ACEL Inspiring Educational Leaders | Australian Council for Educational Leaders

2024 NEW VOICE PERSPECTIVES

SUPPORTING EMERGING VOICES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Supporting emerging voices in educational leadership

The Australian Council for Educational Leaders is proud to present the 2024 New Voice Perspectives, celebrating ten leaders recognised in the fields of school leadership, educational leadership research, indigenous educational leadership and early childhood education leadership.

Every year, recipients are welcomed into the ACEL network, contributing to and supporting the dissemination of new learning and thought. New Voice Scholarships are awarded to educators recognised as forward-thinking, contextually relevant and responsive leaders by peers and the wider education community. Over 100 talented educators have been awarded these scholarships since the program was initiated in 2014.

The New Voice Perspectives provide an opportunity to explore and uncover new and diverse points of view. This year, recipients were asked to respond to one of three questions that considered what are the emerging trends that will shape the next decade in education and how can we prepare for them? How can educational leadership address the growing mental health and well-being needs of students and staff? In an age of AI, how can leaders benefit from the technology whilst ensuring that leadership remains human focused? As to be expected, the ten recipients highlighted many thoughtful and relevant views including the centrality of students and staff learning together both within and beyond the classroom; placing student voice at the heart of all teaching; the necessity for educators to work collectively to create systemic solutions to perennial issues facing schools; support for the wellbeing of both teachers and students; and the uniqueness of teacher-student relationships that cannot be replicated or replaced by AI.

As the 2024 New Voice scholars share their voice and rich perspectives throughout these pages, we envisage it will stimulate further prompts for reflection, planning, and action as we consider an educational environment in which anything is possible. Indeed, we have seen in the past 12 months that anything is possible. Those pivotal moments in time have illuminated the opportunity and importance of thinking without constraint. We are very proud to showcase each of our ten New Voice Scholars who have inspired us with their clarity of purpose in the pursuit of universal access and engagement for all students to achieve in schooling and beyond.

Dr Barbara Watterston
Acting ACEL CEO

ACEL
Inspiring Educational Leaders

The New Voice in School Leadership

The New Voice In Educational Leadership Research

The New Indigenous Voice in Educational Leadership

The New Voice in Early Childhood Education Leadership

Anam Javed

Manager of Learning,
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New Voice in School Leadership 2024 Recipient

Anam Javed is the Manager of Learning within the Teaching Excellence Division at the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership where she works within a team to curate high-quality professional learning from a cross-sectoral and innovation-focussed approach. Anam has undertaken a range of educational leadership roles over her teaching career and is passionate about harnessing the potential of education to combat social inequity and improve access to opportunities for growth and success for students from all backgrounds. For her work in STEM, particularly with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, she was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women for 2023.

Culturally responsive teaching is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

As educators in Victoria, we find ourselves in a transformative moment. Our classrooms are microcosms of an increasingly diverse society, reflecting the richness of Australia's multiculturalism and the profound challenges that accompany it. Over the next decade, the twin imperatives of equity and inclusion will define the educational landscape in Australia. They must. The alternative—a perpetuation of systemic inequities and divisions—threatens not only our students' futures but also the fabric of our society.

The Scanlon Foundation's 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion Report highlights an uncomfortable truth: while Australia is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world, this diversity does not always translate to inclusion or equality. The report posits that social cohesion in Australia is at a 17-year low, with the economy, housing, immigration, and conflicts overseas all impacting communities in Australia (Scanlon Institute, 2024). Racism remains a persistent barrier to social cohesion, with schools often reflecting and amplifying societal prejudices rather than challenging them.

The findings of the Islamophobia Register of Australia's Annual Report document the pervasive discrimination faced by Muslim Australians (Iner, 2019). The report indicated that almost a quarter (24%) of victims of Islamophobia in Australia were teenagers and children (Iner, 2019). Impacts reported by school students include ongoing fear, anxiety and inability to maintain their normal sleep patterns. These statistics are not merely numbers; they are a stark indictment of the environments we create—or fail to create—for our students. The Victorian Anti-Racism Strategy for 2024-2029 (Victorian Government, 2024) reports that in 2023, three out of five Victorians reported having negative views of people from the Middle East, Asia, Africa and those from a non-Christian background.

Exclusion in schools is often subtle—a teacher mispronouncing a name, a curriculum that ignores students' histories, or a peer's comment left unchallenged. These micro-aggressions accumulate, creating environments where students feel undervalued and unseen. The effects are profound, impacting not only academic outcomes but also mental health and self-esteem for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

For First Nations students, the challenges are compounded by the legacy of colonialism and systemic neglect. The ongoing disparities in educational outcomes, highlighted in reports on Indigenous education, reveal the need for a paradigm shift. Equity for these students requires more than policy tweaks; it demands a transformation in how we view and value Indigenous knowledges, histories, and contributions. The Victorian Anti-Racism Strategy for 2024-2029 reports that in 2022, three out of five First Nations' Victorians reported experiencing racism in Australia (Victorian Government, 2024).

In addition to addressing racism and incorporating Indigenous perspectives, we must also focus on the experiences of students from migrant backgrounds in Australian schools. As of 2023, there were over 4 million students enrolled across Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), with approximately 25% speaking English as an additional language (EAL/D) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024). This demographic has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability within the educational system. According to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Report, Australia ranks seventh globally for the academic performance of migrant students (Robinson, 2018), indicating that these students often excel academically compared to their peers.

However, the success rates are not uniform across all migrant groups. While children from certain backgrounds—such as those from English-speaking countries—tend to perform well, those from refugee backgrounds often face significant challenges. For instance, there are over 12,000 students from refugee backgrounds enrolled in New South Wales (NSW) public schools alone, with many experiencing trauma and disrupted education prior to arriving in Australia (NSW Department of Education, 2024). These students require targeted support to help them integrate successfully into the school system and achieve their full potential. Furthermore, studies indicate that schools with higher concentrations of migrant-background students tend to perform better overall due to positive peer effects, where motivated students influence their classmates' academic behaviours (Sonnemann, 2018).

Equity in education goes beyond providing equal resources; it is about recognising and addressing the specific barriers that different students face. This includes not only socioeconomic disadvantages but also the psychological toll of racism, cultural erasure, and exclusion.

Professor Pasi Sahlberg's insights on equity resonate strongly here. He poses that equity in education means that personal or social circumstances, such as gender, ethnic origin, or family background, should not be obstacles to achieving educational potential (Sahlberg, 2023) and to achieve equity, we must adopt teaching practices that are both culturally responsive and actively anti-racist.

For too long, First Nations histories and voices have been marginalised in Australian education. Efforts to integrate Indigenous knowledges into curricula are often tokenistic, reducing thousands of years of cultural richness to a few dot paintings or Dreamtime stories. This approach does a disservice to both Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers, perpetuating ignorance and stereotypes (Smith & Doe, 2023).

Culturally responsive teaching is not a luxury; it is a necessity. The Victorian Curriculum offers guidance on embedding First Nations perspectives, but implementation remains inconsistent (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.). Many educators feel underprepared to teach Indigenous content meaningfully, a gap that must be addressed through endeavours such as liaising with local Indigenous community leaders, artists, authors and change-makers to seek guidance in determining authentic ways to engage with and embed Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in our ways of working.

Moreover, schools must move beyond inclusion as a compliance exercise. True equity involves recognising the sovereignty of First Nations peoples and integrating their knowledges as central, not peripheral, to our shared understanding of Australia.

With the launch of the Victorian Anti-Racism Strategy 2024-2029 (Victorian Government, 2024), there is now a 5-year plan in place to tackle racism and discrimination so that we can take concrete steps to build a safer, fairer and more inclusive state. Teachers in Victoria have a unique opportunity to lead this change. Our State's commitment to multiculturalism and inclusion offers a strong foundation, but we must go further. This involves interrogating our own biases, diversifying curricula, and fostering classroom cultures where all students feel seen, respected, and valued.

This may appear daunting at the outset, but there are many steps we can all take as educators and educational leaders to begin, starting with ourselves, including: checking and naming our own biases and assumptions; using vetted resources to learn about the diverse communities we work in and inhabit; liaising with community leaders and Elders and building trust so that we can seek knowledge and guidance from reliable sources; appreciating and remunerating the work of community leaders and Elders so that their work and mental load can receive due recognition and compensation for longevity and sustainability; and finally, championing the importance of this work while advancing it within the spheres of power and authorising environments we inhabit. It all goes a long way in ensuring that we are moving beyond passive inclusion, to active anti-racism.

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Braydon Giles

Head of Middle School,
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New Voice in School Leadership 2024 Recipient

Braydon Giles is a dynamic and accomplished educational leader with experience across both government and independent sectors. As Head of Middle School at St John's Anglican College, he has directed and elevated academic and pastoral care initiatives tailored to students across Years Seven to Nine. In doing so, he has worked collaboratively with staff, students, families, and community to foster safe and supportive learning environments where students feel valued and empowered to thrive. Beyond his school leadership role, Braydon also serves as Vice President of Adolescent Success and Treasurer of the Joint Council of Queensland Teachers' Associations.

Demand, disruption and disorientation

As our education ecosystem continuously evolves, it presents an interesting paradox where change is seemingly the only constant. In 2025, our schooling systems are facing challenges and advancements characterised by the growing prominence of human capabilities, rise in generative artificial intelligence, and greater understanding of futurist leadership qualities. Through this, nuanced forecasts may assist educators and leaders to navigate these emerging educational trends, responding to the question: *How can educators and leaders ensure that the decisions made today empower the learners, leaders, and thinkers of tomorrow?*

"Schools and educators face a triple imperative" (McKinsey & Company, 2023, p. 34): the need to build skills and a foundation of knowledge; prepare students for an uncertain future; and address broader educational goals and priorities. In light of this, the next decade in education will be shaped by new demands on skills, disruption to the status quo, and disorientation for leaders.

Demand

"... a new learning paradigm is emerging: as the skills revolution unfolds, education and skilling systems need to prepare learners ... to adapt continuously to changing trends ..." (McKinsey & Company, 2023, p. 44). Let's face it: our world is changing at a rapid pace, presenting both challenge and opportunity for our schools. We are shifting from traditional methods of education – the "chalk and talk" or "sage on stage" - to refined approaches focusing on the importance of fostering human skills within an increasingly complex digital world.

Findings from the World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs Report" (2025) highlight the growing demand for explicit education around human skills in our schools to support student wellbeing and growth.

This need for explicit focus on human skills has grown exponentially since the global pandemic. Surges in anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders among young people (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021) remind educators that at the core of every trend in education lies a fundamental truth which is students need to feel valued, respected, and heard. Therefore, a specific set of skills is required for today's adolescents to thrive in tomorrow's environment.

Creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, and agility are not only considered critical now but are predicted to become more important over the next decade, increasing the demand on skills-based education (World Economic Forum, 2025).

As the world of education evolves, it is these skills that remain of paramount importance (McCrindle Research, 2023). For educators and leaders, prioritising a blend of essential human and foundation skills, and digital literacy education will help equip our young people with the tools needed to navigate the next decade of advancement. It is time for educators and leaders to ensure that human skills are embedded into all layers of education.

Disruption

"Ignoring generative AI as a leader is like refusing to learn email in the '90s. You can do it, but why make your job harder?" (Claude, by Anthropic in Peter et al., 2024, p. 32). The rise of generative artificial intelligence has been one of the hottest topics in education for the past few years. As the conversation grows, so too do the updates to programming and capabilities. For educators and leaders, it is a conversation that can't be ignored. Generative artificial intelligence will continue to be one of the most significant emerging trends over the next decade – and not just for education.

It is time for educators and leaders to ensure the human skills are embedded into all layers of education.

What's important to remember is that AI is not a replacement for education, pushing teachers to the side; rather, it is there to assist with things we could not do easily before. For schools, it is time to embrace it and be on the forefront of continued and rapid developments. What can AI do for us? What are the limitations? How should we interact with it? How do we fact check? There's no denying that generative artificial intelligence can amplify our strengths, increase our efficiency and personalise learning. For leaders, it begs the questions: How well are our schools speaking the language of tech? *How well are we modelling adaptability and continuous learning for our students?*

If we know that skills-based education is preparation for the future of our students, so too is digital literacy and allowing opportunities for students (and teachers) to pioneer what education can look like. Ultimately, technology has the power to connect us, to network schools, and assist in collaboration across communities. The time is now for educators and leaders to reimagine how we can learn with the benefits of generative artificial intelligence, rather than waiting for an expert to tell us what we should have done years before the conversation. It is time to balance this responsibility with innovation and optimism.

Disorientation

"We are entering a decade of disorientation" (Peter et al., 2024, p. 7). The rate of change we are currently experiencing is the slowest we will experience in our lifetime. When we pause for a moment to consider this statement, it is equally exciting as it is frightening.

For leaders, what qualities will be required over the next decade to move forward our education agenda? We know from historical leadership that uncertain times of disorientation require critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and much more. We also know the impact of connection in the relationship from great leaders and educators who have inspired us.

Arguably one of the most significant attributes for leaders to manage the emerging trends over the next decade is curiosity. While some view *curiosity* through the lens of a cautionary proverb that has echoed throughout the ages – enter the poor "cat" – what if, instead of being a "harbinger of doom," curiosity holds the key to navigating this decade of disorientation for leaders?

At its core, curiosity is an intrinsically human skill, one that can assist leaders to navigate complexity and uncertainty. It encourages us to ask powerful questions and experiment to seek answers and to build strong connections and relationships, surrounding ourselves with a diversity of thinking, backgrounds and expertise (Peter et al., 2024). Moreover, it fosters innovation and allows us to look for new and exciting ways to navigate the skills revolution and generative artificial intelligence boom.

Final thoughts

The most effective leaders in education inspire hope through vision, celebrate success of the team, empower others, promote equity and inclusion, and much more. Through this, they can fuel positive change and transformation in our schools. While there are many uncertainties and complexities that come with futurist thinking in education, these leaders must step up as the architects of change, rethinking how we can nurture curiosity and adaptability to navigate the next decade of emerging trends.

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Melissa Kennedy

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New Voice in School Leadership 2024 Recipient

Melissa Kennedy is the Head of English at Edmund Rice College in Wollongong, New South Wales (NSW). She has previously led teams as English Head Teacher at Albion Park High School and at The Australian International School, Singapore. She has worked in curriculum development for the NSW Department of Education and for the then NSW Board of Studies developing NSW's first online syllabus. As a sessional lecturer at the University of Canberra, Melissa lectures on the value of strong educational management and administration skills for school leaders. She is passionate about teacher education focussing on sustainable teaching practices, sharing her ideas and strategies in her new book, *The Sustainable Teacher* (Amba Press, 2023).

In the late 1990s, I phoned a parent about her son's disruptive behaviour. Five minutes in, she politely interrupted with, "Ms. Kennedy, I appreciate your phone call but that is not my Jake you're describing." I thought she was trying to defend him and was about to suggest he may behave differently at school, when I looked down at my class roll and felt nauseous. There were two Jakes in the class and I'd phoned the mother of the angelic one. Through a cloud of mortification, I heard her say, "It's OK. I think you meant to call the parents of the other Jake."

Jake's Mum accepted my mistake with grace and good humour. She didn't berate me; she didn't call the principal; she didn't spread rumours or undermine me in front of her child. She let me be human – to make an error, apologise, be forgiven, reflect and move on. She privileged authenticity over perfection.

Fortunately, I began teaching in a world where I could be a "good enough" teacher, to repurpose a phrase from psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971). I was given space and support to learn the cyclical process of becoming a teacher – learning and unlearning what it means to educate, every time I meet a new class.

During the next decade, we must plant the narrative of the "good enough" teacher in our communities, to attract and retain educators. A "good enough" teacher is one who manages the difficult task of initiating young people into a world in which they feel both cared for and ready to deal with life's inevitable complexities. They are a teacher who looks after themselves, maintains healthy boundaries, establishes strong peer networks, reflects and learns from their mistakes (Davey, 2020).

Sadly, I fear a 2025 version of Jake's Mum may not be so compassionate because we are far too quick to judge our teachers. In early 2024, the New South Wales Secondary Principals' Association president Craig Petersen reported that, "cyberbullying against teachers was spiking" and 56.1% of school leaders have been exposed to gossip and slander (in Harris, 2024). Judgement happens because we want teachers to be perfect. We want them to make our kids "better." We want them to be always available. To be experts from the moment they step into a classroom. "Good enough" teachers are not mediocre; they're authentic and balanced, knowing that the quest for perfection is unhealthy and damaging.

The drive to be special, unusually good, or superior to others (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010) forms the foundation of Australian secondary education and it has contributed to a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. Every school and teacher has to be "the" best, rather than "their" best.

Over more than 40 years we have created an Australian education system which helps "high-fee schools engage in the facilities arms race" in a quest to be exceptional and secure enrolments (Baker, 2025). Headlines like "Sydney's top-ranked school has an HSC average subject score of 89.4. How does your school fare?" (Carroll, 2024) fuel an obsession with data, intensifying competition between schools and placing additional pressure on teachers.

This narrative of the exceptional teacher – accessible 24/7 – is about an individual crusader, sacrificing everything so their students always achieve brilliant results. It is the saviour myth perpetuated in American films such as *Dead Poet's Society*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Freedom Writers*. It is dangerous because it simplifies the complexity of teaching and learning; ignoring the reality that change is complex, incremental and reliant on a strong team culture. We need more depictions of "good enough" teachers, like those in the mockumentary series Abbot Elementary, which focuses on collaboration and mentoring.

We need a collaborative culture of dependable innovation to fuel teachers' passion for their profession.

The teacher shortage was grave before the COVID-19 pandemic and now it is dire. The Australian Government's modelling shows, "the demand for secondary teachers to exceed the supply of new graduate teachers by around 4,100 between 2021 to 2025" (Clare, 2022, p. 3). As a middle leader, I've felt the sting of the staff shortage, scrambling to fill positions including recruiting final year University students at book launches or in their part-time supermarket jobs. The federal government's modelling shows that, "Across Australia, annual commencements in ITE declined by eight per cent and completions declined by 17 per cent between 2017 and 2020" (Clare, 2022, p. 4).

This overwhelming pressure on the staffing system takes a physical and emotional toll; resulting in existing teachers leaving the profession to take up education adjacent positions in training, HR, content creation; start entirely new careers; or retire early. This drains schools of experienced educators who support and mentor new teachers. Recently, I met a middle leader whose entire faculty, of ten teachers, are in their first two years of teaching. That pressure is unsustainable.

The Australian government (2023) is concerned about teacher recruitment and retention, addressing it through initiatives like the "Be That Teacher" campaign but a more sustainable solution is to create exceptional systems that support "good enough" people to work collaboratively towards improved student outcomes, in a culture of shared responsibility. As Hargreaves (2024, p. 32) notes, when teachers are engaged collaboratively in a culture of dependable innovation, "students thrive and so do their teachers." Dependable innovation isn't "recklessly disruptive" rather it "gets teachers out of bed every morning" (Hargreaves, 2024, p. 34) to be part of a school culture in which "passionate teaching and engaging learning can flourish" in ways that are contextually relevant to that individual school. They need a "Be part of that Team" campaign.

In the next decade, we need to seed and grow the narrative of the "good enough" teacher. We need more parents, like Jake's Mum, who show compassion for teachers learning to be their best. We need a collaborative culture of dependable innovation to fuel teachers' passion for their profession. We must grow a forest of "good enough" educators to teach our young people. At the moment, that forest is dangerously thin and we're all struggling to breathe.

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Steven Trotter

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New Voice in School Leadership 2024 Recipient

Steven Trotter has held senior leadership roles across large suburban schools, small rural schools, and residential settings, spanning both primary and secondary sectors. With over 15 years of experience in school and system leadership, Steven combines innovative thinking with research-driven, dynamic approaches to leadership development. His work is transforming the way we lead for sustained improvement, equipping education systems and educators with the tools and strategies needed to thrive in an ever-changing environment. Steven has authored and co-authored several books on curriculum design and his true passion is leadership.

What are the emerging trends that will shape the next decade of educational leadership and how can we prepare for them? This is an intriguing question for consideration in today's rapidly evolving environment; a question that is likely to immediately direct our attention towards artificial intelligence (AI) or technological advancements in education and how we might manage them. In this essay, I would like to shift the focus towards educational leadership that, in my experience as an active leader, will continue to hold even greater significance than technological progress. Here I am referring to the growing complexities of engaging with the most essential element of leadership—our people.

Leadership transcends environments and contextual shifts. It is neither bound by specific settings nor limited by the adoption of AI or other technological innovations. At its heart, leadership speaks a universal language; the language of people.

The educational environment in which we operate is changing at an unprecedented rate, and so must our approach to leadership. Traditional leadership models, such as what David Marquet (2012) describes as the "Leader-Follower" approach—where "leader says, follower does"—are no longer sufficient to address the needs of modern educational communities. Marquet (2012) argues that leadership today requires a cognitive response, embracing responsibility and accountability. He argues that effective leaders in the current era, work alongside their people rather than above them. Wehmeyer and Zhao (2020) explain that when schools are structured around control, standardisation, and compliance, the first casualties are trusting and meaningful relationships. These relationships, built on genuine connection and support, are vital for fostering, improving and sustaining a thriving positive learning environment.

Leadership that focuses on impact rather than results

Historically, educational leadership has been measured through outcome-focused metrics. Success has often been defined by achieving specific scores or ratings. Yet this narrow focus raises a critical question: at what cost does this relentless approach to a "score" affect the people—students and staff—who are fundamental to achieving these outcomes? The gradual evolution of leadership practices risks leaving our approach misaligned with the rapidly changing world our students and staff are navigating—much like holding onto a videocassette recorder (VCR) in the age of ever-advancing smart televisions sets (TVs). While a VCR may still work and bring back nostalgic memories of Friday nights at Blockbuster, its limitations in relevance and accessibility highlight the need to embrace more adaptive and forward-thinking solutions.

Outcomes remain an essential element of education. Measured success, along with evidence-based targets and initiatives, continues to support the improvement of education systems. However, these metrics prompt an urgent question: are we, as leaders, educators, and systems, evolving in ways that adequately prepare students for their futures? Individually and collectively, we must ask whether our approaches resemble cutting-edge smart TV technology or dated VCR systems. A people-based approach that leads and places people in front of the outcomes is the first advancement we must embed in our educational environment. It is only through our staff and students that we will achieve the desired results.

Where to start? Get on the dance floor!

A popular leadership metaphor is "moving from the dance floor to the balcony," describing the roles of an adaptive leader (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). This concept emphasises alternating between operational tasks on the "dance floor"

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and gaining a broader perspective from the "balcony." From this vantage point, leaders can observe the organisation as a whole and assess the interplay of various "dance moves" of their people.

However, this metaphor warrants reflection. From the hierarchical standpoint of the balcony, seeing does not automatically translate to effective action. For instance, if a staff member's "dance" seems misaligned, do we immediately assume non-compliance or disengagement? Instead, leaders must actively engage, spending increased time on the "dance floor" as learners and team members while leveraging the "balcony" perspective for holistic decision-making. The balcony is essential only if it is combined with unrestricted curiosity rather than judgement. It's best to stand on the balcony only with intentional positive regard to view your people with curiosity and decide on your next appropriate leadership consideration. This should lead to re-engaging with those on the dance floor by bringing valuable perspectives to share, thus further aligning the team.

Prioritising our people

Returning to the opening question, "What are the emerging trends that will shape the next decade in education, and how can we prepare for them?" there is no single solution or quick fix. However, we need to acknowledge the ongoing evolution of the complex educational environments in which we work and engage. The most challenging and rewarding aspect of leadership are the people who walk through our gates every day. Addressing the need for measurable accountability while maintaining high levels of learning and improvement requires leadership actions of prioritising people over outcomes.

> As leaders, we have an impact on hundreds, if not thousands, of lives both directly and indirectly. We are not leading for our own importance; we lead to get the best out of others, because we know we can have a positive influence and help others reach their full potential. (Trotter, 2024, p. 18)

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NEW VOICE PERSPECTIVES

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Dr Andrea Stringer is the Executive Director of the International Congress of School Effectiveness and Improvement. She also provides consulting services in research, coaching, and professional growth. Andrea was awarded her Doctorate from the University of New South Wales, receiving an international 2024 Innovation Award. Andrea is on the Editorial Board of the School Leadership & Management Journal. She is passionate about supporting early career teachers and creating environments to retain effective teachers. As an internationally accredited coach, she helps educators and leaders develop professionally and increase their wellbeing. Andrea is dedicated to bridging the gap between practice and research.

At the heart of the teacher and principal retention crisis lies a simple truth: individuals stay when appreciated, respected, valued, and have solid support and growth opportunities. Like many nations, Australia is grappling with a concerning trend of retaining educators. While an Australian survey found that 35% of teachers intend to leave before retirement (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2023), a recent survey in Victoria found that approximately 45% of early career teachers plan to leave the profession within a decade, primarily due to excessive workloads (Australian Education Union, 2023).

Additionally, the wellbeing of school principals is an urgent issue that demands our attention, with rising stress levels resulting in an elevated number of individuals intending to exit the profession (Riley & See, 2024). In this perspectives piece, I argue that retaining principals and teachers requires equal emphasis on three essential components for professional growth: wellbeing, professional learning, and autonomous motivation (Stringer, 2024). Although coaching may not be the sole solution for our retention challenges, it can serve as a lifeline by cultivating all three elements, thereby increasing the likelihood of retention through flourishing and growth.

Wellbeing

While the primary focus in education centres on student outcomes, which has recently incorporated wellbeing, it is essential to recognise that the wellbeing of principals and teachers is equally critical. Student wellbeing is contingent upon teacher wellbeing (Hargreaves et al., 2019) since the wellbeing of students and teachers is interconnected (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; Roffey, 2012). Educators' welfare has increasingly been under strain in recent years (AITSL, 2022; Higgins & Goodall, 2021), and the overall success of the education system is contingent upon the contentment and support satisfaction of teachers and leaders. Thus, prioritising the psychological and professional needs of teachers and principals demands shared accountability from the government, education system, and sector leaders, in collaboration with school leaders and teachers.

Multiple strategies exist to attract, retain, and develop the professional growth of Australian teachers with varying degrees of success. The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022) aims to attract more teachers and support their retention through comprehensive induction and coaching programs (AITSL, 2023). My research explored three diverse schools from various geographic regions, school levels, and sectors in New South Wales. Each school independently developed a coaching program tailored to its context to enhance teacher professional growth. The qualitative research used interviews and coaching documents to analyse the learning environments, programs, and motivational factors. While individual states, territories, systems, sectors, and schools are creating programs to address related issues, my research found that the success of coaching programs is predominantly contingent upon the learning environment cultivated by the principal. The principal's beliefs about their staff, coaching, and research are crucial (Stringer, 2024). Consequently, before investing in coaching, it is important stakeholders evaluate the learning environment and the principal's beliefs and commitment, as both are important factors for an effective program.

A positive learning environment for all learners should prioritise the wellbeing of principals and teachers. Coaching is accessible at several levels, with leadership coaching designed to support principal learning and wellbeing (Lofthouse & Whiteside, 2020; Passmore, 2015). A coaching program for early career

To foster professional growth and retain our current teachers and principals, we must prioritise professional growth by focusing on professional learning, wellbeing, and autonomous motivation.

teachers implemented by teacher leaders could lighten the principal's workload, thereby reducing stress levels. School leadership is linked to teacher retention (Allensworth et al., 2009; Player et al., 2017), impacting teacher capacity and motivation, thereby enhancing school outcomes and culture (Pont et al., 2008). One principal in my research study maintained, "You can't have flourishing students without flourishing teachers" (Stringer, 2024, p. 112), and I argue that flourishing teachers are influenced by flourishing principals. Flourishing in education involves thriving intellectually, emotionally, and socially (Seligman, 2011). I assert that thriving has a domino effect, wherein flourishing principals impact coaches and leaders, who in turn impact student learning and wellbeing.

Wellbeing and professional learning

Professional growth transcends training and professional development. Professional growth, while a comprehensive developmental process, seeks to enhance and broaden the teacher's expertise (knowledge and skills) influenced by social and institutional contexts, along with personal attributes and situations (Pylväs et al., 2022). It encompasses increased learning, enhanced wellbeing and the development of autonomous motivation (Stringer, 2024), requiring the development of not only human capital but also social, structural, and psychological capital. The Four-Capital conceptual model proposes that human, social, structural, and psychological capital need to be present, supported, and further developed through various opportunities to retain and develop teachers (Mason & Matas, 2015).

When coaching is examined through the lens of the four interdependent capitals, the framework sheds light on the implementation and outcomes of a coaching initiative. Structural capital includes the coaching frameworks, policies, and documentation necessary for the implementation of coaching. Using structural capital, effective coaching facilitates the development of human capital, while growth in psychological and social capital enhances motivation and social skills. My research found that coaching enhances the learning and wellbeing of ECTs by addressing their psychological and professional needs, cultivating all four capitals within the school context. Therefore, developing the four capitals through coaching improves professional growth and positively influences retention.

Wellbeing, professional learning, and autonomous motivation

Coaching fosters autonomous motivation by encouraging teachers to identify and pursue their goals in ways that are meaningful to them. Through reflective conversations, coaches help individuals uncover their intrinsic motivations, rather than relying on external pressures or rewards. Coaching also supports autonomy by offering a nonjudgmental space where educators can explore solutions, experiment with new strategies, and take ownership of their growth. This empowerment strengthens their sense of competence and self-efficacy, leading to more sustained and self-directed motivation in their roles. When regarded as a valued and approachable resource rather than a compulsory task, coaching fosters a constructive, trust-based environment in which teachers are more inclined to participate genuinely. This method not only improves coaching efficacy but also fosters a culture of continuous learning and collaboration, thereby enhancing professional growth and retention.

Coaching and professional growth: Final reflections

Coaching offers individuals access to coaches who foster a supportive environment where teachers and leaders can share challenges, receive guidance, and reflect on their practice, ultimately boosting confidence and professional growth. To foster professional growth and retain our current teachers and principals, we must prioritise professional growth by focusing on professional learning, wellbeing, and autonomous motivation. It is essential to address all three aspects simultaneously, recognising their interconnectedness and the greater impact of their synergies. Coaching achieves this, essentially being a lifeline for the professional growth and retention of teachers and principals. By collectively committing to these priorities now, we ensure a future where principals, teachers, and students are all flourishing, where experience is valued, and where our education system thrives.

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Dr Shyam Barr is a highly regarded educator and researcher dedicated to advancing students' self-regulated learning (SRL). With over 18 years of experience, he has served as a secondary school teacher, educational leader, and researcher, focusing on evidence-informed teaching approaches to enhance students' agency, self-management, and learning capabilities. In 2021, Shyam was awarded his PhD for his innovative research, "Sustainable School Improvement: Enhancing School Middle Leaders' Epistemic Cognition for Teaching about SRL." As a Professional Associate at the University of Canberra and former Assistant Professor of Learning Sciences, he leads initiatives that bridge research and practice. Shyam collaborates with schools and educational organisations to support professional learning and whole-school improvement initiatives.

To ensure students are prepared for the challenges of a rapidly changing workforce, educational leaders and policymakers must prioritise SRL in curriculum design and professional development initiatives.

As global economies undergo rapid transformation, education must evolve to meet new demands. The next decade will be shaped by significant shifts in technology and the labour market, requiring students to develop adaptability, resilience, and lifelong learning habits. Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) is increasingly recognised as a key mechanism for equipping students with these skills, ensuring they can navigate an uncertain future with confidence and autonomy.

Workplace disruption and the demand for lifelong learning

The World Economic Forum's (2025) *Future of Jobs Report* highlights that 44% of workers' skills will be disrupted within the next five years, with approximately 60% of employees requiring additional training before 2027. This rapid pace of technological advancement, fuelled by AI and automation, demands workers to upskill and reskill continually – that is to engage in a continuous process of learning. Therefore, individuals who can self-regulate their learning processes have a substantial advantage in securing work and maintaining relevant. Lifelong and self-regulated learning is no longer optional but a necessity, especially as traditional job roles evolve or disappear altogether.

In response to these shifts, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2025) has developed new assessment tools, including the *Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] Learning in the Digital World*. This new assessment emphasises the growing importance of self-monitoring, digital literacy, and metacognitive awareness in AI-assisted environments all of which are competencies essential for success in a knowledge-driven world (OECD, 2025). Without these skills, students risk being unable to critically assess, adjust, and regulate their own learning.

The role of self-regulated learning in workforce readiness

Self-regulated learners are proactive in taking ownership of their learning journey and reflective in assessing their progress. They set clear goals and develop actionable plans to achieve them, constantly monitoring their progress against these objectives. When challenges arise, they adjust their strategies, demonstrating flexibility and perseverance. Through consistent self-evaluation, they identify areas of improvement and refine their approaches to maximise learning outcomes. This cyclical process of planning, monitoring, and reflecting enables them to adapt to diverse contexts and demands, fostering independence, resilience, and a lifelong commitment to growth.

Studies have repeatedly shown that SRL can and should be explicitly taught in schools (e.g., Eberhart et al., 2024). For example, students require explicit instruction in SRL strategies, as many lack the awareness or motivation to implement these techniques independently. Without structured support, students may default to ineffective learning habits which fail to promote deep learning and set them up for success in the future.

To acknowledge the many evidence-based teaching approaches, Callan et al. (2020) established the Setting, Exchanges, Event (SEE) Framework which is a structured approach to embedding SRL in educational settings. This framework identifies three key domains:

1. *Settings* – Creating a learning environment that encourages SRL by fostering autonomy, providing scaffolding, and establishing clear routines.
2. *Exchanges* – Facilitating meaningful teacher-student interactions that model, guide, and reinforce SRL strategies.
3. *Events* – Designing learning experiences that allow students to apply SRL techniques in real-world contexts.

This framework offers educators a research-based structure for integrating SRL into daily teaching practices, ensuring students develop the capacity to regulate their learning both inside and outside the classroom (Callan et al., 2020).

SRL teaching interventions, such as those documented in the SEE framework, have shown significant positive effects on academic achievement, self-efficacy, and executive functioning (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2024; Callan et al., 2020; Eberhart et al., 2024). Meta-analyses by Donker et al. (2014) and Dignath et al. (2008) reported large effect sizes, confirming the substantial gains students achieve when taught SRL strategies. More recent findings highlight an effect size of g = 0.48 at immediate post-test, g = 0.29 at follow-up for explicit SRL instruction with young children, indicating beneficial immediate and long-term gains, with teacher-led programs proving particularly effective (Eberhart et al., 2024). These findings highlight the importance of equipping educators with the tools to support SRL development in their classrooms.

Implications for educational leadership and policy

To ensure students are prepared for the challenges of a rapidly changing workforce, educational leaders and policymakers must prioritise SRL in curriculum design and professional development initiatives. Effective strategies include:

- *Embedding SRL in curriculum standards*: Aligning SRL competencies with national frameworks, such as the Australian Curriculum, to ensure these skills are taught across all subjects.
- *Professional learning for educators*: Teachers need targeted training to model and explicitly teach SRL strategies, such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and metacognitive reflection. Tailored professional development can address gaps in teachers' SRL knowledge (Callan et al., 2020).
- *Competency-based approaches*: Schools can adopt competency-based learning models, allowing students to build portfolios that demonstrate evidence of SRL, such as goal-setting, time management, and reflective practice (Barr, 2024).

A call to action: Building an SRL ecosystem

The shifts in labour market demands highlight an urgent need for education systems to prioritise SRL. Students must be equipped with the skills to independently manage their learning, adapt to evolving professional landscapes, and engage in lifelong upskilling. As AI and automation reshape industries, SRL will be the defining competency that distinguishes resilient and adaptable professionals.

Policymakers, educational leaders, and teacher training institutions must take immediate action to embed SRL into curricula and professional development programs. Fostering SRL is not merely a pedagogical preference—it is an educational necessity. Addressing the future of work requires bold action to ensure students are prepared for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

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Lynette is a proud Palawa daughter/mother and educator who is passionate in making a real change in education which she has done for over 25 years. She has a passion for her culture and the Wurundjeri culture of her husband and children, and teaching students, staff and other community members to have respect and compassion for all First Nations peoples. She also helps manage Djirri Djirri Cultural Services in Narrm (Melbourne) and works with a team to develop their programs, as it enables her children and other family members to be staunch and passionate about their culture, be proud of who they are, and share whenever they can.

One of the most important steps in promoting positive mental health among Indigenous students and staff is to create culturally safe, inclusive environments.

There seems to be literature around how educational leadership can address the growing mental health and wellbeing needs of students and staff but is this literature inclusive of how educational leadership can address the growing mental health and wellbeing needs of Indigenous students and staff?

The mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous staff and students is a pressing issue that demands attention from educational leadership. Indigenous people in Australia face unique challenges related to their mental health, many of which are deeply rooted in historical trauma, systemic discrimination, and ongoing social injustices. These challenges are compounded by the increasing racial comments and stereotypes continually portrayed in the media, particularly in the wake of political events like the Australian referendum on Indigenous recognition. Educational leadership has a crucial role to play in fostering an environment of support, respect, and healing for Indigenous educators and learners, particularly considering the growing racial tensions that continue to shape societal attitudes.

The impact of historical and systemic injustice

Indigenous peoples around the world have experienced centuries of systemic oppression, including forced assimilation, displacement, and cultural elimination. These experiences have led to intergenerational trauma that continues to affect Indigenous communities, although the media seems to perpetuate the discourse of "get over it"and "that happened two hundred years ago." In the context of education, this trauma manifests itself in many ways, from underachievement in schools to a lack of cultural representation in the curriculum. For Indigenous students, the education system is often alienating, although there is an increase in resources there are few teachers who understand their unique needs or can provide culturally relevant education.

Indigenous staff, similarly, are frequently isolated in environments that do not recognise or honour their cultural perspectives and experiences, or they are expected to have the knowledge of all Indigenous culture.

Educational leadership must acknowledge the historical context in which these challenges occur and address the ongoing impacts of colonialism, racism, and cultural dispossession on Indigenous communities. The failure to do so perpetuates a cycle of disengagement and underachievement, ultimately affecting the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous students and staff.

The perpetuation of racial stereotypes by the media

In recent years, the media has played a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, much of this representation has been negative or reductive, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and further marginalising Indigenous voices. Social media, in particular, has become a breeding ground for racial slurs, offensive commentary, and misinformation about Indigenous issues. This has a profound impact on the mental health of Indigenous individuals who are forced to navigate a public discourse that often dehumanises or vilifies them.

One particularly glaring example of media-induced harm is the response to the 2023 Australian referendum on Indigenous recognition, where a significant portion of the population voted "no" to acknowledging Indigenous Australians in the Constitution. The media's coverage of the referendum often fostered divisiveness, with numerous racialised comments and a failure to adequately address the concerns of Indigenous communities. This not only exacerbated feelings of marginalisation but also placed additional stress on Indigenous students and staff who were forced to confront the rejection of their identities and culture in a public forum.

These racial tensions, amplified by media portrayals, have a direct impact on the mental wellbeing of Indigenous staff and students. The constant exposure to negative stereotypes and derogatory comments can lead to feelings of alienation, diminished self-worth, and, in some cases, mental health struggles such as anxiety and depression.

The role of educational leadership in promoting mental health and wellbeing

Given the challenges Indigenous teachers and students can face, educational leadership must adopt a comprehensive, culturally responsive approach to support their mental health and wellbeing that fosters a sense of connectedness and cultural safety to place. Below are some key strategies that can help address these issues.

1. Creating culturally safe and inclusive environments

One of the most important steps in promoting positive mental health among Indigenous students and staff is to create culturally safe, inclusive environments. Schools must actively work to integrate Indigenous knowledge, history, and perspectives into the curriculum, ensuring that students see their cultures reflected in what they are learning. This can be achieved by working with Indigenous Elders, cultural advisors, and community leaders to develop educational programs that resonate with Indigenous students.

Professional development for educators should focus on cultural competence, enabling teachers to better understand the unique needs of Indigenous students and to create an environment where all students feel valued and supported. For Indigenous teachers, creating supportive professional networks is crucial to prevent isolation and provide them with the resources they need to thrive in their roles.

2. Addressing the impact of racism and media representation

Educational leaders must also recognise the impact of racism, particularly as it is perpetuated in the media. Schools have a responsibility to create safe spaces where discussions about racism, colonialism, and social justice can take place. These discussions should not only focus on addressing incidents of racism within the school but also include broader conversations about the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of Indigenous peoples.

3. Providing access to culturally relevant mental health support

For Indigenous students and teachers, mental health services must be culturally relevant and accessible. This means that mental health professionals should be trained in understanding the cultural and historical contexts of Indigenous peoples, and schools should consider hiring Indigenous counsellors or mental health professionals who can provide culturally appropriate care. It is also important to look into involving cultural practices, such as yarning circles with Elder guidance and developing Indigenous perspectives into the mental health framework of the school. Peer support programs, mentorship initiatives, and student-led groups can also be particularly helpful in fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity among Indigenous students.

4. Fostering resilience and empowerment

Building resilience in Indigenous students and staff is key to addressing the mental health challenges they can face. Educational leadership can support this by creating opportunities for students to engage in leadership roles and encouraging them to take pride in their identities and cultures. School leadership can provide platforms for Indigenous students to share their stories, ensuring that their voices are heard and their experiences validated. This not only helps students feel valued but also empowers them to take control of their narratives in the face of negative media portrayals.

Conclusion

Educational leadership plays a critical role in addressing the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous staff and students. If you are a leader, what are you doing or what can you do?

Tom Cazaly

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New Indigenous Voice in Educational Leadership 2024 Recipient

Tom Cazaly is a History and English teacher by trade and has worked in schools and educational systems in the United Kingdom, Western Australia, and Victoria. He is passionate about supporting First Nations students, their families, and communities to have a voice in self-determining their education. He advocates for schools to become culturally safe spaces where truth-telling and Indigenous ways of knowing are incorporated into curriculum. Tom is a proud Noongar man and is currently Executive Treaty Co-ordinator with the Victorian Department of Education.

As cultural competency becomes more ingrained in the education system, Australian education will become more inclusive and equitable.

Introduction

Education is constantly evolving to meet the needs of a rapidly changing and diverse society. As we look toward the next decade, one key trend that will shape the future of education is the increasing emphasis on cultural competency. Cultural competency in education refers to the ability to understand, respect, and interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022).

Over the next decade, cultural competency is set to become an essential focus for educators and policymakers as Australia works toward a more inclusive and equitable education system that reflects its diverse society.

Emerging trend: Cultural competency in the Australian education system

Cultural competency involves educators recognising and respecting the cultural backgrounds of all students, especially First Nations students. It also means incorporating First Nations perspectives into the curriculum to ensure that students receive a comprehensive, well-rounded education.

Australia is making progress in embedding cultural competency within the education system, with more emphasis on professional development, curriculum integration, and community engagement. Many schools are working towards creating an environment where cultural diversity is celebrated, and First Nations students feel respected and represented.

In a multicultural society, it is vital that students see their culture reflected in the classroom. For First Nations students, having their history, language, and culture acknowledged and respected is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and improving academic outcomes (Victorian Government, n.d.).

Preparing for the emerging trend

One of the key ways to prepare for the rise of cultural competency in education is by ensuring that teachers are adequately trained. This includes offering professional development opportunities focused on cultural awareness, Indigenous histories, and how to integrate these perspectives into the curriculum.

It is essential for schools to develop curricula that are culturally responsive. This includes incorporating Indigenous perspectives into subjects like history, literature, science, and the arts, so students can learn about the diversity of their own country.

Engaging with local First Nations communities is crucial to ensuring that educational content is authentic and reflective of their cultures. In Victoria, the Department of Education works closely with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) to create educational programs that are respectful and relevant. The Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 sets out a 10 year vision for creating stronger intersections between Victorian public schools and the Victorian Aboriginal community (Victorian Department of Education, 2016).

Victoria's efforts in achieving cultural competency

Victoria stands out as an example of a state that has made significant strides in achieving cultural competency in its education system. *The Strengthening Aboriginal Self-Determination in Education* framework (Victorian Department of Education, 2024) is a key initiative that empowers Aboriginal communities to have a leading role in decisions about their children's education. This framework focuses on self-determination, allowing Indigenous communities to shape policies and practices that impact their children's learning experiences.

As part of this initiative, the Victorian education system has made significant progress in developing culturally responsive curricula that incorporate Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives. In addition to curriculum development, Victoria has expanded professional development opportunities for educators to build their cultural competency. Furthermore, Victoria has made efforts to increase the representation of Aboriginal staff within schools and educational institutions. First Nations role models and staff members play a vital role in ensuring that First Nations students' cultural and educational needs are met in an authentic and meaningful way.

The future: Long-term impact on education

As cultural competency becomes more ingrained in the education system, Australian education will become more inclusive and equitable. Students from all backgrounds will benefit from an environment that values diversity and encourages mutual respect. It is anticipated that First Nations students will experience greater success as they see their culture reflected in the curriculum and the school environment.

Conclusion

Cultural competency is an emerging trend that will shape the future of education in Australia and beyond. By acknowledging and incorporating Indigenous perspectives, education systems will create more inclusive, respectful, and equitable learning environments.

For these changes to be fully realised, continued investment in professional development, curriculum innovation, and partnerships with Indigenous communities are essential. Educators, policymakers, and communities must work together to ensure that the next decade sees a significant shift toward a more culturally competent and inclusive education system. As Aunty Geraldine Atkinson (nee Bamblett), proud Bangerang/ Wiradjuri Elder, states

> Education is important: it is about empowering the next generations as well as breaking the poverty cycle. (Victorian Government, n.d.)

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Dr Amelia Ruscoe has over 30 years' experience in child-focused program development and Australian early childhood policy design. Recognised as a pioneer in consulting with young children, her award-winning PhD research has amplified children's voices to influence curriculum and policy. She lectures and develops nationally accredited teacher programs with a focus on language, literacy and visual-dialogic expression through the arts. Dr. Ruscoe has contributed to major projects including the Western Australian Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines and EYLF2.0. She is a chief investigator in studies on child transitions and health literacy, and an international speaker on children's rights.

The early experiences of children have changed dramatically and are shaping an exciting new era of childhood capabilities.

This paper offers five opportunities for education leaders to respond to the reported decline in school engagement from the "grass roots" perspective of early childhood. An underlying threat to school engagement in Australia was recently crystalised with 72% of children experienced at least one adverse childhood experience by age 11 (Australian Council for the Maltreatment of Children, 2023). For teachers, this is significant. Early childhood educators play a critical role in mitigating the stress of these adverse experiences upon children's health, development, behaviour, and ultimately school engagement. Education leaders who look critically at what happens in the early childhood settings they lead, hold power to facilitate positive experiences that reduce the stress in children's lives and facilitate strong brain architecture for learning. In the context of school planning and reform, children's perspectives are often dismissed as too naïve to take seriously. However, children's first impressions of school offer valuable insights. The following five quotes from five-year-olds are drawn from a study on their views of what school offers (Ruscoe, 2021). The candid pointedness of their remarks is provocative and raises important questions about our values and their alignment with children's realities.

The risk of children giving up early

"This is my broken heart because I don't want to go to school anymore."

Children can begin to disengage from school come commencement. The "schoolification" of early childhood has heightened the "rupture" children experience between home and school (Hedegaard & Munk, 2019). The pressure of a globalised world, and the commercialisation of education has seen ever-increasing emphasis on fast-tracked academic programs in the early years. While these programs may promise efficiency, they risk overlooking the more human aspects of learning—connection, creativity, and curiosity. Education leaders who trust the specialised expertise of early childhood qualified educators enable the dynamic, relationship-based classroom ecology that lies at the "heart" of meaningful learning.

The rise of responsive relationships

"I tell the teacher I know it already, but they just don't listen."

A child's learning and emotional development relies on personalised and attentive serve-and-return interactions. However, factors such as performance demands and assessment fatigue (CSE – Leading Education, 2021) and workforce transience in early learning (Productivity Commission, 2021) may limit opportunity for meaningful exchanges. Children's intrinsic motivation to learn—sparked by their need for connection and understanding— is under threat. "They just don't listen" exemplifies a disconnect between our assumptions and what children really need us to know to support their engagement. Leaders who make time and space for teachers to "be" with young children can stimulate high-quality, individualised interactions that strengthen children's learning and engagement.

The search for the real

"Outside is 'real' and the teacher's stuff is 'fake'"

In an increasingly digitised world, children are learning to distinguish between what is "real" and what is "fake." For many, the outdoors is viewed as more genuine and authentic compared to "fake" classroom learning. The rise of biophilic design and a focus on the importance of nature-based learning environments are part of a broader realisation that digital devices, while powerful, cannot replace the profound developmental benefits of direct interaction with the natural world. As children spend more time in front of screens, the longing for authentic, hands-on experiences outside of the classroom becomes increasingly clear. Nature, with its opportunities for free play and spontaneous learning, serves as a powerful antidote to the increasingly artificial learning environments created by technology.

The trust tragedy

"This is the 100 ways I want to kill the teacher."

This troubling statement reflects a breakdown in trust between children, teachers, and families. Children who hear family members expressing distrust toward teachers may internalise these sentiments, weakening their emotional connection to school authority figures. Emotional connections to teachers are vital for engagement, and when trust is eroded, so too is the child's sense of safety and belonging. Children today also face new emotional pressures, exacerbated by exposure to environmental concerns and social unrest. To restore engagement, educational leaders are challenged to publicly build esteem for early childhood educators and the critically important role they play in shaping children's learning futures in the context of an increasingly disparate social ecology.

The illusion of attention

"We pretend we are paying attention so we don't get to 3 and go to the Principal."

This statement demonstrated the intentionality of children who "go through the motions" to avoid punishment or unwanted attention, rather than being actively engaged in learning. The growing emphasis on academic achievement and measurable outcomes can risk placing undue pressure on young children to master emotional control and compliance before they are developmentally ready (Gray, 2022). In contrast, countries like Finland where there is a focus on empathy, and social skills in early childhood, promote a more holistic approach. Early childhood educators are challenged to rethink notions of self-regulation and entertain one of co-regulation, a culture of emotional safety over rigid academic standards can emerge, and children can learn and grow at their own pace.

A call to action

While school engagement may feel like it is "slipping through our fingers," it is not a time for despair. The early experiences of children have changed dramatically and are shaping an exciting new era of childhood capabilities. But not everything has changed - the rate of child development remains. So, let's not rush the "3Rs" hoping our babies will get there faster. Restoring engagement requires patience. Leaders are urged to listen to children and honour their right to the tempo of childhood so they may build attentive connections, feel trust and security, and have the opportunities they need to be creative, be curious and "be human."

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New Voice in Early Childhood Education Leadership 2024 Recipient

Emma Cross is an accomplished educator, researcher, and academic leader dedicated to advancing the field of early childhood education. With a diverse background and a strong commitment to professional development, Emma has made significant contributions to the field through her research, teaching, and leadership roles. Emma currently serves as an Associate Lecturer coordinating the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and educational studies courses in Curtin University's School of Education. Emma's expertise extends to her role as an Associate Investigator with the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, where she contributes to ground-breaking research in partnership with key sector and industry stakeholders. Emma is currently pursuing her Doctor of Philosophy with a focus on leadership in early childhood services.

One of the major ways AI could benefit leaders, especially in educational settings, is by automating the routine and operational tasks that tend to bog them down.

In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg revealed the first printing press, which mass-produced literature, including books, pamphlets, and newspapers (The Gutenberg Press, n.d.). Prior to the printing press, books were hand-copied by scribes, making them rare and expensive. As a result, only the elite could afford knowledge and education. The printing press disrupted these norms, making education and information more accessible to the masses. In 1983, the birth of the Internet (A Brief History of the Internet, n.d.) further transformed education by enabling access to information, e-learning, online classrooms, and breaking down geographic, financial, and time barriers. These technologies dramatically improved accessibility, creating opportunities that were once unimaginable. Yet, despite their profound impact, the discussion around Artificial Intelligence (AI) seems to carry a distinct undercurrent of fear, with concerns that it might bring about the same level of disruption, if not more.

AI is often depicted in popular media as a force that will take over the world, posing a threat to humanity, as seen in films like *The Terminator*, *The Matrix*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. While AI is indeed a complex technology, it does not possess the autonomy or flexibility seen in these fictional portrayals. Instead, it is designed to enhance human capability, carrying the heavy load of mundane data-driven tasks. Much like previous disruptive technologies, AI is here to stay, and its capabilities are likely to continue evolving. As such, the real question now is how we can harness its power to enhance leadership, especially in education, while ensuring that leadership itself remains human-focused. It is essential that we shift the dialogue of fear and instead embrace the capabilities of AI. Leaders can be relieved of operational burdens by using AI, allowing them to invest more time and energy into the aspects of leadership that require human qualities—empathy, communication, and relationship-building.

In early childhood education and care (ECEC), quality leadership is supported by key competencies across five domains: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, business, governance, and society (Cross et al., 2024). These competencies are not about operational management; rather they draw focus to the importance of fostering a positive culture, supporting staff, and making decisions that prioritise the wellbeing and development of children (Cross et al., 2024). AI could potentially play a significant role in improving leadership effectiveness by relieving leaders of many of the repetitive, operational tasks that often consume valuable time. Tasks like budgeting, scheduling, timesheets, and even staff performance tracking are often necessary but time-consuming. Leaders in ECEC services are often juggling numerous administrative responsibilities, as a result of leading teams while simultaneously operating a business, that requires attention to detail, accuracy, and regular follow-ups (Cross et al., 2022; Cross et al., 2024). Integrating AI into the workplace has the potential to automate these operational processes, offering several advantages. For example, AI could streamline budgeting by automatically categorising expenses, generating financial reports, and even forecasting future financial needs based on historical data. In this way, AI would assist leaders in managing finances more effectively, reducing the time spent on spreadsheets and enabling them to make more informed data driven decisions.

AI's potential role in relieving operational burdens is undeniable but the key competencies of a leader in ECEC are those of a human, not a machine (Cross et al., 2024). While AI could manage data, schedules, and even financial planning, it cannot replicate the core values of leadership that arise from human relationships, such as empathy, communication, and emotional intelligence. These human qualities are central to quality leadership which ultimately drives quality practice, education, and outcomes for young children.

As part of my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) studies, I undertook a multistage research project that aimed to identify the competencies of a quality leader and develop and validate a survey tool that can identify leadership competencies. The first phase of this research focused on identifying competencies that drive effective leadership in ECEC through analysis of focus group interviews and governing documents across five Western Australian long-day-care services. Through this process, six themes emerged, including communication and support, educational programs and practices, mentorship and professional development, service operations, collaboration and professional learning, and knowledge, which informed the development and validation of the survey tool with more than 210 survey completions (Cross et al., 2024). While AI has the potential to support these areas by offering data-driven insights or administrative tools, the actual execution of these leadership elements requires a human leader to provide direction and support.

For instance, the theme of communication and support highlighted that effective leaders must be approachable, empathetic, and responsive to the needs of their teams. AI could potentially help leaders organise feedback or track communication patterns, but the actual act of providing support, especially in times of stress or challenge, requires a human touch (Cross et al., 2024). Similarly, in the realm of mentorship and professional development, AI could help identify skills gaps and suggest learning pathways, but it requires the nuance, understanding, and empathy of a human to support a team member to engage with such opportunities (Cross et al., 2024).

AI offers tremendous potential to support leadership in education by automating operational tasks and improving efficiency. By relieving leaders of time-consuming responsibilities, AI potentially enables leaders to focus more on improving their leadership competencies and the competencies of those with whom they work. These human leadership competencies are central to quality leadership and cannot be replicated by machines. The key to ensuring that leadership remains human-focused in an age of AI is to use the technology as a tool to enhance, rather than replace, the human elements of leadership. By striking this balance, leaders can ensure that AI becomes an asset, freeing up time and resources to engage in the kind of leadership that fosters growth, connection, and community. AI could handle the routine tasks, but it is the leader's human qualities that will continue to drive success and positive change.

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