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"That's just how it is": Neoliberal Subjectification and Teacher Agency Within One Australian High School

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which neoliberal discourses of cost-saving/profit-making, productivity/efficiency, and individualism informed the practice of Lachlan, the head of music in an Australian secondary school. In contrast to existing literature dominantly exploring how music programs are *disadvantaged* within educational systems informed by neoliberalism, this paper highlights how Lachlan directly appealed to neoliberal discourses in an attempt to *advantage* his music program. This paper asks if his reinforcement of neoliberal discourse serves as an example of teacher agency, and/or reflects neoliberal subjectivity.

Keywords: *neoliberalism, music education, teacher agency, neoliberal subjectification, policy studies, Australian education, educational leadership*

> Under the current "neoliberalized" circumstances, music education is becoming weakened, except perhaps in places where it serves to support—or at least does not contravene—neoliberal ideals. (Goble 2021, 10)

This paper examines the ways in which the head of music at one Australian secondary school appealed to neoliberal discourses when attempting to foster change. Specifically, this paper explores how Lachlan—the head of music at Langari Community College—appealed

to discourses of profit-making/cost-saving, productivity/efficiency, and individualism to gain administrative support for proposed changes he felt would benefit the music program.

McDonald, Pini, and Bartlett (2019) position Australia as "a country which has enthusiastically embraced the neoliberal conditions conducive to the dismantling of public schooling" (887). Similarly, Drew (2013) argues that "contemporary educational discourse in Australia is primarily dictated by a neoliberal economic agenda predicated on competition, consumerism and individualism" (175). This paper specifically questions whether Lachlan's appeal to (and thus reinforcement of) neoliberal discourses when advocating for policy changes within an Australian school serves as an example of teacher agency and/or reflects neoliberal subjectivity.

Defining Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Subjectivity

As numerous scholars have noted, defining neoliberalism is extremely difficult. Brown (2015) states that "it is a scholarly commonplace that neoliberalism has no fixed or settled coordinates, that there is temporal and geographical variety in its discursive formulations, policy entailments, and material practices" (20). In its most simplistic sense, neoliberalism is as an economic and political extension of liberalism, in which discourses of productivity/efficiency, free-marketization, individualism, and cost-saving/profit-making inform both policy and practice (Bates 2021; Brown 2015; Giroux 2004; Hall, Crawford and Jenkins 2021). Unlike classical liberalism (in which governments and policy makers take a "hands-off" approach to regulating the economic market), neoliberalism encourages and requires the support of policy makers. As Brown (2015) explains, "neoliberalism is not about the state leaving the economy alone. Rather, neoliberalism activates the state on behalf of the economy" (62).

However, scholars argue that neoliberalism does not only influence economic and institutional policy. Rather, the internalisation and influence of the discourses of neoliberalism on the thoughts, ideals, values, and practices of individuals is of increased scholarly interest (see Ball and Olmedo 2013; Benedict 2022; Bracke 2016; Brown 2015; Giroux 2004, 2018; Lipman 2011; Powell 2023; Woodford 2019; Zavitz, Simpson and

Wright 2024). Bracke (2016) highlights that "this point of departure understands neoliberalism not only in terms of political economy, but also as a cultural project bent on reshaping the structure of social relationships and subjectivities" (62). Giroux (2018) puts it plainly when stating:

> Central to [neoliberalism's] philosophy is the assumption the market drives not just the economy but all of social life. It construes profit-making as the essence of democracy and consuming as the only operable form of agency. It redefines identities, desires, and values through a market logic that favors self-interest, a survival-of-the-fittest ethos, and unchecked individualism. Under neoliberalism, life-draining and unending competition is a central concept for defining human freedom. (para 3)

Within this paper, neoliberalism is conceptualised as a societal system in which discourses of profit-making/cost-saving, productivity/efficiency, individualism, and free-market ethos inform policy, practice, and values at macro (governmental), meso (school) and micro (individual) levels.

Neoliberal Subjectification and Rationality Within the Field of Music Education

Ball and Olmedo (2013), Bracke (2016), and Brown (2015) argue that the influence of neoliberal discourses on the thoughts, feelings, and values of individuals serves as an example of 'subjectification,' a term linked to Foucaudian and feminist thinking (see Butler 1997; Foucault 1982, 1997). Such schools of thinking assert that when discourses and language used within economic/political spheres begin to permeate the values of individuals, existing power relations are reinforced. Within such conceptualisations, the "subject is then governed by others and at the same time [is the] governor of him/herself [/themself]" (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 87). As a result, Gill and Orgad (2018) position neoliberalism as a "psychological project" (478) which impacts the extent to which teachers even consider implementing practices which contravene neoliberal discourses.

The presentation of neoliberalism as a "psychological project" has interesting implications for scholars in the field of education, specifically those interested in the interrelationships between policy, practice and agency. As Ball and Olmedo (2013) note,

"constraining historical, political, and economic contextual factors are ... central to the understanding of the limits of the horizon of possibilities and practices through which the subject actively constitutes him/herself [/themself]" (87). This idea that neoliberal subjectification places limits on the kinds of actions individuals deemed "possible" spotlights the self-regulation and constriction of one's own agency (rather than an external enforcement of restricting neoliberal policies in a top-down fashion). Both Woolley (2017) and Lipman (2011) express that this phenomenon prompts neoliberal subjects to label actions, practices, and policy which align with neoliberal discourses as "common-sense," with the latter arguing that neoliberalism's "saturation of social practices and consciousness [makes] it difficult to think otherwise" (6).

Brown (2015) takes this thinking a step further when highlighting the way neoliberal subjects label those who *do not* perpetuate the dominance of neoliberal discourses as "irrational." She notes that within contexts in which neoliberal discourses are dominant, neoliberalism is positioned as the "natural" or "true" order of things. Thus, neoliberal subjects within such contexts believe that "rational actors accept these truths, thus accept 'reality' conversely, those who act according to other principles are not simply irrational, but refuse reality" (67). Such thinking aligns with Giroux's (2004) assertion that "neoliberal ideology wraps itself in what appears to be an unassailable appeal to conventional wisdom" (49), and with Karlsen (2019) who notes that "one of the central premises of neoliberalism [is] that no [rational] alternative exists" (190).

The conceptualisation of educators as potential neoliberal subjects whose ability to consider practices which contravene neoliberal discourses is constrained has interesting implications for discussions of teacher agency. As Karlsen (2019) states:

> Having an alternative ... is understood as a crucial prerequisite for possessing agency. Certainly, for being able to act otherwise, one also needs to be able to imagine the possibilities of action. Consequently, having one's skills of imagination thwarted or colonised also means having one's agency severely crippled. (190)

If neoliberal subjects are unable to consider alternative practices, are they able to enact individual agency? How might scholarship problematize teacher subjectification, without

conceptualising intelligent and thoughtful in-service educators as non-agentic beings? Are teachers who appeal to neoliberal discourses to benefit their students acting "rationally?" This paper aims to explore these questions by investigating the ways in which neoliberal discourses informed policy and practice at one Australian high school. It begins by exploring how a "top-down" enforcement of policies aligning with neoliberal discourses disadvantaged the music program at Langari Community College (a researcher-chosen pseudonym). It then explores the ways in which the head of music at this school positioned such discourses as "rational" and actively appealed to them with the aim to benefit the school's music program.

Methodology

Data which inform this paper were collected as a part of a wider dissertation research study exploring the ways Australian classroom music educators perceive and respond to policy (Simpson 2023a). This paper focuses on the experiences and practice of Lachlan (a participant-selected pseudonym), who is the head of music at Langari Community College [LCC]. The decision to publish a paper specifically exploring Lachlan's experiences at LCC was informed by three considerations: 1) the instrumental music program at LCC was consistently labelled as "successful" by other participants in the wider research study due to the high number of students engaging with the program and the size of the program's budget; 2) Lachlan consistently noted that he overtly appealed to neoliberal discourses such as cost-saving/profit-making, productivity/efficiency and individualism when advocating for policy changes which would benefit the instrumental music program; and 3) the wider dissertation research focused predominantly on the classroom music programs[1] of each school, rendering much data exploring the co-curricular instrumental music program[2] at LCC unexplored in the published dissertation (Simpson 2023a). Although classroom music education is compulsory for Australian students from levels Foundation (K) to year 7, a school's instrumental music program (which offers instrument specific tuition and ensemble participation) is often considered a co-curricular activity, which students must opt into to participate.

LCC is a government school located in a suburb of low socioeconomic status, with over 50% of its student population drawn from families in the lowest quartile of recorded household income (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2022). Though it serves students from Foundation (K) through to the final level of Australian compulsory schooling (year 12), the secondary school campus from which data were collected housed students from years 7–12. Though LCC's school name includes the word "college," it does not provide tertiary level instruction. The instrumental music program at LCC is very popular, and it offers a large number of ensemble and instrument tuition options when compared to other secondary schools in the same regional city (Simpson 2023a).

The methods used to collect data examined in this paper included semi-structured interviews with Lachlan, the observation of ensemble rehearsals and instrumental lessons within the instrumental music program at LCC, and the analysis of schooling documents (including policy documents, budgeting spreadsheets, and teaching materials). Reflexive researcher journals were also utilised throughout the research project. Excerpts from these author-written reflexive journals are found in italics at the beginning of each discussion section below to contextualise relevant information. Data were coded using inductive analytical methods (Hatch 2002).

The following discussion sections explore the ways in which the neoliberal discourses of profit-making/cost-saving, productivity, and individualism informed policy and practice within the music program at LCC. The paper goes on to question, problematize, and explore whether Lachlan's practice as the head of music at LCC can be conceptualised as unquestioned neoliberal subjectification and/or a conscious enactment of teacher agency.

The Eviction of the Music Program from Dedicated Music Spaces

When I walked into the music building, I immediately turned my head towards the sounds coming from my right. The space looks like most of the high school music buildings I've seen during lunch time. Students who were not quick enough to book one of the two dedicated

music spaces for rehearsal are playing guitars in the hallway. The sounds of four different genres fill the space, whilst Lachlan lets a group of disappointed students know "we are full up today, but you can book for next week." The space is full of enthusiasm, energy, and sound. As a music educator, it feels like home.

However, one look to the left and it feels like I am in an entirely new building. Small transparent offices line the back wall of the left-hand side of the building. Each bears posters advertising government funded initiatives to reduce unemployment across the state. Members of the public between the ages of 18 and 65 quietly wait for an appointment with the job agency housed on this side of the building. They occasionally look over to the commotion to the right, though most are glancing down at their phones. Another group holding yarn and knitting needles are waiting to enter a large room in the centre of the building, which today is housing a community knitting club. "You should see that room on Fridays" Lachlan tells me, "the chef comes in. It's like 10 bucks, three-course meal. Brilliant food from a fair dinkum classy chef ... it's packed." I make plans to join Lachlan for lunch next Friday, as I walk to the right to observe an ensemble rehearsal.

The music building at LCC is unlike any I had seen before. It was purpose-built to house the music program and the weights room for the adjacent gym in the 2010s. The funding acquired to construct this building was not drawn from standard capital works funding, which is allocated by the State level Department of Education and Training [DET]. Rather, this funding stemmed from the now defunct State government "Shared Facilities Fund," which aimed to efficiently provide funding to both schools and community organisations. The Shared Facilities Fund provided government schools with additional funding for buildings if they also housed community-focused organisations, institutions, facilities, or programs—reflecting neoliberal discourses of funding efficiency (Victorian School Building Authority 2016). Thus, the original plans for the music building at LCC included a small space earmarked to be allocated to community organisations (See the green section of Figure 1). After the building was constructed a community employment agency began to rent this space, with the rent serving as an additional funding stream bolstering the school's budget.

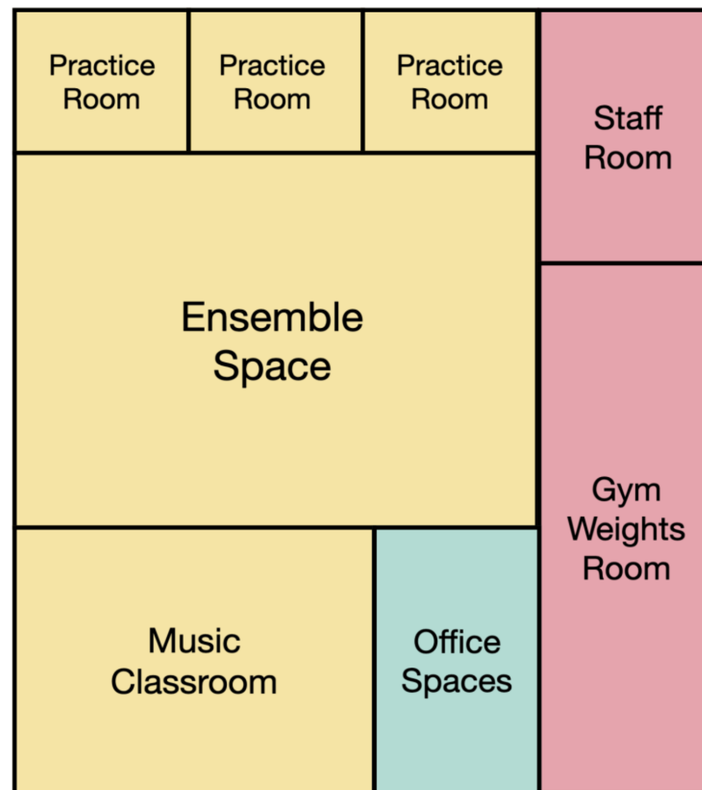

Figure 1. Original room allocation of LCC Music building. Yellow = music learning spaces; green = space dedicated to the community; and red = non-music specific spaces.

Though the building was originally created to house the growing music program at LCC, Lachlan noted that over time spaces previously allocated to the music department were reallocated to fee paying community organisations. In explaining this phenomenon, he stated:

> So when they [the community organisations] came down here, they had this little tiny space. Then they started leasing out the rooms, like the school gets a portion of the money, and they get a portion of the money. But they grew pretty quick, rapidly, and they wanted more space. So, basically, I didn't want to leave, but I just basically got kicked out of that area to give them more space. 'Cause they were getting more money, they could get more grants by having the community there, they could get more money.

By the time data were collected for this research project, all spaces which were previously allocated to the school's music program had been reallocated and repurposed as

community centre spaces (see Figure 2). These spaces included government training spaces, community activity spaces, and offices for the job-seeking agency referred to above. Due to the reallocation of spaces which were previously assigned to the music program, the gym's weight room was converted into an ensemble rehearsal room, the previous staff room was repurposed as an instrumental music lesson room, and the space previously dedicated to the community centre became Lachlan's office/an additional music teaching space (see Figure 2). The classroom music program (and therefore the music classroom) was moved to the other side of the school, creating a geographical barrier between the classroom and co-curricular music programs at LCC (Simpson 2023a).

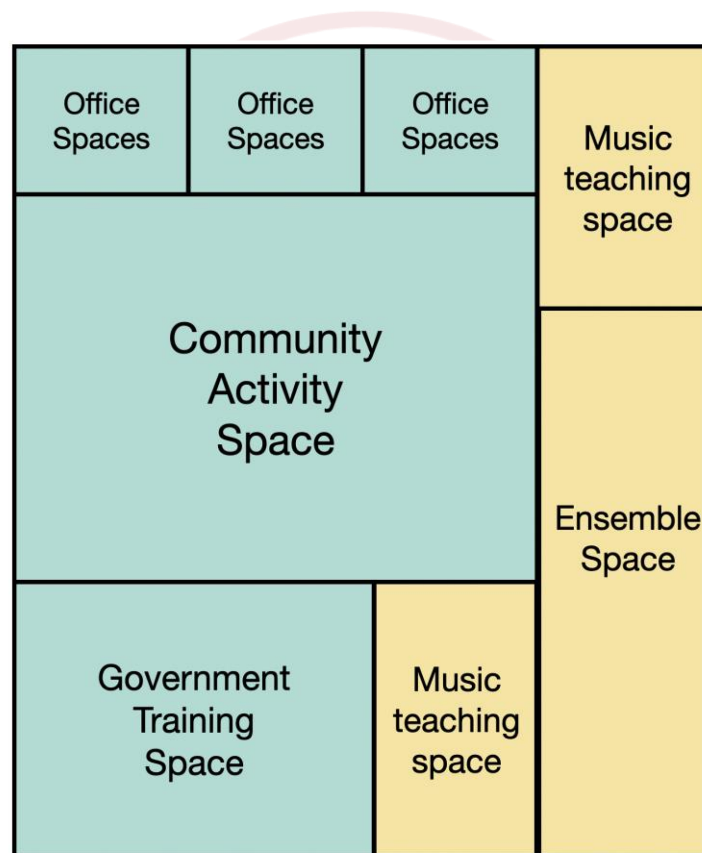

Figure 2. Allocation of rooms in the music building as of November 2023. Yellow = music learning spaces; green = space dedicated to the community; red = non-music specific spaces.

The reallocation of music spaces to community organisations negatively impacted the music program at LCC in a host of ways. The new ensemble rehearsal space did not have any soundproofing or acoustic treatment, leading to high volume levels both within and outside the space during rehearsals. Students who may have previously used the generously sized practice rooms (which are now offices) during lunch times are now required to practise in the hallways of the building. Additionally, the relocation of the classroom music program to the other side of the school created a disconnect between curricular and co-curricular music activities, which teachers stated impacted a sense of cohesion across musical offerings (Simpson 2023a).

Discourses of Cost-Saving/Profit-Making, Real-Estate, and Rationality

Lipman (2007) notes that within neoliberal contexts "all services established for the common good are potential targets of investment and profit-making" (51). Though the decision to reallocate music spaces to community organisations would undeniably impact the quality of music education occurring in the building (particularly when noting the lack of acoustic treatment in these new spaces, and reduced capacity to access multiple dedicated music rooms), the building was targeted as a potential site of profit-making by administrative figures. What is particularly interesting is that despite LCC holding not-for-profit status, Lachlan did not seem shocked by the decision of administrative staff to find ways to increase the budget of the school overall. In fact, he positioned this decision as common-sense within educational systems informed by neoliberalism, stating, "I totally understand; they can get more money for it."

Lachlan's response reveals the ways in which neoliberal discourses are both accepted and reinforced as normative in schools, often without the consideration of potential alternatives. As noted by Brown (2015), Slater (2022), and Smith (2015), a key factor leading to the continued perpetuation of neoliberalism is the tendency of those disadvantaged by this system to continue to reinforce its discourses. Throughout numerous interviews and a large amount of time together, Lachlan did not express a distaste for the ways in which neoliberal discourses may have disadvantaged the music program at LCC.

Neither did he express a desire to appeal to discourses of access, equity, or social justice with the aim of reclaiming music spaces. Rather, he utilised his knowledge that neoliberal discourses of cost-saving/profit-making, efficiency/productivity, and individualism were valued within LCC to actively appeal to such discourses when attempting to garner future support for the music program. The following section highlights specific strategies Lachlan employed to gain financial and non-financial support for the music program at LCC, and the ways in which such strategies reinforced conceptions of neoliberalism as "rational."

Profit and Deal Making to Advantage the Music Program

Even though the music program no longer has access to purpose-built music spaces, it is safe to say the instrumental music program at LCC is thriving. It is well equipped with a range of professional quality instruments, including expensive guitar rigs and a brand-new marimba. There is a waiting list of students who want to take part in private tuition programs, which are offered on a range of instruments. The program's budget is healthy to say the least, with over $33,000 AUD 'in the bank' to fund guest conductors, school camps, and instruments every year. Lachlan spoke of purchasing a new sound system to use in the rehearsal space, with the main barrier not funds, but storage space.

LCC has a very healthy music budget (Simpson 2023a), a fact that Lachlan is particularly proud of. He noted that before taking on the role of head of music, he negotiated an agreement with school leadership stipulating that any additional funds made by the music program would be added to the music budget (rather than reallocated to the larger school funding pool). After the school agreed, Lachlan accepted the position and immediately began implementing policies to increase what he labelled the "incomings" of the music program. In speaking of the first change he implemented as the new head of music, Lachlan referred to a fee which was charged to all instrumental music students to cover instrument repair costs:

> It [a music fee paid to access the co-curricular music program offerings] was 20 bucks a year. So it was insane. So that's why there was no budget for music. You couldn't get instruments 'cause we didn't have a budget. And that was run by a classroom teacher, who said, "No, no, no, music education should be free," like this

> person's done a Masters. And I said, "Well, we'll never have a music program if that's going to be the case, 'cause we're not generating money" … you need to generate money to get instruments basically, because the school's not going to fork out thousands and thousands of dollars if they don't see money coming back in ... I doubled the price immediately. Then the following year, I got it up to $100 within two years. Now it's $330 ... So, me doing that and then the administration seeing this money coming in, that was my budget ... They can see that money coming in, so I can buy the instruments from that money.

This 1550% increase of the annual fee across a five-year period affords LCC a music budget that far outweighed the documented music budget of other schools in the area; including some fee-paying private schools (Simpson 2023a). He puts it bluntly when stating that "if I have 100 students, I've got $30,000. Simple as that."

Profit Making and Entrepreneurship as the Only Rational Way Forward

Throughout our interviews together, Lachlan consistently highlighted that the previous head of music's dominant focus on providing students with economically accessible music tuition *disadvantaged* the music program. Though he acknowledged that this educator's decision to keep music participation fees minimal was drawn from discourses of equity and social justice, Lachlan's choice to immediately increase fees once becoming the head of music demonstrated the ways in which such dispositions are often seen as irrational within neoliberal systems (Brown 2015; Lipman 2011; Woolley 2017). In fact, Lachlan describes the actions of the previous head of music who did not reinforce such discourses as "insane," later stating that he couldn't fathom that a person with a Master's degree would come to this conclusion. This presentation of actions which do not align with the discourses of neoliberalism as "insane" (and therefore "irrational," "unpredictable," or even a symptom of mental illness) highlights the ways in which neoliberal subjectification can lead to "the erasure of intelligible, legitimate alternatives to economic rationality" (Brown 2015, 68). The presentation of statements such as "you need to generate money to get instruments" or "the school's not going to fork out thousands and thousands of dollars if they don't see money coming back in" as unarguable facts reflects this phenomenon. When explicitly asked why he believes such statements to be true, Lachlan argued that this had

been his experience both at LCC and at other schools in which he had taught. Though Lachlan had explored funding options such as grant applications, fundraisers, or donations as potential ways that the music program could have increased funding in the past, he argued that they "don't work" as well as the strategies implemented. Rather, Lachlan conceptualised the music program as a small business operating with a free market system, which needed to "stand on its own two feet" to be successful.

Moore (2016) found that similar neoliberal discourses of individualism, cost-saving/profit-making, and entrepreneurship informed the practices of professional musicians, arguing that "this valorization of entrepreneurship is a corollary of neoliberalism" (35). Like Scharff (2016), Moore (2016) argues that there exists "the expectation of radical self-sufficiency" (33) within the field of music, which has the potential to permeate the field of music education. As a former professional musician, it seemed that Lachlan had not questioned if the music program within a not-for-profit educational institution *should* be managed like a small business. Rather, he positioned the need for the program to be self-sufficient and profitable as common sense and pragmatic. For Lachlan, no other possibility was critically considered. As he stated when asked about the overlap between the skills required to run a small business and those required to lead the music program, "that's just how it is."

Advantages to Appealing to Neoliberal Discourses of Productivity/Efficiency and Cost-Saving/Profit-Making

I can't stop thinking about the ways in which the music program at LCC has been advantaged by Lachlan's willingness to embrace/appeal to/reinforce neoliberal discourses. Throughout my graduate studies (and within much of the literature), neoliberalism has been presented as a kind of boogeyman that must be confronted, disarmed, and undermined at all costs. But Lachlan's reinforcement of these discourses has undoubtedly advantaged the music program. And other participants who have aimed to consciously reject some of these discourses are finding themselves disadvantaged within an educational context which undoubtedly reifies them. Is it Lachlan's job to challenge the "rules of the game" to the

potential detriment of his students? Or is his responsibility to "play the game" to the best of his ability (particularly when he seems so good at it)?

When completing the literature review for this work, policies which reflect neoliberal discourses were often positioned as factors that solely restricted teacher agency and dominantly disadvantaged arts education (see Ball 2003; Matthews 2012; Woodford 2005, 2019). However, it was clear that Lachlan's active appeals to the neoliberal discourses he believed informed the decision making of school leaders at LCC aimed to *advantage* the music program.

For example, when attempting to convince the administrative team at LCC to fund the hiring of additional instrumental music tutors, Lachlan overtly appealed to discourses of employee productivity. Though the standard period of classroom instruction at LCC was one hour in length, Lachlan petitioned for instrumental music classes to be facilitated in 40-minute blocks. He argued that the majority of other schools in the area utilised 30 to 40-minute lesson blocks (following Department of Education recommendations), and that beginner instrumental students were often "chopped out" (physically unable to continue playing their instruments) by this point (Department of Education 2024). He also highlighted that because instrumental music teachers at the school were paid a per-diem rate (rather than a per lesson fee), this system would allow each music teacher to facilitate two additional instrumental lessons per day without additional labour costs. In a managerial sense, this system would extract the most amount of quantifiable productivity from the staff, whilst increasing the number of students able to take instrumental lessons (and thus increase the number of students paying music fees). In response to such appeals, LCC's leadership team agreed to hire two additional multi-instrumentalists to serve as teachers within the co-curricular music program (a request which had previously been denied due to budgetary constraints prior to Lachlan's appeal to discourses of productivity/efficiency). Since Lachlan became the head of music at LCC the range of instruments students were able to learn within the instrumental music program increased from two (piano and classical vocals) to sixteen (electric guitar, classical guitar, bass guitar,

saxophones, clarinet, flute, trumpet, trombone, violin, drum-kit, percussion, piano, keyboard/synthesiser, classical vocals, contemporary vocals and/or sound production).

Lachlan also appealed to discourses of efficiency, productivity, and cost-saving when applying for funding to purchase a fleet of brass/woodwind instruments for the school. He noted that prior to gaining this funding, the school would hire instruments from an external company, a practice he presented to administrative figures as inefficient and cost ineffective. He stated:

> I've been in music programs where they hire instruments from different companies, and to me it was a waste of money because all your fees you get from the students are going straight to these music companies. Yeah, so basically what happened is I decided to hit up the business managers. I said, "I need instruments for year sevens, and yes, it is going to cost a lot of money, but over time they'll pay for themselves."

Lachlan argued that not only would the funding of these instruments allow the school to keep the entirety of student music fees, but it would also save repair costs. When justifying buying a fleet of instruments from the one manufacturer, Lachlan stated that having instruments of the same brand/model in the music building would allow him to bulk purchase parts required for common repairs (appealing to discourses of efficiency and cost-saving). He also noted that having such parts "on-hand" encourages him to hire instrumental music teachers who have the skills required to complete repairs on school owned instruments. As these teachers are paid on a per-diem rate, having them complete such repairs increases teacher productivity and serves as a cost-saving measure. The school eventually agreed to purchase a fleet of Yamaha brass and woodwind instruments, which are owned, maintained, and largely serviced by the school.

Finally, Lachlan appealed to discourses of productivity and efficiency when designing the original music building spaces, and whilst negotiating the allocation of spaces after these music rooms were reallocated to community organisations. When arguing that the rooms earmarked for instrumental lessons should be made larger, Lachlan highlighted that this would make the spaces more efficient, and make instrumental tutors more productive. In recounting a conversation he had with a principal of the school, Lachlan stated, "Am I going to teach six students in the whole day, or do you want me to teach 20

students a day, or 30 students? ... It's cheaper and it's more usable, and we can have bigger groups." In alignment with Department of Education (2024) guidelines, group lessons at LCC now include between 2 and 6 students, with one-on-one lessons offered at intermediate and advanced levels.

The Conscious Acknowledgement of the Benefits of Appealing to Neoliberal Discourses

As a scholar who has actively critiqued the ways in which neoliberal discourses may further marginalise disadvantaged students and undermine the value of arts education (see Simpson 2023b; Zavitz, Simpson and Wright 2024), I feel I am predisposed to problematize the reinforcement and perpetuation of neoliberal discourses within educational systems. I am almost immediately critical of the ways in which such discourses are consciously and unconsciously embedded into policy and practice within education institutions, and I find myself asking how students may be disadvantaged within neoliberal educational systems. Though this goal of this paper is to understand the ways in which Lachlan appealed to and reinforced neoliberal discourses in his practice (rather than to cast judgement upon those actions), the analysis of these data forced me to face an uncomfortable truth: perhaps Lachlan's appeal to neoliberal discourses within LCC benefitted the music program in ways that I highly value.

I will briefly lean into the neoliberal tendency to quantify outcomes: since Lachlan became the head of music and began actively appealing to (and reinforcing) neoliberal discourses, the music program's budget has increased from $1200 per annum to ~$33,000 (a 2650% increase). The number of students engaging with the instrumental music program has increased from 20 to 120 (a 500% increase when compared to a 25% increase in the school population over the same period). The number of instruments students are able to learn as a part of LCC's music program has increased from 2 to 16 (a 700% increase, and now includes instruments associated with popular/digital music making which have extended waiting lists). In response, more diverse ensembles have been offered to students, including orchestras, concert bands, jazz ensembles, and ska bands performing originally composed music. Such outcomes mean that more students, learning more instruments, are

able to access more musical opportunities than could be facilitated before Lachlan became the head of music (and began appealing to/reinforcing neoliberal discourses). These opportunities include the facilitation of a dedicated music camp, chances to attend school music festivals/competitions, the funding of guest conductors/artists-in-residence programs, and the design of a dedicated music production studio space (located in the school's drama building). As a scholar who believes that the more options and opportunities via which students can engage with music education the better, a tension between my criticality of the means by which Lachlan achieved such outcomes and my admiration for their ends was at times present throughout data analysis.

When I explicitly asked Lachlan if he felt that his perpetuation of neoliberal discourses such as cost-saving/profit-making and productivity ever stood in contrast with discourses of equity or social justice, Lachlan made reference to the concept of "compassionate capitalism" (see Benioff and Southwick 2004). He stated that "because the budget's healthy ... there is a pool of money that's set aside" to offset or completely cover the music fees of economically disadvantaged students. He noted that the appeals to productivity and efficiency which prompted the school to fund a fleet of brass and woodwind instruments meant that students no longer needed to cover the cost of hiring instruments, and that a larger number of economically disadvantaged students could elect to continue studying music because they knew they had free access to a school-owned instrument. He argued that similar schools in the geographic area were unable to provide students with the breadth of experiences LCC could provide, and he positioned his ability to increase the music budget to cover such costs as a factor which increased—rather than inhibited—equity and access.

Lachlan is an optimistic person, and thus his tendency to focus on the potential positive influence of neoliberal discourses on the music program was relatively unsurprising. Though he associated some negatives with the perpetuation of neoliberal discourses (such as the absence of acoustic treatments in newly allocated music spaces, or perceived managerialism from previous administrative figures), he did not actively question or problematize these practices. For him, "that's just how it is." Yet, his knowledge

(or belief) that that's "how it is" within his school allowed him to appeal to such knowledge when proposing changes, acts which were ostensibly read as active and agentic.

Conclusion

The doctoral research from which this data is drawn dominantly explored teacher agency within different policy contexts. Thus, I have spent months wrestling with the following question: To what extent is Lachlan exercising agency as the head of music at LCC, a context in which policy and practice is undoubtedly influenced by neoliberal discourses?

Ball (2003) and Shieh (2020) highlight that there can at times be a sense of "helplessness" experienced by teachers working within contexts influenced by neoliberal policy. Schmidt (2020) notes that this feeling may be amplified for music educators, whose practice is often undervalued within educational systems informed by neoliberal discourses. However, it is safe to say that Lachlan did not feel helpless or constrained by the dominance of neoliberal discourses within LCC, even when he was disadvantaged within this system. Lachlan was aware that leadership figures were more likely to consider the changes to policy and practice he proposed as "rational" if they aligned with neoliberal discourses of profit-making/cost-saving, productivity/efficiency, and/or individualism. Thus, he saw the dominance of neoliberal discourses in the school as a potential opportunity, and he used his knowledge of (and/or subjectified belief in) such discourses to actively achieve change.

Yet, I keep returning to Karlsen's (2019) statement quoted above: "Having an alternative is understood as a crucial prerequisite for possessing agency. Certainly, for being able to act otherwise, one also needs to be able to imagine the possibilities of action" (190). Lachlan did not critically analyse the ways in which neoliberal subjectivity informed his own decision making. His appeal to neoliberal discourses when attempting to gain support for the music program may have been strategic, but the influence of neoliberalism on his own decision making (and that of others) was presented as "rational," "sane," and "common-sense." Although Lachlan's use of neoliberal policy to advantage the music

program reads as an example of agency, does his unwillingness (or even inability) to consider alternate possibilities discount this agency?

Like most research endeavours, the data in this study have left me with more questions than answers. They have blurred my own dichotomous thinking which at times positioned neoliberal discourses as only able to restrict agency and disadvantage music programs. They have prompted me to admire the ends of Lachlan's appeals to neoliberal discourses, even if I remain critical of their means. They have also helped me to think more deeply about my own practice as an educator of pre-service teachers who are preparing to enter educational contexts undoubtedly influenced by neoliberal discourses. I hope that this article similarly prompts both K–12 and tertiary educators to ask questions such as these:

- Are there times that I have unconsciously or unquestioningly perpetuated the dominance of neoliberal discourses within my practice?
- Are there times I have consciously appealed to or reinforced neoliberal discourses to the benefit of myself and/or the music program?
- How can I remain critical of the ways in which neoliberalism disadvantages marginalised populations, whilst pragmatically navigating educational systems which are undeniably informed by—and receptive to—the perpetuation of neoliberal discourses?
- Are discourses of neoliberalism and discourses of access, equity, and social justice mutually exclusive?

About the Author

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Notes

[1] In Australia the term "classroom music" connotes classes which are scheduled during regular school hours. These classes are similar to "general music" classes as facilitated in the North American system. Classroom music classes tend not to centre around the facilitation of a large ensemble.

[2] The term "co-curricular music" refers to music classes which are not a part of a student's regularly scheduled classes. These classes may occur before/after school hours (generally the case for ensemble participation), or students may be taken from scheduled classes to attend (generally the case for private instrumental tuition).