual nature of the experiences expressed by participants. In this way, the researcher developed a global understanding of the individual experiences described by participants. This understanding was achieved through a close reading of each participant’s responses. In the process, the researcher identified convergent and divergent elements of experience as described by participants. The researcher achieved the fifth canon through a back-and-forth process of analysis, gaining insight into themes identified within the experiences described by participants. Having developed background knowledge of both the

HSC and the context in which it was experienced, the researcher achieved the sixth canon—positioning the researcher and the knowledge that he brought to the research within the data analysis. In drawing conclusions from the data generated in this study, and in reporting the findings of this study, it was possible for the researcher to identify the nuances present within the experiences reported. Through this process, the researcher enhanced the richness and depth of the data analysis conducted in this study. Guided by the canons of hermeneutic analysis, this study had the orientation, strength, richness and depth that van Manen (1997) identified as hallmarks of a hermeneutic phenomenological study.

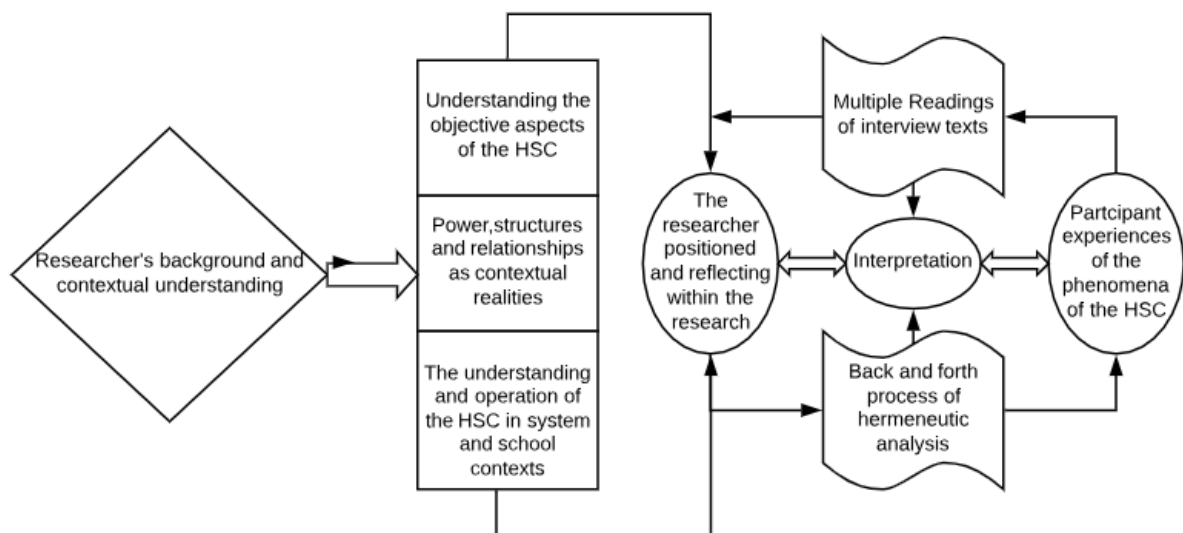


Figure 5.2. Positioning the researcher within the hermeneutic circle.

5.4.2 Interpreting interviews.

In interpreting focus group and teacher interviews, the researcher was guided by the interpretive phenomenological analysis methods described by Smith (2004). Using this approach, the researcher achieved the double hermeneutic described earlier in this chapter. Each interview was listened to three times. Notes were made at the time of the interview, with additional notes being made throughout the listening process. Initial themes were identified regarding participants' conceptions, feelings, and the nature of their experiences with the HSC. In this process, attention was given to interview transcripts, with transcribed interviews

becoming the text for the researcher's hermeneutic analysis. A close reading of the transcripts occurred without the researcher taking notes in the first instance.

At the second close reading, notes were taken, and general themes and patterns of convergent and divergent experiences were framed under the headings established in the subsidiary research questions. In general terms, these were labelled as the purpose, principles and practice of the HSC, as aligned to the subsidiary questions for this research:

1a. How is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators?

1b. In what ways do results in the high-stakes HSC examination impact approaches to teaching and learning at school and classroom levels?

1c. Do expectations of the HSC impact the practices of school educators?

The theme regarding the purpose of the HSC relates to how the HSC is experienced and interpreted within schools and by teachers (see Research Question 1a). The theme regarding the principles underpinning the HSC is understood through an exploration of how the HSC impacts learning (see Research Question 1b). Finally, the theme of practice within the HSC is understood through knowledge of how the roles of school educators are understood in the context of the HSC (see Research Question 1c).

During the third close reading, transcript material regarding descriptive elements of the HSC was discarded. In the process, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the meaning of the HSC for research participants. On the fourth close reading, themes were placed into categories and were coded for referencing purposes. An example of the categorisation of the data generated from interviews is provided in Appendix Nine. On the fifth close reading, a selection of verbatim responses were chosen for reporting on the basis that they were representative of participant experiences, reflecting the nuances of participant experiences of the HSC. A final reading occurred to ensure that, through the back-and-forth of the

hermeneutic, the researcher had reached a point of confidence in understanding participant experiences.

Interpretive processes used in the data analysis for this research enabled the ongoing refinement and clarification of the researcher's understanding of participant experiences of the HSC. Smith and Osborne (2007) and Pasick et al. (2009) have explained that knowledge of the cultural, social, and theoretical contexts in which participants experience the HSC results in an enhanced understanding of those experiences. An understanding of these elements of experience was achieved through the analysis in this study. Fossey et al. (2002) have identified that in hermeneutic analysis, the researcher draws on their personal understanding, experiences and analyses to bring a richness to the text under consideration. Through the back-and-forth of the double hermeneutic in this analysis, the researcher achieved what Mayring (2000) and Merriam (2009) have described as critical to the analysis. Within the analysis in this study, this amounted to the capacity to interrogate, refine and make meaning from the experiences being explored, as well as the capacity to understand how participants made meaning of this experience. The strength of this heuristic established by the hermeneutic analysis undertaken in the study reflects Snow's (2001) observation that interactions within context mediate the nature of experience. This observation is at the heart of Research Question 1a, which denotes the researcher's recognition of the constant interplay between the way in which phenomena is experienced and the way in which it is interpreted.

5.5 Trustworthiness, Dependability and the Researchers Background

Cresswell (2013) has noted that, in conducting qualitative case studies, researchers do not seek empirical objectivity or draw conclusive findings. Instead, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify, the purpose of gathering and analysing data is to provide an authentic window into participant experiences. Prior to gathering data from participants, trial-testing was undertaken for the indicative survey, the focus group and semi-structured interview questions. This process

was done in collaboration with colleagues of the researcher who had expertise in the HSC. As a result of trialling the questions, the researcher refined the questions further. This process resulted in the researcher revising the research design, including the scope, structure and nature of the research questions, and the categories used for data interpretation (Sampson, 2004).

Additionally, the researcher's experience in the role of Head of Secondary Curriculum at Sydney Catholic Schools brings this experience to the study. Within this role was the responsibility to promote quality learning which focused on developing attributes in students such as deep learning, high-order thinking, engagement, self-regulation and connectedness. Simultaneously, the role required the Head of Secondary Curriculum to report on performance in high-stakes tests for those schools for which he was responsible. In seeking to meet these dual responsibilities the researcher was aware of the tension that existed between the rhetoric of quality learning that the researcher espoused and by measuring school effectiveness based on the narrow lens provided by high-stakes tests.

As a teacher the researcher held aspirations for his students that were holistic and extended far beyond what could be measured by a test. Through his experience as a system leader and as a teacher the researcher became acutely aware of the residual tension that exists between seeking broader learning opportunities for students, while balancing the expectations to perform in high-stakes tests. For this reason, the research accessed the experience of school educators within their context to develop an understanding how this problem associated with the phenomena of high-stakes testing was experienced and interpreted by teachers within their school and in their classrooms. At the start of this chapter time was taken to outline the indicative survey as a means of situating the background knowledge and experience of the researcher within the context of the two school sites within the case study.

5.6 Ethical Issues

The research was designed to minimise ethical issues and risks for participants. Privacy and confidentiality for participants were prioritised in this study. This was particularly important in this study given the power relationships that exist between school leaders, middle managers and teachers. By ensuring confidentiality and privacy in the study, the researcher allowed participants to discuss their experiences freely, without fear of ramifications within the structure of their school or with their colleagues. The researcher was conscious of interpersonal, structural and power interactions at the school level. For this reason, the researcher assured participants that their data would remain confidential, including full de-identification of participants. As the researcher had a leadership role in one of the education systems in NSW, staff at schools within the researcher's education system were not invited to participate in the study. By not extending an invitation to staff at these schools, the impact on the study of possible or perceived power relationships between the researcher's role in the educational system and schools within that system was avoided. Through the nature of the relationship between the researcher and staff at schools in the study, it was deemed that, regardless of steps to mitigate the researcher's impact on the study, the potential for the power relationship to distort data collection would remain. For this reason, and for reasons explained earlier in this chapter, staff at independent schools were approached to participate in this study.

Accompanying the invitation to participate in the study was full disclosure of the purpose and scope of the study. This was provided in writing and verbally. Invitations to participate in different aspects of the study are included in the Appendices Six, Seven and Eight. In this communication, the rights of participants were also outlined. Prior to participants providing informed written consent, the nature of the study and the rights of participants were again communicated verbally and outlined in the consent form. Informed consent was sought and received by all participants in the study, with an assurance from the researcher that

participation in the study could be terminated at any time. Invitations to participate in the indicative survey were forwarded to school staff on the researcher's behalf by each school's contact person. Invitations to participate in the indicative survey included written information explaining the nature of the study. Invitations also indicated that completion of the survey was voluntary, and participant details and responses would be de-identified. Within this information was an explanation that, by completing the indicative survey, participants were giving their informed consent.

Through the research design selected for this study, the researcher minimised ethical issues and risks for participants, with privacy and confidentiality of participants (both individuals and institutions) prioritised. Care was taken to ensure that participants understood that their participation was by invitation and that there was no coercion, influence, or inducement for participation in the study, either real or perceived. The researcher brought an understanding and experience of educational settings to the study and used this knowledge to ensure transparency, as explained earlier in this chapter.

School staff have their experience within the dynamics in schools relating to power, structure and relationships. In interviews with focus groups of leaders, middle managers and teachers, differences in experiences of the HSC were identified. Different experiences of the HSC across these groups result in the potential for possible conflict across these groups in schools. School leaders, middle managers and teachers often contradicted one another in their observations of the HSC. At times, members of each group were critical of the approaches taken by members of another group within their school. By isolating these various views and through de-identifying their source, the researcher avoided creating or exacerbating internal conflicts within both schools in the study. For this reason, protocols regarding confidentiality were emphasised in this study. These protocols consisted of de-identifying the source of comments as well as ensuring that groups and schools were fully de-identified. Data security

was maintained through keeping hard copy material in a locked cabinet, and digital records were accessible only via secure password. Ethics approval for the research was sought and obtained (Approval Number 2014315N).

5.7 Limitations of this Research

The researcher's focus in this study was confined to school educator experiences regarding the high-stakes HSC. While matters relating to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment naturally arose in this research, these topics were not the primary focus of the study. Similarly, while participants in the study referred to students, parents and the wider community, members of these groups did not participate in the study. In addition, the impact of members of these groups on the study was limited to school educator experiences of them. A further limitation of the study was the small number of schools involved in the case study. Initially, it was hoped that four schools would participate in the study. The researcher's aim in including this number of schools was to ensure that representation in the study from both boys' and girls' schools, as well as schools from a range of educational sectors. However, only two school leaders agreed for their school to participate in the study. Similarities between these schools resulted in a high degree of homogeneity in the nature and type of schools involved. Both schools included in the study were from the independent schooling sector, which represents about 11% of all schools in NSW. As a consequence, the researcher did not have access to the policies, practices and experiences of school educators from either state or Catholic school systems in NSW. As such, the experiences described in this research are relevant to participants' individual school contexts. For this reason, the researcher makes no claims regarding the nature of educator experiences of the HSC across secondary schools in NSW in general.

5.8 Closing Comments

In this chapter, an outline of the research design used in this study and its alignment to the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter has been presented. The research

question was outlined: Specifically, How do their experiences of the requirements, expectations and culture of the NSW Higher School Certificate influence school educators in their approach to teaching and learning and how they understand their role as educators? The subsidiary research questions were also outlined:

- 1a. How is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators?
- 1b. In what ways do results in the high-stakes HSC examination impact approaches to teaching and learning at school and classroom levels?
- 1c. Do expectations of the HSC impact the practice of school educators?

In addition, a description was given of how the methodology employed in this research was used to address these questions. In this chapter, methods used to gather data for this research and to analyse data generated from the case study were explained. The researcher also demonstrated how he accessed educators' experiences of the HSC in this study. In the next chapter, data from the indicative survey in this study is presented, and an interpretation of the data provided. Data from focus group discussions are also presented regarding factors that affect how the HSC was experienced within the case study sites through policy, practice and culture.

6.0 Insights from Focus Group Interviews regarding School Educator Experiences of the NSW HSC

In the preceding chapters of this thesis, an outline of the research problem, a review of the relevant literature, background information on the HSC, and the theoretical framework and research design used in this study were provided. Data generated from the two focus groups (one of school leaders and the other of middle managers) from each of the two case study schools in this study is analysed in this chapter. An interpretative commentary on this data is also provided. By analysing data from the indicative survey, the researcher developed background knowledge into educator experiences, school cultures, and operational aspects of the HSC in the context of this case study. Knowledge of educator experiences with the HSC was gained through the hermeneutic process adopted to analyse focus group data. Through hermeneutic analysis of focus group member responses, the researcher gained insight into reciprocal interactions across groups in the case study. Focus groups were the vehicle through which the researcher identified the dynamics of positional power in the case study. Given the hierarchical structure of most schools, it is likely that a person's position within their school impacts the nature of their interactions with other staff. Positional power, interactions and culture within the case study were identified as points of convergence and divergence in interview data from focus groups. This is consistent with Foucault's view that "discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (Foucault, 1978. p. 101).

A description of data gathered from the indicative survey is provided as an introductory overview of the two sites in the case study. Based on consistencies in responses to the indicative survey, the researcher deemed appropriate the use of a multi-site case study. Through consideration of convergent and divergent experiences reported by focus group members, the researcher identified emergent themes relating to experiences of the HSC. Strong connections

were identified between themes from focus group interviews, themes discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, and the background to the HSC presented in Chapter 3. These themes were identified through the double hermeneutic employed in analysing data gathered from focus group discussions. Through multiple close readings of interview transcripts and by building knowledge of the context of participant experiences, the researcher made sense of the experience of participants, who, in turn, were making sense of their own personal and social experiences of the HSC.

Members of focus group interviews at both case study sites described the HSC as high-stakes. Focus group participants acknowledged that the HSC is used for many purposes. There were greater nuances between focus group members in terms of how prioritising the HSC impacts school activities. These nuances are explained later in this chapter. A convergence was identified across the focus group interviews regarding the effect of the HSC on the nature of teaching and learning. At the same time, participants expressed different views regarding the degree to which the HSC has positive impacts on teaching and learning. Members of the focus groups agreed that the HSC was used at schools in the case study (and by members of the wider community) as a measure of school and teacher effectiveness. Consequently, it was identified through focus group interviews that measures of student achievement in the HSC resulted in performativity. Focus group participants reported different views on whether the HSC had sufficient validity, reliability or scope to be used as a measure of effectiveness. More generally, divergence in reports from focus group members indicated that some participants questioned whether the HSC was fit for purpose. After presenting data from focus group interviews, a brief commentary is provided on the interpretation of this data via the lens of the social domains. The social domains were used as an additional lens to deepen knowledge of the existential experience of teachers, enhancing the double hermeneutic used in the analysis of the data.

6.1 Background Information from the Indicative Survey

In the first part of this chapter, an analysis of the indicative whole school survey conducted at the two school sites is provided. Information relating to the indicative survey is presented here to provide the contextual knowledge that informed the analysis of focus group interviews and in the following chapter the semi-structured interviews. This knowledge was important to ensure the quality of the analysis provided by the researcher and provides an understanding of how the researcher arrived at the findings arising from the research. It was this contextual data, as well as the knowledge of the HSC the researcher has through his experience as a teacher and as Head of Secondary Curriculum at Sydney Catholic Schools, that enhanced the quality of analysis of the data in the study and provides confidence in the findings reached.

The researcher administered the survey in order to obtain an overview of educator views regarding the purpose and importance of the HSC. This information was used as background knowledge of the context in which participants experienced the HSC. The researcher used this background knowledge to understand and interpret data gathered from focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. Using hermeneutic phenomenology (the framework that underpinned this study, as presented in Chapter 4), researchers seek to uncover lived human experiences through interpretation. As a result of adopting this approach, the researcher accessed participants' experiences in order to develop an understanding of their existential reality, which is derived from their experiences within their own context. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to create knowledge in this study by giving consideration to the cultural, historical and contextual realities in which meanings of experience are interpreted. Using the background knowledge presented in Chapter 3 and findings of the indicative survey, which are detailed later in the chapter, the researcher was equipped with the knowledge

necessary to interpret the meaning participants made of their experiences. In this way, the double hermeneutic was used to analyse data from focus group interviews.

The indicative survey was used in a qualitative way, with inferences made from data gathered. Using data from the survey in a qualitative fashion was consistent with the qualitative data generated from focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews (Jansen, 2010). As identified in Chapter 5, the indicative survey was used to position participants within their context. Easton (2010) has identified that positioning participants in the research results in better quality research. To develop an understanding of the context of both school sites, 40 questions were asked. The first three questions concerned demographic information. Responses to the next 17 questions in the survey were on a six-point Likert scale. These questions were followed by two open response questions. Responses to the next five questions were on a three-point scale. Finally, 13 dichotomous questions were asked. The indicative survey has been included in Appendix One.

These questions in the indicative survey were developed in order for the researcher to gain initial insights into the three subsidiary research questions. Understandings of the purpose of the HSC among teachers in both schools were explored in the indicative survey through questions that sought to answer the following subsidiary question:

1a. How is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators?

Questions in the indicative survey were asked in order for the researcher to gain an understanding of the relationship between performance in the HSC and teaching and learning, with a view to gaining insight into principles that underpin approaches to the HSC. These themes were relevant to the following subsidiary question:

1b. In what ways do results in the high-stakes HSC examination impact approaches to teaching and learning at school and classroom levels?

The indicative survey was also constructed in order for the researcher to gain background knowledge regarding the effect of the HSC on practice in schools and among teachers. These themes were relevant to the following subsidiary question:

1c. Do expectations of the HSC impact the practices of school educators?

By focusing on these areas in the indicative survey, the researcher was able to use background knowledge derived from the indicative survey to identify themes for further consideration in focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. In turn, the researcher used this analysis to develop questions for interviews with both groups, centred around the purpose, principles and practice associated with the HSC. These questions were asked in order for the researcher to answer the overarching research question for this study: How do their experiences of the requirements, expectations and culture of the NSW Higher School Certificate influence school educators in their approach to teaching and learning and how they understand their role as educators?

6.1.1 Indicative survey: Respondent profile.

The number of respondents to the survey varied across the two schools, both in terms of number and nature. This breakdown is shown in Table 6.1. As the indicative survey was an anonymous survey administered to all teachers in both schools, it was possible that participants in focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews had also responded to the survey. Invitations to participate in the indicative survey were sent to approximately 200 teachers across both school sites. A larger number of respondents, 33, were from School 2, while 21 respondents were from School 1. At School 2, 27.3% of respondents were teachers who were not directly associated with the HSC. At School 1, 9.5% of respondents were not HSC teachers. The first three questions concerned the respondent's length of teaching experience, gender, and whether the respondent was directly involved with the HSC. In School 1, 52.4% of respondents were male. In School 2, 57.6% of respondents were female.

Table 6.2

Indicative Survey Participation

<u>Demographic Data</u>		<u>School 1</u>	<u>School 2</u>
Number of Participants		21	33
Gender	Male	11 (52.4%)	14 (42.4%)
	Female	10 (47.6%)	19 (57.6%)
HSC Teacher	Yes	19 (90.5%)	24 (72.7%)
	No	2 (9.5%)	9 (27.3%)
Years Teaching	< 5	2 (9.5%)	6 (18.2%)
	6–15	7 (33.3%)	12 (36.4%)
	16–25	6 (28.6%)	7 (21.2%)
	> 26	6 (28.6%)	8 (24.2%)

6.1.2 Respondent views regarding the importance of the HSC.

Questions 4 to 20 of the indicative survey concerned respondent perceptions of the importance of the HSC, the priority given to the HSC at their school, and how the test is a measure of school and teacher effectiveness. Responses to questions 4 to 20 were on a six-point scale:

1 = Not at all Important;

2 = Low Importance;

3 = Slightly Important;

4 = Moderately Important;

5 = Very Important;

6 = Extremely Important.

Responses from questions 4 to 20 are presented in Appendix 2.

It can be inferred from responses to Questions 4 to 20 that achievement in the HSC held great importance in both school contexts. Most respondents said that achievement in the HSC was considered “very important” or “extremely important” among the wider school community, among school leadership, the media and society. However, in their self-rating of the test’s importance, respondents did not assign the same importance to achievement in the HSC as (in their view) the school community, school leaders, the media and society. Respondents tended to indicate that student achievement in the HSC was of moderate importance to them. In this way, there was some incongruence between the perceptions of teachers themselves and their perceptions of the views of other stakeholders.

When asked in Question 20 about the importance of the HSC as a measure of teacher effectiveness, 38.1% of respondents from School 1 reported that the test was “very important” or “extremely important”. In School 2, 24.2% of respondents indicated that they considered the HSC “very important” or “extremely important” as a measure of teacher effectiveness. More generally, respondents at both schools reported that student achievement in the HSC was very important. However, the largest number of respondents viewed the HSC as less important.

On this basis, it appears that respondents felt that school leaders and educators emphasise achievement as a measure of effectiveness less than members of the wider community. Respondents gave less importance to student achievement in the HSC as a measure of effectiveness. From these responses, it appears that many educators consider the HSC an unreliable and invalid measure of student achievement, with 60.2% of respondents rating the validity and reliability of the HSC as of moderate importance, or lower. Based on the divergence in perceptions identified in participant responses (as described above), there are multiple elements to the use, or perceived use, of student achievement to measure teacher and school effectiveness. In responses to the indicative survey, inconsistencies were identified regarding perceptions of the structure of the HSC and its usefulness.

6.1.3 Respondent descriptions of the HSC and understandings of how it is reported.

In Question 21, respondents were asked to provide one word to describe the HSC. In Question 22, respondents were asked to describe their understanding of Band 6, the highest band of achievement in the HSC. Responses to these questions are included in Appendix 2. In responding to Question 21, participants were asked to provide one word that would best describe their view of the HSC. The list of words provided by respondents is presented in Table 6.2. There was considerable diversity in the words provided by respondents. In some cases, it was unclear whether the word in question was intended as a positive or negative descriptor of the HSC. However, most words provided had an obvious positive or negative connotation.

Six respondents used the word “stressful” to describe the HSC. Four respondents used the word “pressure”. It is reasonable to assume that these words were intended to convey a negative view of the HSC. Two respondents used the word “necessary” to describe the HSC, suggesting a positive perception of the test. However, many words provided had no obvious positive or negative connotation. Based on the words provided, the researcher drew some general inferences regarding respondent experiences of the HSC. Positive words associated with the HSC tended to be related to notions of rigour, challenge, and a culmination of schooling. Negative descriptors applied to the HSC concerned the stress felt by teachers and students due to the demands of the HSC.

Table 6.3

Responses to Question 21

Question 21:	<u>School 1 (n = 21)</u>	<u>School 2 (n = 33)</u>
Provide one word that would best describe your view of the Higher School Certificate.	Challenging (x 2)	Pressure (x 5)
	Stressful (x 2)	Stressful (x 5)
	Ambivalent	Rigorous (x 2)
	Culmination	Choice
	Essential	Culmination

Important	Demanding
Obfuscation	Emphasised
Overload	Evaluation
Poor	Formative
Prescriptive	Important
Public	Inevitable
Yardstick	Knowledge
Archaic	Necessary
Dominating	Overemphasised
Excellence	Tedious
Number	Vital
Political	Adequate
Unnecessary	Contrived
Useful	Incumbent
	Necessary
	OVERRATED
	Prescribed
	Relative
	Unequal

In Question 22, participants were asked in an open-ended question to describe briefly the meaning of Band 6 achievement in the HSC. In responses, participants demonstrated a variety of understandings of this approach to reporting student achievement in the HSC, as well as different understandings of what achievement in Band 6 in the HSC means. Many responses to Question 22 were inconsistent with the meaning ascribed to Band 6 by NESAs, which was described in Chapter 3. Based on survey responses, it appears that many respondents conflated metrics associated with the HSC, such as the ATAR, with metrics used to report achievement in the HSC. Responses to these questions formed the basis for further exploration in focus groups interviews and semi-structured interviews.

6.1.4 Perceptions of school and student potential and the purpose of the HSC.

Questions 23 to 27 concerned participant views on student potential and achievement. Responses, which were on a three-point scale, are presented in Appendix 2. Based on responses to these questions, many educators at the schools in this study considered that students at their school performed above average in the HSC. Educators at both schools also viewed their students' potential as above average. Responses to questions 28 to 40 were dichotomous. These questions concerned perceptions of the impact of expectations, competitiveness and achievement in the HSC on student learning. Responses to these questions are also included in Appendix 2. Generally, responses were consistent between participants at both school sites. Slightly more respondents from School 1 than School 2 reported that students at their school performed above average and had a sound knowledge of the HSC. In addition, more respondents from School 1 than School 2 reported that the HSC was stressful and impacted school policy. It is likely that these differences reflect the different nature of each school's culture and community.

The final 13 dichotomous questions in the survey concerned the impact of the HSC on student learning. Respondents were asked whether the HSC was stressful, a good measure of the effectiveness of teaching and of student learning. More than 57% of respondents in both schools reported that the HSC enhanced learning. In School 1, 76% of respondents indicated that the HSC was stressful for teachers, compared to more than 63% of respondents in School 2. In both schools, 100% of respondents reported that the HSC was stressful for students. Respondents from both schools acknowledged that competition was a central feature of the HSC. Descriptions of the HSC as stressful seemed to be associated with the competitive nature of the test. Many participants reported that they lacked confidence in the HSC as an assessment instrument. Further, numerous participants reported that the HSC impacted the nature of learning for senior students, with many respondents describing this impact as negative.

Based on the majority of responses from both schools, respondents did not consider the HSC a useful measure of teacher effectiveness. A similar pattern of responses indicated a view that the HSC was driven by a focus on achievement rather than learning. These responses suggest that, while elements of the HSC are valuable, the HSC has some negative effects on teaching and learning. In the survey used in this study, the most obvious of these effects was the pressure and stress experienced by teachers and students. Many respondents viewed the HSC as unfit for its purpose. This view was most evident in responses regarding the impact of the HSC on learning.

6.1.5 Initial themes identified from the survey.

Using data generated from the indicative survey, the researcher gained some initial insights into answers for the subsidiary research questions for this study. It was identified that participants viewed the purpose of the HSC as related to the reputations of schools and teachers. Similarly, it was identified that participants viewed the HSC as an external form of judgment and measure of accountability. For this reason, in regard to Subsidiary Question 1a (how is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators?), it was identified that educators at both school sites understood the HSC to be very important. From survey responses, it was identified that this importance was mediated from both within participants' school and beyond. Respondents were unanimous regarding the importance afforded to the HSC. It was also identified that school leaders reinforced this understanding of the importance of the HSC, including through the way in which messages regarding the HSC were mediated to school educators and how these messages were interpreted.

The researcher also gained insight into Subsidiary Question 1b (in what ways do results in the high-stakes HSC examination influence approaches to teaching and learning at a school and classroom level?). It was found that performance in the HSC was central to educator understandings of the test. Based on responses to the indicative survey, it is clear that

performance in the HSC affects teaching and learning in the classroom. On this basis, pressure for students to perform in the HSC impacts educator practices. Insights into Subsidiary Question 1c (do expectations of the HSC impact the practices of school educators?) were also identified. Respondents reported that they perceived the HSC as detrimental to learning and as an inaccurate measure of student achievement or teacher effectiveness. However, respondents also indicated that the test heavily impacts what they felt required to do in their roles. Respondents reported that their roles existed within a climate of competition in which and they were driven to achieve results for students.

6.2 Insights from Focus Group Discussions regarding School Educator Experiences of the HSC

As described in Chapter 5, the researcher used data generated from focus group discussions to provide insight into how the HSC functions at the school level. The researcher drew on participant experiences of the HSC as discussed in focus groups in order to answer the overarching research question for this study: How do their experiences of the requirements, expectations and culture of the NSW Higher School Certificate influence school educators in their approach to teaching and learning and how they understand their role as educators? Focus group questions regarding this research question are provided in Appendix 4. In discussions with focus groups of school leaders and middle managers, the researcher considered the dynamics of reciprocal interactions and positional power within the focus groups. Insights were derived from the focus groups regarding agency and structures that exist in schools as a result of educator experiences with the HSC.

In the next part of this chapter, insights from focus groups regarding educator experiences of the HSC at a school level are discussed. An account is provided in the next section of what the focus group discussions revealed about relationships between school leaders and middle managers in both school sites. These relationships were found to affect

educator understandings of the purpose, principles and practice of the HSC in both school sites. Following consideration of relationships identified in the focus groups is an analysis of how the researcher used data from focus groups to answer the subsidiary research questions. In focus group discussions, the researcher identified a difference in how school leaders and middle managers emphasised, focused on, and approached teaching the HSC. Across the focus groups, two clear issues were identified regarding theoretical understandings of the HSC as articulated by school leaders and the practical realities of the HSC experienced by middle managers. Across the focus groups, school leaders and middle managers were unanimous on and committed to promoting learning that met the needs of students. In focus group data, fewer differences were identified between the two school sites than between groups of school leaders and middle managers. Different factors affecting focus, emphasis and expectations regarding the HSC were noted between these two groups.

Participants in both groups reported their commitment to providing the best education for their students. However, what this meant in practice differed between the two groups. The importance of the HSC as a pathway for students was agreed on by members of both groups. Members of both groups recognised that this situation was stressful for teachers and students. School leaders tended to attribute this stress to factors outside the school, while middle managers tended to view this stress as the result of the focus on performance in the HSC within their school. Middle managers also reported that the HSC heavily impacted decision making by school leaders, including placing teachers on classes. There were marked differences between views of school leaders and middle managers regarding the purpose of celebrations of achievement in the HSC. School leaders saw such celebrations as recognition of the success of individual students. In contrast, middle managers viewed such activities as promotional efforts to improve the reputation of the school, and as a form of judgment upon teachers whose students had performed well and those whose students had not.

Responses from focus group members are reported in the following section of this chapter, with coding used to differentiate responses. Each verbatim report cited is coded “FG” to indicate that the response was made in a focus group interview. These reports are also coded as “SL” or “SM”, indicating whether the participant was a school leader (SL) or a school middle manager (SM). Finally, a number is provided in the identifier code, indicating whether the participant was from School 1 (1) or School 2 (2). Verbatim reports of comments from focus group discussions have been selected, as they are representative of views expressed in both focus groups. These comments are presented to reflect the breadth of data gathered from the four focus group discussions (i.e., two discussions between school leaders and the discussions between middle managers).

6.2.1 The focus on students in the HSC.

There was a consensus among focus group participants that the HSC had positive effects on student learning and functioned as an important learning pathway for students. Focus group participants indicated that the scope of learning for senior students extended beyond the formal HSC curriculum. As a member of one of the leadership focus groups stated,

We’re not just HSC driven. We’re as passionate about our spirituality, our sport, the kids’ social lives. I think we have it in a balance here. (FGLS1)

Members of the four focus groups were clear that expectations of achievement in the HSC were moderated according to each student’s capacity to achieve. As a member of one of leadership team focus groups said,

From the teaching group perspective, a successful HSC result is a student achieving on or beyond expectation and having the thrill of a student jump a band or two bands in their achievement irrespective of their starting point. (FGLS2)

Middle managers and school leaders described student achievement in the HSC in different ways. In turn, this difference of opinion affected the nature of learning within the framework of the HSC. As one middle manager said,

I think also for some of the students just getting through and getting an HSC is a significant achievement. (FGSM2)

Such comments aligned with the overall view expressed by members of each focus group that aspects of the HSC were useful for students as a structure and pathway for learning. Focus group participants agreed that teachers at their school conducted interventions to improve student achievement. In initiating interventions, teachers focus on the learning needs of individual students. Based on this finding, it appears that student learning was an area of focus for educators in this study. As one middle manager said,

If there are some particular students that are struggling it might be then the onus on the teacher to go and do that [provide intervention]. (FGSM2)

Members of each focus group reported their concern for the wellbeing of their students. Across the focus groups, educators acknowledged that the HSC had negative effects on the wellbeing of teachers and students. As one middle manager said,

I look at it as that we're going to actually do something serious with the students and that something with the—that's got a bit of meat in it. But at the same time, it also brings that thought to mind there's going to be a lot of stressed out students coming in the—coming up in 18 months or so. (FGSM1)

Focus group members reported that expectations of performance were a central HSC-related focus at their school. As one middle manager explained,

We all start off with these idealised expectations but as we progress through the course and we get to know the students and how they learn and understand the cohort as a whole, those expectations tend to shift in response to that. (FGMS1)

Members of each focus group reported that achievement was often conflated with effort at their school.

6.2.2 Expectations of HSC teachers.

Throughout the focus group discussions, members explicitly referred to support given to HSC students to manage stress. However, the researcher identified little evidence of interventions to support teachers in dealing with stress and pressure associated with the HSC. Focus group members reported that teachers, along with students, experienced considerable HSC-related pressure and stress. As one school leader said,

So the stress and wellbeing with the HSC is becoming much more prominent issue with HSC students and also the teachers because of the higher expectations and things like that. (FGSL2)

Focus group members identified multiple sources of pressure on teachers as a result of the HSC. Tightened requirements associated with the HSC were identified as one source of increased stress for HSC teachers. One school leader observed that,

We're often driven down—some of the kind—incredible pressures of assessment and incredibly tight practices and policies. (FGSL1)

Middle managers consistently indicated that teachers felt pressure due to expectations of achievement implied by students, other school staff, parents, and the wider community.

It was tacitly accepted, particularly among middle managers, that teachers perceived that student achievement was linked to the allocation of classes to teachers. As one middle manager put it,

I think it places additional pressure on them [teachers]. They—I'm sure that they feel that if they don't do a good job with the class that they've got at a particular level then they know they're not going to get a higher level or that same level again next year. It

doesn't work that way but I'm sure there's that—that goes on in the back of their minds.

(FGSM1)

In this comment, the focus group member indicated that middle managers recognised that teachers felt that their effectiveness was judged according to their students' achievement in the HSC. However, school leaders tended to understate the relationship between student achievement and the placement of teachers in classes.

In focus group discussions, school leaders recognised that teachers experienced HSC-related pressures. However, leaders tended to relate those pressures to factors external to the school. School leaders also tended to underplay the effects of artefacts and activities associated with achievement in the HSC on the culture of their school. The way in which leaders at many schools celebrate student success in the HSC places an emphasis on academic achievement. One school leader described their opinion of the purpose of celebrating achievement in the HSC:

I think in terms of what's possible to show the students across all year levels by having an assembly like that, that marks best effort, that talks about best effort, talks about using God-given talents. Like there's a—the language around that assembly I think was really affirming to students, be they in Year 11 or Year 5, that everyone has a place here. That it isn't—yes, we look to these top achievers and we congratulate them and they're up on the stage, but in terms of that inclusivity as a community, that everyone, if they're doing their best, automatically is included in what we're trying to achieve.

(FGSL1)

This view was in stark contrast to the view expressed by a middle manager from the same school:

We're always expected to get higher results and don't necessarily celebrate those kids who really achieve at the lower end. Hopefully, us as teachers we celebrate with them

and we let them know personally. So it may not be as a school focused recognition.
(FGSM1)

Another school leader from the same school described their view of the role of celebrating achievement in the HSC:

Unashamedly with great results it's a great promotional tool. We've been privileged over a number of years to be held in good esteem and that's been very helpful in—somewhat in either historical time, turning around enrolments in the college and having its name very clearly established as a great academic institution. We got first in state and great results there. So I think that works that way. (FGSLI)

6.2.3 The HSC as a marketing tool.

From the final comment in the section above, it is clear that achievement in the HSC is important in positioning schools within the education market place. Whether this role is consistent with a focus on teaching and learning is an open question. Middle managers implied a degree of cynicism regarding the use of achievement to position a school in the education market place. For example, one middle manager said,

Our results are run up like they're football scores on recruiting billboards pretty regularly. So there's a—so the school obviously expects us to do very well across the board. (FGSM1)

Another middle manager commented,

We also have the Howard board out the front of the school, the ones that John Howard [former Australian Prime Minister] put up—bought all those community notice boards for schools to put up, the values and stuff. Yet our business studies and our Chinese results were splashed up there. Congratulations to everyone driving past to see.
(FGSM1)

In focus group discussions, school leaders reported that achievement in the HSC was important in building the reputational capital of their school.

In contrast, middle managers generally questioned the authenticity of using student achievement for this purpose. School leaders felt that public celebrations of student success in the HSC encouraged high achievement. As one school leader said,

It's also a motivational tool even... the image now that our top achievers, their photographs are out there, and for the reason that the Year 11 boys as they walk past, I want my photo up there. So it's a motivational tool to the next class. (FGSL1)

Another school leader described the public recognition of achievement in the HSC as a form of encouragement:

I think we would use it as a motivator for the students coming behind. When we have our Dux assembly. It is really there for motivation, for encouragement and it's great to celebrate the kid that was in the remedial class in Year 6 that's now the Dux of the college with the greatest HR, with the highest HR—good measure, one could argue—to present and it's just a form of encouragement. (FGSL2)

School leaders described public celebrations of achievement as an important instrument for creating expectations and optimism regarding academic achievement among students. This view is reflective of the implicit meaning associated with the HSC in regard to the language, attitudes and practices that accompany it.

Generally, middle managers viewed the celebration of achievement in the HSC as a de facto measure of performance. Middle managers emphasised some measures provided by the HSC in particular. As one middle manager said,

I think first of all obviously a Band 6 is seen significantly as an achievement. I think probably from a teaching perspective also that percentage above state average is always a fairly I guess valid mark as to success. (FGSM2)

Middle managers consistently described attainment of Band 6 scores and performance above the state average as metrics used to evaluate success in the HSC. On the other hand, one school leader said,

Well we do also emphasise that we celebrate the learning gain. Looking at the HSC results might be only one way but we really celebrate, you know, students achieving the Band 4 as much as we would with a Band 6, if they're struggling students. So we tried not to make at least with school in terms of talking about Band 6s but about achieving to their potential and showing the discipline and the hard work to get the best possible result they can. We celebrate those successes every bit as much. (FGSL2)

This observation supports the conclusion that school leaders and middle managers in focus groups in this study understood, measured and used student achievement in the HSC in different ways.

The notion of effort was described in focus groups as applying to both teachers and students. Stress or pressure associated with the HSC was seen to be related to the effort required to complete the HSC. As a result, effort and stress were expressed in terms of expectations of performativity. This finding was true especially for focus groups of middle managers. Focus group members described a strong commitment to student wellbeing. At the same time, some focus group members felt that some HSC-related school practices did not foster teacher or student wellbeing. There was a clear convergence of views among focus group members that a growing culture of expectation had emerged within schools and the wider community over time, with achievement in the HSC impacting educator activities in schools as a result. None of the focus group members suggested that these expectations were made explicit at their school—instead, it appeared that these expectations were mostly implicit. It was also identified that focus group members viewed building the reputational capital of their schools and promoting their school in the education marketplace as important functions of the HSC.

6.3 The Purpose of the HSC is High-Stakes

In this section, consideration is given to how comments from focus group members were relevant to Subsidiary Research Question 1a: How is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators? Based on focus group discussions, the researcher identified that a key aspect of educator experiences of the HSC was the need to perform. Often, this focus on performance was expressed by school leaders and middle managers in terms of implicit and explicit expectations, both from parents and from the culture of the school. Both factors (i.e., parents and the culture of schools) were identified as raising the stakes associated with the HSC. In this vein, focus group members described the way in which schools mediated the HSC as a factor that increases the stakes around the test. There was unanimous agreement across and within focus groups that the notion of the HSC as a high-stakes test was reinforced at a school level by messaging regarding the importance of the HSC as a pathway, particularly to university.

In addition, school leaders and middle managers were unanimous in their view of the HSC as a high-stakes test. In describing how the HSC functioned at their school, focus group members described many traits of high-stakes tests—including the way in which success in the HSC was judged, the importance ascribed to the HSC, and the impact of the HSC on decision making. One school leader said,

I think there's an adjunct to that in terms of we have some strong drivers of parent expectation and they have the high expectations of their sons, and there's a strong grip of that and historically we have that. (FGSL1)

Focus group members felt that expectations among the school community also resulted in a high-stakes culture around the HSC in schools. One school leader noted,

Whilst we're comfortable where we are at present, if things started to drop then I think you would get some considerable parental pressure and question around HSC results as opposed to the overall educative outcomes that have been going on. (FGSL2)

Such expectations impact the culture of a school, resulting in a focus (among educators, students and parents) on excellence as defined and measured by achievement in the HSC. As one school leader put it,

There's a culture of—and I hate the word in many ways—but there's a culture of excellence. So teachers and kids—teachers and students—thrive and embrace the culture of achievement, of high achievement to the best they can. (FGSL2)

This focus within schools raises the stakes associated with the HSC for teachers and students, as evident in one middle manager's observation that,

I get a sense of intensity and expectation not only for myself, but from students and parents and fellow peers and colleagues. (FGSM2)

In turn, parent and student expectations regarding levels of achievement in the HSC made the HSC high-stakes within the local community. Focus group participants implied that schools were complicit in making the HSC high-stakes. The use of achievement in the HSC for promotional purposes was identified as a reason for the rising stakes associated with the HSC. One middle manager explained that,

The way schools like [ours] choose to market their results, you tend to look at—you tend to focus at the people at the top. So, I'm not sure what we can really do about that. That's our culture. (FGSM1)

Focus group members acknowledged that credence was given to achievement in the HSC due to perceptions among parents and the wider public that HSC achievement was a measure of school and teacher effectiveness. However, focus group members agreed that achievement in the HSC was not an appropriate measure of teacher effectiveness. One middle manager said,

I do think there has been a perception for some time that the [HSC] results are a definitive statement about the quality of teaching and learning at the College or school. (FGSM2)

Another school leader said,

Parents at enrolment interview—and I know even when XXXX and I and YYYY do interviews for students seeking entry that are currently in Year 3 looking for entry into Year 5—we do them two years in advance—or if they're coming into Year 7, performance at the [HSC] is something that parents have looked at, even if their child is as young as that. So I believe it is a significant factor in the ways in which parents choose a school for their child. (FGSL1)

Focus group members considered that achievement in the HSC greatly impacted the reputational capital of schools within the education market. In this vein, focus group members implied that an emphasis on achievement in the HSC would remain the reality in schools in NSW.

It was clear that focus group members understood the high stakes associated with the HSC. They felt that the HSC was a high-stakes test because of the pathway it was perceived to provide. As one school leader observed,

I think that given the nature of the HSC like it or not, that is a pathway for the careers that they wish to take and it is a sorting process into university. (FGSL2)

There was general agreement among focus group members that the HSC's status as an exit credential made the test high-stakes. As one middle manager commented,

I do feel that there's certainly again a feeling that the [HSC] is paramount and that policy as you said at the beginning of the question is largely directed with consideration to the fact that the [HSC] is the final statement of the success of learning. (FGSM2)

Most focus group members felt that educators, in general, acknowledged the high-stakes nature of the HSC as a credential, modifying their practice as a result. As one middle manager said,

You only have go through the staff room on a daily basis to see how important teachers perceive the HSC to be in terms of, you know, lesson preparation and just the dedication to the students here at the school. (FGSM2)

Many participants reported that they were troubled by the impact of the HSC on approaches to teaching and learning at their school.

Notably, few focus group members mentioned learning as a prominent element of the purpose of the HSC. Rather, an emphasis was given to expectations of achievement among parents, students and colleagues. Based on focus group discussions, it appears that the HSC serves a transactional function as a post-school pathway for students. Focus group participants identified this feature as being of paramount importance. It was also identified that an important purpose of the HSC was to build the reputational capital of a school. As a result, an important purpose of the HSC was identified as the test's effect on public perceptions of a school. Overall, it was identified in focus group discussions that the HSC was mediated and interpreted through the lens of achievement at both schools in this study. In addition, achievement underpinned the culture around the HSC at both schools, and was an important feature of focus group members' experiences of the HSC.

6.4 Principles that Underpin Approaches to Teaching the HSC

In this section of the chapter, consideration is given to insights from focus group interviews regarding Subsidiary Research Question 1b: In what ways do results in the high-stakes HSC examination impact approaches to teaching and learning at school and classroom levels? Focus group members reported consistently that, in many respects, achievement in the HSC was an end in itself. This was evident in the comment from one school leader in a focus group that,

In terms of the parent community it is how well the school has done overall in terms of Band 6s, whether they're in the top 100 in that beautiful *Sydney Morning Herald* comparative report. Whether we're above state average in the majority of our courses offered et cetera, et cetera. So we're not ashamed of the fact that we're achieving good HSC results and improving those because that's the system that we've got. (FGLS2)

For this reason, achievement in the HSC was a driving principle that underpinned policy, processes and practices at both schools in this study. Focus group members also reported that students' final HSC scores were the main factor taken into account in devising approaches to teaching and learning at their schools. This was made clear in the observation from a member of a leadership focus group observed that,

Where if you look at the HSC as a way of learning or the end result, it is just one way of doing it. It's not too bad. But then the ATAR is just simply the universities.

(FGLS1)

At the outset of this research, the researcher had anticipated that syllabuses, assessment and processes associated with the HSC would impact teaching and learning. However, the researcher was taken aback by the extent of this distorting effect and the intensity with which educators in this study adhered to these requirements.

Focus group members identified the main reason for the impact of the HSC in this respect as the focus on students' final HSC scores, rather than on the process of learning to achieve this end result. The force of this principle was evident in focus group members' acknowledgement that the HSC was the main factor taken into account in teaching and learning decisions across all years of secondary education within the two schools in the case study. This was captured by one focus groups member who commented that,

In our educational policy, there has been a tendency to have a heavy focus on formal assessment tasks in our assessment of learning. The predominance of these formal

assessment tasks, I think, has been because the end result is the HSC. It's a written exam so therefore we're going to do written exams... I think that's an example where the HSC has driven what we've doing in the junior years. (FGLS1)

Focus group members stated that students' final scores in the HSC impacted teaching and learning, even as they conceded that the HSC examination, syllabuses and assessment were limited instructional instruments, with educators describing them as one dimensional and lacking sufficient depth and breadth for learning.

6.4.1 Students' final scores are the focus of teaching and learning in the HSC.

Focus group members disagreed on the merits of privileging achievement in the HSC as a learning pathway. One middle manager identified concerns regarding approaches to the HSC at their school:

It's [the HSC is] the destination; it's not the journey. For the students, it's a long journey for them to focus only on the destination, I think is manifestly wrong. (FGSM1)

This observation reflected a view reported by many focus group members that the high-stakes nature of the HSC detracted from a focus on student learning. Nonetheless, focus group members accepted the high-stakes nature of the HSC as their reality for the time being. This view was expressed by one middle manager, who said,

I don't agree with that whole driven externally and it's not driven by us, it's driven predominantly by the parents and I think by societal attitudes towards the [HSC]. That students have to do the hard subjects; students have to achieve at the very top end. That does influence how we go about things and it does influence the way that we write programs and the way we assess learning. (FGSM1)

This comment was representative of a consistent and strong view among focus group members that the high-stakes nature of the HSC affected approaches to learning at their school. The same middle manager quoted directly above also commented that,

The HSC distorts teachers and learning to a real extent. So much so that I think we've got teachers here, if you said to them well I am teaching a few things that are not in the course, they would say well you're wasting time. Where is that accounted for in the program and things like that so I think it's a bit of sad thing really in terms of [our school] and schools like [ours]. That we're so focused on the HSC and the results we're going to get that it's damaging for education. (FGSM1)

Similar views were expressed by other focus group members. Based on observations from focus group meetings, the HSC examination is a factor that impacts on school educators approaches to teaching and learning, with educators focusing on equipping students to meet the requirements of the examination. Opportunities for learning are narrowed as a result.

6.4.2 The final score inflates the role of the syllabus and assessment in the HSC.

Most school leaders and middle managers reported that the HSC syllabuses, assessment and examination resulted in narrower opportunities for students to learn. One school leader said,

I think the HSC itself can act as a constraint to really good teaching, holistic teaching. (FGLS2)

However, a contrary view was expressed by another school leader, who felt that the HSC provided a,

Focus on improving student performance and trying to encourage students to achieve their optimums, to, yeah, maximise their opportunities later. (FGSL1)

This view was consistent with principles of teaching and learning in which the focus is on maximising knowledge, skills and opportunities for students.

Focus group members reported that teaching practices associated with the HSC were used with students as young as Year 7 at their school. This was identified as most evident through approaches to assessment and instructional practice in the junior secondary years of

schooling that focused on the transmission of knowledge and the measuring and reporting achievement in similar ways to those experienced in Years 11 and 12. Some focus group members saw this approach as beneficial for students. One school leader said,

I think there's a lot to be said for teachers in terms of teaching practice across all the stages, because a lot of what you do in those foundational years setting up for the HSC benefits your older students anyway in terms of routine, structures, especially in a boys' education framework... In fact, a lot of what those classroom teachers are doing in Stage 4 and 5 is fundamental to success at the end. (FGSL1)

Based on this observation, questions arise regarding the degree to which HSC syllabuses and the pedagogy used to prepare students for the HSC examination are conducive to teaching and learning, especially for students in their junior secondary years.

6.4.3 The final score is the focus of teaching and learning across the secondary years.

A consistent view among focus group members was that the structure of the HSC impacted teaching and learning in secondary schools in NSW. One middle manager described this situation, observing that,

I think for a good teacher or an expert teacher, we'll be able to play [as I said] both sides of the coin. I encourage the students to see the HSC as a game and there are rules and they can play the rules and work around the rules. (FGSM1)

This view reflected the challenge faced by HSC teachers, who must attend to the requirements of the HSC as well as their students' broader learning needs. Recognition of teachers' dual responsibility for their senior students was demonstrated by one school leader's comment that

I'd like to think it's more than that [ATAR]. I'd like to think that it goes beyond that to how well we prepare them for what they do after school. If we've prepared them well,

that when you see them a couple of years later they feel that their education served them well in their pursuits later in life. (FGLS2)

Focus group members identified a tension between ensuring that students were equipped to achieve well in the HSC, and their personal desire to provide quality teaching and learning. This tension was described by one school leader, who said,

Having said that [the HSC is limited], we can't assume that that impact is always a negative one. That some of the structures that we've got in place are—there is a belief there that it is in the best interests of the kids and can facilitate best learning. (FGSL2)

It was evident from focus group member responses that the HSC had overt and covert effects on teaching and learning across Years 7 to 12 in NSW.

6.4.4 Limitations of the HSC examination, syllabuses and assessment.

A range of disparate views were expressed in regards to the range of experiences associated with the HSC. These views range from experiences that the HSC lacked rigour, that it is too narrow to reflect the totality of learning for students in their senior years, that the HSC was too procedural and that the HSC distorted the focus of learning to achievement. The limitations of the HSC examination in measuring learning through HSC syllabuses were expressed by one middle manager, who said,

Then the actual test that comes out is not necessarily indicative of the level of rigour that they have to go through in the curriculum. Which is frustrating. (FGSM2)

The relationship between the syllabuses and the examination was considered by some of the middle managers to be problematic, constraining learning. One middle manager commented that,

The exam is often from a history point of view particularly somewhat constructed and limited by the syllabus. So I think the syllabus has a real impact on the testing process

and it might need to be the fact that the syllabuses need to be reviewed and upgraded and adjusted so that they're actually meeting the requirements. (FGSM2)

Middle managers reported one deficiency of the HSC in particular—that the test was being used to serve too many purposes for too many audiences. For these reasons, the HSC was considered an instrument not fit for purpose. One middle manager said,

So as an instrument because there's—they're trying to make it consistent but it's not—it can't be. So in that way, as a measurement tool, it's not really effective in that respect. It—I think it measures some aspects but not as—it's not the tool that we all thought it—well it wasn't—it's not the tool that I thought it was to be sure. (FGSM1)

This comment reflected the dissatisfaction reported by many educators in this study regarding the HSC, indicating that the test fails to do what it is intended to do. One middle manager indicated their disappointment with the HSC, arguing that the test lacked rigour:

I've taught to HSC level all the [subject name] and the upshot is they're watered it down. Compared to what the HSC was 30 years ago—and I've been teaching HSC for 30 years—they are significantly watered down. The whole assessment system in [subject name] has, I believe, been significantly watered down to the extent that they've stripped the nature of the subject itself in [subject name]. There's nowhere near the amount of rigour and content that existed 30 years ago in the HSC. (FGSM2)

This comment reflected the educator's view that the nature and content of the HSC had changed over time. It also reflected that some middle managers perceive rigour as an important aspect of the HSC.

Another middle manager described the HSC as,

Quite one-dimensional. What it does bring in is a sense of rigour, which is great but rigour is just one part of that and it can promote discipline and routine and it's also the way it's structured. (FGSM1)

There was a lack of agreement regarding the extent to which rigour in the HSC mattered. Many focus group members conflated the HSC and ATAR. As one middle manager said,

So you know they've got Band 6s in 10 units and they don't get an ATAR of 96. Then you've got the student that's nowhere near an all-rounder and he gets an ATAR of over 99. So it's not just about the HSC in terms of the Band 6s. It's also about the ATAR in terms of a measure of success. (FGSM2)

Responses from focus group members indicated some confusion as to what achievement in the HSC meant and the limitations of the HSC in measuring achievement.

Verbatim reports from focus groups presented in this chapter represent members' consistent views that the principles of the HSC, like the purpose of the test, were underpinned by the notion of achievement. It became apparent that the HSC was the dominant principle that underpinned teaching and learning activities in both schools. As a consequence, it was identified that importance was given to the outcome of the process associated with the HSC rather than the process itself. The implication of this finding is that the HSC distorts teaching and learning at secondary schools in NSW. As a result, educators are constrained in their ability to provide holistic approaches to teaching and learning due to the structured and regimented nature of the HSC. In analysing focus group member discussions, some evidence was identified for a desire to counter the focus on achievement and to provide broader learning opportunities for students. However, educators acknowledged that this could not be done at the expense of achievement in the HSC. For this reason, the HSC (and achievement in it) were identified as overwhelming limitations placed on teachers in secondary schools in NSW. At the schools in this study, the consequence of this situation has been that learning at school and classroom levels has become one dimensional.

6.5 The HSC as a Driver of Teaching Practice

In this part of the chapter, consideration is given to how insights from focus group discussions were relevant to subsidiary research question 1c: Do expectations of the HSC impact the practices of school educators? In discussing how the HSC impacts teaching practice, the greatest difference of opinion between focus group members was identified. As indicated earlier in this chapter, there were fewer differences of opinion between focus groups from different schools than between focus groups of school leaders and focus groups of middle managers. School leaders reported that teaching and learning activities were guided by learning goals rather than achievement alone. Overwhelmingly, middle managers expressed a strongly contrary view, reporting that expectations regarding student performance were the most important factor in their practice. A consistent observation among middle managers was that school leaders were focused on continuous improvement of HSC results. Middle managers (and some school leaders) reported that many teachers narrowed the range of learning activities they offered their students as a result of this focus on achievement. In particular, middle managers reported that they, along with classroom teachers, were aware that they narrowed the focus of their teaching activities, prioritising areas that would be used to judge their effectiveness.

6.5.1 The need for continuous improvement in the HSC.

Middle managers indicated a disconnect between their experience of performativity as it operated in their school and school leader understandings of the role of performativity in their school. One middle manager described this difference:

There's a difference between what the school expects our faculty to achieve. What the school expects our faculties to achieve in and what that looks like and what we think it looks like. There's a dichotomy between what the school expects and I think what we expect as coordinators. (FGSM1)

School leaders indicated that achievement in the HSC impacted their decision making on matters of HSC-related policy and practice. However, they said that other considerations also informed their decision-making on these issues.

Most middle managers reported that performance in the HSC was given prominence and priority in their school. One middle manager explained their experience of performativity at their school:

It's all about those big numbers and less about the stories behind them. I think we as an organisation, we tend to focus on those numbers. I go as far to say that [my] department only achieves well when it gets lots of Band 6s and lots of E4s. It doesn't have anything to do with the fact that the middle group might move up significantly. If you didn't get as many Band 6s as you got the year before, as many E4s and extension subjects as you did the year before then the year was considered to be a failure. (FGSM1)

The “big numbers” referred to by this middle manager were the number of students achieving Band 6 scores or course scores above the state average. Use of this data is accompanied by the need for continuous improvement. It is likely that the result of this focus on continuous improvement results in increased pressure relating to performativity. As one middle manager noted,

It always seems to be about improvement and when you have—I'm lucky in that my department already gets pretty solid results. So how do you keep on improving as such? So I think that practice I find is directly influenced by this HSC results thing. (FGSM2)

6.5.2 Focus on achievement narrows the lenses of school and teacher activity.

It was evident from comments by most middle managers that performative requirements of the HSC resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum. The impact of syllabus dot points in his respect was raised by several middle managers. For example, one middle manager said,

But there are always going to be those teachers who themselves feel that anxiety and cling to those syllabus dot points like a life raft. As almost like a spiritual guide to get them through because they are so concerned about the pressure and what their students are saying. (FGSM1)

In striving to meet performance expectations, middle managers described that Band 6 achievement impacted how school leaders and teachers understood their role. As one middle manager noted,

You're just trying to lift those boys and get them to that Band 6 which if we had a little bit more time, if it wasn't so fast-paced then that would be a possibility. (FGSM2)

Middle managers felt that compromises needed to be made in achieving broader student learning outcomes, in particular regarding the emphasis on Band 6 scores. One school leader said that high numbers of students achieving Band 6 scores did not necessarily indicate a teacher's effectiveness:

Maybe they're the best at playing the game—the HSC game. (FGSL2)

Focus group members identified that students could only achieve high scores in the HSC if their teachers understood how the HSC works and how to operate within the structures of the test. Participants viewed these factors, rather than an educator's teaching ability per se, as important factors in student success.

6.5.3 Teacher activity is affected by how teacher effectiveness is judged.

The importance of students achieving strong HSC results was evident in one middle manager's view that,

There is also some—not – manipulation's too strong a word but some—definitely some interest from school leadership in which teachers are taking which course. They seem to have picked the winners in terms of the teachers and they're the ones who get the

results and the thing is, is that—so you might be encouraged to place a certain teacher in a certain year group. (FGSM1)

Other middle managers indicated that school leader expectations regarding student performance were not necessarily stated explicitly—instead, they were implied. As another middle manager stated,

So as a result, teachers know that [performance is important]. It might not be stated explicitly but they know the school keeps an eye on them and thus, I think that contributes to a certain sense of pressure for the teachers. (FGSM1)

Based on these observations, it appeared that middle managers in this study felt that leaders at their school conveyed explicit and implicit performative demands. The way these demands were mediated to teachers in this research was reflected by one middle manager's comment that,

I think that the studies coordinators need to look at—they do look at—teachers that are generally successful with those classes. I think that there's an acknowledgement of the success of teaching strategies associated with successful [HSC] classes. (FGSM2)

It is possible that knowing the “rules” and how to “play the game” of the HSC are key components of teaching HSC students successfully. Indeed, focus group members suggested that effective teaching would not necessarily result in strong student achievement in the HSC. The clearest evidence that performativity in the HSC affected how teachers in this study understood their role was identified in comments that teaching across Years 7 to 12 was geared towards the HSC. One middle manager said,

I think the HSC drives all the teaching and preparation for the students from 7 to 11 as well. You set the high standard at the top at the HSC level and it filters down to junior teachers as well in those junior subjects. (FGSM2)

A school leader provided an example of the impact of the HSC on learning and teaching across the secondary year levels:

In going back to that formal assessment there was a decision that we are going to keep those exams in Year 10, and there's expectation there will be exams, to start setting that foundational work on, how do you approach exams, in that sense. Another example of a practice directly related to the HSC, [better that] it's two-dimensional, but just this year we've implemented an expectation that [broad] assessment tasks from Year 10 onwards are clearly linked to the BOSTES terms. (FGSL1)

Another school leader indicated that learning activities in the lower secondary years were intended as training opportunities for the HSC:

So it's sequential and age appropriate if you like training through the programs that we have in place in our assessment and in our teaching and learning programs while still meeting the requirements of the syllabus and so forth. We've got that end result in mind that we've got a training purpose with those kids. (FGSL2)

Based on focus group discussions, it was identified that performance in the HSC was used to measure school and teacher effectiveness at both schools in this study, to guide the delivery of curricula requirements, and affected teaching practices across all year levels in both schools.

In practice, focus group discussions revealed that the HSC was given priority at both school sites. As with the purpose of the HSC and principles underpinning it, performance was identified as a key driver of practice. Focus group members indicated that educational practices at their school were determined by performance, as well as the view that measuring performance can improve practice, driving continuous improvement of student outcomes. However, this dynamic can result in teachers feeling anxious over their ability to meet HSC-related demands in their roles. Focus group members acknowledged (although generally implicitly) that school educators selected teaching and learning practices based on their

potential effect on student achievement in the HSC. As a result, the HSC impacts how teachers approach their lesson preparation, pedagogy and assessment.

6.6 Interpreting Focus Group Member Experiences of the HSC through Social Domains Theory

In the final part of this chapter, a synthesis of the findings discussed throughout the chapter is presented through the lens of social domains theory (Layder, 1997). In this research, social domains theory was used to identify social settings, contextual resources and situated activities in focus group discussions. This approach enabled the researcher to consider reciprocal interactions and aspects of positional power demonstrated in focus group meetings. Reciprocal interactions refer to interchanges across and within focus groups. Given the hierarchical nature of most schools and of authority structures within schools, positional power is an element of most educators' professional experience. As Anderson (2009) and Ryan (2007) identify, those with positional power play a central role in the discourse of policy and practice. The nature of the discourse that occurs from those in a position of power occurs through language and culture that inform and shape practice (Foucault, 1977).

In this thesis, the term "positional power" is used to describe the impact of the authority ascribed to particular roles in the school on how educators experience the HSC. In focus group discussions, HSC-related interactions between school leaders and middle managers were identified as dynamic. These interactions affected how the HSC was mediated to teachers at both schools in this study, as well as to the wider school community. In addition, these interactions were bi-directional. As a result, school leaders and middle managers' thinking, approaches and attitudes about the HSC are shaped by interactions between members of these two groups. Focus group members indicated that expectations of high student achievement were embedded in their school's culture and practices. Additionally, focus group members

consistently reported that the wellbeing of students and their overall development were priorities in both schools.

At both schools in this study, the influence of school leaders and middle managers affected HSC-related situated activities. In this study, expressions of positional power lay within educators' explicit and implicit interactions regarding the HSC. In this regard, there was a strong dissonance between reports from school leaders and middle managers in this study. This divergence was clearest in the way in which middle managers identified requirements of performativity within their roles. In focus groups, school leaders suggested that performativity was only a small part of their approach to the HSC. Typically, school leaders identified the HSC as one part of a broader and more holistic approach to student development and learning. As such, school leaders indicated that, while achievement in the HSC was important for their school's reputational capital and was in the interests of students, they sought a wider range of education outcomes than those related to the HSC. In contrast, middle managers reported that their experience was that student achievement in the HSC and adherence to the requirements of the HSC were defining features of teaching and learning activities across their schools. Middle managers reported that judgements regarding the effectiveness, direction, and purpose of what they do were driven, almost exclusively, by school leaders' pursuit of strong student achievement in the HSC.

6.6.1 Social settings.

Social settings relate to the organisational shape and form in which teachers operate, which affects their roles, practices, positions, and relationships. Within the social setting of a school, school leaders and middle managers play significant roles in the social reproduction of the priority and prominence given to the HSC. This reproduction occurs through the way in which school leaders and middle managers influence how the HSC is mediated and interpreted within their school. Focus group members reported that the HSC was given high importance at

both schools in this study. In addition, they revealed that the language and practices associated with the HSC in both schools predominantly concerned achievement in the HSC. In focus group discussions, school leaders and middle managers perceived the meaning and importance of student achievement in the HSC differently. Focus groups indicated that achievement in the HSC was of paramount importance at both schools in this study, affecting educator understandings, approaches and expectations of learning.

HSC-related bureaucratic arrangements in both schools were interpreted by middle managers in this study as implicit statements regarding the priority given to the HSC. These arrangements included placing certain teachers on certain classes, prioritising the HSC in timetabling and scheduling, and focusing on HSC-specific skills and content in teaching students in their lower secondary years of schooling. Particular reference was made to honour assemblies, awards and promotional material as artefacts of the HSC. A common view shared by middle managers was that these artefacts implicitly emphasise achievement in the HSC. Within these artefacts of the HSC are language and customs that reflect notions of excellence, of high standards, and of performance-based expectations. Pedagogical practices, as well as the structures and nature of assessment at both schools, were identified by focus group members as driven by the HSC.

6.6.2 Contextual resources.

The term “contextual resources” is used to refer to the nature of authority, ethos, mores, and levels of social, educational, and cultural capital. In both schools in this study, as social domains, contextual resources were represented through symbols and priorities central to each school’s projected and core identities. Focus group members demonstrated that both schools were perceived to have high levels of social, reputational and educational capital. A recurrent theme in focus group discussions was the importance of parental expectations and the competitive education market place, in which achievement in the HSC was prioritised. Due to

these dynamics, the HSC was given de facto authority within both schools in this study. Middle managers observed that school leaders shaped how educators at their school approached the HSC. Middle managers reported that the authority of the HSC was implicit in the culture, language, attitudes and practices associated with the HSC at their school. Focus group members also identified that the HSC had explicit and implicit effects on pedagogy. These explicit and implicit aspects of the HSC were identified by focus group members as being transmitted through the language, ethos and culture in both schools.

6.6.3 Situated activities.

Situated activity is the lens through which social interactions are explored—the relationships that affect the meaning and identity of teachers, shaping how participants in this research interpreted their experiences. School leaders and middle managers in this study expressed different views regarding approaches and attitudes to the HSC. Differences in their opinions on this topic are evidence of the dynamic nature of interactions between school leaders and middle managers. Hence, competing and contradictory views on how the HSC should be enacted in schools were identified in this study. The main areas of contention related to the priority given to achievement in the HSC, the validity of making judgments of school and teacher effectiveness based on student achievement in the HSC, and opinions that the HSC had resulted in a distorted curriculum in both schools. Amid the hierarchical structure of most schools (including both schools in this study), certain practices and behaviours around the HSC will become prescribed over time. This is because as Foucault identified, knowledge, meaning and practice are created through discourse dependent upon the subjectivity of power relationships (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013). Nuanced differences in experience, as identified by focus group members, reflected the reciprocal nature of relationships and discourse across both school settings.

6.7 Closing Remarks

In this chapter, consideration was given to philosophical, operational and practical aspects of the HSC that were identified in participant responses to the indicative survey and in focus group discussions. The dominant function of the HSC across the school landscape in NSW, and the range of purposes that the HSC serves have been considered. A particular negative consequence of the importance afforded to the HSC was identified in this chapter—that is, stress and pressure associated with the high-stakes nature of the HSC. Commentary has been provided on data gathered from focus group discussions, providing insight into experiences, culture and operational aspects related to the HSC at a school level. There is evidence of a desire among educators at both schools in this study to focus on the learning needs of students. However, educators' capacity to do this is inhibited by expectations around performance in the HSC, including the effect of HSC results on the reputational capital of both schools. These factors were identified as reasons for the high stakes associated with the HSC. As a result of these factors, students' final scores in the HSC are given central importance. It was identified that the high-stakes nature of the HSC has impacted teaching and learning in both schools considerably due to the perceived need for continuous improvement. In turn, this focus on continuous improvement has resulted in a narrowing of the activity of teachers, who have focused their attention on activities related to the HSC—the metric against which their effectiveness is judged.

7.0 The Situated Experience of Teachers with the HSC

In the previous chapter, responses from an indicative survey administered to educators at both schools in this study were described. Based on participant responses, the researcher identified contextual information regarding teacher experiences, understandings and attitudes towards the HSC at both school sites. Next, data generated from focus group interviews conducted with educators from both schools were analysed. In focus group discussions, insights were identified into the research question for this study: How do their experiences of the requirements, expectations and culture of the NSW Higher School Certificate influence school educators in their approach to teaching and learning and how they understand their role as educators? By analysing this question using a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, knowledge was gained of the experience of school leaders and middle managers regarding attitudes, culture and practices associated with the HSC at the two school sites in this study.

As discussed in the previous chapter, school leaders and managers at both schools indicated that their experiences of the purpose, principles and practices of the HSC were underpinned by a focus on student achievement. For this reason, participants felt that the HSC heavily impacted priorities among educators at their school. It was clear that focus group members were committed to student learning. However, in response to the high-stakes associated with the HSC, focus group members tended to frame student achievement in terms of students' final HSC result. In itself, a focus on academic achievement is a positive aspiration for students and ultimately is the aim of school educators. However, in light of the nexus between achievement and the reputational capital of schools in this study, educators' narrow focus on the HSC syllabus and examination, and the way in which student achievement was used as a measure of teacher effectiveness at both schools, the emphasis on student achievement was distorted at both schools. Focus group members revealed that their experience

was that the focus on student achievement in the HSC resulted in narrower approaches to the curriculum and to teacher activity.

In this chapter, teacher experiences of the HSC as reported in semi-structured interviews are described and situated within each teacher's school context. As explained in Chapter 5, a double hermeneutic approach was used in this study to interpret data gathered from semi-structured interviews with teachers. The researcher drew on their background knowledge of the HSC (as presented in Chapter 3) and findings presented in Chapter 6 to make sense of the experiences of teachers, who are making sense of their own personal and social experiences of the HSC. In the process, the researcher recognised that each teacher's individual experiences were situated in their personal context. Through the background information outlined in Chapter 3, the researcher gained an understanding of the dynamics present in each school's context. The researcher also used this information to understand the context of teachers' experiences and agency in regard to the HSC. Participant responses from semi-structured interviews were relevant to teacher experiences of the purpose, principles and practice of the high-stakes HSC. In analysing these responses, the researcher answered the three research questions for this research: How is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators (Subsidiary Research Question 1a)? How do results in the high-stakes HSC examination impact approaches to teaching and learning at school and classroom levels (Subsidiary Research Question 1b)? and, Do expectations of the HSC impact the practice of school educators (Subsidiary Research Question 1c)?

7.1 Themes Identified from Semi-Structured Interviews

In this part of the chapter, an explanation is provided of themes that were identified in interviews with teachers, and how these themes were categorised and interpreted. At School 1, 17 teachers were interviewed. At School 2, 15 teachers were interviewed. Themes discussed in this chapter are consistent with many themes identified in the review of literature relevant to

this research, as described in Chapter 2. Themes identified from semi-structured interviews were consistent with those identified from the indicative survey of teachers and from focus group discussions. As a result, data gathered for this study have been triangulated and the researcher is confident in the veracity of the findings presented in this chapter. Consistent with other data gathered for this study, it was identified in semi-structured interviews that participants considered that the HSC was used for multiple purposes, with the perceived stakes associated with the test rising as a result. In semi-structured interviews, it was identified that the HSC functions in ways that are predicated first and foremost on student achievement. In addition, it was identified that educators prioritised student achievement because of its impact on the work and study options available to students after graduating, as well as its effect on the school's reputation. Participants identified these themes as results of the importance given to the HSC examination and the fact that the results from the HSC were available to the public.

In this chapter, these key themes are further explored in light of the perception (identified by participants in this research) that the HSC functions as a stepping stone for life. Participants viewed the HSC as an especially high-stakes test because of its effect on students' entrance to university. Participants also saw the HSC as high-stakes due to its broader role in equipping students for adulthood. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher identified that participants felt a tension between maximising student achievement in the HSC and the need to equip students for life after the end of their secondary schooling. In discussing this conflict, participants questioned whether the HSC was fit for purpose. Participants reported that this tension arose from the priority the HSC was given by school leaders (and, therefore, by teachers).

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews is presented according to themes as they were identified. Verbatim responses were coded with the first two letters as individual identifiers, followed by gender identification ("M" for male and "F" for female). This

information was included in coding even though gender was found to have no effect on findings. The final numeric identification in each code was used to identify School 1 (1) or School 2 (2). This coding was used so that nuances in educator experiences between the two schools in this study would be obvious to the reader. At both schools in this study, there was a convergence in participant experiences of the HSC as a high-stakes test for schools, teachers and students. In the following parts of the chapter, participant reports on how they experienced and interpreted the purpose of the HSC are described.

7.2 The Purpose of the HSC

In this part of the chapter, consideration is given to how participants experienced the purpose of the HSC. Key to understanding this topic is the way in which the purpose of the HSC was experienced by participants. As a result, Subsidiary Research Question 1a is addressed in this section: How is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators? In semi-structured interviews, it was identified that most participants viewed the high-stakes nature of the HSC and its purpose as indistinguishable. It was identified that participants prioritised the HSC in teaching and learning activities because of the high stakes that were perceived as accompanying the test. This understanding of purpose was clearly affected by the role of the HSC examination in the culmination of students' 13 years of schooling. Many participants indicated that their perception of the HSC examination as the defining feature of the HSC was not necessarily correct. However, this was the reality they had experienced in teaching the HSC. Most participants indicated that this situation was a source of tension for them. This tension extended to participants' experience of the purpose of the HSC as a stepping stone for students after leaving school. Participants indicated that they understood that the HSC was designed for students to obtain an ATAR in order to gain admission to university. Most teachers in this study reported that personally, they felt that the HSC should serve a greater purpose than university admission. However, achieving a high

score in the HSC and ATAR were given top priority in their schools. In light of this tension between maximising measurable academic achievement and holistic learning outcomes for students, many participants questioned whether the HSC was fit for purpose.

7.2.1 Teacher priorities reflect the high-stakes nature of the HSC.

In light of its public nature and its impact on the options available to students as they transition from school, the stakes associated with the HSC are high. As the culmination of 13 years of schooling, considerable significance is given to the HSC by educators, students, and parents. In this study, participants from School 1 tended to emphasise the importance of the final HSC. In contrast, participants from School 2 discussed the importance of the HSC in more general terms. Despite this divergence in experience, participants at both school sites reported that the public nature of the HSC examination raised the stakes associated with the test. This experience was captured by one participant's observation that,

Naturally it [the HSC] assumes a priority because it's an external assessment. It's not something that you can hide... It is the end thing. It's the big kahuna. I must admit I find it a little unhealthy. (AGF1)

A participant from School 2 said,

The HSC gives itself the priority. At the end of the day, that's kind of what we're here for. (NPM2)

The purpose given to the HSC at both schools in this study, as described and affirmed by numerous participant responses, stemmed from the high-stakes associated with the HSC examination. The importance given to the examination was noted by another participant from School 1, who said

In an HSC class, I'm always conscious of the end result, of where the HSC marks are... I will very much teach to the style of the exam so they know how to write the essay in the third part. (DBM1)

In describing their experiences of the HSC, educators indicated how the nature of the examination impacted their pedagogical thinking and practice. A number of participants suggested that student learning in the senior years was narrowed as a result of the high-stakes nature of the HSC examination. As a participant from School 1 commented,

I don't necessarily enjoy the whole idea of the test being so high-stakes and as I've said before there's a whole bunch more to learning that is sidelined or not measured and probably can't be measured in too many ways that probably should be somewhere.
(SBYM1)

Universally, participants described the HSC examination as their main consideration in teaching Year 11 and 12 students. In addition, participants indicated that school structure and practice were shaped around achievement in the examination.

The reason for this approach was captured by one respondent, who observed that, It would take a very strong principal and school board indeed to say, we are willing to compromise on results for the benefit of the whole student. I don't know if such bravery exists. (AGF1)

In sum, many participants viewed student achievement in the HSC as their colleagues'—and their own—main consideration with regard to teaching and learning. As one participant said,

The whole of the senior school from [Years] 11 to 12 is centred around it [the HSC], so all your choices go in that direction, all your timetabling goes in that direction. Everything else that happens is in balance with it or looking at trying to counteract it in some ways. (GDF2)

Based on these findings, it appears that the HSC examination's function as the culminating point of schooling for students in NSW impacts how teachers and school leaders at schools in NSW practice. In participants' comments about the need to modify the high-stakes nature of the HSC (due to the examination) and its effects on teaching and learning, there is evidence

that the HSC distorts learning at secondary schools in NSW. On the other hand, some participants viewed the HSC as inherently valuable because of the high stakes associated with the test.

7.2.2 The HSC is experienced by teachers as impacting students' future.

As discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, participants recognised that, in theory and in practice, the HSC affected the pathways available to students after finishing secondary school. Most participants reported that the HSC functioned primarily to provide a variety of post-school pathways. However, there was some divergence of opinion regarding the nature of pathways facilitated by the HSC. Some participants viewed the purpose of the HSC as providing multiple opportunities for students after completing their schooling. For example, one participant said,

I think of the HSC as the first stepping-stone for a student's life. It doesn't matter if that student is going to just work after the HSC, going to TAFE, or getting to university.
(MCF1)

Most participants believed that a student's performance in the HSC often predicted their success in life in general after finishing school, although some participants held this view grudgingly. These participants questioned whether it was right to define a student's success based on their performance in the HSC. One participant from School 2 said,

For me it's just that their future could depend on it. If they don't do so good in Year 8 or 9, they've got a few more years. Their future depends on how they go often—I mean it's probably not right but it certainly gives them a good head start if they get a good HSC. (BHM2)

Many participants described the HSC as a pathway to university. In turn, most participants said university was a preferred post-school pathway among their students.

A small minority of participants indicated that university entry was the premium post-school pathway. They also reported that they saw this pathway as the main purpose of the HSC. One participant indicated the importance of matriculation when they said,

It's not so much that they have the exam and I think the exam is more important than all the others, but it is a huge pathway because so many of our students are pursuing higher education. I think because so many take the university pathway it's seen as very important, particularly by parents, which those values and attitudes obviously pass on to their sons, so they end up giving it high importance. That means we as teachers reflect it as well. (RMF1)

In semi-structured interviews, participants identified the culture of their school and parental expectations as reasons for the preference given to a post-HSC university pathway by many students. A number of participants reported that, within their school culture as they experienced it, the HSC as a university pathway was a primary focus. As one participant said,

The school is saying to the kids, well, you're going to choose an HSC tertiary education pathway generally by going to the HSC. You would like to gain an ATAR and potentially see where that will lead you, whether it will lead you to a university pathway or whether it will get you to re-evaluate your life after school. (GBM2)

Some participants viewed the purpose of the HSC as providing an ATAR (an explanation of the ATAR and its relationship to the HSC was given in Chapter 3). Among these participants, there was a tendency to conflate the HSC with the ATAR. There was an implicit acknowledgement among this group that the ATAR rank provided a useful summary of student achievement in the HSC. One participant said,

The main goal is to get an ATAR. When you see the HSC results in the media, apart from those that get [10 meritorious] or whatever, the focus is on the score. Yeah, I

would think that most kids would do an HSC to get an ATAR and not just to get the certificate. (GBM2)

Based on the fact that some participants used the HSC and ATAR as interchangeable terms, it appears that many educators prioritise the HSC in their teaching because of its effect on students' ATAR. One participant said,

I've been asked by friends in other professions, they say what does an ATAR of 95 mean. I say he's a mighty well-educated kid. [The student is] able to handle pressure. He's able to handle very higher order concepts. If you sit in an exam and you can get 99.9 you can become a doctor pretty much. So to me that's about as fair as you're going to get. (TCM1)

These participants viewed the ATAR as a useful summary of a student's academic achievement, and achieving an ATAR as the main reason for sitting the HSC.

Participants who associated success in the HSC with a high ATAR not only conflated the HSC and the ATAR—they also identified a student's ATAR as the key to their post-school success. As one participant said,

There is that golden ticket associated with the ATAR mark. That's not a reflection on [our school], that's a reflection on the [NSW] system in terms of getting into uni. (NPM2)

Many participants implied or stated explicitly that performance in the HSC was a predictor of success later in a student's life. In their focus on the ATAR, these participants demonstrated an experience of the purpose of the HSC as a competitive activity. As a respondent from School 2 said,

At the end of it, the rank is a means to an end. Once you've got to that end, the rank isn't really important anymore. Even to some degree the marks, your marks determine I suppose I'm saying your ATAR. (MTM2)

Most participants expressed the view that the mark or band a student achieved in the HSC was unimportant relative to the rank provided by the ATAR in understanding the purpose of the HSC.

Many participants viewed the purpose of the HSC as much broader than matriculation, and the nature of academic success as encompassing factors that could not be measured by the ATAR. Participants in this group emphasised the broad range of post-school pathways available to students after the HSC. These participants viewed the HSC, despite its limitations, as a basis for broader learning. One participant said,

Ultimately to me the HSC is not the end game. To me it's the beginning of where they decide to go as an adult. (AGF1)

The role of the HSC in preparing students for their life post school was identified as a consistent theme in interviews. A range of opportunities and options beyond the ATAR were seen to be available to students. As one participant said,

My message from Day 1 of Year 11 is this is about maximising your choice when you leave us, when you go out into the world. I just keep that as a consistent message particularly when they're feeling stressed and tired and overworked. (SGF1)

These participants reported that regardless of its strengths or weaknesses, the ultimate purpose of the HSC was to give students a range of opportunities for their lives after secondary school.

Most participants interpreted the HSC in a more holistic way than participants who viewed matriculation as the main purpose of the HSC. For these participants, teaching the HSC was about more than meeting syllabus requirements, preparing students for the examination, and helping students achieve a high final score. Participants in this group expressed the view that the totality of the HSC experience played a role in preparing students for their future lives. As one participant noted,

I teach it [the HSC] with the intention of life skills, how to be a good student beyond Year 11 and 12, so university, or even life, how am I going to run a business when this is challenging? (WYM2)

Another participant commented that,

The HSC prepares the [students] for whatever they're doing next. Because of—to be successful in the HSC it's not just about how academic you are, it's about how well you can handle and juggle lots of different things. (OTM2)

Underpinning this view was the notion that going through the process of the HSC, and managing the various elements associated with the HSC, helped students develop the skills they would need after finishing school. Participants in this group saw skills such as resilience, adaptability and motivation as useful attributes that students developed in the process of completing the HSC.

Overall, participants interpreted the purpose and direction of post-school pathways in different ways. Among a small number of respondents, there was a narrow understanding that the university entry was the main purpose of the HSC. Participants who focused on matriculation in semi-structured interviews did not refer to vocational pathways as a viable option for students. Indeed, few participants mentioned vocational pathways at all. Most participants felt that completing the HSC equipped students to become functional, competent and contributing members of society after leaving school. Participants who expressed this view also viewed the HSC as a high-stakes test because of its role in preparing students for their future lives.

7.2.3 The HSC serves many functions—but is it fit for purpose?

As detailed in Chapter 3, the HSC has historically been used as an aspect of university entry, with respondents indicating that this purpose raised the stakes associated with the test.

As one participant said,

It [the HSC] prepares them for the expectations at university or universities as well because they all have different criteria. I think it's very realistic. It's very hard because of the stresses put on them and the media beefs it up as well too but you need some kind of standard. (ALM1)

In this respondent's view, the HSC was fit for the purpose of preparing students for university and providing a university entrance score. Participants disagreed on the appropriateness of the emphasis given to the HSC as a pathway to university entrance. There was greater unanimity that the HSC was high-stakes due to its perceived impact on students' futures. As one participant said,

Their future depends on how they go [in the HSC] often —I mean it's probably not right but it certainly gives them a good head start if they get a good HSC. (BHM2)

It was clear from participant reports that the HSC's role as a pathway made the test a high stakes one. One participant expressed their understanding of the importance for students of performing well in the HSC, saying:

I think it does shape the rest of their lives. It gives them opportunities. If they fail at it the faults that cause the failure will reappear in their next life. (TCM1)

A corollary to the importance of the HSC as a pathway for students was the effect of student performance in the HSC on schools' place in the education marketplace. Participant responses in semi-structured interviews demonstrated clearly that the HSC was experienced and interpreted as being high-stakes. Consistent with findings from focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews revealed that achievement was experienced and interpreted as a central purpose of the HSC. It became apparent in semi-structured interviews that the defining feature of secondary school education in NSW was preparing students to meet the requirements of the HSC examination. The powerful effect of the external examination on educators' mediation and interpretation of the purpose of the HSC was evident from participant comments in semi-

structured interviews that decisions made at a school level were governed by the HSC. Participants indicated that, as a consequence, student learning was often sidelined in the pursuit of achievement in the HSC. In semi-structured interviews, participants indicated that one reason for this focus on student achievement in the HSC was the role it played as a pathway for students—especially a pathway to university.

7.3 The Impact of the High-Stakes HSC on Teaching and Learning

In this part of the chapter, consideration is given to the principles of the HSC that participants in semi-structured interviews experienced as underpinning approaches to teaching and learning. In this section, Subsidiary Research Question 1b is addressed: In what ways do results in the high-stakes HSC examination impact approaches to learning at school and classroom levels? Earlier in this chapter, participant experiences of the HSC as high-stakes were outlined, along with participants' reasoning as to which factors made the HSC a high-stakes test. Given these experiences, it is unsurprising that semi-structured interviews revealed that the HSC examination was given ultimate priority in teaching and learning at both schools in this study. As indicated previously, achievement in and of itself is typically what educators at both schools in this study desired for their students. However, in semi-structured interviews, participants reported that the focus in schools on achievement in the HSC shaped approaches to teaching and learning. Most participants recognised that this approach came at a cost for students and teachers. It was universally acknowledged by participants that their teaching and learning was driven and limited by the HSC examination. Overwhelmingly, they indicated that they felt obliged to prepare students to achieve results in a narrow testing instrument, wedding them to addressing every aspect of the HSC syllabus.

As a result, all participants indicated that their focus was ensuring that they covered any examinable content represented by syllabus dot-points exhaustively. Most participants reported that this approach served no other greater learning purpose than meeting the demands

of the HSC examination. Most participants reported that they found the prescriptive nature of the HSC syllabuses, and the way the HSC examination dictated how they delivered the syllabus, was not how they wanted to teach. Nor did participants think that this approach to teaching necessarily served the interests of students. Some participants expressed that they valued the prescriptive nature of the HSC as it gave them direction, and that their students' achievement in the examination affirmed the effectiveness of what they were doing in their classroom. Even so, all participants recognised that the importance given to the HSC examination (and as a result, to teaching to the syllabus) made teaching and learning transmissive. Transmissive learning is based on the definition provided in Chapter 2 which is a mode of learning where traditional pedagogies are utilised in which knowledge and skills are transmitted by teachers and assimilated by students.

7.3.1 Teachers prioritise the HSC examination in their instruction.

For participants in semi-structured interviews in this study, achieving student results in the HSC was a priority that subsumed their considerations of learning. The priority given to achievement in the HSC as a result of the external nature of the examination was made clear in one participant's comment that,

I think that idea of its very public nature can bring a sense of almost—not humiliation, but it can be a really resounding blow to your self-confidence and your self-efficacy too. (AGF1)

This view was consistent with responses from participants at both school sites, who indicated that their experiences of the HSC impacted how they approached student learning. One respondent commented that,

Basically the HSC is my top priority. I'm just going to shoot straight into it, I'm going to be honest here. Over the last 15 years of my teaching career, probably the last 18, I've been promoted on my ability to achieve results in the HSC. (SHM1)

In this statement, the importance placed by this participant on student achievement in the HSC was made clear. This sentiment appeared consistently (although to varying degrees) in responses from other participants.

Participants at both school sites acknowledged that the high-stakes nature of the HSC impacted their teaching practice. One participant said,

[The HSC] does definitely inform procedure and definitely inform policy and I think you would be naïve not to see that in any school that it definitely does. (NPM2)

Consistently across both schools in this study, participants indicated that student results in the HSC were taken into consideration in assigning teachers to classes. As one participant said,

The HSC is used for choosing the teachers for which subjects. So I think, yes, that's— [school leaders] won't say it's important, but I have a feeling that which teachers teach which subjects for Year 11 and 12 really is an underlying thing. (MCF1)

Responses from teachers at both schools diverged from views expressed by school leaders in focus group discussions, with participants in semi-structured interviews identifying that, in their experience, performance in the HSC was the main factor considered in placing teachers on Year 12 classes.

Consistently, participants reported that they prioritised their Year 12 classes due to the high stakes associated with the HSC examination. One participant described Year 12 students as,

First in terms of my organisation, they're first in terms of making sure that I am prepared, they're first in making sure that my assessment tasks are up to speed, they're first in terms of when I give them feedback. (OTM2)

In this statement, the participant implied that students in other year groups were given less attention. Another participant echoed this view, saying,

Everything about secondary education seems to be focused towards getting to the HSC, so the level of priority is quite high. I do pay a little bit more attention to grades, assessments, content, teachers [and] markers feedback. (WYM2)

In this comment, the participant confirmed that school educators prioritise the HSC when it comes to teaching and learning. The priority given to the HSC, and how this priority affects teachers and students, was evident in one participant's description of the HSC as,

A very high priority... It's a lot of work and I do take it really seriously. This year is the first time I've actually been given [Year 11 and 12 classes] and I don't like it... Year 12s are a huge responsibility and your Year 11s are a huge responsibility because really, that's your HSC. It's a lot of practice for the kids, it's a lot of work for the kids and it is a very serious year for them. It defines their confidence and I think it does set them up. (MWF1)

This observation was consistent with most participants' experiences and depicted the impact of the HSC examination on teachers in this study (and their students).

7.3.2 Due to the importance given to the examination, many teachers use the HSC syllabus as their sole guide for teaching and learning.

Earlier in this chapter, consideration was given to the impact of the pressure—whether real or perceived—on students and teachers to achieve results in the HSC examination. All participants indicated that student results in the HSC examination drove teaching and learning at their school, commodifying the nature of learning. Participants described notions of success and achievement as limited to factors that could be defined and measured through the HSC examination. As a participant from School 2 described,

The examination itself, and even understanding the syllabus as like a legal document. I mean I had a discussion with a teacher about the word development and expression as a syllabus dot point. (WYM2)

This participant was not alone in describing syllabus dot points, which denote topics that will form the basis of the HSC examination, as central drivers of teaching and learning. As another participant from School 2 said,

Well, the syllabus dot points, obviously we want to make sure that the kids are ticking the boxes for what they're going to expect in the—how they're going to be assessed in the HSC. I'm covering myself from a legal or a professional standpoint with regard to ticking the dot points. (GBM2)

Participants reported feeling a strong sense of obligation to address syllabus dot points in their teaching in order to maximise student results in the HSC examination. Frequent references to syllabus dot points demonstrated their prominence in participant experiences of the HSC.

Participants from School 1 also felt the driving influence of syllabus dot points. One participant from School 1 said,

I'm very conscious of the syllabus documentation and the dot points and because over the years, we know the questions. The questions are there, so it really is working with the language that the—that the BOSTES provides for us and ensuring our kids are comfortable with that. (IMCM1)

This statement was consistent with many statements from other participants, who stressed the importance of teaching all syllabus dot points for a given course. Many participants likened this process to ticking boxes. As another participant observed,

I always feel like I've really got to just—that's the first thing I've got to do, is tick off every dot point. I often find there's a lot of pressure just to get through the content. It would be quite hard to get through it, so you sort of feel like you're really just plugging along and just knocking off every dot point. (STM1)

Participants identified the demands of teaching content to be covered in the HSC examination as an additional driving aspect of the HSC. There was a strong sense among participants that,

by covering course content in the form of teaching syllabus dot points, participants would have fulfilled their professional responsibility—that is, maximising student results in the HSC examination.

7.3.3 As a result of educators' focus on the HSC examination, teaching and learning are prescriptive in NSW secondary schools.

Many participants identified problems with the HSC examination, reporting that they felt restricted by the requirement to teach syllabus dot points in order to prepare students to meet the requirements of the examination. One participant said syllabus dot points

Restrict what you're actually teaching and what [students are] learning. (DRM1)

While a number of teachers identified the nature of the HSC examination as an impediment to their teaching, there was a view among other participants that the prescriptions of the syllabuses provided a useful guide for teachers. One participant reported that syllabus dot points,

Keep me precise and focused. I suppose in a way it's ensuring that the information the students attain, they use it in a method, which will best—probably best answer the question. (MCM1)

This response represented the sentiment expressed by other participants who experienced the syllabus as providing direction in terms of student learning and standards expected of students. However, most participants felt that the prescriptive nature of the HSC limited opportunities for students to engage in broader learning. This feeling was captured by a participant who said,

You've got a lot of tedious little dot points that you really do need to address because if you don't in the classroom and then there's a four mark question on the exam you know you have done your students a disservice. (KFF2)

In this comment, the participant indicated the importance given to adhering to the HSC syllabus in order to prepare students to attain the best mark possible in the HSC examination.

Observations from participants indicated that teaching and learning in the HSC were directed towards preparing for the final examination. As one participant said,

We make sure that those syllabus statements are well understood and the language, the terms are understood and how those terms can actually be manipulated for different questions. They need to be writing nine pages in 40 minutes by October. You know, they're up to six now so they have to really work hard. (MWF1)

Participants frequently described the need to “tick off” learning outcomes in preparing students for the examination, which narrowed learning. Another participant described this process,

So in terms of what it looks like in the classroom we just hammer through content. It's just PowerPoints and worksheets and videos. It sounds really boring and I don't like that way of teaching personally but I found that that's what I've had to do to adjust to the time pressure. (SFF2)

Another participant said,

I've been teaching for seven years... from my first year until today it [dot points] very much dictates the way I am as a teacher in the classroom. (AFF1)

Overall, it was evident from participant responses that teachers at both schools in this study were focused on meeting HSC syllabus and examination requirements, largely due to the high-stakes nature of the HSC examination.

7.3.4 As a result of educators' focus on the HSC examination, teaching and learning are transmissive in NSW secondary schools.

It was identified that the requirements of the HSC examination shaped participants' approach to teaching, with participants focusing on covering syllabus dot points and content. One participant's comments revealed the impact of the HSC on their classroom practice:

I actually teach the HSC a bit more like uni. I lecture. I would be old school probably. That's the style I use. It seems to have worked over the years. We've got some good results. I start to question it every now and again now when I lose them a bit. (BHM2)

In this observation, the participant suggested a transmissive understanding of the HSC, with transmitting content and procedural knowledge of the HSC paramount. The connection between the HSC syllabus and student performance, and the impact of the syllabus on teaching and learning were explained in one participant's comment that,

If you can use the correct terminology from the syllabus, if you can write a cohesive response, if you can make some links between concepts from consistent application and study, you can achieve success in terms of [your] marks. (RMF1)

Based on this comment, it appears that memorisation, repetition and mastering requirements associated with the syllabus were key to achieving strong results in the HSC examination.

Many participants acknowledged that the requirements of the HSC and its high-stakes led to a narrowing of the curriculum, with learning and teaching geared towards covering knowledge and skills to be examined. As one participant observed,

We did a lot of work on just getting kids to understand rote learning the syllabus. We would make copies of the syllabus as closed passages and gave them to the kids. So we're almost rote learning them just to know the terms so that when they got into the exam they would be able to navigate each of the questions. (MIM2)

Participants identified that, in response to the high-stakes nature of the HSC examination, they approached teaching and learning in terms of checking off syllabus dot points in order to ensure that students understood the requirements of the examination. Participants reported that this approach resulted in a mechanistic approach to learning:

I think it [this approach] dumbs kids down. I think it shuts down their thinking. I think by controlling their thinking and making a preferred response, a preferred agenda, the

expected outcome, the HSC teaches kids to train their thinking at an age when it would be beautiful to see brains being really challenged. (MWF1)

Participants were clear that they felt bound to follow the syllabus to the letter. They reported feeling obliged to ensure that they covered all aspects of the syllabus in order to equip students to perform well in the final examination. Most participants were equally clear that they viewed this approach as an impediment to good teaching and meaningful student learning.

7.4 Performativity and the HSC

In this part of the chapter, consideration is given to how teachers in this study reported their experience in terms of expectations associated with the HSC and how they perceived their role as teachers. In this section, Subsidiary Research Question 1c is addressed: In what ways do expectations associated with the HSC impact the practice of school leaders and teachers? In semi-structured interviews, all participants to some degree identified performativity as central to their experience of HSC, guiding their practice as a result. They also recognised that the focus on teacher performance in ensuring students achieved strong results in the examination arose from a widespread view of education as a commodity. In this regard, there was a tacit acknowledgement that teacher effectiveness was judged in neo-liberal terms, based on inputs and outputs. This was despite the fact that most participants felt that student achievement in the HSC examination was a narrow means of assessing teacher performance and effectiveness. Many participants indicated that student achievement in the HSC examination could not capture whether teachers were effective in meeting the broader learning needs of their students. Almost all participants indicated that, at their school, the primary focus of teaching and learning was achieving high numbers of Band 6 scores or strong ATAR scores.

The focus on reporting Band 6 and ATAR performance at both schools in the case study was identified by most participants as failing to represent the learning growth achieved by lower-achieving students. Similarly, participants identified that the attention given to these two

measures failed to capture the broader range of learning outcomes met by students. Participants acknowledged deficiencies in their schools' approaches to reporting HSC achievement. Even so, all participants indicated that their practice was influenced by reporting measures, whether they agreed with the measures or not. As reasons for this situation, almost all participants mentioned school policies, processes, or a culture that emphasised student achievement in the HSC. All participants indicated that their practice was affected in some form by the way in which achievement in the HSC was reported at their school. Most participants explained that this impact was due to explicit and implicit messaging, via reporting of results, that student achievement in the HSC was a measure of their effectiveness as teachers.

7.4.1 Teachers shape their instruction around expectations of student performance in the HSC.

Participants at both school sites indicated that the requirements of performativity in the HSC drove their approach to teaching and learning. Most respondents considered the influence of performativity in this respect detrimental. For teachers who participated in this study, expectations of student performance impacted their practice in teaching students in each year of secondary school. One participant said,

We start heightening their interest about the importance of the HSC as early as Year 7 when they enter high school because I'm not going to devalue all that experience I have in the senior school. (ALM1)

A number of participants indicated that expectations of student performance in the HSC required them to prepare students for the HSC from the time they commenced their secondary education. As one participant observed,

We said even in Year 7, we want to start bringing in the idea of a structured short response and we've decided that out of everything we cover in this unit... because the strong understanding... is foundational to Stage 6 you're backwards mapping to Year

7 course work and assessment, knowing where the kids are headed in five years' time.
(DLF2)

Participants gave different reasons as to why teachers adopted a transmissive approach to student learning in response to expectations of performance. One participant said,

Education's now a commodity. It's a thing you pay for, so where are the results. I think it stems from that—now, it's like a little bit of an Americanisation of everything turns into—if you pay money for it, what's the result? What's the outcome? With education it's a tricky thing because not everything's measured. (MKM1)

This statement reflected many participants' view that expectations associated with the HSC shaped teachers' attitude and practice. In School 1, participants consistently described the HSC as determining teaching practice:

We measure success now by external exams. We don't measure success in a community standard, or even in a national dialogue, by who a person is. We measure it by a number, and I can't see that changing anytime soon. (KMF1)

In School 1, participants identified a link between achievement in the HSC and their school's reputational capital. Participants in School 2 reported a greater focus on cultural and communal aspects of the HSC than participants in School 1.

Participants at both schools reported that expectations associated with the examination often overrode other considerations. As a participant from School 1 observed,

Because it's process driven, what the examiners look for in the examinations, we need to ensure that our students are replicating for them. (DRM1)

Most participants recognised that performance in the HSC was the defining feature of their practice. As another participant from School 1 indicated,

Get them through the techniques about how to get marks really, but at the same time you're still giving them a life skill by having attention to detail, being able to answer the question, what is required of you. (MCF1)

This sentiment (“get them through”) was expressed by many participants. Many participants described the performativity of the HSC as underpinning their practice. In addition, many participants identified that the HSC shaped their approach to teaching students in the early years of secondary school. Overall, it was identified that expectations of performance affected how teachers in this study perceived their role within their school.

All participants reported that performance in the HSC was important both to their students and to themselves. However, as observed earlier in this chapter, participants viewed the nature of performance in the HSC as transmissive. As one participant commented,

Just jump the hoops, darling. Just get it done, hand it in, move on and then do your own thing when you've done all the hoop jumping. So that's what I see the HSC as. (MWF1)

Participants noted that, in this transmissive arrangement, performance in the HSC examination was the critical and clearest measure of their effectiveness. Many participants reported that their approach to teaching became mechanistic in order to ensure student performance in the HSC. This was evident in one participant's comment that,

I'm getting to a stage that I think it's too much. Part of it is being such a senior teacher, that sometimes teaching hasn't become fun anymore because I've just got to get through the content. (MCF1)

This comment reflected a view reported by many participants that expectations of performance in the HSC disempowered teachers, resulting in a focus on maximising student performance.

7.4.2 Teacher performance is measured by student achievement in Band 6 and the ATAR.

Participants mentioned two things as yardsticks of student performance—students achieving Band 6 in the HSC and/or a high ATAR. In semi-structured interviews, strong evidence was identified that teachers receive implicit and explicit prompts for their understanding of what performance means. As one participant said,

It's not that somebody is saying you've got to get Band 6s, it's more the positive reinforcement if you do get a Band 6. Yeah, people like seeing that and they look at the teacher who got the Band 6s. (SFF2)

In some cases, participants reported that this implicit expectation that students would achieve Band 6 scores was made explicit, and accompanied with an expectation of continuous improvements in student performance in this measure. As one participant indicated,

So that nature of success would definitely be how many Band 6s, how much above state average your course fell or your class fell within that course and improvement from the previous year, or previous years, and so on. (GDF2)

In this response, it was evident that meeting the expectations of performance in the HSC gave meaning to how teachers understood and responded to demands to perform. This was clear from a participant who said,

The school community do make judgements. The school I think are usually the most perceptive about which teachers are good or not. I think the students at the end of it would be able to make a judgement about whether you're a good teacher or not irrespective of the results that that class or that student achieved. (MTM1)

The notion of judgement loomed large in the practice of teachers in this study. It was through this lens that teachers attributed meaning to student performance in the HSC. Through the HSC examination, the effectiveness of teachers in this study was measured. As a result, it was

evident that participants understood that they needed to direct their practice to focus on student performance in the HSC. For this reason, their approach to helping students achieve strong results in the HSC was through process-driven and mechanistic activity geared towards performance in the HSC examination.

7.4.3 Performance expectations are communicated to teachers.

All participants in semi-structured interviews understood that expectations of performance were associated with their roles as teachers. As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, these expectations were implicit and explicit. However, the implicit way in which expectations to perform were established was most evident in participant responses. One source of this expectation was identified as informal comparisons of performance among peers. As one participant said,

I just suppose when—oh what did your class get? Okay then, the other teachers got—they got that as well or he got this or you got that so I suppose there is that comparison.
(CCF2)

It became evident from many participants' responses that underpinning comparisons of performance was a sense of competition among teachers. Seemingly, this sense of competition among teachers emerged due to judgments made based on performance in the HSC examination. As one participant noted,

I definitely know that there are [judgements]—I've never experienced myself. I do know boys will drop subjects because of a staff member that they might get. (STM1)

In addition to peers and students, judgements on teachers' performance were also made by parents. As one participant explained,

So you do become well-known sometimes in a short period of time with the parental body. I think that that informs how successful you've been as a teacher for their child during the preliminary or HSC. (AFF1)

The weight of expectations to promote activities that led to performance in the HSC examinations was most explicit through the culture, policies, and practise in schools in this study. This is evident from one participant's observation that

I have been in schools where people have been taken off Year 12 because they haven't been able to achieve at levels that the executive expect. Where teachers have actually been asked to leave the school for similar reasons, where they haven't been able to achieve. So here, it's pretty cruisy in comparison to some other places. (SBYM1)

In focus group discussions, school leaders indicated that a range of factors influenced the placement of teachers. However, teachers in this study felt that performance in the HSC was a significant consideration in placing teachers on classes. This experience led to a situation in which teachers built their practice around being considered to have met performance expectations in the HSC. As one participant commented,

I've built my whole career [around HSC success]. Kids know that they get in my class they're going to do well in the HSC. It's arrogant, it's rude, it's the truth. I will go further than the [teacher] next to me. (SHM1)

This sense of competition and one-upmanship was made explicit through the way in which schools in this study recognised performance in the HSC. As another participant said,

It's almost like the walk of shame. If your class doesn't do well it's like, oh. Particularly when the school places so much emphasis on good results, you can feel really... I know teachers feel really awful when their class might have actually done really well for that class, but because it's not great, not sellable, they're made to feel that their contribution isn't valued and I think that's really sad. (AGF1)

As noted earlier in this thesis, schools position themselves in the education marketplace by establishing a culture of expectation in regard to performance in the HSC examination. This

expectation is communicated to teachers through the overt way in which schools review and present performance in the HSC examination.

7.4.4 *Building a culture of student performance in the ATAR or at Band 6 level.*

Consistently, participants indicated that the way in which HSC results were reported to staff and recognised at school assemblies and staff meetings created implicit expectations of performance. Participants recognised that the publication and promotion of performance in the HSC examination led to tacit expectations of performance. As one participant observed,

Results are published and we celebrate those boys in a dux assembly for those that are the highest achievers and all-round achievers. I think there's enough public information that's disseminated around. (WYM2)

Expectations to perform were reported to be motivated by reasons other than simply maximising achievement for students. There was general acceptance by participants that publication and promotion of performance were tools to build the reputational capital of schools. This was captured by one participant who commented that,

We milk it for all we can. I think that's part of the—that's part of our competitive world. I don't think it's right. It's not a reflection of the school. It's a—yeah. But our society expects very much so. (MCM1)

It was apparent that the motivation for promoting student performance in the HSC examination outside of the schools in this study was to contribute to the broader community's positive perception of both schools. However, it was also identified that this approach placed implicit expectations on teachers to perform. In addition, it was evident in semi-structured interviews that competition in the education marketplace resulted in a focus on student performance in the HSC.

Participants indicated that expectations to perform in the HSC examination were based as much upon what was unsaid as what was said. It was noted by many participants that, by

highlighting high levels of performance in the HSC examination, attention was also drawn to students who did not perform. One participant said,

The only way they do show that really is like they say congratulations 30 per cent, 90 and above in ATAR, when the results come out, that sort of thing. But that's also what people are looking for. As I say, if they are going out and pushing that, well as a teacher, I think it's subtle. (DBM1)

However, the degree to which expectations of performance in the HSC examination were communicated subtly was contested by other participants, who suggested that such expectations were more implicit than subtle. As another participant indicated,

No names are mentioned, so to speak, but it's pretty obvious when you look up there and everybody what you teach and only those subjects that get X number of Band 6s get a mention and it's what's not said that's very starkly obvious—they may as well be wearing neon. (FFF2)

In most cases, participants identified that staff meetings at the commencement of each year were significant in this respect, with implicit messages a central aspect of the presentation and analysis of HSC results.

Participants identified that the focus of these meetings was not on teachers who were named as having performed well. Rather, the significance of not being identified implied underperformance. As one participant put it,

At the start of the year we have this big presentation where all the results go up and this and that, like most schools. You sit there hoping by dear god that your faculty looks good. (JNM2)

It was clear that great importance was given to analysing performance in the HSC, with this process accompanied by a sense of judgment. There was a sense among some participants that

these meetings simply confirmed existing judgements regarding the capabilities of their colleagues. As one participant said,

At the start of every year we have a look at the results. As soon as they come out we have a look at them. Then the start of every year XXXX will go through them, a bit of analysis, sometimes they've put a chart up and say this is how it compares to what we've done in the past. It changes. Most of the time nobody is really surprised. (JNM2)

Analysis of performance data is useful for teachers. However, the way in which it was done at both schools in this study fostered a sense of competition, was based on judgement, and promoted an expectation of strong student performance in the HSC. However, as noted earlier in this chapter, participants reported that this was done implicitly at their school. As one participant stated,

I know that it is definitely recognised when we come back—when the kids aren't here and we have staff days the first days back. It's the first thing that goes up on the—the PowerPoint. So not by teacher, by subject, but everybody knows who teaches what. When you're the only teacher of that subject, it's talking about you. (FFM2)

It was evident in semi-structured interviews that performance in the HSC examination was expected of teachers, with this expectation driving their approach to teaching and learning. Teachers in this study defined success in terms of student performance in the HSC because of community understandings of success and meanings of success in their own school context. Overall, expectations of student performance in the HSC examination came from both the broader and school communities, and also from teachers in this study themselves, who realised that their effectiveness in their role was judged against the expectation to perform. Teachers in this study reported that they adjusted their practice accordingly as a result.

7.5 Expectations to Perform Affect the Wellbeing of Teachers

Another theme that emerged from participant observations was in regard to the stress created for teachers and students by the HSC. A prevalent view expressed by participants was that, to a certain degree, the stress and pressures of the HSC provided the opportunity for students to develop resilience and coping skills that would be necessary for their future lives. However, most participants indicated that the stress and pressure associated with the HSC were too great. As one participant commented,

It's stressful. What I've noticed, I mean, I haven't been teaching that long compared to some people I suppose but... I've noticed that each year the kids seem to get more anxious about it and worry a lot more about it and stressed and whatever. I get stressed about it but I think that some schools and some teachers put too much emphasis on it.
(CCF2)

Most participants felt genuine concern and responsibility for the wellbeing of their students. In regard to the stress placed on students completing the HSC, one participant observed that,

You see them around the HSC and the way it affects their sleep and the way it affects their eating. So I guess maybe some of those less tangible pieces of wellbeing I think can be correlated to the HSC. (MIM2)

Many participants indicated that they felt an obligation to provide general wellbeing support to their students but felt they lacked the skills necessary to do so.

The stress caused by the HSC was, for the most part, considered negative by participants in this research. One participant from School 1 observed that,

[Students are] being bombarded with different family expectations and even media expectations. That's shaping what they perceive to be as this huge hurdle. I'm there to support them sometimes to try and bring them back down a few notches to de-stress them as well, and to help them cope with working. (KMF1)

Although another group of participants indicated that, given the high-stakes nature of the HSC, stress for students and teachers was inevitable. As one participant commented,

You don't want them oversteering and you say there's other ways that they can do what they want to do in life and that is true too. But for a lot of people it is what they do use, it is what sets things up for them. (JNM2)

Many participants reported that they found the HSC a stressful experience, with much of this stress related to expectations of student performance. As one participant explained,

I feel pressure for expectation on results, not from my studies coordinator but from people above her. The fact that there's focus on results and focus on just top performing students. (GBM2)

Another participant from School 1 indicated that,

I don't like the pressure in the HSC but the parents want results and the kids want results, you know. They're pushing themselves. (MWF1)

In expressing these views, participants recognised their concern over the stress created by the HSC, but also that they were complicit in contributing to the stress associated with the HSC. Both tangible and intangible aspects of the HSC were identified by a number of participants as detrimental to wellbeing for teachers. related to the rigours of the HSC, which were identified as taking a physical and mental toll. There was a general consensus among participants that the stress associated with the HSC was due to its high-stakes.

Numerous participants indicated that the nature of the HSC created stress for students and that the level of stress for students had increased markedly over recent times. Teachers at both school sites indicated that they feel a strong sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of their students, with this feeling contributing to the pressures associated with the HSC. There was also a clear indication that the demands of teaching the HSC created stress for teachers.

The high-stakes nature of the HSC and the accompanying school and community focus on performativity were also identified as contributing to the stress experienced by teachers.

7.6 Closing Remarks

In this chapter, findings from semi-structured interviews with teachers were presented. The data has been illuminated by using the direct voice of teachers to report on their experiences with the HSC. At the heart of the culture associated with the HSC is the need to perform. As a result, a major finding identified in this chapter was that the purpose of the HSC is fundamentally seen through the lens of achievement. The importance of achievement was identified as driven by the role it plays in determining future opportunities available to students, particularly with regard to university entry, and the reputational capital it builds for schools. Participants reported that both these factors led to a focus on performance, in conjunction with the importance given to the HSC examination and because the results of the HSC were available and promoted publicly. As such, these high-stakes purposes of the HSC were identified by participants as strongly influencing their priorities. In addition, participants questioned whether the HSC was fit for purpose, suggesting that there was a need for the HSC to serve broader purposes than it currently does.

As one reason for this need, participants explained that the HSC examination had a strong impact on teaching, learning, and teacher practices. This view was expressed most clearly by participants through their experience of the prescriptive nature of HSC syllabuses and the relationship between the syllabuses and the examination. A consequence of this relationship was identified by participants as a transmissive approach to teaching and learning. Participants identified that the transmissive nature of teaching and learning was the result of performativity based on achievement in the HSC examination. It was identified by participants that this focus on performance affected their activity, resulting in a particular focus on students achieving Band 6 in the HSC and a high rank in the ATAR. The importance placed on these

two measures was identified as being communicated in the two schools in this case study through a culture of performativity. It was identified by participants that this culture of performativity in the HSC examination led to stress for students and teachers.

In the following chapter, a series of recommendations are provided based on the researcher's findings in this study. Implementing these recommendations would lower the stakes associated with the HSC. The researcher's recommendation that the focus on performativity in the HSC be modified is also outlined in the next chapter. In addition, it is recommended that consideration be given to developing an end-of-school credential that better aligns with the needs of school-leavers in the 21st century.

8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This final chapter draws together what has been learnt from this study in response to the research question and to the subsidiary research questions. The research was situated as a case study within two Independent boys' schools which by their nature have distinctive characteristics and as such are not presented as representative of all secondary schools in NSW. However, the study has investigated the voices of school leaders, middle managers and teachers which provides insight into school educators experiences of the HSC. The study has established that the HSC has attributes of high stakes tests. Significantly though, this study has also demonstrated how the stakes associated with the HSC are raised through the way in which the HSC has been operationalised at the two school sites used in this study, and by the way in which teachers in those two schools have engaged with the HSC. Emerging from the study are a number of major themes related to how school educators experience the HSC as a high-stakes exam. These themes are:

- How the HSC is Operationalised as a High-Stakes Test
- How Performativity Underpins Educator Experiences of the HSC as a High-Stakes Test
- How the HSC is a High-Stakes Pathway to Future Opportunities for Students
- The HSC is Used as a High-Stakes Judgement of Teacher Performance
- The High-Stakes Nature of the HSC Makes Teaching and Learning Transmissive
- School Educators are Complicit in Creating the Narrative of the HSC as High Stakes
- Teachers Play the HSC “Game”, Making the Test High-Stakes
- The HSC has High Stakes for the Reputational Capital of Schools
- The Impact of the HSC on Teacher and Student Wellbeing

8.1 How the HSC is Operationalised as a High-Stakes Test

Characteristics of high-stakes testing described in the relevant literature (Ball, 2008; Lewis & Hardy, 2015; Marchant, 2004; McNeil, 2000; Ritt, 2016) were apparent in the experience of school educators in this study. Through consideration of how school educators experience the HSC, it was identified that high-stakes testing not only impacted policy, processes, structures and activities at both schools—it shapes all of these phenomena. It was evident that the high-stakes HSC was not only a priority in activities at both Independent schools in this study—it was also embedded in the culture that underpinned school community and educator understandings of the purpose of education.

It became clear from the experiences described by school educators in this case study that prescribed practice associated with the high-stakes HSC has become accepted teaching practise. By establishing that school educators experience the HSC as high-stakes, the researcher has provided insight into how the HSC is experienced and interpreted in schools. School educators experience the HSC in ways that are characteristic of high-stakes tests and are affected by the accompanying professional, bureaucratic, cultural and political features associated with high-stakes testing.

8.2 How Performativity Underpins Educator Experiences of the HSC as a High-Stakes Test

A recurrent theme in the literature on high-stakes testing was aspects of performativity and how the importance of performance has changed the landscape of teaching and learning (Ball & Maroy, 2009; Biesta, 2014; Kostogriz, 2012; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Mercer et al., 2010; Thibodeaux, 2015). The experiences of school educators in this study confirmed that performativity is central to high-stakes testing cultures described in the existing literature. Importantly, the experience of educators in this case study provided additional evidence regarding the role of performativity in defining the purpose of the HSC. School educators in

this study consistently identified that, in their experience, their effectiveness was measured by how their students performed in the HSC.

Participants in the case study indicated that their experience of performativity in the HSC had intensified over time as comparative league tables had grown in prominence, with an increased focus on public measures of achievement. In this regard, school leaders, in contrast to middle managers and teacher participants, tended to underplay the importance of performance in the HSC. Nonetheless, the study not only revealed that performativity in the HSC was the result of the high stakes associated with the test—it also revealed how the importance of performance in the HSC made the test high-stakes. The experience of school educators in the case study demonstrates that performativity associated with the HSC creates a focus on teaching as a technical activity at the expense of the social and relational dimensions of teaching.

8.3 How the HSC is a High-Stakes Pathway to Future Opportunities for Students

Among school educators in the study, there was the consistent experience of the HSC as high-stakes, identified through its role in providing a transitional pathway to either university, further training or work. Adding to the existing literature, this study demonstrated the strong sense of obligation school educators experienced to help their students perform in the HSC. Participants in the case study identified that an important purpose of the HSC was as a pathway for students, with this priority guiding their focus on performance. It was apparent that school educators in this study privileged access to university as the preferred pathway for students (and, therefore, as a significant purpose of the HSC). As a result, it was evident that there were two dominant discourses that underpinned the experiences of school educators in this study. Firstly, their thinking was mediated through the neo-conservative view of a university pathway as a road to success later in life. The second dominant discourse was the interpretation of the neoliberal agenda that considers the HSC as an economic instrument that

builds human capital through qualifications. This situation identified in the case study illustrates how school educators grapple with the tension that high-stakes testing creates for teachers. In this case the mandated requirements of the HSC, and the associated implications for the future lives of students' and the sense of professional responsibility that they have for their students.

8.4 The HSC is Used as a High-Stakes Judgement of Teacher Performance

The relevant literature identified that high-stakes testing has become a public measure of school and teacher effectiveness (Biesta, 2014; Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011; Lewis & Hardy, 2015; Mercer et al., 2010; Thomson, 2009). Whereas the literature indicated that a key purpose of high-stakes testing was to provide an external measure to judge teacher and school effectiveness, the case study revealed that school educators were complicit in this process of judgement. It was evident from school educators in this study that school communities considered one purpose of the HSC as facilitating public judgements of school and teacher effectiveness based on student performance.

The way in which aspects of performance in the HSC were experienced at the two case study schools in this research indicated that performance in the high-stakes HSC was of paramount importance at both schools. Participants indicated that staff meetings focused on achievement in the HSC, particularly at the commencement of the school year, created a strong sense of the high-stakes associated with performance in the HSC. School leaders described events such as staff meetings, assemblies and notices reporting student achievement in the HSC as celebrations. In contrast, middle managers and teachers indicated that such reporting increased the stakes associated with performance in the HSC. They also reported that their effectiveness was implicitly and explicitly judged through such reporting of student achievement in the HSC. In essence the HSC is high-stakes because levels of student performance has reputational benefits and costs for both teachers and schools.

8.5 The High-Stakes Nature of the HSC Makes Teaching and Learning Transmissive

Participants in the case study identified that they saw the HSC as a transmissive process, with the prescribed curriculum, accountabilities and expectations set by the community strongly determining approaches to teaching and learning. This finding was consistent with the research identified in Chapter 2 (Ball, 2008; Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Comber & Nixon, 2009; Doecke & Kostogriz, 2008; Marchant, 2004; Porter, 2000). Transmissive learning has been described in Chapter 2 as traditional pedagogies where knowledge is transmitted by teachers and assimilated by students. Approximately 80% of participants identified that the HSC restricted overall student learning. Even so, they felt an obligation to help their students meet the requirements of the HSC examination and identified that this necessitated a transmissive approach to learning. This is evidence that strengthens the findings of previous research on high-stakes testing, which has found that high-stakes testing narrows curricula, limiting what teachers can do beyond the confines of the requirements of high-stakes tests (Au, 2013; Berliner, 2002; Dulude et al., 2017).

The findings of this case study verified that the high-stakes nature of the HSC changes how teachers understand their role as teachers and what they do as teachers (Ball, 2003). The knowledge generated in this study has built on previous research, identifying that requirements of high-stakes testing drive learning in the senior years in NSW and impact teaching and learning in the earlier secondary years. The study identified that purpose, principles, and practice of learning have come to be defined by the requirements of the high-stakes HSC, with priorities for school teachers, managers and leaders determined by the high-stakes demands of the HSC. Further, the study identified a divergence between the intended purpose of the HSC and the interpretation and operationalisation of the HSC by school educators. The influence of this incongruence of understanding and emphasis given to the high-stakes HSC is an issue that warrants a future study.

All participants in this research described their role with resignation in regard to their need to respond to the prescriptions of the high-stakes HSC. The reality of the high-stakes HSC as the predominant feature in the senior years of schooling permeated most aspects of school life, culture and experience for teachers in this study. Most school leaders in this study indicated that they attempted to account for elements beyond the HSC in teaching and learning at their school, such as school ethos, values, and opportunities for students to realise their full potential. Middle managers and teachers firmly held the view that the dominant features of teaching and learning in the senior years was transmissive due to the requirements of the HSC. There was acceptance across all participant groups that the nature of the HSC limited broader opportunities for student learning.

Interestingly, the purposes of the HSC described in syllabus documents were barely referenced in semi-structured interviews with teachers. This finding demonstrated how the pervasive hidden curriculum of neoliberal discourse has been enacted through high-stakes testing. As a result, a clear incongruence was identified between the policy rhetoric of the HSC as transformational, as expressed in HSC syllabuses, and its transactional high-stakes enactment, which emphasises competition. This approach is consistent with a business model of education that reduces education to a series of inputs and outputs. In this setting, actions (namely high-stakes testing that encourages competition between students and schools) speak louder than words (i.e., official rhetoric regarding the transformational purpose of the HSC). In short the study revealed that the high-stakes nature of the HSC was detrimental to aspects of teaching and learning that extend beyond that which can be measured by a score in the HSC examination.

8.6 School Educators are Complicit in Creating the Narrative of the HSC as High-Stakes

The high-stakes HSC is accompanied by a range of prescriptions, accountabilities and expectations (Comber, 2012). These factors are key determiners of how school educators understand their role and what they do in relation to the HSC (Doecke, Kostogriz & Illesca, 2010). Participant responses in the case study confirmed Ball's (2003) observation that high-stakes testing not only changes what school educators do—it also changes their sense of who they are as educators. The prescriptive nature of the high-stakes HSC was particularly noted by school educators for the way in which it drove what teachers felt they needed to do and how they did it. Data generated in the case study identified that expectations, competition, and reputation were elements that shaped how school educators understood the purpose of their role. The importance of the affirmation for teachers that accompanied high student achievement in the HSC, were identified as powerful factors in shaping the culture of schools and the identity of teachers in this study. It was accepted by all participants in this study that the processes, requirements, practices and reporting of the HSC drove what teachers and students do on a day-to-day basis. While the nature of the HSC limited learning opportunities for students, school educators found that they needed to enact these elements of the HSC within their various roles. In doing so school educators became complicit in making the HSC high-stakes.

The final public examination provides certification in the HSC, as well as data that is used to generate student ATARs. A core element of the HSC that makes it high-stakes is the fact that it is an exit credential, although HSC syllabuses situate the HSC within a broader range of purposes. In this case study, it was evident that participants gave far greater emphasis to the HSC as an exit credential than is conveyed in the syllabuses. This situation resulted in school educators in the case study describing their role as framed by the importance of the final

HSC examination. It is noteworthy that participants felt the need to ensure that students could maximise their ATAR through their HSC. It is the emphasis that school educators give to the importance of a score, either in the HSC examination or through the ATAR rank that make them complicit in making the HSC high-stakes.

8.7 Teachers Play the HSC “Game”, Making the Test High-Stakes

Findings from the case study confirmed findings in the relevant literature that high-stakes testing affects how teachers understand and approach what they do (English, 2006; Hahs-Vaughan & Scherff, 2008; Levin, 2013; Plank & Condliffe, 2013; Ritt, 2016). The case study identified that high-stakes testing pervades school operations and what teachers do in the classroom. The case study demonstrated that the high-stakes HSC does more than influence how school educators understand their role—it directs what teachers do (Comber & Cormack, 2011; Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011). In the process, teachers themselves contribute to the high-stakes nature of the HSC. Participants indicated that, in their experience, the HSC required them to “tick the boxes” or “play the game” to ensure that their students performed well in the final examination. In this regard, participants referred to syllabus dot points as the necessary pathway to student performance in the HSC. Participants recognised that adherence to the syllabus limited their opportunities to meet the specific and diverse learning needs of their students. However, this was a sacrifice they deemed necessary and a game that needed to be played.

Driven by the need to meet the narrow requirements of the HSC examination, participants indicated that they directed their teaching and assessment towards content and skills likely to be tested in the exam. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews indicated that performance in the HSC had paramount importance in their school and classroom contexts. The need to adhere strictly to programmatic learning and practices that required intense preparation for performance in a final examination was identified as restrictive. Many

participants indicated a level of disappointment that, as teachers, the HSC required them to “jump through hoops”, limiting their role. Despite this view, it was evident that participants understood that there were procedures and requirements associated with the HSC and its high-stakes nature required them to adopt a formulaic approach as dictated by the rules of the game.

8.8 The HSC has High Stakes for the Reputational Capital of Schools

Conclusions from this case study reinforced what the literature has revealed regarding the use of achievement in high-stakes testing as a measure of school and teacher effectiveness (Ball, 2008; McNeil, 2000; Taubman, 2009). The case study identified that performance in the HSC played a role in building the reputational capital of schools in this study, which was identified by participants as critically important in a competitive education marketplace. Even so, with the exception of a small number of participants, there was little enthusiasm among participants for the use of HSC data in constructing comparative performance league tables. Middle managers indicated that they experienced that school leadership used performance in the HSC to evaluate the performance of teachers and faculties. Teacher participants indicated that they experienced that their school culture gave high priority to performance in the HSC.

A recurring theme in teacher experiences was that the HSC was the dominant feature of school life. Both middle managers and teachers indicated that performance in the HSC was an important part of the discussion, activities and symbols associated with the HSC in their school’s culture. In the same way, as the examination was a driver of teaching and learning, performance in the HSC was foundational to how schools promoted themselves to the wider community. Key metrics used by schools to measure performance were reported by participants as measures of performance above the state average and the number of Band 6 scores achieved. The way in which school educators in this study used Band 6 scores indicated that both school leaders and classroom teachers in this study contributed to making the HSC high-stakes by using it as a marketing tool. Promotion of schools in the educational market

place was recognised by all participants in the study as contributing to the high-stakes nature of the HSC, equally they acknowledged that marketing served no educational purpose.

8.9 The Impact of the HSC on Teacher and Student Wellbeing

It became evident from the case study that the transmissive nature of the HSC and the emphasis on performance in the HSC had negative impacts on student and teacher wellbeing. There is strong evidence in the literature that high-stakes testing is detrimental to teacher and student wellbeing and health (Adam et al., 2017; Christian, 2010; Gonzaleza et al., 2017; Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008; Schaubman et al., 2011; Zernike, 2015). The evidence provided by participants in this case study confirmed these findings in the literature. Participants reported that the stress they experienced as a result of the HSC was exacerbated by the obligation they felt to support the wellbeing of their students, which was negatively affected by the high-stakes HSC. There was also recognition among school educators in this study that the type of teaching and learning required by the HSC (i.e., focused on performance) contributed significantly to the stress, pressure and anxiety associated with the high-stakes HSC.

Many participants identified that the HSC increased levels of stress for teachers. Participants also indicated that, while they were sensitive to and felt a responsibility for the wellbeing of their students, they were limited in what they were able to do to alleviate the stresses that accompanied the HSC. The vast majority of participants experienced the HSC as detrimental to their wellbeing and their students' wellbeing. It was evident from this case study that the effect of the HSC on teaching and learning at both schools in this study was significant, and came with negative consequences. It was apparent from this case study that the current culture, function and practice of teaching and learning in the HSC is inconsistent with Article 36 of the *United Nations Convention on the Child* (United Nations Children's Fund, 2015), which indicates that "children should be protected from any activity that could harm their development". Data gathered for this case study indicated that, in some cases, the HSC causes

harm to children under the age of 18. The high-stakes HSC carries consequences that result in material harm to some teachers and students.

8.10 Recommendations

Consideration of the overarching research question for this study (How do their experiences of the requirements, expectations and culture of the NSW Higher School Certificate influence school educators in their approach to teaching and learning and how they understand their role as educators?) has confirmed the findings of previous studies regarding the effects of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning. Building on previous research, this case study has provided new knowledge regarding the impact of high-stakes testing in the senior years of schooling, as well as the pervasive effects of high-stakes testing on curricula, culture and practice. Exploration of Subsidiary Research Question 1a (how is the HSC experienced across schools and interpreted by school educators?) demonstrated that the high-stakes HSC has become all-encompassing in the thinking, processes and activities of schools and teachers. The prescriptive nature of the HSC syllabuses and the way in which the nature of the HSC examinations determine how those syllabuses are interpreted and delivered determine the nature of learning for HSC students. This process occurs through explicit and implicit ways in which the role of performance in the HSC is experienced across schools and internalised in the practice of teachers.

The experience of school educators, as explored through Subsidiary Research Question 1b (how do results in the high-stakes HSC examination impact approaches to teaching and learning at school and classroom levels?) revealed that the high-stakes HSC dominates the education landscape of Secondary education. Responses from school educators showed that the high-stakes HSC has come to define learning, driving the instructional practices and the priorities of school educators. Consideration of Subsidiary Research Question 1c (in what ways do expectations associated with the HSC impact the practice of school leaders and teachers?)

provided findings from this case study, demonstrating that the driver of priorities and practices in schools and classrooms is the need to strive for strong results in the HSC.

The case study provided evidence that the high-stakes HSC not only impacts what school educators do—it determines it. As such, schools and teachers, either willingly, or with some reticence, are drawn to enact the tenants of the high-stakes HSC in their thinking and practice. This case study demonstrated that the requirements of performance in the HSC not only distort the nature of teaching and learning—they define teaching and learning for HSC students. Based on insights from this subsidiary research question, the researcher has made two recommendations that could assist in addressing school educators’ negative experience of the high-stakes HSC.

8.10.1 Recommendation 1: Modify Credentialing and Reporting of the HSC

As long as the HSC examination is the primary measure of student achievement in the HSC, it will remain the primary focus of teaching and learning. Only by ensuring that equal weight is given to all learning intentions in the HSC syllabuses will this tension be resolved. What is measured is valued, and for this reason, it is important to implement mechanisms and measures to assess student achievement equally across the full range of learning intentions proposed in HSC syllabuses. This approach would require a recalibration of the importance given to the examination, making it proportional to other intended learning outcomes in the syllabuses. The way in which HSC scores are reported places pressure on teachers to approach the syllabus from the lens of performance. While the HSC is a standalone credential, school educators in this case study identified that, due to credentialing arrangements, the ATAR and the HSC were often considered interchangeably. As a result, it would be beneficial to de-couple any aspect of the HSC credential from the ATAR.

The numeric representation of achievement in Bands for the HSC was identified in the case study as distorting the understanding of achievement in the HSC and as a driver for schools

as they seek to build reputational capital. The way in which the HSC is credentialed and reported places little emphasis on standards of achievement, becoming instead a measure to rank and sort students. This is despite the fact that the HSC is intended to operate within a standards referenced framework. By introducing micro-credentialing of achievement in the HSC, which could be implemented at varying points throughout the final years of schooling, a cumulative credential could be established. In this way, the HSC would no longer be reported as a point-in-time comparison of achievement. It is likely that a model of cumulative credentialing would minimise levels of stress experienced by teachers and students. It would also ensure that the focus of credentialing would be on what students achieved throughout the period of their learning, rather than on the instrument that provides the credential, namely one point in time final examination. Micro-credentialing would necessitate differentiated modes of reporting achievement that could be better aligned to standards and it could also provide more innovative ways of understanding what students know and can do.

8.10.2 Recommendation 2: Modify the Prescriptive Nature of HSC Syllabuses

The HSC examination drives teaching and learning. As a result, the broader purposes identified within the HSC syllabuses are given scant attention by school educators. The lack of alignment between the syllabuses' stated intentions for the HSC and the way in which participants give emphasis, interpret and apply these intentions is problematic. The structured, formulaic and restrictive nature of the current HSC syllabuses, particularly in regard to syllabus dot points, school-based formal assessment and the examination, narrow the lens of teaching and learning. Current linkages between the HSC syllabuses and the examination mean that developing a broad range of skills and knowledge to enable problem-solving, inquiry, adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity are placed a distant second in relation to syllabus dot points. The prescriptive nature of the HSC syllabuses could be modified by explicitly referencing and focusing expectations of the HSC on teaching and learning, not

on performance. This approach would allow the syllabuses to be aligned more closely to teaching and learning of the skills and knowledge students need in order to function in, contribute to, and be successful in their post-school lives.

Modifying the prescriptive nature of the syllabuses would require a cultural shift in the way in which the HSC is understood and approached by schools, teachers, the media and the wider community. The case study indicated that school educators in this research felt that their roles were determined by the requirements of the HSC. As a result, the decisions they make are governed by the requirements of the HSC. In light of this finding, school educators must be empowered to make decisions for students undertaking the HSC that are in the best interests of students. This requires that school educators understand that the core purpose of their role is to serve the interests of their students. HSC syllabuses should be designed to promote, not hinder, this focus on students. The rules and requirements of HSC syllabuses should be amended to provide flexibility in order to ensure they serve the needs of students and their learning, not an external credential that is based on the narrow measure offered by an examination.

8.11 Closing Remarks

In this chapter, conclusions from the findings of this study were provided, with two accompanying recommendations. This case study provided an outline of the effects of the high-stakes HSC on learning, of performativity in the HSC, of the nexus between the HSC and university entry, and of the detrimental impact of the HSC on student and teacher wellbeing. These features of the HSC provided evidence of the high-stakes associated with the test, revealing how both structure and application of the HSC make it a high-stakes undertaking. The case study also demonstrated that the high-stakes nature of the HSC and associated performativity requirements drive teaching and learning. The case study provided evidence that the high-stakes nature of the HSC distorts teaching and learning across the secondary years

of schooling in NSW. This distortion is represented through a narrow focus on students' final HSC score, which has particular meaning for students seeking university admission. Participants in this research recognised that the HSC should provide learning opportunities that prepare students for a broad range of post-school pathways. However, there was widespread recognition that learning was skewed towards the ATAR and performance in the final examination. The result of this focus was an increased attention to HSC syllabus dot points and the final examination, rather than the broader learning outcomes outlined in each syllabus. In sum, this case study has provided evidence that the high-stakes HSC does more than impact teaching and learning—instead, the test has come to define teaching and learning.

9.0 References

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Appendix 1: Indicative Survey administered to Educators regarding their Experiences of the HSC

Questions 1 to 3 seek demographic information.

Question 1: How long have you been teaching?

- 0–5 years 6–15 years 16–25 years 26 years +

Question 2: Do you teach a Higher School Certificate class?

- Yes No

Question 3: What is your gender?

- Male Female

Questions 4 to 20 are based on the following scale:

- 1 = Not at all Important;*
- 2 = Low Importance;*
- 3 = Slightly Important;*
- 4 = Moderately Important;*
- 5 = Very Important;*
- 6 = Extremely Important*

Question 4: How much emphasis does the school give to student achievement in the Higher School Certificate?

- 1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 5: How important do you believe the Higher School Certificate is in the eyes of the wider community?

- 1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 6: In thinking about media focus on issues of achievement and testing in the Higher School Certificate, how much importance is it given in public perceptions of school quality?

- 1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 7: In thinking about media focus on achievement and testing in the Higher School Certificate, how much importance do you think this focus has on public perceptions of teacher effectiveness?

- 1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 8: How important do you believe the Higher School Certificate is for students?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 9: How much importance do parents ascribe to the Higher School Certificate?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 10: What importance do you think your colleagues attach to the Higher School Certificate?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 11: What level of importance do you give the Higher School Certificate?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 12: What importance do you give to the Higher School Certificate as an accurate and a reliable measure of student achievement?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 13: How important is it for you to have a good knowledge and understanding of the way in which student achievement is measured in the Higher School Certificate?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 14: What emphasis do your school's leadership and management place student achievement in the Higher School Certificate?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 15: How do policy and practices at the school reflect the importance of student achievement in the Higher School Certificate?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 16: What importance does the Higher School Certificate have on the way you approach teaching?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 17: How important is student performance in the Higher School Certificate as a measure used either formally or informally to assess teacher effectiveness in your school?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Question 26: How would you describe your knowledge and understanding of the Higher School Certificate?

1

2

3

Question 27: How would you describe the importance that your colleagues place on the Higher School Certificate?

1

2

3

Questions 28 to 40 are dichotomous questions seeking Yes or No responses.

Question 28: Do you believe the Higher School Certificate enhances student learning?

Yes

No

Question 29: Do you believe that the Higher School Certificate creates unnecessary stress for teachers?

Yes

No

Question 30: Do you believe that the Higher School Certificate creates stress for students?

Yes

No

Question 31: Do you believe that student achievement in the Higher School Certificate reflects the quality of teaching?

Yes

No

Question 32: Do you believe that teachers are more driven by student results rather than students learning?

Yes

No

Question 33: Do you believe that decisions made in the school are strongly influenced by student achievement in the Higher School Certificate?

Yes

No

Question 34: Do you believe that competition in the Higher School Certificate is important?

Yes

No

Question 35: Do you believe that teachers use a particular pedagogy when teaching the Higher School Certificate that differs from the pedagogy used in Years 7 to 10?

Yes

No

Question 36: Do you believe the Higher School Certificate's main purpose is as a pathway to university?

Yes

No

Question 37: Do you believe that the Higher School Certificate is a useful tool to compare and rank the performance of students across subjects?

Yes

No

Question 38: Do you believe that parents and the wider community have a good understanding of the Higher School Certificate?

Yes

No

Question 39: Are there expectations at the school regarding learning and achievement in the Higher School Certificate?

Yes

No

Question 40: As a teacher, is your approach to the Higher School Certificate influenced by factors outside the school?

Yes

No

Thank you for your participation in this survey.

Appendix 2: Responses to the Indicative Survey regarding Educator Experiences of the HSC

Questions 1 to 3 concerned demographic information.

<i>Demographic Data</i>	<i>School 1</i>	<i>School 2</i>	<i>Total</i>	
<i>Participants</i>	<i>n = 21</i>	<i>n = 33</i>	<i>n = 54</i>	
<i>Question 1: How long have you been teaching?</i>	< 5	2 (9.5%)	6 (18.2%)	8 (13.9)
	6–15	7 (33.3%)	12 (36.4%)	19 (34.9)
	16–25	6 (28.6%)	7 (21.2%)	13 (24.9)
	> 26	6 (28.6%)	8 (24.2%)	14 (26.4)
<i>Question 2: Do you teach a Higher School Certificate class?</i>	Yes	19 (90.5%)	24 (72.7%)	43 (81.6)
	No	2 (9.5%)	9 (27.3%)	11 (18.4)
<i>Question 3: What is your gender?</i>	Male	11 (52.4%)	14 (42.4%)	25 (47.4)
	Female	10 (47.6%)	19 (57.6%)	29 (52.6)

<i>Questions 4 to 20 were based on the following scale: 1 = Not at all Important; 2 = Low Importance; 3 = Slightly Important; 4 = Moderately Important; 5 = Very Important; 6 = Extremely Important</i>	Scale Response	School 1 % n = 21	School 2 % N = 33	Total n = 54
<i>Question 4 How much emphasis does the school give to student achievement in the Higher School Certificate?</i>	6	52.4	45.5	48.95
	5	47.6	48.5	48.0
	4	0	6.1	3.0
	3	0	0	0
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0

<i>Question 5</i> <i>How important do you believe the Higher School Certificate is in the eyes of the wider community?</i>	6	47.6	42.4	45.0
	5	33.3	33.3	33.3
	4	19	18.2	18.6
	3	0	6.1	3.0
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 6</i> <i>In thinking about media focus on issues of achievement and testing in the Higher School Certificate, how much importance is it given in public perceptions of school quality?</i>	6	42.9	39.4	41.2
	5	52.4	45.5	48.9
	4	0	9.1	4.5
	3	4.8	6.1	5.5
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 7</i> <i>In thinking about media focus on achievement and testing in the Higher School Certificate, how much importance do you think this focus has in public perceptions of teacher effectiveness?</i>	6	28.6	42.4	35.5
	5	47.6	45.5	46.5
	4	9.5	9.1	9.3
	3	9.5	0	4.7
	2	4.8	3.0	3.9
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 8</i> <i>How important do you believe the Higher School Certificate is for students?</i>	6	23.8	3.0	13.4
	5	38.1	54.5	46.3
	4	23.8	33.3	28.5
	3	9.5	9.1	9.3
	2	4.8	0	2.4
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 9</i> <i>How much importance do parents ascribe to the Higher School Certificate?</i>	6	71.4	42.4	56.9
	5	28.6	54.5	41.5
	4	0	3.0	1.5
	3	0	0	0
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0

<i>Question 10</i> <i>What importance do you think your colleagues attach to the Higher School Certificate?</i>	6	33.3	27.3	30.3
	5	52.4	60.6	56.5
	4	14.3	12.1	13.2
	3	0	0	0
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 11</i> <i>What level of importance do you give the Higher School Certificate?</i>	6	33.3	24.2	28.7
	5	23.8	33.3	28.5
	4	33.3	36.4	34.8
	3	9.5	6.1	7.8
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 12</i> <i>What importance do you give to the Higher School Certificate as an accurate and reliable measure of student achievement?</i>	6	4.8	3.0	3.9
	5	19.0	33.3	26.1
	4	47.6	45.5	46.5
	3	14.3	12.1	13.2
	2	14.3	3.0	8.6
	1	0	3.0	1.5
<i>Question 13</i> <i>How important is it for you to have a good knowledge and understanding of the way in which student achievement is measured in the Higher School Certificate?</i>	6	52.4	42.4	47.4
	5	47.6	48.5	48.0
	4	0	6.1	3.0
	3	0	3.0	1.5
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 14</i> <i>What emphasis does your school's leadership and management place student achievement in the Higher School Certificate?</i>	6	47.6	39.4	43.5
	5	52.4	51.5	51.9
	4	0	3.0	1.5
	3	0	6.1	3.0
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 15</i> <i>How do policy and practices at the school reflect the importance of student achievement in the Higher School Certificate?</i>	6	33.3	18.2	25.7
	5	52.4	63.6	58.0
	4	14.3	15.2	14.7
	3	0	3.0	1.5
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	0	0

<i>Question 16</i> What importance does the <i>Higher School Certificate</i> have on the way you approach teaching?	6	33.3	39.4	36.3
	5	42.9	39.4	41.1
	4	0	12.1	6.0
	3	4.8	3.0	3.9
	2	0	3.0	1.5
	1	0	3.0	1.5
<i>Question 17</i> How important is student performance in the <i>Higher School Certificate</i> as a measure used either formally or informally to assess teacher effectiveness in your school?	6	19	15.2	17.1
	5	33.3	33.3	33.3
	4	42.9	36.4	39.6
	3	0	15.2	7.6
	2	4.8	0	2.4
	1	0	0	0
<i>Question 18</i> How important is student achievement in the <i>Higher School Certificate</i> for the placement of teachers on senior classes at your school?	6	23.8	15.2	19.5
	5	47.6	39.4	43.5
	4	19	33.3	26.1
	3	9.5	9.1	9.3
	2	0	0	0
	1	0	3.0	1.5
<i>Question 19</i> In your experience, how important is student achievement in the <i>Higher School Certificate</i> when used as a measure of effectiveness in performance reviews/contract renewals?	6	9.5	3.0	6.2
	5	33.3	24.2	28.7
	4	28.6	39.4	34.0
	3	23.8	21.2	22.5
	2	4.8	9.1	6.9
	1	0	3.0	1.5
<i>Question 20</i> How important do you feel student achievement in the <i>Higher School Certificate</i> is as a measure of teacher effectiveness?	6	14.3	3.0	8.6
	5	23.8	21.2	22.5
	4	42.9	54.5	48.7
	3	4.8	15.2	10.0
	2	14.3	6.1	10.2
	1	0	0	0

Questions 21 and Question 22 sought a free response.

Question 21	School 1 (n = 21)	School 2 (n = 33)
Provide one word that would best describe your view of the Higher School Certificate.	Challenging (x 2) Stressful (x 2) Ambivalent Culmination Essential Important Obfuscation Overload Poor Prescriptive Public Yardstick Archaic Dominating Excellence Number Political Unnecessary Useful	Pressure (x 5) Stressful (x 5) Rigorous (x 2) Choice Culmination Demanding Emphasised Evaluation Formative Important Inevitable Knowledge Necessary Overemphasised Tedious Vital Adequate Contrived Incumbent Necessary Overrated Prescribed Relative Unequal

Question 22: Briefly describe what Band 6 achievement means in the Higher School Certificate.
School 1 (n = 20)
Students have achieved the highest level possible.
High levels of student motivation and knowledge of how to use criteria from BOSTES effectively
That the planets have aligned in terms of student effort, cohort achievement, and the good wishes of the scaling fairy.
Personally, Band 6 implies a strong understanding of key concepts, an outstanding ability to apply knowledge of key concepts to tasks competently and independently on a consistent basis.
Highest level of achievement. With the mark range of 90–100. with the caveat that the minimum standard is 50.
These students represent the <i>creme de la creme</i> of the student body. This Band is difficult to attain and is worthy of commendation at School level. Band 6 for me reflects the fact that the student absorbed the content and was able to interpret and analyse the information at a personal level.
It is whereby the student is capable of demonstrating extensive, detailed knowledge with insightful understanding through sophisticated evaluation.
Acknowledgement of the efforts of students who have maximised their academic talents in their chosen subjects.
Band 6 means you achieved in the top 10% of students who completed that exam.

Outstanding marks achieved according to relevant knowledge and skills output within limited timeframe
Assessment of the student's performance in the top group of candidates equivalent to a score between 90 and 100 for a given subject and therefore judged to have demonstrated a higher order of student performance outcomes in the HSC for that subject.
It means that the student has a natural ability in the subject area, and their desire, be it interest or drive, ensures they work hard to master all aspects of the course. This can be fostered and nurtured by a good teacher; however, the student is the main driver of success.
Students were able to learn a system and recall irrelevant information for their lives.
A student has consistently demonstrated in school-based Assessment Tasks, Examinations AND the final External Examinations, a detailed knowledge of course content and a high degree of skill appropriate to the course.
Superior knowledge, strong analytical skills, organised and insightful intelligence to plan and create outside the box. Disciplined and well-balanced. Takes on board feedback yet checks and exhausts all options. intrinsically motivated.
Band 6 is a symbol of success. Unfortunately, it has become the motivating force for many rather than the intrinsic value of learning.
The top ten percent of possible marks allocated to a task. That is, 90–100. Students have demonstrated their understanding and application of the content and achieved the outcomes to a very high standard.
Achieving 90% and above for the total subject, including assessments, exams, major projects, folios etc.
A Band 6 achievement is a result of 90/100 for a 2-Unit Course and 46/50 for a 1-Unit Course. A Band 6 achievement means that a student has sound understanding of course content and terms. This student knows how to answer questions appropriately and he/she knows how to structure a response using exactly what is required of an answer. This achievement means that this student has worked consistently throughout the course and is probably assisted by an interest in the subject and a sound rapport with his/her teacher. A Band 6 answer means that this student has worked extremely hard to achieve this result and he/she has listened and acted on teacher advice.
It means heaps to some schools—it is the driving factor and leads to higher enrolments and enrolments of students whose parents are more driven than the kiddies at times. For students who achieve Band 6 it is good for their future prospects.

School 2 (<i>n</i> = 33)
Success
Very good to outstanding knowledge, synthesis and refection of content or concept and explained or applied well to a given situation, interpretation or problem.
An excellent understanding of content, combined with ability to apply that content in new and unfamiliar contexts. The ability to reason or make a judgement of an answer based on the contextual knowledge.
The student is relatively bright, has worked hard and had some luck on the day of the exam.
The student has learnt to answer the question according to the marking criteria desired.
I would describe this as dedication and hard work by all parties involved (student, teachers, parents/caregivers).
Achieving a result of 90%+ in a subject merit listing.
Students achieving in the top 10 percentile band. It shows the capability of a student to understand what is being asked of them and give a response with detail and application. It

often shows hard work and practice rather than straight intellectual capability, but is ultimately a combination of both.
It means that these students perform at the top level required of them in any discipline
An achievement of Band 6 in any subject indicates a level of performance against stated descriptors for that subject. The performance is a combination of both adjusted external examination results and moderated internal assessment results. Consequently, in a secondary way, it corresponds to a top percentage of students in that subject.
Confirmation as a measure of success for those students who can achieve it and are academically capable however at the same time a measure of failure as some students measure themselves against it [Band 6] not against their own personal best which is a more accurate measure of personal success for them.
Being in the top band of students in the state for that particular subject.
Achievement of a Band 6, in my understanding, means that students are achieving the top level outcomes expected for a course. Following the HSC marking process, raw marks are assessed and a cut off is made based on where it appears the border is between those just achieving those outcomes, and those just failing to achieve those outcomes. Raw marks do not equate to reported band marks necessarily.
Top 10% of candidates in the course
Band 6 denotes exceptional achievement.
It gives you more options, but is not the be all and end all!
Thorough knowledge of the key concepts and a sophisticated ability to synthesize knowledge and articulate this insightfully
Band 6 means an insightful and perceptive understanding—students have a deep understanding of their content.
Highly capable students or those who work their backsides off achieve high levels of synthesis and application in relevant areas—but to do so they must also have very strong knowledge of what exactly is expected to achieve those results and consistently work towards them... they cannot get those results without the aid of a teacher who understands the game and can guide them successfully in their achievement. Lots of kids have good knowledge or are more well-rounded in understanding—but just don't have the skill to express their understanding in a way measured/interpreted by the Board.
Sophisticated and perceptive understanding of the processes and content involved in the subject.
Quantitative measurement, often of how well a student can rote learn and provide an answer in line with the prescribed criteria. Does not encourage individuality, thinking-outside-the norm and creativity is not seen or marked as important as “correct” answers are.
Student has displayed a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the course content and syllabus in answering their examination
Thorough knowledge of content and skills consistently displayed by students.
To be amongst the best performers overall in a subject.
The top group of students within that subject for the state.
A Band 6 achievement is a student grade/mark that falls between 90–100.
Excelling.
Band 6 is what all students want to achieve. It means their work is of a high quality and they can perform to tests and write a prescribed response.
Band 6 achievement means a student has achieved a result reflective of consistent effort and excellent time management within a subject they are both good at and that they enjoy.

They are the students who care most about the feedback given to them via teachers and who work towards making the necessary changes.
Highest ranking.
High level of ability to know how to get a Band 6.
Achievement of an above 90 adjusted mark.
An academic student.

<i>Questions 23 to 27 sought perceptions of the school on a three point scale: 1 = Above Average; 2 = Average; 3 = Below Average</i>	Scale	School 1 % n = 21	School 2 % n = 33	Total % n = 54
<i>Question 23 How would you typically describe the performance of students in the Higher School Certificate at your school?</i>	Above Average	100	93.9	96.9
	Average	0	3.0	3.0
	Below Average	0	3.0	3.0
<i>Question 24 How would you typically describe the potential of students in the Higher School Certificate at your school?</i>	Above Average	100	84.8	92.4
	Average	0	12.1	6.0
	Below Average	0	3.0	1.5
<i>Question 25 How would your school community perceive achievement in the Higher School Certificate by students at your school?</i>	Above Average	85.7	90.9	88.3
	Average	14.3	6.1	10.2
	Below Average	0	3.0	1.5
<i>Question 26 How would you describe your knowledge and understanding of the Higher School Certificate?</i>	Above Average	90.5	69.7	80.1
	Average	9.5	30.3	19.9
	Below Average	0	0	0
<i>Question 27 How would you describe the importance that your colleagues place on the Higher School Certificate?</i>	Above Average	71.4	72.7	72.0
	Average	28.6	27.3	27.9
	Below Average	0	0	0

<i>Questions 28 to 40 were dichotomous questions seeking Yes or No responses.</i>	Response	School 1 % n = 21	School 2 % n = 33	Total % n = 54
<i>Question 28 Do you believe the Higher School Certificate enhances student learning?</i>	Yes	57.1	57.6	57.3
	No	42.9	45.5	44.2
<i>Question 29 Do you believe that the Higher School Certificate creates unnecessary stress for teachers?</i>	Yes	76.2	63.6	69.9
	No	23.8	36.4	30.1
<i>Question 30 Do you believe that the Higher School Certificate creates stress for students?</i>	Yes	100	100	100
	No	0	0	0
<i>Question 31 Do you believe that student achievement in the HSC reflects the quality of teaching?</i>	Yes	42.9	33.3	38.1
	No	57.1	72.7	64.9
<i>Question 32 Do you believe that teachers are more driven by student results rather than students learning?</i>	Yes	61.9	69.7	65.8
	No	38.1	33.3	35.7
<i>Question 33 Do you believe that decisions made in the school are strongly influenced by student achievement in the HSC?</i>	Yes	81.0	72.7	76.8
	No	19.0	27.3	23.1
<i>Question 34 Do you believe that competition in the Higher School Certificate is important?</i>	Yes	61.9	66.7	64.3
	No	38.1	33.3	35.7
<i>Question 35 Do you believe that teachers use a particular pedagogy when teaching the HSC that differs from the pedagogy used in Years 7 to 10?</i>	Yes	90.5	90.9	90.7
	No	9.5	9.1	18.6
<i>Question 36 Do you believe the Higher School Certificate's main purpose is as a pathway to university?</i>	Yes	95.2	87.9	91.5
	No	4.8	12.1	8.4
<i>Question 37 Do you believe that the HSC is a useful tool to compare and rank the performance of students across subjects?</i>	Yes	42.9	75.8	59.3
	No	57.1	30.3	43.7

<i>Question 38</i> <i>Do you believe that parents and the wider community have a good understanding of the HSC?</i>	Yes	14.3	27.3	20.8
	No	85.7	75.8	80.7
<i>Question 39</i> <i>Are there expectations at the school regarding learning and achievement in the HSC?</i>	Yes	100	97.0	98.5
	No	0	3.0	1.5
<i>Question 40</i> <i>As a teacher, is your approach to the HSC influenced by factors outside the school?</i>	Yes	61.9	48.5	55.2
	No	38.1	54.5	46.3

Appendix 3: Questions for Background Interview with Education Sector Leaders

Hello, my name is Paul Cahill. Thank you for participating in this interview, which aims to develop an understanding of the nature of the Higher School Certificate (HSC), its relevance and significance to the system/sector and to explore how the HSC is understood within the context and culture of schools represented by your organisation. The data gathered from this interview provides me with background information for this study in interpreting teachers lived experience of the HSC.

The interview is being recorded for later transcription. Through the transcription process, you will be de-identified. A summary of the findings of this study will be provided to you at its conclusion and further information about the study, your rights within the study and contacts for you to express any concerns relating to the study are available on the information sheet provided.

There are three areas relating to the Higher School Certificate and I would like to have a conversation across a series of themes regarding the HSC and how these themes are enacted across schools in your sector in policy and practice. These areas are:

The purpose and importance of the Higher School Certificate for schools across your sector

- What does your sector consider to be the purpose of the Higher School Certificate?
- How much focus is given to the Higher School Certificate by schools in your sector and how would you describe the level of resourcing dedicated to supporting students in the Higher School Certificate?
- What does your system/sector understand to be the most important aspects of the HSC?
- From your experience of Secondary schools in your sector, how would you describe the level of importance given to the HSC and could we explore some of the reasons for this importance?

How the Higher School Certificate influences the policy and practice across schools in your sector

- If I wanted to understand the nature of the HSC, what would be three of the most important things I would need to understand?
- Could you explore whether student achievement in the HSC is important for your sector and why?

The significance given to the Higher School Certificate is given in evaluating the effectiveness of teachers and schools

- Does your system believe that achievement in the HSC is an effective way to evaluate school and teacher performance?

- Does your system/sector have expectations surrounding teachers of the HSC, and if so what are these?
- What does your sector understand to be the most important aspects of the HSC and which are the most important measures of achievement in the Higher School Certificate?
- Is student achievement in the Higher School Certificate used in any way by schools in your sector to measure teacher effectiveness and if so, how?

Thank you for your participation in this interview. If you have any questions about the research contact either the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, the Co-Principal Investigator, Dr Scott Eacott or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

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Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome. Once again, thank you for your participation in this interview.

Appendix 4: Questions for Focus Group Discussions with School Leaders and with Middle Managers

Hello, my name is Paul Cahill. Thank you for participating in this focus group with the School Leadership Team/Middle Managers. This focus group is to help develop an understanding of the context and culture of the school, particularly in relation to the Higher School Certificate. The data gathered from this focus group will help to inform the focus of this study, which is to explore school educators' lived experiences with the Higher School Certificate.

During this focus group, I will ask questions and facilitate a conversation about your experience with the Higher School Certificate as leaders/middle managers of a school. Your input will give me a better understanding of the experience of the Higher School Certificate in your school. The purpose of the process is to stimulate conversation and hear the opinions of everyone in the group. I hope you will be comfortable speaking honestly and sharing your experience and understanding of the Higher School Certificate within your school.

The data gathered from this focus group will inform the iterative processes in this study. The conversation of the focus group is being recorded for later transcription. Through the transcription process, any identifying features like your name and school will be coded so that you cannot be identified. A summary of the findings of this study will be provided to you at its conclusion and further information about the study, your rights within the study and contacts for you to express any concerns relating to the study are available on the information sheet that has been provided to each member of the group.

The focus groups will explore the purpose and importance of the Higher School Certificate for the school, the influence it has on policy and practice and how the school uses the HSC as a measure of teacher effectiveness

Experience of the HSC

1. When you think of the Higher School Certificate what thoughts, feelings or reactions come to mind?
2. Can you describe what successful achievement in the HSC looks like at the school?

Perception of importance of the HSC in the school

3. Is the Higher School Certificate given any particular importance in the school and is this reflected in policy or practice?
4. Does the school use the results of the Higher School Certificate and if so in what way?
5. Can you tell me about the emphasis given to the Higher School Certificate at the school as a measure of teacher effectiveness?

Influence of the HSC on instructional thinking and practice

6. Does the school have a particular approach in preparing students for the Higher School Certificate?
7. In your experience, does the Higher School Certificate influence decision-making across the school, and if so how?
8. Is there anything else not discussed that you think is important to understand the context of the Higher School Certificate at the school?

Thank you for your participation in this focus group. If you have any questions about the research please contact either the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, the Co-Principal Investigator, Associate Professor Scott Eacott, or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

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Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome. Once again, thank you for your participation in this focus group.

Appendix 5: Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers

Thank you for participating in this interview, which is to help develop an understanding of how school educators experience the Higher School Certificate. The data gathered from the interview will inform the focus of this study, which is to interpret school educators' lived experience with the Higher School Certificate.

During the interview, I will ask questions and facilitate reflection on your experience with the Higher School Certificate as a teacher. I hope you will be comfortable responding openly and sharing your experience of the Higher School Certificate, especially as it relates to your pedagogical thinking and practice.

The data gathered from the interview will inform an iterative process in this study and this interview will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. All participant responses are de-identified in the study. A summary of the findings of this study will be provided to you at its conclusion and further information about the study, your rights within the study and contacts for you to express any concerns relating to the study are available on the information sheet provided prior to the commencement of the interview.

Area 1: Participant Profile

1. Time in the profession: Early/Mid/Late Career
2. Time as a Higher School Certificate Teacher: 0–5, 6–10, 11–15, 20–25, 25+ years
3. Gender: Male/Female
4. Role in the School: Leadership, Middle Management, Teacher

Area 2: Significance of the Higher School Certificate (HSC)

1. Does the Higher School Certificate have any particular priority in your work, and if it does, please describe the level of priority and the reasons why it has that priority?
2. Can you think of a concrete example of a way in which the HSC has influenced your teaching?
3. Can you describe what success for your students in the HSC means?
4. Do you believe the HSC accurately reflects student achievement?

Area 3: Experience of the Higher School Certificate at the School

1. How important is the Higher School Certificate at the school?
2. Does student achievement in the Higher School Certificate influence policy and practice at the school?
3. Can you describe how a specific policy or practice is influenced by student achievement in the Higher School Certificate?

Area 4: Personal/professional Experience of the Higher School Certificate

1. Have you ever experienced, or do you feel that the school and wider community judge your effectiveness as a teacher using your students' achievement HSC?
2. Can you provide an overall reflection of your experiences as a teacher of the Higher School Certificate?

3. Are there any areas of the HSC I haven't touched on that you would think would be important for me to be aware of or to consider in my study?

Thank you for your participation in this interview. If you have any questions about the research, please contact either the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, the Co-Principal Investigator, Associate Professor Scott Eacott, or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

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Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome. Once again, thank you for your participation in this interview.

Appendix 6: Information about the Study and Informed Consent provided to Prospective Participants in the Indicative Survey



Information for Potential Participants in the Indicative Survey

Project Title: How do School Educators Experience High-Stakes Testing? A Case Study of the Australian New South Wales Higher School Certificate in Two Independent Schools.

Principal Investigator: Dr Katarina Tuinamuana

Co-Principal Investigator: Associate Professor, Dr Scott Eacott

Student Researcher: Paul Cahill

Student's Degree: Doctor of Education

I am a doctoral student at the Australian Catholic University, and I invite you to participate in the research project that will form the basis of my doctoral thesis. The study has as its focus school educators experience of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) as a form of high-stakes testing.

The details of my research project are described below:

What is the project about?

The project explores the experience of school educators of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) and considers how this experience influences teachers. The study will add to our understanding of the influence of high-stakes testing by directly exploring with teachers their experience of high-stakes testing. The study will also explore what effect this has on the thinking and practice of teachers.

Who is undertaking the project?

This study is being undertaken by Paul Cahill and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Education at the Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Principal Investigator Dr Katarina Tuinamuana and Co-Principal Investigator Associate Professor, Dr Scott Eacott.

What am I being asked to do?

Participate in a short survey regarding aspects of the Higher School Certificate. The survey can be completed in less than ten minutes.

What are the benefits of the research project?

Your participation in this research will help to inform understandings of the context and role of the HSC in the life of your school and how this is communicated. This will help to build an understanding of how the HSC operates, the significance ascribed to the HSC and expectations on teachers relating to the HSC.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, Associate Professor, Dr Scott Eacott or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

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What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

The study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (Approval Number 2014 315N). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

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Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Katarina Tuinamuana
Principal Investigator

Paul Cahill
Student Researcher

CONSENT FORM for COMPLETION of the INDICATIVE SURVEY

Project Title: How do School Educators Experience High-Stakes Testing? A Case Study of the Australian New South Wales Higher School Certificate in Two Independent Schools.

Principal Investigator Dr Katarina Tuinamuana
Co-Principal Investigator: Dr Scott Eacott
Student Researcher: Paul Cahill
Student's Degree: Doctor of Education

By completing this survey, I am indicating that I have read and understood the information provided in the Information for Participants provided below. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the researchers sending me a whole school survey. I understand that I am under no obligation to complete the survey. By undertaking the survey I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way. Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, the Co-Principal Investigator, Associate Professor Dr Scott Eacott or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

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Appendix 7: Information about the Study and Informed Consent provided to Prospective Focus Group Participants



I am a doctoral student at the Australian Catholic University and I seek your consent to participate in my research. The study has as its focus teachers' experience of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) as a form of high-stakes testing.

The details of my research project are described below:

Project Title: How do School Educators Experience High-Stakes Testing? A Case Study of the Australian New South Wales Higher School Certificate in Two Independent Schools.

Principal Investigator: Dr Katarina Tuinamuana

Co-Principal Investigator: Associate Professor, Dr Scott Eacott

Student Researcher: Paul Cahill

Student's Degree: Doctor of Education

What is the project about?

The project explores the experience of school educators of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) and considers how this experience influences thinking and practice. The study will add to our understanding of the influence of high-stakes testing by directly exploring with school educators their experience of high-stakes testing.

Who is undertaking the project?

This study is being undertaken by Paul Cahill and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Education at the Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Principal Investigator Dr Katarina Tuinamuana and Co-Principal Investigator, Associate Professor Dr Scott Eacott.

What will you be asked to do?

You are asked to consent to participate in a focus group by the researcher. Your support is being requested by way of providing a signed consent form.

Participation in the focus group will take between 30 and 45 minutes and will be held at a place and time convenient to you. This focus group will be audio-recorded on a digital recorder, then transcribed and de-identified. No identifying information will be retained, and findings from the study will be reported in a way that does not identify participating teachers or schools in any way.

What are the benefits of the research project?

Your participation in this research will help to inform understandings of the context and role of the HSC in your work and how this is reflected in your school life and culture. This will help to build an understanding of how the HSC operates, the significance ascribed to the HSC and expectations on teachers relating to the HSC.

Can I withdraw my participation or that of the school from the study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences.

Will I be able to find out the results of the project?

At the conclusion of the project, you will receive a copy of the summary of the research findings.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, Associate Professor, Dr Scott Eacott or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

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What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

The study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (Approval Number 2014 315N). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

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Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

I want to participate! How do I sign up?

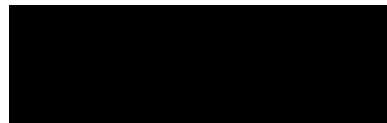
If you agree for your school to participate in this study, please sign both copies of the Consent Form, retain one for your records and return the other copy to the Student Researcher. This copy can be scanned and returned to the researcher at pvcahi001@myacu.edu.au or paul.cahill@syd.catholic.edu.au.

Thank you for your time in considering this invitation to participate in this research project.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Katarina Tuinamuana
Principal Investigator



Paul Cahill
Student Researcher



PARTICIPANT PERMISSION FORM

Project Title: How do School Educators Experience High-Stakes Testing? A Case Study of the Australian New South Wales Higher School Certificate in Two Independent Schools.

Principal Investigator Dr Katarina Tuinamuana
Student Researcher: Paul Cahill
Student’s Degree: Doctor of Education

I, _____ a School Leader/Middle Manager at XXXX College have read and understood the information provided in the outline of the study. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study and for my staff to be invited to participate in the study. The study will consist of focus groups with leaders and middle leaders, a questionnaire and a structured interview with HSC teachers. I understand that I can withdraw my consent for school at any time without any adverse consequences. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT: _____

SIGNATUREDATE

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign the Consent Form and return it to Student Researcher, Paul Cahill, via email pvcahi001@myacu.edu.au or paul.cahill@syd.catholic.edu.au.

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, the Co-Principal Investigator, Associate Professor Dr Scott Eacott or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

In appreciation of your consideration of participating in this study.

Appendix 8: Information about the Study and Informed Consent provided to Prospective Semi-structured Interview Participants



I am a doctoral student at the Australian Catholic University and I seek your consent to participate in my research. The study has as its focus teachers' lived experience of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) as a form of high-stakes testing.

The details of my research project are described below:

Project Title: How do School Educators Experience High-Stakes Testing? A Case Study of the Australian New South Wales Higher School Certificate in Two Independent Schools.

Principal Investigator: Dr Katarina Tuinamuana

Co-Principal Investigator: Associate Professor, Dr Scott Eacott

Student Researcher: Paul Cahill

Student's Degree: Doctor of Education

What is the project about?

The project explores the experience of teachers of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) and considers how this experience influences teacher thinking and practice. The study will add to our understanding of the influence of high-stakes testing by directly exploring with school educators their experience of high-stakes testing.

Who is undertaking the project?

This study is being undertaken by Paul Cahill and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Education at the Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Principal Investigator Dr Katarina Tuinamuana and Co-Principal Investigator Associate Professor, Dr Scott Eacott.

What will your school be asked to do?

You are asked to consent to participate in a semi-structured interview by the researcher. Your support is being requested by way of providing a signed consent form.

Participation in an interview that will take approximately 45 minutes and will be held at a place and time convenient to you. The interview will be audio-recorded on a digital recorder, then transcribed and de-identified. No identifying information will be retained, and findings from the study will be reported in a way that does not identify participating teachers or schools in any way.

What are the benefits of the research project?

Your participation in this research will help to inform understandings of the context and role of the HSC in your work and how this is reflected in your thinking and practice. This will help to build an understanding of how the HSC operates, the significance ascribed to the HSC and expectations on teachers relating to the HSC.

Can I withdraw my participation or that of the school from the study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences.

Will I be able to find out the results of the project?

At the conclusion of the project, you will receive a copy of the summary of the research findings.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, Associate Professor, Dr Scott Eacott or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

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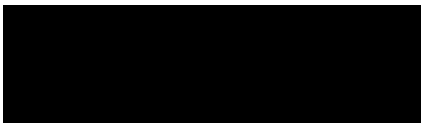
Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

I want to participate! How do I sign up?

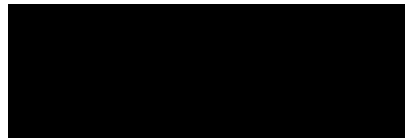
If you agree for your school to participate in this study, please sign both copies of the Consent Form, retain one for your records and return the other copy to the Student Researcher. This copy can be scanned and returned to the researcher at pvcahi001@myacu.edu.au or paul.cahill@syd.catholic.edu.au.

Thank you for your time in considering this invitation to participate in this research project.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Katarina Tuinamuana
Principal Investigator



Paul Cahill
Student Researcher



SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT PERMISSION FORM

Project Title: Teacher Experience with High Stakes Testing: An exploratory study of the lived experience of teachers with the Higher School Certificate across three school sites
Principal Investigator: Dr Katarina Tuinamuana
Student Researcher: Paul Cahill
Student's Degree: Doctor of Education

I, XXXX of YYYY College have read and understood the information provided in the outline of the study. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree for my school to participate in this study and for my staff to be invited to participate in the study. The study will consist of focus groups with leaders and middle leaders, an indicative survey and a semi-structured interview with HSC teachers. I understand that I can withdraw my consent for school at any time without any adverse consequences. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF TEACHER: XXXX

SIGNATUREDATE

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign the Consent Form and return it to Student Researcher, Paul Cahill, via email pvcahi001@myacu.edu.au or paul.cahill@syd.catholic.edu.au.

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the Principal Investigator, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana, the Co-Principal Investigator, Associate Professor Dr Scott Eacott or the Student Researcher, Paul Cahill.

In appreciation of your consideration of participating in this study.

Appendix 9: Examples of the Stages of Data Analysis

GREEN = The purpose and importance of the HSC

BLUE = HSC impact on policy and practice

YELLOW = HSC as a measure of school/teacher effectiveness

2015_05_05_14_25_01

Accountability

Stress?

Mark down tension with leaving

Process Structure

Expectation

broken purpose of learning

not focused on learning

approach to perform

not right after 2 identity

Purpose of HSC

purpose

PERFORMANCE

school reputation

expectations = why?

teacher commitment to students

Reputation

school reputation

What does this mean

little bit harder or my teacher didn't really teach that very well. I want them to go away and at the end of it, walk away from that examination hall going okay, I never have to do that again, but you know what, I've done my best at it and whatever I get is whatever I get.

I suppose there's probably a partial inflection there with the answer I just gave what I got is what I got not what I've learnt is important. It's what I get. I think that's one of the underlying problems we have with the Higher School Certificate - if I'm digressing, please stop me.

Facilitator: Not at all.

Interviewee: That it's what you get is what you get and that defines you. It's not what you learn along the way and how you've learnt about learning, all the other things that you've picked up along the way or other different things you've been exposed to, it all translates down really and society tells them it translates to a number at the other end. That's not true. It's not a pass fail exam. The number doesn't define who you are or what you are or where you're going to go. I don't want my students coming out of class just thinking that a number at the end determines their worth or their value or what they've learnt.

Facilitator: With that you said with inflection and there is a distinction between the two, you've emphasised from a personal perspective the view of learning. When you speak about the number, what are the pressures or what are the groups if you like within the school community that are looking at the number as opposed to learning or is that a fair representation?

Interviewee: Look, we are an academic school and we make no bones about it. We are an academic school but we also take anybody who fits the criteria. We don't have a selection policy or anything like that. We just take anybody who is enrolled and we'll do our best to teach them but we are an academic school. That in itself or being under the guise of the academic school, places greater emphasis on student achievement than I think it would if we weren't considered an academic school. We expect our students to do well and as a

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AFG1	
Purpose	
High Stakes Performativity Teaching & Learning	It [HSC] formulates very strongly in my teaching practices, especially in terms of assessment tasks; and also motivating and encouraging the students through the various units to ensure that they're prepared adequately for the examination.
Performativity Teaching & Learning	... by year 11 and 12, I expect my students to have a general knowledge developed through the 7 to 10 stage four and five syllabus.
Performativity High Stakes	... throughout 7 to 12 there is a strong correlation between the assessment tasks and the skills that we're hoping to develop in the students; so that with building up their academic potential hopefully by year 11 and 12...
Performativity High Stakes	...our assessment task criteria and the skills and outcomes we're developing in the students is only broadening their horizons into Year 11 and 12...
Performativity	But in Year 11 and 12 it's a lot more focused on that one particular text as well as drawing in related knowledge.
Teaching & Learning	In my classroom I look at the HSC as being very much a team effort and setting up a positive learning environment...
Teaching & Learning High Stakes	I encourage study groups, I encourage obviously after school tutorials, homework help. I encourage senior students to email me regularly and I make a point, if they hand in an assessment, it's marked at night and returned...
ALB1*	
High Stakes Performativity Matriculation	...there is an obsession with the HSC for obvious reason because that's the reason why people invest the money to send their sons to this school in the hope that they get a very good ATAR score...
Performativity High Stakes	I start heightening their interest about the importance of the HSC as early as Year 7 when they enter high school because I'm not going to devalue all that experience I have in the senior school.
High Stakes Performativity	Even with parent and teacher night you warn them about well, this is what's going to be expected in the HSC when your son gets to Year 11 and Year 12...
AGG1	
High Stakes	Naturally it assumes a priority because it's an external assessment. It's not something that you can hide...
Teaching & Learning High Stakes Performativity	I'd like to think that I do keep a balance. I might prioritise the return of HSC marking over younger years but only in that if I hadn't set up the timeline effectively because I'm a very strong believer that it's actually in the younger years you do your most important work.

Pathway GGB2	the fact that we're trying to prepare them for life away from compulsory schooling and trying to hopefully teach them ways to be able to think for themselves and organise their time
Pathway GGB2	the school is saying to the kids, well, you're going to choose an HSC tertiary education pathway generally by going to the HSC. You would like to gain an ATAR and potentially see where that will lead you, whether it will lead you to a university pathway or whether it will get you to re-evaluate your life after school
Pathway JNB2	it's the end of school, they've got the exam, it's important, for most of them it is the thing that does set them for whatever they want to do.
Pathway KFG2	It's very clear and concise; you either fail or you don't, you get a band six or you don't, you get 80 or not... the exam itself is then the gateway to whatever it is you want to do as your next step
Pathway MTB2	The other thing for me that's important is I see 11 and 12 not as an end, I see it as a step to whatever they do afterwards. Which for most [students] these days is university
Pathway NPB2	So if students can see that they're in a position to add value to their ATAR or to the HSC, then they're more inclined to pick my subject
Pathway OTB2	But the HSC prepares the boys for whatever they're doing next. Because of - to be successful in the HSC it's not just about how academic you are, it's about how well you can handle and juggle lots of different things
Pathway WYB2	I teach it with the intention of life skills, how to be a good student beyond Year 11 and 12, so university, or even life, how am I going to run a business when this is challenging?
Performativity ALB1	there is an obsession with the HSC for obvious reason because that's the reason why people invest the money to send their sons to this school in the hope that they get a very good ATAR score
Performativity AFG1	I want to be looked at as capable by my superiors. So as much as it is caring for my students personally it's also important for me and my job satisfaction
Performativity AGG1	the results are out there and when you get back to school the next year and it's in the newsletters and stuff, it's almost that - as I mentioned the other day, I'm very lucky that my department and my class results are very solid
Performativity AGG1	So I think that idea of its very public nature can bring a sense of almost - not humiliation, but it can be a really resounding blow to your self confidence and your self
Performativity DBB1	I believe that I'm measured by my success, measured against previous years of the same place. So my ability to get the students to that level or to what level within their - that measurable level, is certainly very important
Performativity DBB1	we've high end leadership and we have high end teaching. We've high end students. We're in a high end area in Sydney. We're certainly very much marching to the high end band
Performativity DRB1	what I got is what I get not what I've learnt is important. It's what I get. I think that's one of the underlying problems we have with the Higher School Certificate