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Editorial

Evolving Landscapes of Educational Leadership: Preparation, Culture, and Practice

Across global educational systems, educational leaders are navigating rapid reform, competing priorities, and the need to implement evidence-based practices. This issue of *Leading & Managing* compiles a collection of scholarship that highlights redesigns in educational leadership preparation, developing and sustaining organisational culture, and integrating new technologies, which are shaping the work of educational leaders. These articles demonstrate the dynamic, contextually grounded practice educational leaders work within that requires reflection, innovative practices, and a commitment to providing students with the best learning opportunities. In this issue, we present two articles that discuss the different reform approaches educational leadership preparation programs in the U.S. undertook to ensure students were provided new opportunities to apply theory to practices to real-world challenges faced by school administrators. In *Innovation and Immersion of High Impact Practices: Leading Change and Transforming Leadership Preparation Practices*, Walker, Gray, and Wilson discuss how high impact practices, experiential learning, and change management embedded in the program effectively supported leadership growth. These strategies provided space for students of leadership to grapple with applying their new learning to challenging leadership scenarios and developing their critical thinking skills through structured field experiences, simulations, and reflective exercises. In *Effects of a Standards-Aligned, Online Redesign of a Master's in Educational Leadership Program*, Ungarean examines the redesign of the program through elements of design thinking and through collaborative efforts with regional school districts. Through the collaborative redesign efforts, curriculum was closely aligned to state leadership standards, best practices in online pedagogy were implemented, and application of theory to practice through field-based learning experiences were developed.

Not all leaders are necessarily prepared through educational leadership programs in readiness for their leadership and teaching responsibilities that significantly impact teaching and learning. In the article *Frequent Practices of Effective Middle Curriculum Leaders and the Significance of Professional Context*, Lamont interviewed 10 middle curriculum leaders in Australia to explore what perceptions of effective curriculum leadership align closely with lead teacher practices. Findings suggest that context had significant impact on middle curriculum leaders' goals and tasks. This was highlighted by the leaders' responses to staff needs related to effective strategies of communicating direction from senior leadership, leading by example, curriculum and resource development, and promoting vision. In the article *Beyond Routines: How Tools Cultivate Senior Leaders' Creativity Leading Rigorous Conversations with Middle Leaders*, Makin, Sinnema, and Le Fevre explored how senior leadership in New Zealand can grow the capacity of middle leaders in supporting professional inquiry among teachers utilising a rigour framework tool.

Staffing shortages seem to plague many nations and leadership strategies are needed to find teachers that support the diverse student body of schools today. McHolm reframes the staffing shortage through a study conducted in Canada in the article *The Opportunity in Staffing Shortages: Solutions to Monocultural Staffing Within Diverse School Communities* as an opportunity to expand staff diversity through mentoring and other short-term, mid-term, and long-term strategies. Once teachers are hired, teacher retention becomes a critical focus for schools. In *People Management in Schools: Practical Strategies Used by Selected UK Local Headteachers to Create Supportive and Respectful Working Environments for Teachers*, Minott, Enow, and Urbina-Garcia explored how school leaders can create an atmosphere where teachers feel valued and respected every day. The review of the book titled *Workplace Culture: Tips & Traps for School Leaders* by Trevor Doyle and Ross McSwan continues this theme and supports school leaders in creating a positive school environment of trust, collaboration, and wellbeing.

In addition to retaining and supporting teachers, educational leaders are transversing a new landscape as artificial intelligence (AI) is quickly gaining ground in education as a support for students. Now, research is exploring how AI can be used to support educational leaders. Through interviews, Kafa explored the limitations of AI integration by school leaders in the centralised education system in Cyprus in the article *Unlocking Artificial Intelligence in School Leadership: Understanding the Limitations from the Cypriot Context*. Six main themes emerged as challenges to AI use including accessing AI, training, resistance, lack of policies, data privacy, and decision-making constraints.

Lastly, this issue concludes with a thought-provoking commentary by Adam Bongers, *The Leaderisation of Schools: How Did Schooling Come to be About Leadership?* The commentary examines how schooling has been reframed around leadership theory, and how leadership has come to function as the default lens through which problems and solutions in education are examined. The author argues that by limiting school problems to matters of leadership, we narrow how educational issues are understood, and would benefit from engaging alternative conceptual frameworks alongside leadership theory.

Associate Professor Krista Bixler

Special Edition Editor

Florida Gulf Coast University

Innovation and Immersion of High Impact Practices: Leading Change and Transforming Leadership Preparation Practices

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ABSTRACT: This article highlights how integrating Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Kuh's High-Impact Practices (HIPs) within Fullan's framework for change enables an educational leadership program to be more responsive, engaging, and effective. When integrated with experiential learning approaches, HIPs have the potential to provide transformative practices that enable students to engage in real-world applications, developing critical skills essential for instructional leaders. Furthermore, Kolb's ELT framework promotes student engagement through active learning cycles, including concrete experiences, reflective observation, conceptualisation, and active experimentation, for aspiring leaders (Egan et al., 2023).

Key words: High-impact practices, leadership preparation, experiential learning

Introduction

Educational leadership preparation programs face challenges in preparing leaders for increasingly complex and rapidly changing educational environments. The pandemic, growing achievement gaps, artificial intelligence, and teacher attrition have fundamentally altered the landscape of school leadership (Harris & Jones, 2023). Traditional preparation models, often criticised for their theoretical emphasis and limited practical application, require transformation to develop leaders capable of navigating multifaceted challenges (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Harris & Jones, 2023; Mincu, 2022). They highlight how programs integrate real-world experiences and evidence-based practices to develop leaders to adapt to complex educational challenges.

As education systems face complex challenges, preparation programs must incorporate innovation and change to remain effective (Fullan, 2025). It is important to embed evidence-based practices, leverage technology, enhance experiential learning, and focus on reflective practice to develop leaders who are well-equipped to address these demands (Fullan, 2025; Kuh, 2008). In this study, the authors examine the process of integrating high-impact practices (HIPs) within an online educational leadership program to broaden experiential learning opportunities for leadership candidates. Fullan's (2025) change model provides a framework for the stages of transformation needed to embed HIPs in a leadership preparation program. Within educational institutions, change is not an isolated event, but rather a process that unfolds in phases, each of which is essential for successful adaptation and improvement. This three-year longitudinal, qualitative study aligns Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Kuh's (2008) HIPs as the conceptual framework guiding decision making within the change process.

Background

Over the past decade, educational leadership programs have faced growing pressure to demonstrate relevance, rigour, and tangible impact in the real world. Accrediting bodies and school systems have called for preparation programs to align better with the practical demands of school leadership, particularly in areas such as ethics, instructional improvement, and community engagement (Harris & Jones, 2023). In response, high-performing programs have turned to evidence-based frameworks, such as HIPs, to foster experiential learning and reflective leadership development. Online and hybrid modalities have expanded access to leadership preparation while introducing new challenges to authenticity and engagement.

To enact meaningful and sustainable improvements within the leadership preparation program, the team recognised the need for a structured approach to guide the redesign process. Rather than implementing isolated changes, the team adopted a systems-thinking perspective emphasising long-term transformation through planning, stakeholder engagement, and iterative evaluation. By grounding the program improvement process in Fullan's (2025) model, the faculty aligned high-impact practices with strategic goals, ensured course coherence, and embedded innovation that would endure beyond individual faculty efforts.

During the initiation phase of Fullan's change model, when an organisation decides to pursue and develop a commitment to innovation, the need for change is identified, and initial support for transformation is established (Fullan, 2025). Over the course of three academic years, the program faculty analysed qualitative data gathered from surveys, course and stakeholder feedback, curriculum reviews of courses, and state licensure assessments. This analysis highlighted areas where the program could improve its focus on competencies, such as instructional leadership, ethics, and responsiveness to students' needs. These findings highlighted the importance of cultivating leaders who are well-versed in instructional strategies, ethical decision making, and inclusive practices to benefit all students.

The faculty integrated evidence-based practices and specific HIPs through the implementation phase, including critical reflections, ePortfolios, internships in diverse educational settings, field experiences in each course, and a capstone action research project. With the integration of ELT and HIPs into the curriculum, the faculty increased student engagement, fostered active learning, and enabled candidates to develop the practical, ethical, and culturally responsive skills necessary for effective educational leadership. By following Fullan's (2025) change model, this research study demonstrated how effective experiential learning and HIPs can be in preparing aspiring leaders as change agents.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework represents the foundation for change in one principal preparation program's approach to embedding innovation through HIPs and experiential learning. Programmatic changes were guided by a conceptual framework integrating Fullan's (2025) change model, Kolb's ELT (2015), and Kuh's HIPs (2008). This framework ensured that innovations in the program were structured, impactful, and aligned with best practices. Kolb's ELT component emphasised learning through experience, a critical component in preparing effective leaders.

Applying ELT to leadership program development fostered a learning environment in which candidates actively engaged with content, reflected on their experiences, conceptualised new insights, and tested the theories behind practical leadership scenarios—incorporating HIPs into the curriculum enhanced candidates' learning experiences and skills development. Internships in two settings, collaborative projects, reflective ePortfolios, and action research projects offered aspiring leaders hands-on experiences to cultivate critical thinking skills in real-world settings.

Alignment of Kolb and Kuh

The ELT model explains how individuals learn through lived experiences and their essential role in the learning process (Kolb, 2015). The model acts as a framework for redesigning a program to include hands-on, reflective, and immersive experiences. Concrete experiences allow candidates to connect practical applications to the theoretical knowledge provided in the coursework. Reflective practices lead to deeper understanding and continuous growth, personally and professionally (Kolb, 2015). The abstract conceptualisation stage encourages candidates to

consider what was learned, why they believe and act as they do, and conceptualise “new” ways to approach challenges in the field (Kolb, 2015).

During the active experimentation phase, candidates test strategies and refine skills to be more innovative and adaptable as developing instructional leaders (Kolb, 2015). Fullan’s model aligns with Kolb’s cyclical approach to experiential learning and complements Kuh’s HIPs. The following HIPs were selected for the program:

1. **Learning Communities** were strategically integrated into courses to foster collaboration, critical thinking, and peer-to-peer engagement, including smaller discussion groups, collaborative projects, and reflective activities.
2. **Writing-intensive courses** promoted critical thinking, communication, and reflective skills essential for effective leadership, including case study analysis, critical reflections, and strategic action plans to promote higher-order thinking.
3. **Collaborative Assignments and Projects** allowed students to develop essential leadership skills, such as collaboration, communication, and problem solving.
4. **Diversity/Global Learning** opportunities encouraged future leaders to navigate and address equity, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness issues within diverse educational settings for stakeholders.
5. **Community-based learning** activities addressed the needs of local communities and schools and allowed candidates to understand the social, cultural, and economic factors impacting education.
6. **Internship** experiences provided students with immersive, hands-on opportunities to bridge theory and practice while participating in day-to-day operations of schools under the supervision and mentorship of experienced leaders.
7. **Capstone Courses and Projects** were culminating experiences in which candidates applied leadership skills, including analysis, synthesis, and problem solving complex educational issues, as aligned to ethical leadership standards and best practices.

Additionally, the following eight key criteria for HIPs (Kuh, 2008) were considered as assignments and were redesigned:

1. **Performance Expectations Set at Appropriately High Levels** – rigorous, demanding tasks to demonstrate substantive effort and commitment to excellence;
2. **Significant Investment of Time and Effort by Students Over an Extended Period** – practices require students to dedicate considerable time and sustained effort, leading to deeper learning;
3. **Interactions with Faculty and Peers About Substantive Matters** – coursework fostered meaningful interactions between students and faculty to promote collaborative learning;
4. **Experiences with Diversity** – assignments require students to engage with diverse perspectives and experiences, develop cultural competence and adaptability;

5. **Frequent, Timely, and Constructive Feedback** – instructors deliver continuous feedback to help students reflect on their learning, identify improvement areas, and make adjustments;
6. **Periodic, Structured Opportunities to Reflect and Integrate Learning** – assignments incorporated opportunities for critical reflection;
7. **Opportunities to Discover the Relevance of Learning Through Real-World Applications** – experiences to apply learning to real-world situations that enhance understanding; and
8. **Public Demonstration of Competence** – the development and presentation of an ePortfolio representing leadership skills and knowledge to reinforce achievements and confidence.

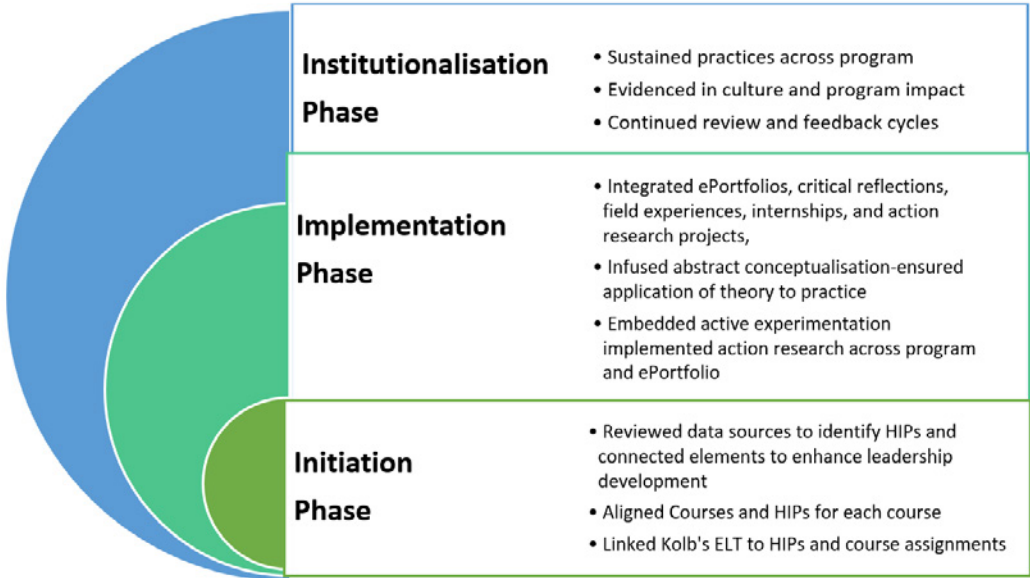
Change Model

The program redesign used Fullan's (2025) change model to provide a framework for driving meaningful change. Research on change has focused on the organisational level to identify the system's role in supporting changes and establishing effective practices. The organisation must initiate, implement, and maintain accountability for change to institutionalise and sustain it as a practice, thereby creating consistent and lasting change. Fullan's (2025) change model highlighted the phases of the improvement process that occurred throughout the redesign process.

As illustrated in Figure 1, this conceptual framework demonstrates how the alignment of Fullan's (2025) change model, Kolb's ELT (2015), and Kuh's HIPs (2008) supports a transformative approach to leadership preparation. The program develops a sustainable and innovative model for preparing future leaders by integrating experiential learning and HIPs within a phased change process. This holistic framework positions candidates to navigate educational leadership landscapes with adaptability, insight, and practical expertise. Fullan's change model provides the organisational scaffolding necessary for systemic change, while Kolb outlines the internal learning cycle that underpins the acquisition of leadership skills. When implementing change, consider that this model involves an ongoing learning process that can "act as the bridge that links together otherwise siloed reform efforts" (Reinholz & Andrews, 2024, p. 5).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Literature Review

Experiential Learning

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) posits that learning through hands-on experience necessitates a deep understanding and practical application, thereby significantly influencing learning outcomes (Kolb, 2015). Active learning via hands-on experiences allows learners to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways. ELT is structured around four interconnected constructs: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2015). During active learning, learners engage in experiences, reflect on meaning, construct understanding, and apply their insights to new situations. Kolb's model emphasises the importance of simulating real-world situations through case studies, simulations, field experiences, or internships, as these methods provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge and practice skills in authentic, real-world settings (Ambrose & Poklop, 2015; Egan et al., 2023).

The four constructs or central tenets of the theory consist of concrete experience (engaging the senses), abstract conceptualisation (decision making), reflective observation (using specific resource material), and active experimentation (testing the resources). Kolb (2015) asserts that the stages are sequential; however, the learning cycle can be entered at any point and conceptualised

as a spiral of actions. During individual learning cycles, learners repeatedly cycle through the process (Egan et al., 2023).

High-Impact Practices

HIPs have emerged as significant tools in higher education and educational leadership programs, as they enhance student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall success (Kuh, 2008). HIPs are transformative experiences that provide students with active, experiential, and reflective learning opportunities (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AACU], 2017; Kuh, 2008). Examples of HIPs include service and community-based learning, capstone projects, internships, undergraduate research, learning communities, and diversity/global learning. These practices deepen learning and foster more significant interaction between students, faculty, and communities (AACU, 2017; Brownell & Swaner, 2010). Internships, field-based experiences, and capstone projects allow students to apply leadership theories to real-world scenarios (Ambrose & Poklop, 2015; Kolb, 2015).

Field Experiences/Experiential Learning

As part of the program redesign, experiential learning activities were strategically integrated into six courses, with more extensive early field-based assignments incorporated into three of these courses. These field experiences require students to document 20 hours of practice under the guidance of their principals or district supervisors, totalling 60 hours across the three courses, before entering the practicum. The documented 60 hours include key leadership tasks such as shadowing a principal, developing and presenting a data-driven decision-making issue, and conducting classroom observations alongside an experienced observer. This structured approach ensures that candidates gain authentic leadership experience in school settings, aligning with research that emphasises the importance of hands-on, contextual learning in educational leadership preparation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Capstones Courses and Projects

Capstone courses are a critical component of educational leadership programs, providing students with opportunities to apply theory to practice and integrate the knowledge they have gained throughout their studies. Capstone experiences take various forms, including research papers, portfolios, and culminating projects (AACU, 2017). These experiences enable instructors to assess students' growth, cumulative abilities, content knowledge, and skills, while evaluating their capacity to present and communicate effectively (Brown et al., 2009). Research highlights the positive impact of capstone experiences on students' preparedness for professional roles. Capstone courses enhance students' sense of self-efficacy, boosting confidence and readiness for success in their fields (ACCU, 2017).

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is a key HIP that engages faculty and students in group-based learning through structured and intentional activities, fostering academic and social development, as well as building teamwork and communication skills (Kuh, 2008). Research demonstrates that collaborative learning experiences lead to higher levels of metacognition and greater motivation to engage in tasks, as opposed to passively receiving information through traditional teaching methods (Davidson & Major, 2014). Structured reflection, a key component of collaborative learning, enables students to assess their own contributions and evaluate others' ideas within the collaborative process (Albon & Jewels, 2014).

Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is a powerful approach that allows students to investigate and solve discipline-related problems by applying their knowledge to real-world challenges. Examples of PBL include data-driven research projects and developing solutions to field-specific issues (AACU, 2017). This method engages students in authentic, inquiry-based learning, exploring complex questions and designing practical solutions that reflect real-world scenarios (Holmes & Hwang, 2016). Reflection is another integral component, as it enables students to evaluate their processes, decisions, and outcomes, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding and personal growth.

Internships

Internships are a cornerstone of HIPs, providing students with field-based experiential learning that integrates theory, knowledge, and skill development. They are primarily designed to allow students to apply their learning to tasks and challenges related to their discipline or field of study (Valentine & Price, 2021). For leadership candidates, internships paired with field-based experiences under the supervision of an experienced principal provide hands-on learning opportunities that align with the complexities of school leadership, such as decision making, stakeholder communication, and instructional improvement. Kilgo et al. (2014) emphasise that internships cultivate autonomy by requiring students to adapt to situations, make informed decisions, and build confidence in their abilities.

ePortfolios

Electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) are a recognised HIP that promotes reflection, critical thinking, and integration of learning by allowing students to collect, organise, and evaluate evidence of their learning experiences (Haave, 2016; Watson et al., 2016). Reflection within ePortfolios should build on inquiry and help students make connections across experiences, ultimately fostering transformation and deepening understanding of learning (Eynon & Gambino, 2017). Candidates also benefit from the development of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and practical communication skills, which are essential for educational leaders (Harring & Luo, 2016; Wawrzynski & Baldwin, 2014).

Immersive Simulation as Problem-Based Learning

Immersive simulations have emerged as a high-impact practice (HIP) in educational leadership programs. Through Virtual Reality (VR) simulations, leadership candidates actively participate in scenarios that require critical thinking, problem solving, and knowledge-based decision making. Hallinger and Bridges (2017) emphasise the value of problem-based learning in leadership preparation, describing how students gain and apply new skills and knowledge while resolving conflicts, problems, or making decisions. Immersive simulations create a safe and challenging environment where leadership candidates explore complex and unpredictable situations.

Critical Reflections

Critical reflection is a recognised HIP that promotes deep learning by encouraging individuals to analyse experiences, identify gaps in knowledge and practice, and apply new insights for continuous improvement. Ash and Clayton (2009) define critical reflection as the “evidence-based examination of the sources of and gaps in knowledge and practice with the intent to improve on both” (p. 28). For educational leadership, critical reflection is a vital tool for developing aspiring leaders, allowing them to evaluate their actions and reframe learning to enhance leadership skills. Critical reflection enables learners to challenge assumptions, formulate meaningful questions, and address biases that may influence their practice (Kuh, 2015). As an HIP, critical reflection ensures that leadership candidates engage in intentional and transformative learning.

Contemporary Challenges in Educational Leadership Preparation

Program improvement efforts in educational leadership preparation programs are essential for ensuring alignment with accrediting body standards and fostering institutional accountability. The accreditation process requires institutions to report on metrics and assess performance using specialised standards (Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008; Ewell, 2011). Continuous improvement cycles require faculty to analyse program-level data, such as admissions requirements, student learning outcomes, clinical experiences, stakeholder feedback, and certification data, to identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth (Ruben, 2007). The faculty applied Fullan’s (2025) change model, building shared purpose, capacity-building, and system-wide improvement to create sustainable change.

Program Improvement Efforts Using Fullan’s Change Model

Fullan’s (2025) change model strategically guided the Educational Leadership program’s improvement efforts, emphasising the building of shared purpose, capacity building, and systemic improvement to ensure alignment with state and accreditation standards. Through a data-informed, collaborative process, the faculty and stakeholders analysed program-level components and

implemented changes to address areas for improvement, foster leadership development, and enhance student outcomes.

Initiation Phase

The catalyst for change stemmed from the state and national accreditation process, which required institutional accountability and a comprehensive review of program-level data (Eaton, 2012). The faculty used normed, nationally adopted standards to assess program performance by analysing state licensure results, program rubrics, dispositions, stakeholder feedback, and exit surveys. Fullan (2025) asserts that successful change begins with a shared understanding of the need for improvement. The improvement process began with data retreats where the faculty analysed program-level metrics, including state-required certification results, program assessment rubrics, candidate dispositions, and exit and employer surveys.

The data revealed specific strengths and areas for growth. For instance, the program consistently ranked above state averages in candidate certification scores, achieving an overall pass rate of 92% compared to the state's average of 81% over a three-year period. Strengths included prioritising student learning (75% CRA), recruiting practices (78.6% CRA), and managing school operations (79.9% CRA). However, areas requiring improvement, such as communicating effectively (70.5% CRA), implementing an instructional framework (72% CRA), and managing financial resources (69.5% CRA), became focal points for redesign.

During the initiation phase, data analysis revealed strengths in student learning priorities and managing school operations, but exposed gaps in effective communication (70.5% CRA), instructional frameworks (72% CRA), and financial resource management (69.5% CRA). Using Fullan's focus on capacity building, faculty realigned Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) to state and certification competencies. A new Educational Leadership Program Level Assessment Rubric (ELPLAR) has been developed to align all key assignments with state leadership standards. Experiential learning activities were embedded across six courses to build candidate capacity with field-based assignments in three additional courses. Candidates documented 60 hours of internship experience, including principal shadowing, data-driven decision-making projects, and classroom observations, within their ePortfolios, along with critical reflections for each course.

Implementation Phase

During the implementation phase, the faculty implemented programmatic changes to address identified areas for improvement, align with state and national standards, and develop strategies to enhance candidate success. This phase focused on embedding structures and activities that connected theory to practice, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Data retreats and faculty discussions identified areas for growth, including communication skills, instructional frameworks, and financial resource management. The faculty realigned SLOs with state certification competencies and created a new ELPLAR to ensure consistency in measuring candidate performance. These experiences included shadowing principals, analysing data-driven decision-making issues, and conducting classroom observations. Candidates documented these activities in ePortfolios, which became a reflection and progress-monitoring tool.

Immersive simulations and innovative technology enabled candidates to practice decision making, problem solving, and critical thinking in virtual environments, thereby strengthening their use of technology in school settings. These simulations mirrored real-world challenges, enhancing candidates' ability to apply leadership theory to complex situations. Additionally, action research projects were introduced in three courses, guiding candidates to identify school-based problems, analyse data, implement change initiatives, and evaluate their impact. This approach deepened candidates' understanding of using data-driven practices for school improvement.

The faculty incorporated a character education framework centred on professional virtues and moral leadership (Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues, 2013). This framework prepared candidates for ethical complexities in educational settings. The faculty established four transition checkpoints, spanning from admission through program completion, to ensure consistent progress among candidates. Faculty also implemented mentoring systems to provide individualised support for candidates during field experiences and internships. Feedback from candidates, alumni, and supervising administrators informed continuous program improvement efforts.

Institutionalisation Phase

The Educational Leadership program has successfully transitioned into the institutional phase by embedding programmatic changes and ensuring sustainability and continuous improvement. This phase represents the culmination of data-driven efforts to address challenges, align with state and accreditation standards, and institutionalise practices that prepare future leaders to meet the demands of school leadership. The institutional phase integrates improvements into the program's core operations. The ELPLAR was revised, along with key assignments, to align with new state standards. These components have become standard practices that ensure accountability and provide data for ongoing evaluation and refinement.

The character education framework and Instructional Leadership in Diverse Settings are now integral components and prepare candidates to lead in digitally dynamic and ethically complex educational environments. These changes reflect a shift toward developing future-ready leaders to address the moral and cultural challenges faced by schools.

Methods/Measures

The study employed qualitative research methods to analyse an educational leadership program, with a focus on candidates' experiences with HIPs. Data were collected through Qualtrics open-ended surveys, Google Form simulation feedback, leadership demonstration video assessments, and student course evaluations, all of which provided rich, descriptive data to assess program effectiveness and identify areas for enhancement. Qualitative methods are particularly effective for uncovering the depth and complexity of participants' perceptions, as they capture personal experiences through reflective insights via open-ended responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

The university's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures, and informed consent was obtained from participants. All participants were provided with an informed consent form that outlined the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and assurances of confidentiality. Participation in surveys, reflection responses, and course activities used for research purposes was optional, and no identifiable data were collected. Anonymity was preserved through code identifiers, and participation had no impact on grades or standing. This multi-method approach enabled thematic triangulation, ensuring a rich and context-sensitive interpretation of candidate experiences across various delivery formats. All data were de-identified during analysis and stored securely in password-protected files.

Consideration has been given to global differences in obtaining a master's degree and principal certifications. The actions outlined herein primarily apply to the United States of America (USA) and are not universally applicable. The authors acknowledge that literature critical of the USA approach exists.

Data Collection

In a comprehensive evaluation of HIPs within an educational leadership program, qualitative data were gathered through Qualtrics open-ended surveys and Google Form feedback on immersive simulations. The open-ended surveys provided an in-depth exploration of leadership candidates' perceptions, allowing articulation with key program components, including ePortfolios, critical reflections, action research, collaborative projects, field experiences, and leadership demonstration videos. Students could offer insights into how these practices influenced learning, professional development, and readiness for leadership roles.

We selected open-ended surveys for several reasons: (1) ability to capture perspectives from a larger sample of participants ($n=200$ vs. typical interview sample of 15–25); (2) anonymity encouraged honest responses about program weaknesses; (3) participants could reflect at their own pace; (4) standardised questions ensured consistent data collection across three academic years; (5) combination with other data sources (video assessments, course evaluations) provided triangulation unavailable through interviews alone.

Participants

The qualitative research study involved 200 participants in the field of educational leadership. The participants were Master's-level students pursuing educational leadership certification. The focus was on exploring perceptions of HIPs within their program. The study utilised anonymous surveys sent through the department's advising office. Questionnaires were distributed during the coursework and answered anonymously to encourage honest responses. Participants provided feedback on experiences with ePortfolios, critical reflections, action research, collaborative projects, field experiences, leadership demonstration videos, immersive simulations, and internships.

These HIPs were embedded into the program to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application. Through open-ended responses, participants shared how each practice influenced their learning and professional development. Their insights highlighted how these practices fostered critical thinking, reflective learning, and hands-on experience, preparing them to navigate the complexities of educational leadership. The study underscored the role of HIPs in creating authentic learning opportunities that enhanced their skills, confidence, and readiness to address real-world challenges in school leadership roles.

Participants noted that the simulations allowed them to apply theoretical knowledge to realistic, school-based scenarios, develop decision-making skills, and receive constructive feedback in a safe and controlled environment. This combination of data collection methods provided a deeper understanding of the program's impact, highlighting the role of HIPs in fostering candidates' confidence, critical thinking, and preparedness for leadership challenges in educational settings.

Debriefing sessions emerged as a pivotal component in the leadership preparation experience. Participants reported the debriefing space helped them "slow down and critically examine what went right and what needed improvement" after the simulations. These sessions facilitated deeper metacognition, enabling students to link theory to practice. Across responses, themes such as perspective-taking, emotional regulation, and strategic communication consistently surfaced, suggesting that debriefings functioned as reviews and collaborative sensemaking opportunities that accelerated leadership efficacy.

A student shared: "The debriefing helped me realise that my initial approach was more compliance-focused than relationship-driven. Hearing peers reflect on alternative responses helped me see options I had not considered". In addition to cognitive growth, students cited debriefing sessions as essential for building leadership confidence. One respondent noted: "Without the debrief, I wouldn't have connected my simulation response to actual school scenarios I have experienced. It helped me see that I am growing into the leader I want to become".

Others highlighted the role of instructor and peer feedback in reshaping their approach to conflict, ethics, and equity. Importantly, students described how the structured nature of debriefing allowed them to explore "what-if" scenarios and anticipate unintended consequences—an essential skill for adaptive leadership. These findings align with Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle, particularly the "reflective observation" and "abstract conceptualisation" phases, where learning is consolidated through dialogue and meaning making. Debriefings thus served as a pedagogical tool and a psychological anchor, providing confidence to re-enter complex leadership situations with clarity and purpose.

Data Analysis

The authors used thematic analysis to analyse the data, a systematic process for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. Responses were coded to identify themes, trends, and areas of strength or concern within the program. The analysis revealed key themes related to the effectiveness of immersive simulations, field experiences, and instructional strategies in fostering critical leadership skills. Feedback was gathered from leadership candidates

participating in simulations that mirrored real-world scenarios, including conflict resolution, personnel management, instructional planning, and ethical decision making.

Findings

This research, focusing on integration of HIPs, aimed to evaluate the implementation and impact of programmatic changes within the Educational Leadership program; feedback data were collected through Qualtrics open-ended surveys, immersive simulation Google Form feedback, leadership demonstration videos, and course evaluations to assess participants' experiences, satisfaction, and areas for improvement. The themes described (see below) underscore the importance of bridging theoretical learning with practical application, enabling candidates to gain valuable insights into their professional development for leadership roles. The following themes emerged as key outcomes of the program's impact.

Theme 1: Bridging Theory and Practice Through Field-Based Learning

Internships and field experiences consistently emerged as the most impactful component of the program. Participants (100%) reported that opportunities to observe, participate in, and lead in authentic school settings were essential for translating theory into practice. Candidates cited shadowing principals, leading PLCs, and conducting instructional evaluations as deepening their understanding of leadership responsibilities. One participant shared: "The field experiences allowed me to see how instructional leaders navigate complex issues in real time". These hands-on opportunities aligned with Kolb's (2015) ELT by allowing candidates to experiment and reflect while grappling with real-time challenges in dynamic school environments.

Theme 2: Strengthening Ethical Decision Making Through Immersive Simulations

Immersive simulations using virtual platforms were praised as innovative and transformative features. Candidates described simulations as realistic, emotionally engaging, and intellectually challenging. One candidate reflected: "The simulations allowed me to practice tough conversations without being personal. The feedback was instrumental in improving my leadership skills". Students also reported increased confidence in handling confrontation, conflict resolution, and public communication. These findings support both Kuh's (2008) emphasis on high-impact, feedback-rich pedagogy and Fullan's (2025) emphasis on developing adaptive, morally grounded leadership capacity.

Theme 3: Building Reflective Capacity Through ePortfolios and Journaling

Student feedback on the ePortfolio acknowledged its usefulness as a reflective tool and as a "comprehensive record" of their learning journey, linking course assignments to leadership standards. Others noted its limited relevance to post-graduation job-seeking. One participant

shared: “The ePortfolio was a great way to collect and reflect on my work, but I struggled to see its future use beyond the program”.

Nonetheless, ePortfolios encouraged deeper engagement with course content, fostered personal accountability, and served as a professional showcase of growth and development. Candidates also emphasised the importance of journaling, discussion boards, and reflective logs in developing their leadership identity. These practices align with Kolb’s (2015) reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation phases, providing a structure for ethical and self-aware leadership development.

Theme 4: Fostering Continuous Growth Through Feedback and Ethical Engagement

Candidates emphasised the importance of feedback from instructors, peers, and simulation facilitators in shaping their leadership development. Effective feedback was described as “critical to growth”, enabling candidates to refine communication, evaluate ethical decisions, and improve task execution in subsequent experiences. Participants also highlighted the value of engaging with ethically grounded content where they balanced care, justice, and policy in decision making. These activities reinforced Fullan’s (20225) moral purpose and systems thinking model and supported Kuh’s (2008) view of deep learning as embedded in high-effort, high-engagement learning experiences.

Theme 5: Areas for Improvement and Program Growth

Participants praised the program’s structure and authenticity and identified opportunities for refinement. Several candidates requested a broader variety of simulation scenarios and greater flexibility in scheduling. Regarding the ePortfolio, participants suggested better alignment with real-world applications, such as job-focused content like resumes, letters of intent, or leadership philosophy statements. Additionally, candidates recommended more formative feedback on critical reflection assignments to enhance effectiveness. These suggestions inform future program iterations and underscore the importance of co-designing learning with practitioner input to ensure continued relevance and value.

Discussion

The findings support Kolb’s (2015) Experiential Learning Theory, particularly the full learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Student responses described how simulations, fieldwork, case studies, and project-based assignments offered authentic, real-world scenarios that served as “concrete experiences”. For instance, Mursion simulations placed the candidates in ethically challenging conversations with stakeholders, prompting immediate and engaged responses. The reflective observation phase was most evident in students’ discussion board entries, ePortfolio narratives, and debriefing logs, where they dissected their decisions and emotional responses. One student reflected: “I did not realise how much my tone impacted the conversation until I saw my peer do

it differently”. These reflections led to an understanding rooted in fairness, communication, and stakeholder engagement. Finally, candidates applied new learning in follow-up simulations or practicum settings, completing the cycle through active experimentation.

Kuh’s (2008) framework is evident throughout the program redesign, particularly in the use of capstone projects, collaborative assignments, ePortfolios, internships, and diversity/global learning initiatives. Student reflections revealed that HIPs played a central role in learning and identity development. The internship emerged as a cornerstone of HIP, giving students access to mentor principals, real-time school data, and leadership decision-making processes. One participant described the practicum as “the most powerful learning I have had”.

Fullan’s (2025) change leadership principles—moral purpose, building relationships, developing capacity, and fostering coherence—mirrored how students internalised and enacted their leadership roles throughout the program. The moral imperative was reflected in students’ consistent emphasis on fairness, empathy, and comprehensive practices, and encouraged them to lead for impartiality and social transformation.

Capacity building surfaced through scaffolded assignments that demanded critical thinking, data literacy, and ethical reasoning. Program coherence was achieved by aligning assignments, standards, and fieldwork, which students praised as “consistently relevant” and “connected across courses”. The findings support Fullan’s (2025) view that sustainable leadership development requires coordinated change at both personal and institutional levels—where skills, beliefs, and systems evolve in tandem.

Scholarly Significance

This research highlights the successful implementation and impact of high-impact HIPs within the Educational Leadership program, highlighting their role in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical leadership skills. By integrating experiential opportunities such as field experiences, immersive simulations, ePortfolios, action research, and capstone projects, the program has created a transformative learning environment that prepares aspiring leaders for the complexities of real-world educational leadership. The program supports candidates in refining leadership abilities through hands-on opportunities that connect coursework with practical applications (Dodson, 2015; Gray et al., 2019; Walker & Gray, 2022). Candidates overwhelmingly value field experiences, with 100% reporting that the key assignments provided essential insights into instructional leaders’ workload, decision making, and problem-solving responsibilities. Educational leadership candidates reported that simulations enhanced their critical thinking skills and equipped them with strategies to handle complex, high-pressure situations, thereby improving their leadership readiness.

Similarly, action research and capstone projects provided candidates with opportunities to analyse school-based problems, implement data-informed decisions, and evaluate their impact on student outcomes and school culture. These experiences fostered ownership of their learning, promoting research-based leadership practices to drive academic excellence and equity within schools. Reflective practices also played a significant role in promoting self-awareness and continuous improvement. Candidates shared mixed perceptions, acknowledging ePortfolios as

valuable tools for highlighting growth, development, and accomplishments, but also citing concerns regarding their time-consuming nature and limited professional relevance. Nonetheless, ePortfolios encouraged critical reflection on leadership experiences, aligning with the research on the value of critical reflection.

These findings have significant implications for future program improvement efforts and other institutions seeking to redesign leadership preparation programs by addressing challenges, such as refining the ePortfolio process to align with professional needs and enhancing the variety of immersive simulation scenarios. The program has demonstrated its ability to innovate and improve based on candidate feedback and data-driven evaluation. These efforts enhance the quality of leadership preparation and provide a scalable framework for integrating experiential learning and reflective practices into similar programs.

The findings demonstrate how experiential learning opportunities effectively bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and practical application. Programs seeking innovative ways to develop practical leadership skills can replicate this approach to build candidates' confidence and preparedness for school-based challenges. Those seeking to enhance outcomes for aspiring leaders can utilise this research as a foundation for redesigning curricula, incorporating experiential opportunities, and aligning program goals with the real-world demands of school leadership.

This study advances educational leadership preparation literature in three significant ways. First, it provides empirical evidence that combining multiple educational theories creates emergent properties that exceed the impact of individual frameworks applied in isolation. Integrating change management, experiential learning, and high-impact practices produced competencies around adaptive expertise, reflective practice, ethical reasoning, and change agency that neither traditional coursework nor isolated innovations typically develop. Second, the research reveals specific mechanisms through which experiential learning translates theoretical knowledge into practical competence. Third, the longitudinal documentation of systematic change implementation provides rare empirical evidence of how Fullan's (2025) change model functions in higher education contexts, demonstrating that sustained improvement requires a multi-year commitment to the initiation, implementation, and institutionalisation phases.

Practical Significance

The practical implications extend beyond the immediate institutional context to inform field-wide transformation efforts. Leadership preparation programs facing pressure to demonstrate relevance and impact can utilise this integrated framework to embed experiential learning while maintaining academic rigour and accreditation compliance. The model's emphasis on theory–practice integration addresses persistent complaints from graduates and employers about the preparation–practice gap. For policymakers and accreditation bodies, the findings suggest the need for standards that emphasise program outcomes and experiential learning components rather than traditional input measures. The research supports revised certification requirements prioritising authentic leadership experiences and demonstrated competency over credit hour completion.

Call to Action

This study provides a theoretical framework and practical guidance for systematic program transformation. The question facing the field is not whether change is needed—recent graduate and employer feedback indicate that traditional approaches are inadequate for preparation. The question is whether preparation programs will embrace the systematic, evidence-based transformation approaches necessary for developing leaders who can navigate complexity, promote equity, and drive meaningful educational improvement.

Future Directions and Sustainability

As this program continues into its institutionalisation phase, several priorities ensure sustained impact and continuous improvement. First, ongoing evaluation using multiple stakeholder perspectives will guide the refinement and adaptation of leadership approaches to evolving challenges. Second, expanding community partnerships will provide diverse and authentic learning contexts, thereby strengthening theory–practice connections. Third, faculty development initiatives will build capacity for experiential learning facilitation and assessment. The broader field would benefit from collaborative networks among institutions implementing similar transformations.

This study demonstrates that integrating experiential learning approaches can better prepare leaders for effective leadership. As one participant stated: “This program did not just teach me about leadership—it taught me how to be a leader who can learn, adapt, and grow throughout my career”. That outcome represents the ultimate goal of leadership preparation transformation: developing competent administrators and adaptive educational leaders prepared for challenges we cannot yet imagine.

Summary

This three-year qualitative investigation demonstrates that systematic integration of High-Impact Practices within educational leadership preparation programs can significantly enhance graduate readiness for contemporary school leadership challenges. By combining Fullan’s (2025) change management framework with Kolb’s (2015) experiential learning theory and Kuh’s (2008) evidence-based pedagogical practices, this study provides a replicable model for program transformation that addresses the growing gap between traditional preparation approaches and current leadership demands.

The research reveals five insights that advance leadership preparation. First, active field experiences that engage candidates in authentic leadership tasks create transformative learning opportunities. Second, immersive simulations provide safe practice spaces for developing high-stakes communication and ethical decision-making skills. Third, reflection-based learning tools require customisation to align with diverse career goals and learning preferences. Fourth, explicit scaffolding of theory–practice connections is essential for integration of academic knowledge with practical application. Ultimately, systematic change management, as outlined in Fullan’s model, enables program transformation that improves over time.

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Effects of a Standards-Aligned, Online Redesign of a Master’s in Educational Leadership Program

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ABSTRACT: Administrative leaders and faculty in a Southwest Regional Florida (USA) university master’s in educational leadership (M.Ed.) program determined to take steps to confront two major programmatic problems. The first was declining student enrolment and the second was diminishing performance on the Florida Educational Leadership Exam (FELE). These two trends were visualised as serious because the University exists in an extremely competitive marketplace. With online availability to all eligible students, traditional notions of institutional or geographical political boundaries creating exclusivity no longer apply. Online delivery obviates geographical monopoly. This report examines whether a program redesign—anchored in state standards, embedded internships, and a shift to high-quality online delivery in partnership with school districts—was most likely positively associated with changes in enrolment and FELE outcomes. After careful review, various collaborations, and multiple programmatic changes over the last several years, enrolment has tripled, and state test scores are above the state average in all categories.

Key words: Educational leadership preparation, FELE, online learning quality, program evaluation, design thinking, job-embedded internships, Five Whys protocols

Introduction

In 2019, program leaders and faculty in a master’s in educational leadership program observed two challenges: (1) first-time Florida Educational Leadership Exam (FELE) pass rates were below statewide averages in most subtests, and (2) declining enrolment (Ungarean, Bixler, & Desmore, 2023). Courses were delivered exclusively on campus, and recruitment only focused on nearby school districts. In response, the program initiated a redesign guided by a “design-thinking” process (Brown & Katz, 2019) and collaborative inquiry loosely based on the “Five Whys” protocol to determine the causes for the problems and create a scenario for transformational change (Ungarean, Bixler, & Desmore, 2023).

Design thinking is an iterative approach to problem solving that emphasises empathy, collaboration, ideation, prototyping, and testing potential solutions (Brown & Katz, 2019; Liedtka, 2018). It encourages stakeholders to understand user needs and continuously refine solutions through cycles of feedback and reflection. In educational contexts, design thinking has been used to reimagine academic programs and improve student outcomes by engaging faculty, students, and community partners in the innovation process (Razzouk & Shute, 2012).

The Five Whys design thinking protocol, originally developed by Sakichi Toyoda as part of the Toyota Production System, is a root-cause analytical technique used to identify underlying issues by repeatedly asking “Why?” until the problem is clearly revealed (Serrat, 2017). When combined with design thinking, this method helps teams move beyond symptoms of problems to uncover the structural causes of extant challenges. In this case, program leaders formed an advisory board comprised of local district leaders to work through the design thinking process using the Five Whys protocol to determine the cause of the problems identified: (1) low enrolment and (2) low FELE pass rates.

To contextualise the significance of the Florida Educational Leadership Exam (FELE), it is important to note that this state-mandated certification exam is designed to verify that aspiring school leaders in Florida possess the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively lead schools and promote student achievement. Candidates must pass all sections of this exam in addition to completing their master’s degree in educational leadership to become certified as a school administrator in Florida. Master’s programs in educational leadership are required to include coursework in instructional leadership, school law, ethics, finance, human resources, and other topics that align with state leadership standards. The FELE is comprised of three subtests that assess core leadership competencies based on Florida Principal Leadership Standards (FPLS). The first subtest focuses on leadership for student learning with topics like instructional leadership, data-driven decision making, and school improvement. The second subtest focuses on organisational development which measures knowledge of human resource management, professional development, ethical decision making, and creating a positive school culture. The third subtest focuses on systems leadership with topics like understanding systems management, policy and legal compliance, resource allocation, and communication. There is also a timed-writing performance test on this exam. Graduate students are permitted to take each section of the exam until they successfully pass each. The state reports data for first-time test takers and their success rates on each section of the exam. The state also compares student performance for students associated with each university to the state average and reports that information to each university. Program leaders in the master’s in educational leadership program analyse first-time FELE pass rates annually as a key measure for evaluating the program’s effectiveness. The goal is always to have first-time pass rates above the state average in all subtests.

Over the course of several weeks and continuing into months, program leaders collaborated closely with the advisory board to identify the root causes of the program’s structural challenges. Their analysis revealed three key issues: (1) the program’s length created time and financial burdens for students, (2) many students were unable or unwilling to travel to campus to attend in-person classes, and (3) the curriculum lacked clear alignment with Florida Principal Leadership Standards (FPLS).

After determining why the challenges occurred, program redesign planning began to address the structural problems within the program. Program leaders and the advisory board focused on revising the program with a focus on online delivery to address enrolment concerns and completed a detailed curriculum review to address low state test scores.

While moving the program to an online format, two events accelerated the transition: (1) the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), and (2) a university contract with an external marketing partner that required online delivery for a portion of the program. During this transition to online learning, program leaders wanted to ensure the curriculum would address the problem of low state test scores, so they re-examined program curriculum. This curriculum review (and revision) included FPLS standards alignment, ensuring quality pedagogy for online learning, and determining how candidates could apply theory to practice in an online setting. This evaluation articulated clear and measurable outcome-based questions, described data and procedures utilised, reported numerical results, and addressed various explanations for the results.

Evaluation Study Parameters

Program evaluation reports are advantageous when the evaluators cannot control all variables, are not sure of the interactions among the variables, and are chiefly concerned with the results obtained of interventions to modify aspects of the program. If the results obtained are those that are desired, then an evaluation study is useful in attempting to parse out more information which may lead to program continuation and further improvements and perhaps even replication.

This is different from a research study which is often aimed at discerning relationships between variables and approaches in formulating hypotheses to be tested. In the case reported in this evaluation, interventions were tried based on a review of the literature and in a variety of reports and contemporary information which purports to personify best or promising practices. It is also common knowledge that researchers cannot exert the type of regulation of the context to exert levels of greater precision necessary to engage in explicit explanation of the results or lack of results obtained. In such cases, an evaluation may be as good as it gets. Nonetheless, it is useful to look back and take account of both means and ends when trying to improve practice and program efficacy.

Literature Review

Program leaders in a master's in educational leadership program in Florida, USA used "design thinking" and the "Five Whys protocol" to determine why the program had low enrolment and low performance on state certification exams. Design thinking is an iterative process used to generate solutions to complex problems (Brown & Katz, 2019; Liedtka, 2018). Within educational leadership, design thinking serves as a framework for continuous improvement and encouraging collaboration between faculty, students, and community partners to create systems responsive to learners' needs (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). The Five Whys protocol allows teams to uncover systemic challenges by asking a series of "Why?" questions to identify root causes of issues (Serrat, 2017). By integrating these methods, program leaders were able to analyse program processes,

identify barriers to student success, and implement solutions grounded in stakeholder feedback and state standards.

Design thinking has also been used in higher education to evaluate and redesign entire academic programs. For instance, Boling and Smith (2020) found that design thinking fosters empathy-driven inquiry and collaborative problem solving during program evaluations, enabling educators to align curricula more effectively with learner and employer needs. Similarly, Guerrero and Kalnins (2021) explained that using design thinking principles in academic program review helps institutions create sustainable, learner-centred improvements that respond to changing educational and workforce demands. This research supports the program's use of design thinking as a model for ongoing evaluation and innovation.

Using design thinking and the Five Whys protocol, program leaders, together with their advisory board, determined several explanations for the identified problems and worked collaboratively to resolve them. To resolve the low enrolment issue, program leaders turned to online learning as a solution. Virtual education has become prevalent in learning institutions across the globe. For this program, implementing online learning was imperative due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a university contract with a marketing firm. Online learning offers flexibility and an alternative platform for students who may not have the time or ability to travel to campus.

Research suggests that virtual education can positively influence academic outcomes, including performance on standardised tests, especially when supported by effective pedagogy (Pei & Wu, 2019). Similarly, Means et al. (2013) found that students in online or blended environments often achieve equal or modestly superior outcomes compared to those in traditional settings when instruction follows evidence-based design with opportunities for interaction and feedback. Abuhassna et al. (2020) found that combining Transactional Distance Theory and Bloom's Taxonomy provides a strong conceptual foundation for developing online learning that fosters deeper understanding and higher-order thinking. Research also supports the integration of well-structured online learning frameworks in professional preparation programs to improve engagement, comprehension, and performance. Means et al. (2013) emphasised that interactive platforms, personalised learning tools, and multimedia resources enhance student motivation and retention in virtual settings. Online learning allows students to work at their own pace and adapt instructional strategies to their preferred learning styles, which can be especially beneficial when preparing for standardised assessments such as the Florida Educational Leadership Examination (FELE).

To address issues related to student learning and program effectiveness, design thinking principles guided the redesign process of this master's in educational leadership program. This human-centred approach (Brown & Katz, 2019) emphasises understanding learner experiences and refining course structures through feedback and iteration. Program leaders also reviewed research on authentic assessment to strengthen the connection between coursework and professional competencies. Sokhanvar et al. (2021) found that authentic assessment improves both learning experiences and employability outcomes in higher education. Their review concluded that authentic tasks promote student engagement, satisfaction, and achievement while cultivating essential professional skills such as communication, critical thinking, and collaboration. Likewise, Ashford-Rowe et al. (2014) observed that increased demand for workplace-ready professionals has prompted higher education institutions to adopt more authentic, performance-based assessment

methods. Program leaders worked with the advisory board to combine online learning with authentic internship experiences to resolve both low enrolment and low state exam scores.

In the context of educational leadership preparation, strong program design and effective assessment are critical for producing competent school leaders. Research indicates that high-quality leadership programs provide candidates with authentic, job-embedded learning experiences that directly link theory to practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Aligning coursework with Florida Principal Leadership Standards (FPLS) and offering supervised internships can enhance leadership readiness and certification success (Ungarean, Bixler, Desmore, & Dawes, 2023). During the redesign process, program leaders examined best practices in online pedagogy and revised course content to ensure that FPLS competencies were consistently and explicitly addressed across the curriculum. Studies by Archambault et al. (2022) and Brennan (2003) highlight the importance of structured interaction, assessment alignment, and multimedia-supported engagement as key elements of quality online instruction.

Collaboration between universities and external stakeholders, such as school districts and community partners, is also an essential component of effective leadership preparation. Research demonstrates that university–district partnerships play a vital role in aligning leadership preparation programs with the realities of school leadership practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Orr & Barber, 2006). These partnerships foster shared responsibility for leadership development, ensure curriculum relevance, and strengthen field-based learning opportunities (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2013). By engaging district leaders in the advisory board, the program ensured that redesign decisions were informed by practitioner insights and grounded in the needs of local schools.

Virtual learning also supports accessibility and scalability in leadership preparation programs. Online delivery expands access to educators who face barriers to traditional on-campus learning, including geographic distance, full-time employment, or family responsibilities (Allen & Seaman, 2017). For this master's in educational leadership program, implementing an online format not only increased flexibility for candidates but also broadened the program's reach to prospective students across the state. By combining design thinking principles, authentic assessment practices, and research-based online pedagogy, the program redesign sought to improve both student outcomes and overall program quality while addressing the demands of modern educational leadership.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The iterative design thinking process (Brown & Katz, 2019) incorporating the Five Whys protocol was utilised to determine the root causes of the challenges faced by program leaders, specifically low enrolment and poor test performance. The process emphasised continuous inquiry to uncover underlying systemic issues rather than address surface-level problems.

To operationalise this approach, program leaders formed an advisory board comprised of regional school district leaders to collaboratively investigate the factors contributing to the identified challenges. Through iterative questioning and analysis, the group determined the root causes included:

1. the extended time required for students to complete the program (compared with other programs);
2. limited accessibility to the program, as the program was offered only in an on-campus format; and
3. a curriculum not fully grounded or aligned to the FPLS.

Using these findings, the group applied design thinking concepts to explore innovative solutions to address structural and instructional barriers. The process integrated continuous questioning, feedback, and testing of potential improvements to strengthen the program. The framework guided pathways for improvement as follows:

- Effective pedagogy, standards alignment, and embedded internships → promote instructional coherence and integration of leadership practice → leading to improved FELE performance;
- Online quality assurance and statewide recruitment → ensure expanded access and flexibility → resulting in increased enrolment.

By connecting diagnostic inquiry (Five Whys) with iterative solution development (design thinking), this conceptual framework provided a systematic and reflective approach to educational leadership program enhancement. It emphasised that effective innovation emerges from collaborative problem solving, continuous evaluation, and a commitment to aligning program practices with established professional standards and measurable student outcomes.

Methods

This study utilised quantitative data and a qualitative case study design to examine the effects of a comprehensive program redesign on enrolment and student performance within a university's master's in educational leadership program. The redesign sought to address two primary issues: declining student enrolment and below-average performance on the state required FELE.

The theoretical and conceptual framework for this study was grounded in design thinking (Brown & Katz, 2019), emphasising program and regional district leader collaboration, continuous improvement, and innovation in educational program development. This framework supported the identification of problems, construction of solutions, and implementation of evidence-based practices to improve program quality and enrolment.

Data Sources

Data for this study were drawn from multiple instructional and state sources to ensure triangulation and content validity.

- FELE performance data: Aggregate results for program affiliated first-time test takers and statewide cohorts were obtained by subtest and academic year. Only first-time test takers were included in the analysis; retake scores were excluded.

- Enrolment data: Institutional enrolment datasets included all admitted, degree-seeking M.Ed. in educational leadership students by academic term (Fall 2018–Spring 2024). Non-degree seeking students were excluded.
- Qualitative program documentation: Internal university and college records were reviewed, including course syllabi, internship task descriptions, quality-review reports for online course design, and advisory board meeting minutes.
- State standards and frameworks: The Florida Principal Leadership Standards (FPLS) served as the guiding framework for curricular alignment and analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

Program leaders initiated the test-performance inquiry by examining FELE first-time pass rates for students associated with this university program to identify performance trends relative to state averages. Following the identification of below-average results across most subtests, the team conducted a comprehensive review of course content, curriculum alignment, and instructional design within the M.Ed. in educational leadership program. Program leaders formed an advisory board comprised of school district leaders and the group met regularly to identify the skills and competencies required for effective educational leadership and to align program outcomes accordingly.

At the same time, two concurrent developments influenced program enrolment: (1) the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the transition to online learning, and; (2) the university's partnership with an external recruitment contractor to expand statewide outreach (which also required us to employ an online learning platform).

Program leaders and the advisory board determined to align all courses with FPLS, reformat courses for online delivery, and evaluate courses through the university's quality assurance process for instructional design and pedagogy. Each course was assigned a focus FPLS standard and included a job-embedded, standard-focused internship component allowing candidates to apply theory to practice in their own schools/districts.

To streamline program completion and address concerns regarding time and cost, total credit hours required for program completion were reduced from 39 to 30 credits. The redesigned courses were aligned to FPLS and reviewed and certified to be "high-quality" by the university-based criteria including objectives-assessment alignment, instructional materials, learner interaction, course technology, and accessibility.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted using aggregate, de-identified datasets.

- Quantitative Analysis: FELE data were analysed to compare first-time pass rates of program affiliated examinees to statewide cohorts by subtest and academic year. Enrolment data were analysed by term and county to identify patterns and trends before and after the program redesign.

- **Qualitative Analysis:** Meeting minutes, curriculum documents, and quality-review reports were analysed to document the redesign process, stakeholder collaboration, and implementation of best practices for online learning.

The analysis covered two major phases: a pre-redesign baseline (Academic Years 2018–2019 and 2019–2020) and a during/after redesign phase (2020–2024). All data were collected and analysed in compliance with university and state governance policies. The project was reviewed by the university’s Institutional Review Board and judged exempt from human subjects review due to the use of de-identified, aggregate data.

Results and Discussion

In 2019, when program leaders began using design thinking to resolve the issues noted for the master’s in educational leadership program, student enrolment was historically low. However, shortly after implementing curriculum changes in concert with online course delivery, student enrolment began to increase. It is important to note the coronavirus occurred at the same time and the university hired an outside company for recruitment which could be contributing factors to increased enrolment. Figure 1 shows student enrolment in fall 2018 was 48 and increased to 188 by fall 2023. Table 1 shows more detailed enrolment for each semester from fall 2020 through spring 2024. More recent enrolment data are not included in this study as this information was obtained from previous research (Ungarean, Bixler, & Desmore, 2023).

Figure 1 and Table 1 show a headcount enrolment for students enrolled in the master’s in educational leadership (M.Ed.) for the fall 2018 semester (48), fall 2019 (55), fall 2020 (115), fall 2021(177), fall 2022 (179), and fall 2023 (188). Between the fall 2018 semester to fall 2023 semester, the program experienced a significant increase of 151 students, a 300% increase. Table 1 provides additional enrolment by semester from 2020–2024. Combined international and out of state graduate student figures are and have been less than 10 with no significant change since the inception of programmatic changes.

The headcount enrolled from regional districts increased significantly for the years 2019 to 2024 as university program leaders continued to be engaged in collaboration with district leaders. Additionally, contracted university recruiters help explain the increase in overall enrollment.

Figure 1

Fall Semester Enrolment Data 2018–2023

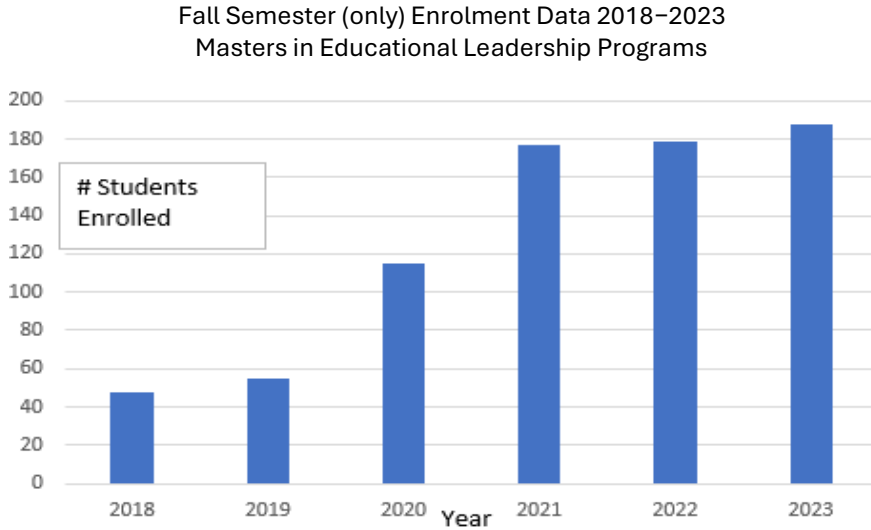


Table 1

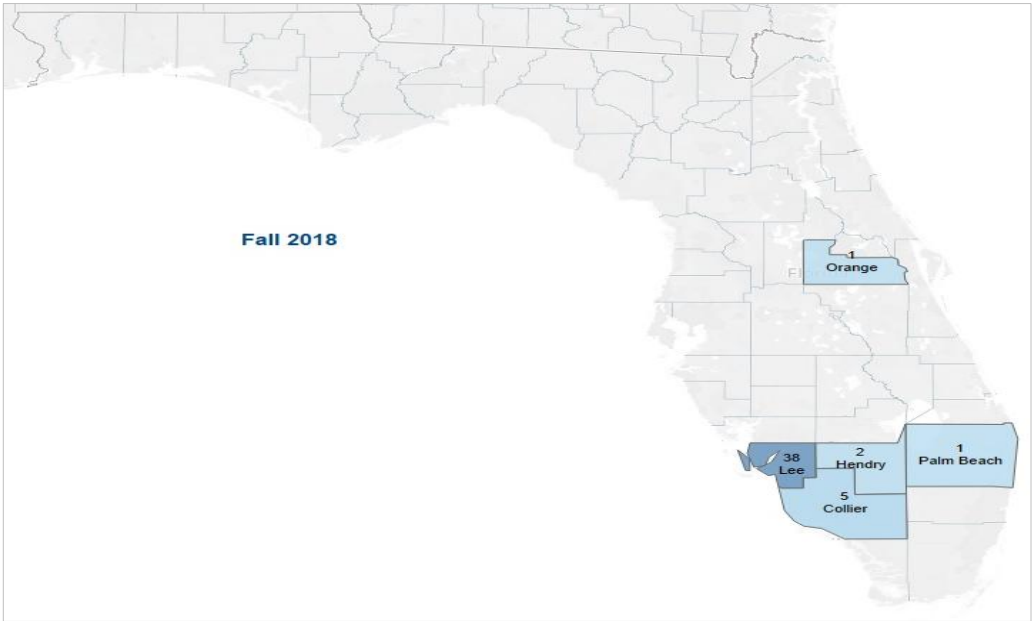
Enrolment by Semester Master's in Educational Leadership 2018-2023

Programs	2020-21			2021-22			2022-23			2023-24	
	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Summer 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Summer 2022	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Summer 2023	Fall 2023	Spring 2024
MA-FDLFAD	38	37	27	35	26	18	18	17	14	19	18
MA-EDLEAD-A	23	33	34	44	51	41	46	46	39	49	51
MED EDLEAD	42	43	60	70	58	53	55	45	34	47	54
MED-EDLEAD-A	12	19	22	28	31	45	60	70	66	73	85
Grand TOTAL	115	132	143	177	166	157	179	178	153	188	208
Total Academic Year	390			500			510			396	

Figure 2 shows the enrolment of students in the master's in educational leadership degree program by district in the fall 2018 semester when all courses were delivered only in person and on campus.

Figure 2

Headcount Enrolment by County Fall 2018



Note. From “Forming a unique partnership between a university’s educational leadership masters’ degree program and its surrounding school districts using the Five Whys protocol”, by M. Ungarean, K. Bixler, and K. Desmore, 2023, *Journal of Formative Design in Learning*, 7(1), p. 21 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41686-023-00076-6>). Copyright 2023 by Springer.

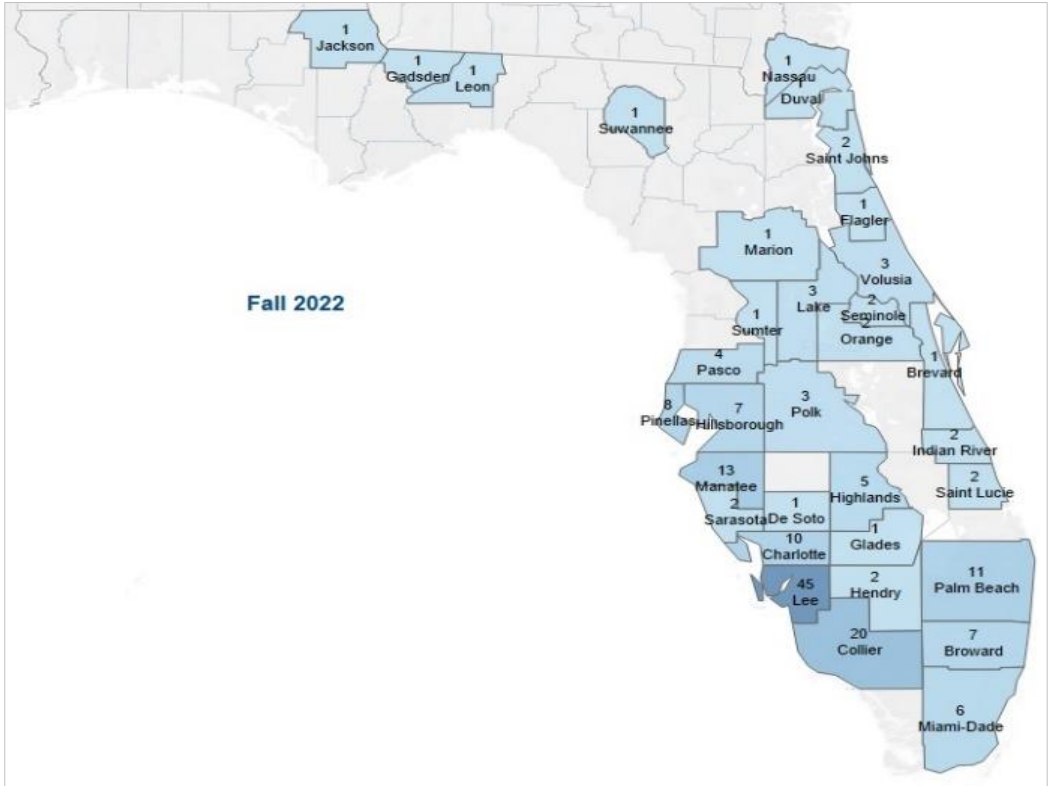
In 2018, the degree program had 48 students enrolled. However, Figure 3 shows the headcount enrolment by the fall 2022 semester, which increased to 179 students. The enrolment of students who live outside of the state of Florida is not shown in these figures.

Between the fall 2018 semester and the fall 2022 semester, the enrolment increased from five districts to 40 districts and remained steady through 2024–25. This was, in part, due to curricular changes, but also because the pandemic required a shift to online teaching so the university could reach candidates from various locations. International students and out-of-state students also enrolled but the combined figure for this was less than 10 and didn’t represent any significant change from before program changes were implemented.

The increase in enrolment appears to be due to the overall program redesign with the move to online learning, effectiveness of the program, engagement of regional districts, increased recruitment efforts, and focus on Florida standards.

Figure 3

Headcount Enrolment by County Fall 2022



Note. From “Forming a unique partnership between a university’s educational leadership masters’ degree program and its surrounding school districts using the Five Whys protocol”, by M. Ungarean, K. Bixler, and K. Desmore, 2023, *Journal of Formative Design in Learning*, 7(1), p. 22 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41686-023-00076-6>). Copyright 2023 by Springer.

In Figures 4 and 5, “Competency Score” indicates the average percent of multiple-choice items answered correctly within the subarea (subtest) by all examinees the first time they took the Florida Educational Leadership Exam. The charts show data before curricular changes in the 2019–20 and before column on the left, and during and after curricular changes in the middle far right column (current AY 2023–2024). Figure 5 shows data from AY 24–25 as well. The average percentage is based only on questions that contribute to examinee scores and first-time pass rates. The data show that with curricular changes, FELE test scores improved.

Figure 4

FELE First-Time Percent Passing by Subtest and Academic Year University vs. State

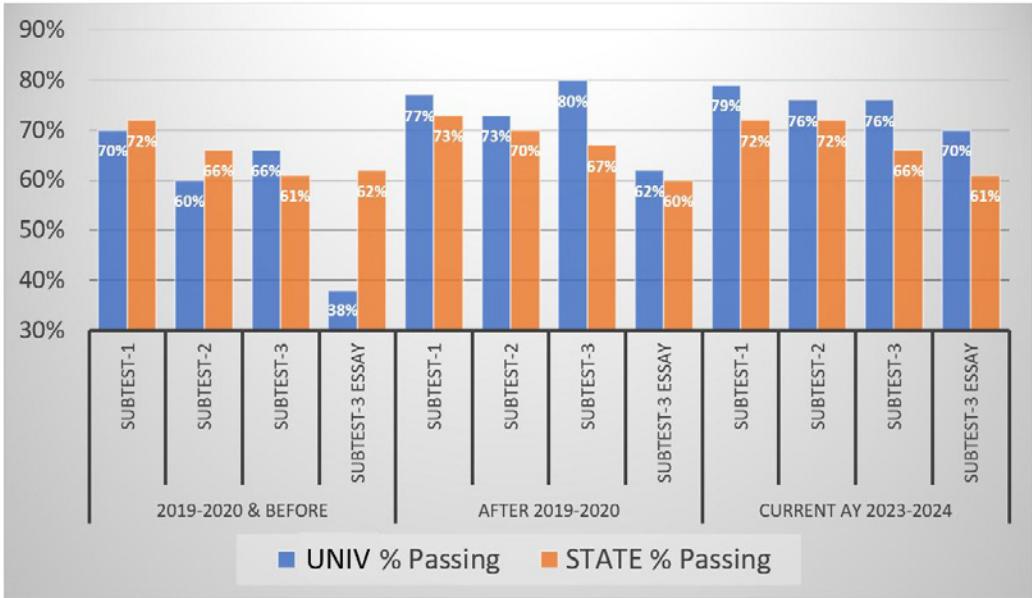


Figure 5

FELE First-Time Percent Passing by Subtest and Academic Year University vs. State

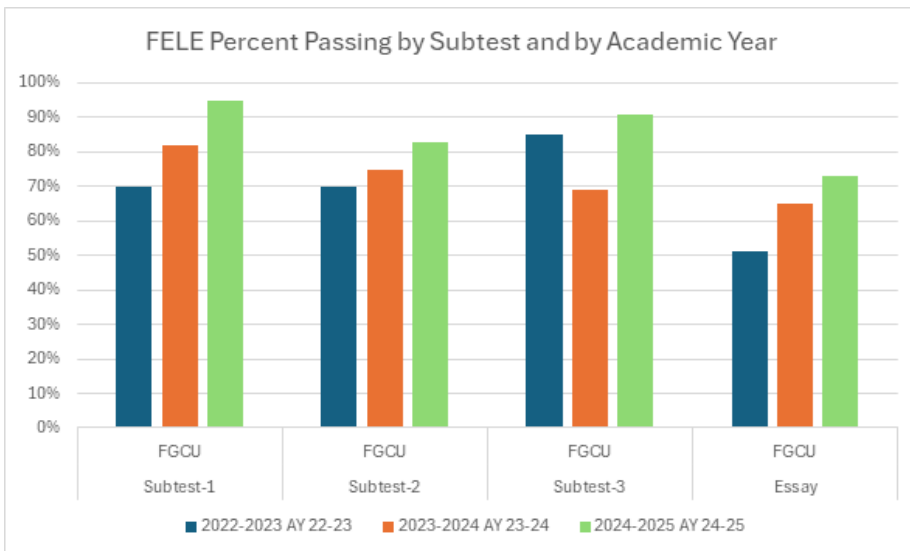
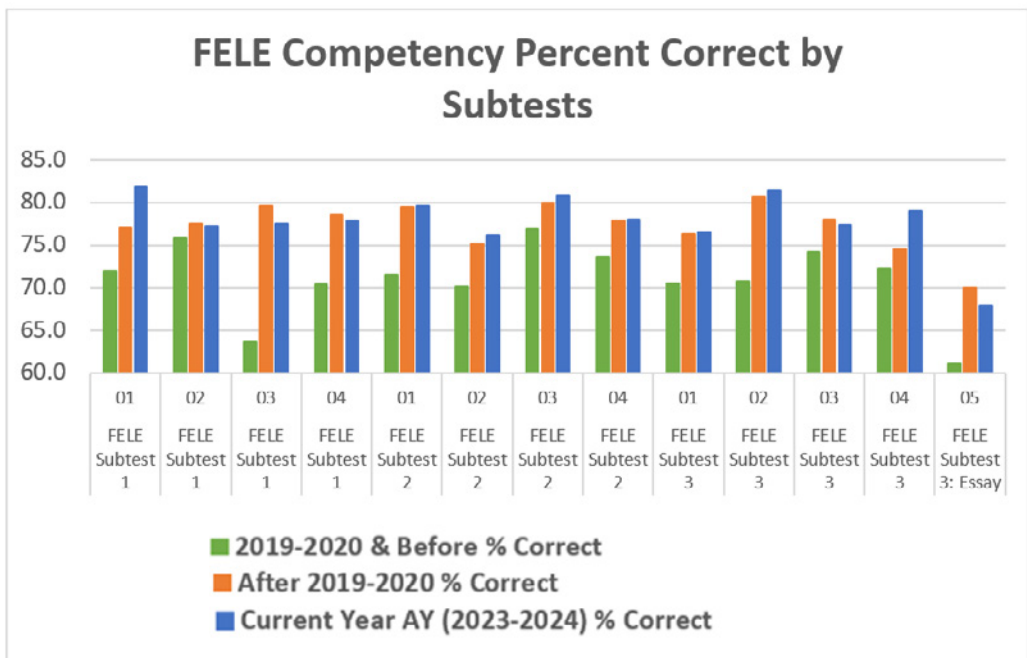


Figure 6 shows FELE competency percent correct by subtest from 2019–20 and before programmatic changes were made to show a baseline for scoring on the FELE. The orange and blue columns show FELE score improvement during and after curricular changes that align with Florida standards.

Figure 6

FELE Competency Percent Correct by Subtest Year Over Year



The results of the evaluation are as follows:

Enrolment: Enrolment increased from 48 (Fall 2018) to 188 (Fall 2023) (+151 students, +314.6% relative increase). Table 1 provides term-by-term counts for Fall 2020–Spring 2024. The use of online delivery and external recruiting expanded the program’s reach as counties represented expanded from 5 counties (Fall 2018) to 40 counties (Fall 2022) and remained broad through 2024–2025. Out-of-state and international enrolment remained <10 combined across years with no change.

FELE Exam Scores: Program first-time pass rates improved from pre-redesign (AY 2018–2019/2019–2020) to 2023–2024 and met or exceeded state averages across most FELE subtests. Program percent-correct rose year-over-year across FELE subtests and the differences relative to FELE state averages narrowed by 2023–2024.

Program Design Components: Observed trends appear to be associated with redesign components, curriculum standards focus, and pandemic effects and contractor marketing efforts. It is important to note that the evaluator for this work was also the program leader responsible for

redesigning the program. However, the factual data would indicate that the two major objectives of the redesign substantially improved enrolment figures and FELE test performance. A more rigorous and objective evaluation could be accomplished in the future if warranted.

Conclusion

Program leaders in this master's in educational leadership program partnered with district administrators to form an advisory board with the goal of addressing several challenges within the program. Guided by the principle of "starting with the end in mind", the group sought to increase program enrolment, improve performance on the Florida Educational Leadership Exam (FELE), and ensure graduates were prepared to effectively lead P-12 schools in ways that improve student achievement. Through this collaboration, program leaders streamlined the curriculum by focusing on state standards and reducing credits from 39 to 30 hours and transitioned the program to a fully online format, which increased accessibility for candidates and reduced the overall cost. Courses were restructured to align with the Florida Principal Leadership Standards (FPLS), include authentic, job-embedded learning experiences, and utilise research-based practices in online pedagogy. These changes collectively contributed to improved FELE performance and notable growth in enrolment.

The redesign outcomes are consistent with research highlighting the benefits of collaborative, design-oriented approaches to program improvement. As Brown and Katz (2019) emphasise, design thinking promotes iterative problem solving and innovation by centring the user experience, in this case the needs of the students and districts. Similarly, Razzouk and Shute (2012) note that design thinking fosters creative problem solving and systemic reform in education by encouraging collaboration. The partnership between university faculty and district leaders aligns with these principles, as it created a shared sense of ownership and relevance in the redesign process. Collaborative partnerships between preparation programs and P-12 systems are frequently cited as an example of effective leadership development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These partnerships help ensure coursework and field experiences are authentic, contextually relevant, and directly aligned with the demands of school leadership practice.

The integration of authentic, standards-based experiences also reflects current trends in leadership preparation research. Sokhanvar et al. (2021) and Ashford-Rowe et al. (2014) emphasise that authentic assessment and experiential learning improve engagement, deepen understanding, and build employability skills essential for educational leaders. The redesigned program's inclusion of standards-based internships allowed candidates to apply theory to practice, consistent with Ungarean, Bixler, Desmore, & Dawes's (2023) finding that job-embedded learning enhances leadership readiness and certification success. Furthermore, the transition to online delivery supports finding by Means et al. (2013) and Pei and Wu (2019), who report that well-designed virtual learning environments can produce equal or superior learning outcomes when instruction emphasises interaction, feedback, and multimedia supported engagement.

Overall, this program's collaborative, research-informed redesign represents a promising model for leadership preparation programs nationwide and beyond. By integrating design thinking, authentic assessment, and strong university-district partnership, the program addressed critical

issues of accessibility, alignment, and effectiveness. The resulting increases in enrolment and improved FELE outcomes demonstrate how intentional design and stakeholder collaboration can enhance both student learning and program success. This case reinforces the growing body of evidence that leadership preparation programs grounded in collaboration, standards alignment, and authentic practice are best positioned to develop competent, career-ready leaders equipped to meet the evolving challenges of P–12 education.

Limitations

First, enrolment trends and state assessment trends have continued to climb with the changes to the program. Florida leadership standards changed in 2022 and the program has modified curriculum in collaboration with district leaders to ensure curriculum and internship tasks address the new standards and graduate student and district needs are met. Next, to date, program leaders have maintained positive, collaborative relationships with district leaders and this will be important to continue to ensure the university program meets their needs and the needs of districts throughout Florida.

Additionally, this study is primarily an observational, single-institution study with no randomised assignment. The aggregate FELE data limit covariate adjustment. The pandemic and contractor marketing coincide with redesign timing, complicating attribution. Some term-level data (e.g., Summer 2024 and beyond) were unavailable at analysis time.

Plausible rival explanations: (1) COVID era demand for online graduate study likely increased applications statewide; (2) Contractor supported marketing expanded the applicant pool independent of curricular changes; (3) State standards revision (2022) may have altered FELE emphasis and program–exam alignment; (4) Reduced credits (39→30) could attract cost and time sensitive candidates; (5) Cohort composition shifts (e.g., more experienced teachers) could explain FELE gains; (6) There could be “confirmation bias” in the study as the evaluator was also the program leader who led program redesign. The author attempted to address these issues by comparing university data to statewide benchmarks and by trend analyses, but residual confounding remains.

Implications for Practice

Programs seeking to scale up with improved access and enhanced licensure outcomes should align curriculum with state leadership standards, design authentic internships tied to coursework, and adopt quality-assured online delivery models. Partnerships with school districts can sharpen the practice relevance of coursework and support targeted recruitment by connecting preparation programs to the specific leadership needs of schools and school systems. Improved collaboration between universities and P–12 districts is one of the most significant takeaways from this evaluation study. Sustained engagement ensures that preparation programs remain responsive to the evolving needs of the educational workforce and the accountability demands of the state certification system.

Another critical lesson is that program transformation takes time and must be approached as a continuous improvement process rather than a one-time intervention. Establishing trust and a

unified vision among stakeholders, including university faculty, leadership, and district administrators, requires deliberate effort, transparency, and shared accountability. Meaningful reform also depends on iterative cycles of implementation and evaluation, in which data are used not just for compliance, but for reflective learning and informed decision making. There are rarely “quick-fixes” for systemic challenges that arise from interconnected causes; instead, sustainable change occurs when institutions commit to long-term collaboration and evidence-based innovation.

Future leadership preparation programs can draw from this case by adopting a design thinking mindset that emphasises experimentation and co-creation with practitioners. Embedding authentic internships and aligning online instruction with professional standards ensures that candidates not only meet certification requirements but also develop the adaptive skills needed to lead P–12 school systems. Ultimately, the success of such initiatives depends on maintaining robust partnerships, continuously evaluating outcomes, and fostering a culture of shared learning between universities and school districts to ensure the ongoing relevance and quality of educational leadership preparation.

Competing Interests and Funding

The author declares no conflicts of interest. This research received no external funding.

Data Statement

Supporting data are available upon request.

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Frequent Practices of Effective Middle Curriculum Leaders and the Significance of Professional Context

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ABSTRACT: This article contributes to research on middle leaders in secondary schools and the ways in which middle leadership practices are framed by and responsive to professional context. The significance of context shown in this study, through the perceptions of middle curriculum leaders in Melbourne, Australia, highlights the way that frequent practices are used to navigate the complex work of those with both teaching and leadership responsibilities in schools. Ten middle curriculum leaders were individually interviewed to elicit perceptions of their work. In this phenomenological study, four frequent and complex practices were revealed. Practices that are frequently utilised by effective middle curriculum leaders are: plan for and implement effective teaching and learning; engage in professional learning; collaboration; and management of staff. Each of these is framed by and responsive to context which allows effective leaders to navigate the broad scope of their role and complexities of their work. Further, through an understanding of leadership in context, various ways in which curricular area-wide capacity building are revealed. The findings of this study go some way to illustrate how the important work of middle leaders is complex, broad in scope, and bound by influences from jurisdiction, individual school, and role.

Key words: Middle leadership, curriculum leadership, professional context, leadership actions

Introduction

Effective middle curriculum leadership in schools is an emerging area of interest in research due to a number of factors, including empirical findings demonstrating the strong impact middle led initiatives have on student outcomes, greater need for managerial support for principals, and the development of collaborative leadership ideas (e.g., Gurr, 2019; Harris et al., 2019; Leithwood, 2016; Lipscombe et al., 2020). The term *middle leadership* is used in an Australian context to describe staff in schools who lead from the “middle” of a hierarchical leadership structure where teachers are on the bottom and senior leaders, including the principal, are on the top. Middle leadership literature has mostly examined teachers working in secondary or high schools (12- to 18-year-old students) who have some teaching responsibilities and some leadership responsibilities

(Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). The term *teacher leadership* is also used within literature, however this term is much more broad as it describes a process of influence rather than a specific role bounded by structure (Gurr, 2024). The term *middle leadership* will be used throughout this article. Middle leadership roles and responsibilities vary by jurisdiction and by individual school but what is common of such roles is that they support the curriculum (such as Head of Faculty or Subject Area Coordinator), wellbeing, or are student focused (such as Year Level Coordinator or Head of House), or co-curricular (such as Head of Music or Sport) life of secondary schools. The work of secondary level curriculum leaders is relevant to this research owing to the discrete specialisation of their work as curriculum leaders and as teachers within one curriculum area. Curriculum leaders in primary settings (5- to 12-year-old students) mostly operate as generalists in the classroom even if their curriculum leadership role is specialised. The dual specialisation of secondary curriculum leaders was of interest in this study. When considering the roles and value of middle curriculum leaders in secondary schools, Hickman's (2012) insight into the value of co-leaders is visible in a 21st century hierarchical leadership model: principal, senior curriculum leader, middle curriculum leader. Hickman's (2012) co-leaders insight speaks to the way the big picture is conceived at the top of the hierarchy and the small picture is actioned at the bottom. Middle curriculum leaders in secondary schools, typically, are responsible for overseeing the implementation of curriculum and pedagogy within one curricular area and report to the senior leader and principal.

School context is examined through different levels in leadership and management frameworks and discourses, each having influence on the next: macro (jurisdiction), micro (school), and professional (role and responsibilities) (Bennett et al., 2007; Dinham, 2005; Duignan, 2012; Gurr & Drysdale, 2021). This study presents findings that show ways professional context, which is bound by jurisdiction and school contexts, has significant influence on ways curriculum leadership practices are expressed. Middle curriculum leaders, most significantly, practice through dual lenses where they practice as teacher and as leader simultaneously. These two lenses must be understood together. Therefore, their professional context must be understood through both lenses. For the purpose of this article, the term *context* refers to professional context unless otherwise stated. An examination of frequent practices of effective middle curriculum leaders goes some way to unpack how middle curriculum leaders respond to context through their dual teacher/leader lenses. Frequent practices found in this study, undertaken in Melbourne, Australia, are:

- plan for and implement effective teaching and learning,
- engage in professional learning,
- collaboration, and
- management of staff.

The purpose of this article is to examine these frequent practices of effective middle curriculum leaders and explore the significance of context in how these are enacted. The following question guided this study: How are frequent middle curriculum leadership practices framed by and responsive to context?

Literature

The context where leadership actions occur is emerging as a significant factor in educational leadership and management literature (Hallinger, 2018; Lamont, 2023). Examining contextual factors in unpacking how leadership actions are applied in practice are beginning to be used to shape our understanding of success in school leadership. Hallinger (2018) describes the effective practice of leadership as adaptive to the needs and context of the school. The notion of context being valuable within a school leadership framework is well supported in contemporary literature (Begley, 2012; Gurr & Drysdale, 2021; Moos, 2012; Southworth, 2009), yet the term *context* is used to describe highly varied factors that stem from macro-context, such as political and system, to micro-context including school resource constraints and the socio-economic status of the school specific student population. Professional context is further explored in literature to unpack ways that practitioners need to respond to micro-contexts differently, even within the same institution (Lamont, 2023). There is tension in the way that institutional contexts are explored in educational leadership and management literature. While school leaders are powerless to effect control over the federal, state, or jurisdictional contexts within which their school operates, it is evidenced that school leaders who use system requirements to their opportunity (Dinham, 2005) are more likely to benefit from this macro-context. A pull in the opposite direction sees literature which does not consider system level contexts as valuable to the discourse and therefore does not unpack this element (Hallinger, 2018). The tension between these two approaches highlights that context-sensitive impacts on school leadership can be undervalued in research. Empirical research into contextual effects highlights that principals who adapt their leadership practices on factors that are within their capacity to control influence the context of the school; namely, goal setting, instructional supervision, and parent involvement (Hallinger, 2018). It is unsurprising in many ways that understandings of middle leadership highlight responsiveness to the context of the school and its impact on educational outcomes. By responding to the school context, Grootenboer et al. (2019) describe middle leadership as critical to educational activities:

The situatedness and locally responsiveness of middle leading is of critical importance since the fundamental goal undergirding any educational activity – be it leading, researching, teaching, learning, evaluating or developing – is to educate students. (p. 252)

The relationship between goal setting and school context is shown to be significant as more focus is given to research which aims to quell problematic one-size-fits-all models of leadership (Hallinger, 2009; Niesche, 2018) and examines instead the influence of context. By citing Day et al.'s (2009, p. 15) "principals adapted and refined their leadership strategies in response to changes in the school's capacity and performance over time", Hallinger (2018) implied that the micro and professional contexts of the school are not static. By being able to read the shifting needs of a school, leadership actions shift in response. As the needs of a school vary significantly, so must our understanding of school leadership. Middle leaders are often required to be strategists as shifting needs results in change management (De Nobile, 2019). Skilled change managers use leadership actions to develop a vision for their curricular area of responsibility, use collaborative strategies to generate "buy-in", and develop whole staff teaching strategies (De Nobile, 2019). Literature highlighting leadership actions often focuses on the "turn around" school (Gurr et al.,

2010; Hallinger, 2018). This is due, in part, to be able to make connections between an aggregate of action and context. Middle leaders are hierarchically well positioned to read both the action and the context, often through the lens of a whole school strategic plan or similar. Day et al. (2009) provide some insight into time and scope of the school capacity being two contextual factors that are both within the control of school leaders and also significant in realising leadership actions. The next sections will explore the contexts of time and school capacity in further detail.

It is evidenced that school context has a significant impact on leadership practices (De Nobile, 2018; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2023). Responsiveness to context influences the success of leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020). Sun and Leithwood (2012) describe socio-economic status, for example, to have a predictable influence on the effects of transformational leadership. In an educational climate where the contextual needs of schools are changing perpetually under the reign of school improvement, the “leader’s behaviours are shaped by the school context” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 346). Whilst Sun and Leithwood (2012) are focused mostly on external contexts, examining the school context is important as the context within which each leader operates differs greatly. The professional context of individual practitioners often differs within institutions (Lamont, 2023). The school contexts of each participant and their implications are discussed later in this article.

Measuring the impact of leadership actions over time allows for the school context to visibly inform the success of the actions. That is, for an individual school context, what is considered successful? Gurr et al. (2010) investigated three case studies of successful school principals who each focused on school improvement outcomes. The researchers accounted that in each case the profile of the school had dramatically changed over time as was considered continuously by the leader. In two of the three cases, improving academic outcomes was the focus which then had a flow on effect on other school outcomes including culture and enrolments. Similarly, team cultural climate is necessary for middle leaders to understand. Leadership actions which are responsive to the climate of individual teams have the potential to build team collaborative capacity (Grootenboer, 2018). Hallinger (2018) provides some insight into understanding context and leadership actions:

Optimizing leadership practices for a specific school at a specific moment in time must take into account multiple layers of the widely shared context (i.e. institutional, community, socio-cultural, political, etc.) as well as the personal resources of the leader. Indeed, the task of specifying a ‘context-specific set of actions’ is akin to peeling back layers of an onion. There will always be a limit to the degree that research can formulate an ‘optimal strategy or set of actions’ for this level of specificity. This conclusion stands regardless of the extent and quality of empirical research. (p. 19)

Here Hallinger explores how the uniqueness of a school context requires a “context-specific set of actions”. Davies and Davies (2009, p. 31) agree with this idea by stating that the right intervention needs to be implemented at the right time and that solutions must “come from within the unique context”. While Davies and Davies (2009) do not describe ways of knowing when the “the right time” is, Spiller et al. (2015) provide some solution whereby practical experience will shape how a school leader navigates timing of leadership actions. The relationship between practical experience and leadership actions is explored later in this article.

The ways that context, particularly micro and professional contexts, shape the impact of leadership actions in schools has the potential to influence the perceived effectiveness of the leader. In an educational climate where continuous improvement is a constant expectation, middle leaders are well positioned to respond readily to the micro-contexts of their institution due to their insights both up and down the hierarchical ladder.

Method

In a qualitative empirical study, perceptions of 10 middle curriculum leaders at different career stages and working in various non-government school contexts in Melbourne, Australia were examined to explore: What perceptions of effective curriculum leadership align closely with lead teacher practices? The lead teacher practices under examination were derived from themes taken from Australian lead teacher standards. This phenomenological study used in-depth interviews, applied through the lens of an interpretivist paradigm, to generate richness in the perceptions of participants' middle leadership practice (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014; McChesney & Aldridge, 2019; Opie, 2004). One-on-one 45 to 65 minute interviews were transcribed verbatim to act as a representative form of the data set. Thematic coding was used to determine frequency of practices described by participants in alignment with the Australian professional standards for teaching. Themes were predetermined and described in both depth and breadth in the standards. Recruitment through system or schools was not possible during the time of the research due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on research imposed by the systems. Melbourne had some of the strictest pandemic restrictions globally at the time of research (Dunstan, 2021). Recruitment then had to rely on networks and recommendations to directly appeal to individuals who wanted to be involved and to some extent determined the practicalities of participant selection, for example those available and willing to be interviewed. Participants and their professional contexts, using pseudonyms, are detailed and analysed in Table 1.

Results

Prior research examining alignment between middle curriculum leadership and Australian professional standards for teaching identified substantial practices via frequency analysis (Lamont, 2023). This article extends upon these previously reported findings more broadly. Frequent practices of middle curriculum leaders revealed broad themes which aligned with Australian professional standards for teachers (Lamont, 2023), which included:

- knowing students and how they learn,
- knowing content and pedagogy,
- planning for an implementing effective learning and teaching,
- creating and maintaining safe learning environments,
- assessment and reporting practices,
- engaging in professional learning,

- engaging professionally with colleagues and parents/carers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017),
- collaboration, and
- management of staff.

These broad themes were then broken down into 37 task-based sub-themes, all of which were determined by the professional standards. Sub-themes included tasks such as content selection, student assessment data analysis, pedagogy, feedback, and learning sequencing and evaluation. Two practices revealed in the study—collaboration and management of staff—did not appear in the professional standards but were described as frequent practices by all participants. Frequent practices conducted by middle curriculum leaders revealed insight into ways that practitioners simultaneously worked as both an effective teacher and as an effective leader. This article focuses on the four most frequent areas from the research—plan for and implement effective teaching and learning, engagement in professional learning, collaboration, and management of staff—so as to explore actions framed by leadership in context. All 10 participants demonstrated contextually relevant leadership through these four most frequently practiced areas. The relationship between actions and context can reveal insights into ways actions are used responsively by middle curriculum leaders.

Significance of Professional Context

A significant finding of this study was that the professional context of each participant heavily impacts the practice of curriculum leaders. Contextual factors include, but are not limited to, school-wide resourcing and organisational structure, stability of faculty team and time in role, and personal leadership philosophy informing the direction or goals for the capacity building of their team. An expression of practice was shown to be responsive to the bounds of professional context which provides insight into simultaneous nature of teacher and middle leader. Table 1 links each participants' most frequently discussed theme (identified via thematic coding where themes were pre-determined by the Australian professional standards for teachers) to their professional context. An analysis regarding why their context informs their expression of leadership aligned with practice is then provided.

Table 1*Participants, Professional Context, and Expression of Practice*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Most Frequently Discussed Theme(s)</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Analysis</i>
Matthew Head of Mathematics, independent girls' school	Collaboration <i>and</i> Management of staff	Focus on professional development to increase team capacity.	Matthew practices collaboration and management of staff in a significant manner due to his goal of moving away from a solely textbook based curriculum. In order to design an effective textbook free curriculum, his team needs to undertake professional development, together, and share a willingness to develop capacity.
Neil Head of Digital Learning and Innovation, independent girls' school	Collaboration	Role sits to the side of the middle curriculum leader band and does not directly lead a team, but works across and with teams and individuals.	Neil was able to articulate where his practice lies broadly as the scope of his role is far-reaching. Neil has a diverse skill set that he utilises to contribute to many projects across the school. In this sense, he pivots his practice in a reflective and conscious way.
Ross Head of House (Year 7–9), independent co-educational school	Collaboration	Learning how to best function within the broader scope of the school and does not directly lead a teaching and learning team.	Collaborative practice allows Ross to best operate between Senior Leadership and his teaching team. Particularly in regards to feedback and sharing of professional learning, Ross relies on the expertise of others so that he can make informed choices and share his learning with peers.

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Most Frequently Discussed Theme(s)</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Analysis</i>
June Head of English, independent girls' school	Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning	Leads a steady and successful faculty where curriculum and resourcing are constantly reviewed and developed.	June, who sees herself as a servant leader, actively performs and enjoys preparation tasks frequently in order to provide for her team. Prioritising resource development, in particular, is a way that June supports her team to deliver quality teaching. Given June's tenure, she has overseen multiple senior study design implementations and reflected upon improving the implementation process each time so that her staff are best supported. "Behind the scenes" planning that June undertakes is a way that she facilitates effectiveness.
Bridget Domain Leader: Humanities, Catholic girls' school	Management of staff	Works with resourcing constraints where some subjects are operating more effectively than others.	Bridget is very conscious that workload distributed to her team should be as equitable as possible. In instances where there are sole subject teachers, for example, she manages differently from those in a subject team. In order to promote equity in her team when implementing improvement strategies, Bridget uses different management strategies between higher performing subjects and poorer performing subjects. However, she is aware of controlling the optics and communicating robust justifications.

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Most Frequently Discussed Theme(s)</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Analysis</i>
Charlotte Head of Music, Catholic girls' school	Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning	Aims to develop curriculum that feeds into the instrumental music program and does not directly lead a teaching and learning team.	The combination of rapid and continual growth of Charlotte's music program, both in a curricular and co-curricular sense, has forced Charlotte's practice to focus extensively on planning. Through rewriting and re-scoping curriculum with performance at its centre, Charlotte's own admission is that knowing students and how they learn drives her planning and implementation of effective teaching and learning.
Christina Director of Religious Education [RE] and Identity, Catholic girls' school	Collaboration	Is better suited to leading the big picture, but wants to ensure staff are confident in their pedagogy.	Collaboration is expressed significantly in Christina's practice due to her high engagement in dialogue. Dialogue, not only an important pedagogical practice in RE teaching, is a key way that Christina supports her staff. To be able to both explore what's possible in the big picture and ensure that her staff have the capabilities to functionally engage in the small picture, Christina's collaborative practices link her leadership of curriculum and mission.
Harry Learning Area Leader: Science, Catholic co-educational school	Collaboration	Knows how to operate between senior leaders and teaching staff.	Given that Harry understands how to effectively operate within his leadership hierarchy, it is unsurprising that he understands that "[collaboration]'s probably one of the most important things in teaching. Yeah, it's hugely important" (Harry). Further, Harry leads a large team where he values collaboration as a tool to ensure that students access a consistent learning program.

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Most Frequently Discussed Theme(s)</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Analysis</i>
Naomi Head of Art and Design, Catholic boys' school	Management of staff	Creating a culture shift within the department.	Naomi uses several management strategies to steer a culture shift in her department. She takes a hands-on approach and applies tangible modelling to achieve this goal. She models imperceptible as well as subtle actions to enhance collegiality.
Mary Head of Languages, Catholic boys' school	Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area <i>and</i> Content selection and organisation	Leads a steady faculty where curriculum and pedagogy are constantly reviewed and developed.	To effectively lead a team where she is not a content expert in all languages, Mary's drive to lead strategies and to scope and sequence effectively speaks to the autonomy she gives her staff. To raise the profile of languages outside of her expertise, she proactively demonstrates her functional understanding of languages content and pedagogy. She is able to share these with her team to facilitate growth in others. Whilst the specific themes Mary discussed most frequently were not the themes explicitly examined in this article, Mary's frequent practices can be broadly understood to contribute to "Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning" to their inherent pedagogical application.

The practice of each individual participant has a close link to their professional context. From Table 1, it can be understood that the practice of effective curriculum leadership interacts with context by shaping goals and the scope of leadership tasks. Naomi, for example, used management strategies to lead a culture shift in her department so as to improve the cohesion of the working relationships within her team. Mary, on the other hand, focused on leading curriculum scoping and sequencing to facilitate the collective expertise of her team. Naomi and Mary each lead a curriculum team from the same Catholic boys' school. Even whilst their institution is the same, they are afforded different resources to lead their teams. Naomi's team (including support staff) is smaller and therefore called a department and Mary's team (including support staff) is larger and therefore called a faculty. Resources such as staffing, time release, and technical and administrative support were different and thus the bounds of their contexts are not the same. The ways that each leader interacted with their context was largely responsive to the needs of staff to underline capacity building. The practice of curriculum leadership uses knowledge of and experience in professional contexts to proactively and collaboratively develop contemporary curriculum, empower staff, and ultimately benefit the student experience. Each participant demonstrated why their most frequently discussed theme was dictated by their individual professional context. It can also be understood that goal setting impacts participants' most frequently discussed themes. It is important for curriculum leaders to consider how goals are shaped and framed by the professional context. The diversity present in the professional contexts of each participant is shaped by their level of success in actioning their roles and responsibilities within the scope of their school organisational structure.

Curriculum leaders are required to have an intimate knowledge of relevant, contemporary curriculum, resources to inform curriculum implementation (such as curriculum audit tools), and content appropriate pedagogies. Largely, this intimate understanding was used to best position leaders in supporting teaching staff to effectively know the content and how to teach it. The tangible ways that participants supported their teams to achieve effective content and pedagogy knowledge included:

- dialogue and sharing, including allowing staff to showcase their skills,
- authoring clear and informed documentation, underpinned by philosophy, and
- sequencing learning programs with expertise in content and pedagogy, but viewed through a different lens to classroom teachers, where curriculum is never static.

June described her view of documenting curriculum with an example of understanding contemporary curriculum through the lens of a leader:

So, I do a lot of the ground work ... I love that work, whereas other people find it, you know, a bit dry working with curriculum documents and I like the planning and the strategising and working out the philosophy underpinning new pedagogy and new [curriculum documentation]. So, for example, with the current [senior years] Study Design, it's really interesting to think about why some of the changes have occurred in terms of how they're trying to build that sense of global citizenship into their programs and infuse that throughout their curriculum, their not only having students who are becoming experts in the study of literature and all the metalanguage and the content, the skills of literary analysis, but they're

then being invited to make real life connections, real world connections to, you know, current issues and global issues.

Here, June described why curriculum must evolve and provide students with real-world applications. This notion was referenced by other participants, but was particularly important for Harry in Science: “Context for the real world is really, really important is Science. Getting kids hands on, practical experience is really, really important, and preparing them for [senior years] Science”. Further, Matthew, Mary, Harry, Bridget, and Naomi each manage staff who are experts in other curricular areas, meaning that the ways they supported those staff had a different focus than facilitating the work of staff with shared curriculum expertise. For example, Mary is not an expert in Spanish, yet she manages the Spanish teacher. The evolution of curriculum in these instances is less collaborative. Mary and Matthew explicitly described supporting these staff through teaching strategies, content strand selection and organisation, assessment, and reporting as these tasks require task-based expertise which the curriculum leader could share. The inference here is that Mary and Matthew exhibit pedagogical leadership, and, whilst an exploration of pedagogical leadership is outside the scope of this article, it does go some way in affirming that middle curriculum leaders are often appointed due to pedagogical expertise in their area (Shaked, 2024).

Where middle curriculum leaders know and are responsive to their professional context, their leadership actions can be purposefully framed within that context. Context shapes the goal setting direction of middle leaders and where we see frequency across their work, it can be understood that underpinning their effective leadership is high quality teaching.

Plan for and Implement Effective Teaching and Learning

Expression of practice used to plan for and implement effective teaching and learning is large in scope due to the diversity of curriculum development actions. Curriculum leaders need expertise at planning for and implementing effective teaching and learning in order to facilitate success at classroom level. However, the focus of the curriculum leader is not singularly to support teacher capacity at classroom level. The tasks expressed by all 10 participants aligning strongly with effective teaching and learning practices (frequency of 95) drives the “big picture” of effective teaching and learning with the student experience at its centre. Put succinctly by Neil: “The whole thing is done for the students, isn’t it?” Big picture actions revealed in this research that drive effective teaching and learning focus on curriculum design that:

- is strategic and rigorous,
- utilises higher order thinking at its forefront,
- makes tangible connections to competencies and cross curricular through lines,
- is authentic and contemporary,
- uses resources that facilitate multi-faceted points of view, and
- is fit for purpose.

These big picture actions were driven by curriculum leaders to enable students to have transferable skills, which are often included in jurisdiction curriculum (e.g., Ministerial Council

on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). The transferability of these skills, such as higher order thinking, allows students to experience success across the curriculum and were championed by participants leading diverse curricular areas. In order to facilitate the aforementioned big picture actions, effective curriculum leaders in this research described:

- feeding instructions and strategy from Senior Leadership to their team and back to Senior Leadership in a largely linear fashion,
- leading by example,
- promoting the vision of the team,
- growing the department through curriculum development,
- developing resources (more so than selecting/purchasing resources) so that they are contextually suitable, and
- ensuring that the junior (12- to 14-year-olds) and middle years (14- to 16-year-olds) curriculum equips students for senior years (16- to 18-year-olds) curriculum.

The experiences and aims of all 10 participants across these actions were largely similar except the ways in which instructions and strategy were communicated between senior leaders, middle leaders, and teaching teams. Most participants described a vertical relationship where communicating hierarchically from senior leader to teachers was most common. Some participants, mostly from smaller schools, described a linear relationship where instructions were communicated down vertically through the leadership hierarchy and then back up again. In the case of Matthew and Neil, who are colleagues, instructions and strategy were communicated differently. Matthew and Neil work in an institution where there are many roles, like Neil's, that sit to the side of the curriculum leadership band and are designed to "report through me to someone else" (Neil) in a non-linear way. Both Matthew and Neil described a hierarchical structure that operated both vertically and horizontally, different from the more conventional vertical-only structure typical of Australian schools. Each described their school's vertical and horizontal structure as helpful as there were various opportunities to collaborate and tap into the expertise of many individuals. Matthew elaborated that this structure enabled him to be creative and to take risks in his curriculum design. Encouraged by his principal, this also provided Matthew with the scope to develop the capacity of his team. In contrast, two other participants described seeking "permission" when explaining ways they interacted with their vertical line management. Further empirical evidence of what effective principal or senior leader support of middle leaders looks like is needed to better understand this phenomenon.

Engage in Professional Learning

The way in which participants frequently practice engagement in professional learning was heavily informed by their identification of a broad and general understanding of what professional learning is, as opposed to nuanced professional learning opportunities. Participants' discussion, both with and without specific examples, broadly identified that engaging in professional learning was a common and valued practice. Naomi articulated the view and tone of all participants:

Staff need to feel that they are valued and that their expertise is valued and that's one thing I've noticed. If people feel that what they do is an extremely specialised skill, I really feel that [identifying, planning, engaging in, collaborating, and applying professional learning] is a really important one to get the best out of the staff to then be the best teachers that they can be in the classroom.

Participants were able to identify that they engaged with professional learning through participation, encouraging their staff to attend, and leading/facilitating in-house or external experts. Four participants actively described that professional learning was the responsibility of someone else in the school. All participants, however, did identify that they ran internal professional development and/or encouraged teachers to attend external professional development that was specific to their curriculum area. The most common professional learning that was curriculum area specific that participants engaged in was through their subject association and through state-run assessing at Year 12 level. Those from Catholic schools also engaged in professional learning facilitated by the Melbourne Archdiocese of Catholic Schools (MACS). Four participants articulated that they participated in professional development pertaining to leadership. Three of these four engaged in formal Masters level leadership study with a further participant, although not discussing it in interview, was recruited to this research through her Masters level leadership study. As signposted at the beginning of this section, participants identified that they engaged in professional learning in leadership but did not provide details to engage with professional learning nuance.

Collaboration

From the perspectives of all 10 curriculum leaders, collaboration is essential to developing effective curriculum. Participants were able to describe through-lines of collaboration with senior leaders and whole staff to enhance school culture and large, whole-school projects, such as the new Learning Management System at Matthew and Neil's school and a Learner Profile document at June's school which sits adjacent to the Strategic Plan. More regularly, collaboration was used at department and subject level where curriculum leaders facilitated the collective work of their teams. The key that underpinned these ideas was staff buy-in and input. Ross articulated that staff input was critical:

I think the staff need to have some sort of involvement in rolling it out. So, in the past some of the things we have rolled out that's been really effective, staff have had their opportunity to say their piece on it and how it might work and then we use that information to guide our approach after that. So then we would use that information from the whole community, I suppose, and then put that into action.

Middle leader work collaborating on whole-school initiatives was often described in this manner; that leaders will seek input to guide actions and shape outcomes. Collaboration at department and subject level, however, was largely driven by discussion in tandem with work completion. Collaborating at department and subject level was mostly actioned by participants to plan to achieve goals (e.g., Lamont, 2023). Collaboration was identified and described by all 10 participants in micro and macro aspects. Micro aspects included identifying who collaborates,

delegating work, and using interpersonal skills (such as listening) to collaborate. Macro aspects included collaborating with people to build capacity, planning to achieve goals, and to empower staff. Macro aspects are more significant, particularly amongst participants who directly lead teaching and learning teams (i.e., not Neil, Charlotte, and Ross). Planning to achieve goals is mostly described through developing teaching and learning programs. Planning to achieve goals also impacted capacity building and staff empowerment. The curriculum leader acted as a facilitator whose objective is to not only collaborate with teaching and learning at the centre, but to also elicit knowledge and experience from others to enhance collaborative outcomes. Harry described an instance where he engaged in collaboration when evaluating teaching and learning in the VCE Sciences:

What we do is we have a copy of the [external assessment] data, we have a copy of the exam and we'd sit down as a team and we'd go question by question, say we'd answered this question pretty well as a school, great let's keep going. "Oh this question we really struggled with as a school as compared to other schools, do you guys have any ideas? Is there something we could do to improve this? Do you have any, you know, insights?" All that kind of thing. So, actually sitting down and going through the exams for me as someone who's never taught those subjects ... it helped me learn a lot about those subjects and it was a really good collaboration experience. Because they could teach me, basically. They could say, "oh yeah, this is something we cover really, really well, don't know why the students didn't get this".

Harry's description puts collaboration at the forefront of his assessment and data practices.

Management of Staff

Management of staff was a feature of the work of nine middle leaders in this study. The remaining participant did not have staff directly reporting to him. Each of these nine participants aimed to foster change within the department through their management of staff. The desired change, mostly, aimed to generate continuous curriculum improvement and ultimately impact positive student experience. The strategies used to manage staff in order for staff work outputs to drive improvement were varied. Time in role and relationship with staff significantly influenced the strategies used. Naomi, for instance, had been in her role for a year and was focused on fostering a culture shift within her department. She managed cultural aspects through leading by example and providing opportunities to connect with each other and the wider staff body. Staff were reported to be responsive and on board. Where participants each encountered challenges was when staff were reluctant and did not demonstrate buy-in. Two participants described instances where long standing staff in their team were notably reluctant to participate. In each instance, senior leadership members were historically brought in for management support, yet there was a sense of acceptance that these staff were going to remain recalcitrant. One of these two participants explained that they had sought professional development to build their capacity to manage challenging staff. This participant identified a gap in leadership professional development in managing staff who continue to be reluctant after various interventions.

Line management responsibilities undertaken by middle curriculum leaders include:

- new staff appointment,
- assigning subject coordinators, where applicable, and
- ensuring that staff are correctly completing curriculum tasks in a well-supported manner.

Correct completion of curriculum tasks include using consistent learning tasks, resources, assessments, and timelines to ensure that all students have an equitable learning experience across subjects. This was particularly relevant for Harry who, at junior and middle level, has nine classes per year level. This goes some way to explain why Harry, and five other participants (Table 1) were able to identify that collaboration is significant to middle curriculum leader practice.

Discussion

Professional context heavily impacts the way that each individual's practice is framed. Participants demonstrated that they are responsive to their unique context, which even differed in practice between participants from the same schools. This is a key finding in this study and supports the existing research denoting the impact of internal context on school leadership (e.g., Davies & Davies, 2009; Day et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2018; Harris, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2023). The most impactful school contextual factors were the wider school resourcing (including staffing and support systems needed to operate effectively as a leader) and the goals led by the curriculum leader, which could be either curriculum or professional development focused. To a lesser extent, time in role was also important, with the participants with longer tenure being better able to better "read" their professional context (Hallinger, 2018). Whilst the professional context of individual participants framing their practices was significant to this study, the leadership practices described by all 10 participants elicited some common patterns. Common practices aligned to knowing content and how to teach it, planning for an implementing effective teaching and learning, and engaging in professional learning.

Collaborating with staff outside a faculty to develop curriculum outcomes is emerging in the practice of some curriculum leaders, and especially in schools that have organisational structures which support this kind of work, such as sufficient time allowance to explore collaborations, and cross-faculty roles that were designed to foster faculty collaboration. Several participants emphasised that cross-collaboration was an emerging practice for them and that they valued the outcomes it had produced so far, such as units of work that fostered high levels of student engagement. Yet, principals often discouraged this through an emphasis on working within a curriculum area (Ylimaki, 2012) which can encourage a narrow curriculum focus. Participants reported having an autonomy to collaborate and highly valued it as a regular practice (e.g., Dao & Cranston, 2018). Yet, collaboration initiated and conducted by middle curriculum leaders blurs the line somewhat between leader and teacher. Effective curriculum leaders must be able to view collaborative outputs through dual lenses. Collaborative practices highlight the value of the middle leader as they have the platform to drive strategic initiative (through leadership) and support impacts at classroom level (through teaching). Given that contemporary leadership frameworks

have teaching and learning as a core focus, the proximity to improving teaching and learning offered by the middle leaders of this study is increasingly valued in both research and practice (Chew & Andrews, 2010; De Nobile, 2019; Hallinger, 2009; Tian & Risku, 2019). The value of collaboration pertaining to instructional, leadership for learning, and transformational frameworks is seen in this study (Blase & Blase, 2000; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Participants were able to evidence significant collaborative practices possible at department level, akin to findings of Blase and Blase (2000) and Leithwood (2016). Fisher (2021) and Zuckerman and O'Shea (2020) show that collaboration enhanced trust built and this was likely to fuel school improvement, most importantly at teacher level.

This study's understanding of middle leaders' management of staff supports the initial factors which lead to the development of leadership for learning (e.g., Dempster, 2009) where principals need to be supported by those in middle leadership to have impact on teaching and learning. Subject expertise is a key factor in the appointment of curriculum leaders. The contention of Bennett et al. (2007) that management and leadership expertise is also required for the role is echoed in this study. The significance of staff management duties for middle curriculum leaders found in this study points to two shortfalls of middle leader support; professional learning for middle leaders, whilst targeting leadership practices, often supports quality teaching rather than leadership; and, that there is limited professional development for middle leaders to build their staff management capacity. Looking to the team-based management approaches found in existing literature appropriate for middle leadership (e.g., Bennett et al., 2007; Dao & Cranston, 2018; De Nobile, 2018) could provide a starting point to review these two shortfalls.

Conclusion

The work of middle curriculum leaders is context sensitive and context responsive. Since middle leaders can be simultaneously understood to be both teachers and leaders, the impact of context is particularly relevant to their expression of practice. The nuance between effective lead teaching and the effective leading of teaching is somewhat blurred. The challenge for middle curriculum leaders is how they navigate the fullness and significance of their broad and diverse responsibilities within the restraints set by professional context. In today's educational environment where school improvement is largely measured by curriculum innovation and student results, is it any wonder that middle leadership in the curriculum sphere is gaining more attention? The theorisation of middle leadership (e.g., De Nobile, 2018) is further understood through understanding middle curriculum leaders simultaneously as teachers and as leaders and provides an opportunity to view outcomes through actions illustrated by effective practice. This study has presented an opportunity to expand upon impact analysis by viewing the impact of curriculum leadership practices on curriculum outcomes.

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Beyond Routines: How Tools Cultivate Senior Leaders' Creativity Leading Rigorous Conversations With Middle Leaders

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ABSTRACT: Conversations that support professional learning require school leaders to rigorously inquire into their own and others' beliefs about effective teaching, a process made more challenging when differences arise (Sinnema et al., 2023). This study investigated an intervention where senior leaders utilised a highly structured tool as a conceptual frame for improving the interpersonal practices middle leaders used to support professional learning. The intervention specifically aimed to structure conversational routines, addressing the challenges middle leaders face in exploring professional differences (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2014) by integrating resources for rigorous practitioner inquiry (Sinnema et al., 2017) and belief validity testing (Sinnema et al., 2023). Data from observations, interviews, and document analysis of two senior leaders in two New Zealand secondary school settings revealed that counterintuitively, the highly structured tool supported these leaders to develop highly creative responses adapting and contextualising the tool to respond to their unique situations. The result was a fundamental shift in their focus from what to lead to how to lead with middle leaders. Our study highlights the importance of robust conceptual anchors to guide creative leadership responses that develop desirable leadership capabilities crucial for instructional improvement.

Key words: Leadership development, educational leadership, professional learning, reflection tool, middle leadership

Introduction

This article explores senior leaders' approaches to leading instructional improvement with middle leaders before and after intervening with a rigorous inquiry talk routine. One of the greatest challenges middle leaders face in their roles as instructional leaders is having conversations that surface and explore differences (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2014). To fulfil this expectation, middle leaders need the capabilities to have rigorous conversations with colleagues that are grounded in evidence and focused on learning from that evidence (Sinnema et al., 2023). At times, evidence and the way it is interpreted may be different from and challenge both middle leaders' and teachers' original understandings of a situation. Despite this opportunity to promote professional learning, when there are differences, school leaders typically steer away from these risky conversations because they anticipate the rigorous exploration of differences may upset collegial relationships (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Le Fevre & Robinson, 2014). In these instances, the opportunity to rigorously inquire into how to be effective is sacrificed in favour of maintaining the status quo.

The Role of Senior Leaders in Developing Middle Leaders' Capabilities

When senior leaders delegate the role of leading instructional improvement to middle leaders, they may assume middle leaders already have the capabilities needed to explore differences with teachers. However, one of the greatest challenges middle leaders report facing is the change in the dynamics from leading student learning to leading teacher learning (Irvine & Brundett, 2019). Middle leaders identified a lack of targeted development to grow crucial interpersonal capabilities for leading teacher learning (Bassett, 2012; Meyer & Hanna, 2022). Although senior leaders involve middle leaders in leading instructional improvement (Bryant & Walker, 2022), this involvement often fails to develop leaders' interpersonal capabilities, representing a missed opportunity for on-the-job professional growth (Makin, 2023).

Structures and Routines in Leadership

The extant literature suggests that instead, senior leaders tend to develop and implement educational infrastructures that shape learning routines by outlining the activities middle leaders and teachers should undertake together (Makin, 2023). Educational infrastructure is defined by Spillane et al. (2018) as the formal structures and resources intended to support and improve instructional practices, including curricular materials, student assessments, frameworks, and routines for analysing practice and structuring the work of improvement. These structures can provide opportunities for desirable job-embedded interactions (Shirrell et al., 2019; Spillane et al., 2018).

Interactions that promote powerful professional learning must connect with people's backgrounds, their existing knowledge, and their beliefs (Noonan, 2019). Rather than highly

prescriptive models, the notion of professional learning that enables greater personalisation and agency in the learning is preferable (Noonan, 2019). Furthermore, job-embedded learning models have the potential to be powerful when they connect professional learning with the situated nature of the problems of practice both leaders and teachers identify and are motivated to solve (Spillane et al., 2018). While infrastructures may increase the opportunities for middle leaders to interact with teachers, it is the nature of these interactions and the extent a person's beliefs are bypassed or engaged with that will influence what they learn (Robinson, 1993).

Leaders Adapt Structures to Support Effective Professional Learning

School leaders tend to adopt and adapt existing structures, to shape professional learning routines and subsequent interactions with colleagues (Shirrell et al., 2019; Spillane et al., 2018). There are different models of job-embedded learning that are collaborative and classroom based. Two examples, commonly used in New Zealand schools, that are also student centred are: teaching as inquiry (Ministry of Education, 2007), and spiral of inquiry (Timperley et al., 2014). Both offer an interpretive framework for leaders and teachers to inquire into the effectiveness of current teaching practices in order to generate new knowledge of practice. Collectively these two frameworks are referred to as professional inquiry (PI) in this study.

These frameworks are important determinants of middle leaders' approaches to leading because they structure the routines and experiences middle leaders and teachers have as they learn together (Makin, 2023). While infrastructures may increase the opportunities for middle leaders to interact with teachers, a common mistake is that routines are often treated like objects. Senior leaders implicitly believe and mistake the resources they design for the routine itself (Pentland & Feldman, 2008). Any organisational routine that involves people is at least partially "alive" and generative because the experience of the participants gives rise to learning, including new unintended patterns of action.

Routines and Their Relationship to Creativity

The adaption of routines and structure should not be misunderstood to preclude the kind of creative responses that are key to educational leadership. On the contrary, as Glăveanu explains, accounts of a dichotomy between habit (reinforced by structures and routines) and creativity are problematic and fail to recognise that creative performance is achieved *within* habitual practice (Glăveanu, 2012). Glăveanu uses the example of artisans who improvise and innovate their craftwork as they express their creativity and do so in a way that is embedded in habit. They go about their habitual practice, and when they encounter obstacles or challenges, their existing habits provide a frame within which improvisation occurs.

Similarly, Pentland and Feldman (2008) describes how the concept of routine dynamics explains how the internal dynamics of practice contribute to stability and also to change in organisations. Sonenshein (2016) goes further to propose that people (and organisations) can produce "familiar novelty" or "recognisable creativity" through their use of personalisation and depersonalisation mechanisms that leverage the mutuality between creativity and routines. Theoretically grounded tools provide a mechanism for establishing norms by supporting the

development of habitual practices. This highlights the importance of habitual practices, or routines in educational leadership, as an underpinning of the kind of creativity and innovation that reflects the needs of particular educational settings.

Methodological Approach

This qualitative study used problem-based methodology (PBM) to understand two senior leaders' approaches to leading school-wide professional learning with middle leaders before and after introducing a rigorous inquiry intervention. PBM, developed by Robinson (1993), defines a person's actions as their solution to solving a problem. For example, a problem a senior leader may face is how to effectively engage middle leaders in leading instructional improvement. The senior leader's solution will drive their approach to working with these middle leaders. PBM uses Argyris and Schön's (1974) theories of action to describe and explain what a person does to be effective in a given context.

There are two types of theories of action: an espoused theory, what a person says they will do, and a theory in use, what a person actually does. Studies reveal that there is often a gap between these two types of theories (Argyris and Schön, 1974). A theory of action can be constructed by identifying the three integrated components that make up a person's decision to take action. By making the connections between these components explicit: the constraints, the actions, and the consequences, a person's problem-solving process can be assessed. Theories of action have been used to investigate a range of educational practices including school leaders' interpersonal challenges, understanding and solving educational problems, and improving professional practices (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2014; Makin, 2023; Meyer & Hanna, 2022; Sinnema et al., 2021).

This current study investigated two senior leaders' theories of action describing their approaches to leading school-wide professional learning with middle leaders before and after introducing a rigorous inquiry intervention. PBM was used to frame the following research questions:

RQ1. What characterises senior leaders' approaches to working with middle leaders to lead professional inquiry with teachers in secondary schools? (Actions)

RQ2. What explains senior leaders' approaches to working with middle leaders to lead professional inquiry with teachers in secondary schools? (Constraints)

RQ3. What are the outcomes of senior leaders' approaches to working with middle leaders to lead professional inquiry with teachers in secondary schools? (Consequences)

The study was organised into three distinct parts: Phase 1, the pre-intervention phase, followed by the intervention, and finally Phase 2 examining the intervention impact. Phases 1 and 2 involved constructing a theory of action that accurately described each senior leader's approach to leading with their middle leaders before and after the intervention. In the intervention, the first author engaged with each senior leader to both check the accuracy of the theory of action, evaluate its effectiveness, and determine how it might be revised with reference to a rigorous inquiry matrix tool (the rigour matrix).

The Rigorous Inquiry Intervention

The rigorous inquiry intervention referred to as the “rigour matrix” is a tool developed to provide school leaders with a structure to reframe conversations using interpersonal skills to increase the quality of information available to teachers as they inquired into the impact of their instruction (Makin, 2023). The rigour matrix was developed by integrating two pre-existing theoretical models (see Appendix 1). The first model, teaching for better learning, promotes five resource sets educators draw on that influence the quality of their problem solving and decision making through inquiry (Sinnema et al., 2017).

The second model, a process model of quality problem solving (Sinnema et al., 2023), draws on theories of interpersonal effectiveness. How leaders talk with teachers to surface and examine beliefs can influence the quality of information available for problem solving throughout PI. The model identifies six validity-testing behaviours (VTB) integral to rigorous inquiry: disclosing beliefs, providing grounds for those beliefs, inquiring, engaging with differences, evaluating linkages, and reaching an agreement. These behaviours were utilised in the matrix to shift inquiry talk with teachers from an implicit, private account of a situation to an explicit, shared account for joint evaluation and revision. The pursuit of valid information is of particular interest in this study because it is closely associated with the process of rigorous problem solving.

When school leaders can have conversations that publicly test beliefs simultaneously with the capabilities that draw on the five resource sets to understand a teaching and learning context, then inquiring into practice with teachers can increase the dependability of information available for decision making. The goal of rigorous inquiry is for school leaders to be able to create the conditions that facilitate sharing and testing thinking to ensure high-quality information is available for instructional decisions.

The rigour matrix was used to train senior leaders to foster rigorous inquiry in their own conversations with others. In the intervention, senior leaders first learned how to use the matrix to identify instances in professional learning conversations that lacked rigour. For example, senior leaders were asked to identify instances when their thinking did not match what they actually said. This mismatch presented an opportunity to increase rigour by sharing and testing thinking rather than withholding their thoughts. Using the matrix, senior leaders were asked to reframe their talk to disclose their thoughts to prompt a deeper exploration of their own and the teacher’s understanding of a situation.

Examples of talk patterns that represent rigorous inquiry at the matrix intersections were added to the tool with each senior leader (see Appendix 1 for selected examples). Lastly, in the post-intervention phase, the senior leaders’ theories of action and the impact on rigorous inquiry talk were reexamined to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Effectiveness, in this case, was judged by the cognitive and behavioural strategies these leaders employed to collaborate with others as a process of rigorous inquiry, rather than any decisions that were reached. A description of the two school contexts, participants, data sources, and data analysis strategies follow.

Context

Two New Zealand secondary schools with extremely different contexts were selected to take part in this study to maximise variation and the likelihood the two senior leaders would have a different approach to leading professional learning: Eastern High and Southern College (pseudonyms). These variations in contexts allowed insight into a range of leadership approaches, enhancing the relevance and transferability of findings. Eastern High, a large urban school (2,000 students), had a higher-than-average socioeconomic status and strong student performance on national achievement tests. In contrast, Southern College was a small semi-rural school (282 students), with lower socioeconomic status and student underperformance on national tests.

Both schools used the “Spiral of Inquiry” (Timperley et al., 2014) framework for professional inquiry (PI) where teachers inquired into the effectiveness of their teaching practices. Eastern High had established PI routines, while Southern College was in the early stages of developing them. In both schools, senior leaders were responsible for leading PI, delegating tasks to involve middle leaders.

Participants

At Eastern High, senior leader Allan (pseudonym) worked with 13 middle leaders who met bi-weekly to plan teacher inquiries. Southern College’s senior leader, Eleanor (pseudonym), met with three middle leaders and the principal every 2–3 weeks to plan leading PI. Eighteen participants took part—14 from Eastern High and four from Southern College. There were no changes to the participants who were interviewed over the two years of the study.

Data Collection

This study collected data from three sources: school-specific documentation outlining the purposes and expected processes and approaches to PI, video records of leadership meeting observations, and transcripts from interviews with participants. These sources enabled a broad picture and deep understanding of the senior leaders’ approaches to PI and, in the case of the recorded observations and subsequent interviews, focused on what they did (theories in use) rather than only relying on their account of their practice (espoused theory).

Documents

PI documentation was used to explore the constraints relating to goals and intentions for implementing school-wide PI. This provided a way of evaluating the effectiveness of each senior leader’s theory in use, the extent to which their approach realised their school’s aspirations for carrying out school-wide PI. Documents setting out the guidelines for PI were analysed to establish the expectations each school had for PI giving the standard against which the effectiveness of actual leadership practices could be compared in the analysis. In total 14 documents were analysed, seven from Eastern High and seven from Southern College.

Video Recordings of Meetings

Video recordings of leadership meetings captured interactions between senior and middle leaders during PI planning. Overall, a total of 12 meetings were observed, six at each school. Three observations were made before introducing the intervention training and three after. These observations provide detailed, unfiltered insights into situated actions that are difficult to capture through other methods (Christianson, 2018). Videos offer a less intrusive way to collect data, minimising behaviour modifications caused by direct observation (Liang, 2015), allowing monitoring of intervention's impact on senior leader's actions over time.

Critical Dialogue Interviews

To understand senior leaders' behaviours and the influence on middle leaders' practices, semistructured interviews using a critical dialogue technique were conducted with each senior leader and three middle leaders from each school. This method fosters critical and collaborative conversations, promoting trustworthy information and shared commitment to change (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Robinson, 1993). Unlike surveys, this technique encourages deeper engagement and accountability. In total, 40 interviews were held involving the senior leaders and three middle leaders from each school which were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The first author conducted a thorough coding process, beginning with familiarisation with the school contexts and documentation. Each school's documentation was used to explore the rationale behind the PI initiatives—a key constraint influencing each senior leader's decisions. The analysis used a theory of action approach similar to that used in other studies (Patuawa et al., 2021; Sinnema et al., 2021) to identify and integrate the components—constraints, actions, and consequences—that shape a person's theory about how to be effective in a given context; their theory of action. Meeting observations provided data on senior leaders' actions (or inactions) leading PI. Subsequent interviews provided explanations from each senior leader for their actions (constraints), and the impact on middle leaders' approaches to leading PI (consequences). The analysis also followed Saldaña's (2016) first and second cycle coding, identifying patterns across the data in ways that maintained connections between these components as each theory of action was being developed.

First Cycle Coding

For the first cycle of analysis in both Phases 1 and 2, the video and audio recordings were transcribed and coded to identify the components of each senior leader's theory of action. This "start list" of codes was: actions (including both actions and inactions), constraints (including beliefs, assumptions and values), and consequences. Verbatim coding was applied to attune to participants' perspectives and actions (Saldaña, 2016).

Second Cycle Coding

In the second cycle, the focus shifted to identifying broader patterns using the “touch-test” strategy described by Saldaña (2016). This strategy works by clustering similarly coded verbatim data, then elevating these clusters to generalised descriptions of the patterns they represent. See Appendix 2 for some examples of pattern descriptions developed in this study along with links to original clusters of data. These pattern descriptions were also categorised depending on the theory of action component they represented: an action, constraint (including, for example beliefs, values, assumptions, norms, etc.), or consequence. A spreadsheet was used to maintain links between associated components. Once the patterns were finalised, they were organised into diagrams representing each leader’s theory of action. In total, two theories were developed for each senior leader, allowing comparison of their approaches before and after the intervention.

Data Presentation and Findings

This section uses the theories of action constructed in the analysis to compare how Allan and Eleanor adapted their leadership approaches with middle leaders after being introduced to the rigour matrix. First, key findings that describe the senior leaders’ initial approaches are presented, then the shifts are revealed after introducing the intervention and the rigour matrix tool. Next, the way each senior leader creatively applied the tool, personalising its use to meet the needs of their school context is shared. Finally, the impact on the capabilities the middle leaders developed are described.

Senior Leaders Shifted Their Focus From What to Lead to How to Lead

Initially, both Allan and Eleanor focused on procedural PI aspects, structuring planning meetings based on their beliefs about school priorities and what middle leaders and teachers needed to learn (see Figure 1). Both senior leaders provided middle leaders with PI resources and allocated meeting time to engage with them. The resources were used to develop a shared plan for what to lead with teachers. At Eastern High, Allan supplemented these with academic readings to enhance capabilities and inform the developing coaching model. Eleanor, in contrast, sought feedback on school-based resources, believing this would strengthen middle leaders’ understanding of PI and leadership skills.

Figure 1

Shifts in Senior Leader's Approaches to Leading Before and After Introducing the Rigour Matrix Tool

Senior Leaders' Shifted their Focus from What to Lead to How to Lead

Initially both Allan and Eleanor:

- Structured meetings to include resource materials for middle leaders to use for leading.
- Allan provided resources and middle leaders decided how to use them to progress PI with their teachers.
- Eleanor provided resources and expected the middle leaders to use these in the same way to progress PI with teachers



After intervening both Allan and Eleanor:

- Structured meetings to focus on how interactions between middle leaders could support rigorous inquiry
- Allan analysed leaders' conversational practices using the matrix to develop capabilities for rigorous inquiry.
- Eleanor used the matrix to teach middle leaders the theory and skills for selected interpersonal capabilities.

Creative Use of the Tool's Structure Supported Senior Leaders' to Shift their Approach

- Invited middle leaders to share ideas and expertise to develop capabilities and refine resources for leading PI.

- Allan provided readings on various leadership capabilities to middle leaders.
- He collaborated with middle leaders to document procedural aspects leading inquiry-coaching conversations.
- Eleanor asked middle leaders for feedback to refine the resources she designed for them to use with teachers to learn the PI process.



- Used the Rigour Matrix to develop activities that required middle leaders to consider and evaluate their own conversational practices leading PI

- Allan developed novel activities from inquiry-coaching transcripts (using his own transcript first) for middle leaders to identify undisclosed beliefs and assumptions.
- Eleanor provided personalised resources from the rigour matrix to target the individual needs of each middle leader.

From experience-influenced to research-influenced capability development

- Required middle leaders to report on their experiences leading teachers to gauge the next steps for progressing PI.

- Allan invited middle leaders to share experiences of leading groups and individual PI.
- Eleanor used the middle leaders' experiences to plan what to do to progress PI with teachers.



- Invited middle leaders examine the interpersonal capabilities evidenced in their PI transcripts and used research-informed practices to consider new patterns of interaction

- Allan had middle leaders apply components of the rigour matrix to restructure conversations during meetings, **but**
- did not use the matrix to evaluate and give feedback on middle leaders' practices.
- Eleanor had middle leaders evaluate and give feedback on each other's conversational practices using the rigour matrix, **and**
- set goals to commit to using new interpersonal skills with teachers

- **Overlooked how they might evaluate the impact of middle leaders' ideas and practices on inquiry rigour.**

Despite similarities, interviews revealed Allan and Eleanor had different overarching constraints influencing their actions. Allan valued middle leaders' expertise, encouraging them to share strategies without assessing their effectiveness. Even when these strategies sacrificed rigour in favour of collegial relationships, Allan accepted them. For example, when a middle leader announced they were giving teachers a "fortnight off", Allan supported the decision, saying, "That's great, isn't it?"

Eleanor's actions were constrained by her desire for consistent leadership practices. She believed using the same resources and strategies would set rigorous routines and develop her leaders' capabilities. Eleanor explained: "I think we need to be unified. If it is our major drive for teacher improvement, we need to be speaking the same language". Middle leaders worked through planned activities to develop a shared understanding of PI and ensure consistency across the school.

The intervention shifted their approaches from focusing on what to lead to considering how the quality of middle leader–teacher interactions supported rigorous inquiry (see Figure 1). Allan encouraged middle leaders to examine their interpersonal practices, explaining: "We want [the] real conversations and real practising in the meetings". At Southern College, Eleanor integrated theory with practice, using research underpinning the matrix tool to explain desirable interpersonal capabilities. One middle leader described this as a "lightbulb being turned on" (ML4). Another reflected that applying research to practice was useful and noted: "It's nice to have that background research" (ML5).

The Tool's Structure Supported Senior Leaders to Shift Their Approach

School documents outlined the goal of professional inquiry (PI) at both schools, and that was to support teachers to evaluate and improve their practice. Both Allan and Eleanor wanted middle leader–teacher interactions to foster rigorous inquiry to support this goal. Allan confirmed that middle leaders should prompt teachers to examine the beliefs underpinning their decisions. He explained: "[the] intention is that this [middle leaders coaching] is going to help. Especially, this idea of probing and challenging and getting the assumptions out onto the table and then being able to test them". He acknowledged the need to develop skills that opened up conversations, but didn't know how, reflecting his uncertainty stemmed from a lack of expertise.

At Southern College, middle leaders inquiring with teachers was intended to increase the depth of teacher inquiries. Eleanor acknowledged: "I don't feel I have the capabilities to know what that conversation looks like". However, she recognised the potential for a more conversational approach, stating: "I'm not saying what I did was wrong or it needs to be chucked out, but I think there was space in there to have more of a conversation lens". Both senior leaders signalled that they wanted to proceed with the intervention.

The rigour matrix was introduced and both senior leaders analysed transcripts of their PI conversations to identify discrepancies between their thoughts and what they actually said to teachers. Allan reflected: "It is interesting when you see your own use of language ... if I was Trevor [teacher] hearing this stuff he would have to be working hard to pick out [my intended meaning]". He realised he had not clearly conveyed his beliefs and used the rigour matrix to structure his talk more effectively.

Eleanor also noticed times when she concealed her thinking. She explained: “I think my hidden agenda was to try and get him to identify himself as opposed to me disclosing what I thought might be a challenge”. She later shared that she believed it was more powerful when someone reached a realisation themselves. When she looked at the transcript she noticed that she had “steered his thinking anyway”. Recognising she was steering conversations rather than testing ideas, she reframed her talk using the rigour matrix. These insights motivated both senior leaders to use the rigour matrix’s structure to more closely align their talk with their thoughts, making their reasoning explicit, increasing inquiry rigour.

Senior Leaders Used the Tool Creatively

After the intervention, both senior leaders began to consider how they would use the matrix to plan PI meetings with middle leaders to support rigorous inquiry. They adapted the rigour matrix creatively to align with their school contexts and support capability development on the job (see Figure 1). Instead of following the training model, both used the tool to structure novel activities tailored to middle leaders’ needs. To prevent overwhelming their teams, they introduced the matrix in stages, focusing on discrete skill development.

Allan developed novel activities initially using his own inquiry-coaching transcripts. He asked middle leaders to identify what motivated his statements; then he shared his undisclosed thinking. Using the rigour matrix, he invited middle leaders to suggest how the conversation could be made more rigorous. The novelty generated interest and engagement. Allan didn’t want the middle leaders to get tired of the same type of activity and reflected: “I need to now think of another way of doing something that gets at similar things, the beliefs and assumptions, and evolves in another format”. His middle leaders concurred, one explaining: “It [the activity] was a real conversation they had rather than one of those made-up ones” (ML3). Allan sought new ways to sustain engagement, designing new activities to continue developing his leaders’ capabilities.

Eleanor modelled activities using examples of talk from her own transcript, then asked middle leaders to analyse their transcripts for instances where their speech did not align with their thoughts. She explained: “I wanted them to feel ownership [of these conversations]”. She added: “I wanted them to be able to be quite personal and share reasons why they hadn’t [shared their beliefs]. Before showing them some of the theory behind what tends to happen in conversations”. After middle leaders identified examples of their talk that lacked rigour, she used stems from the rigour matrix so they could practise reframing their talk.

Subsequent meetings became more personalised, with Eleanor tailoring resources to individual needs based on middle leaders’ questions, goals, or areas needing improvement. Going through the agenda, Eleanor pointed out the activities she had included for each middle leader. Eleanor shared: “I really wanted to help support them move past some little niggles or help them understand a bit more about their problem areas”. One middle leader reflected: “I did get my question answered around having a belief without evidence” and went on to explain: “I felt like I had gone away with a bit more confidence ... you need evidence for a hunch” (ML5). Both senior leaders creatively adapted the rigour matrix to personalise development by focusing on middle leaders’ practices.

Both senior leaders also modelled themselves as learners, beginning activities by openly sharing their own practice examples. Eleanor admitted: “When you are a senior leader and you are working with middle leaders you might think it shows I don’t know what I am talking about”, but allowing scrutiny of her own talk supported her middle leaders to “practice in a safe space on issues that we face”. Middle leaders at both schools reported this approach created safe conditions for learning together. One middle leader at Southern College shared: “It is like any skill the more you practice, and we are a safe team as well, you can be vulnerable in that space”.

From Experience-Influenced to Research-Influenced Capability Development

The resources and activities senior leaders designed in Phase 2 supported their middle leaders to develop research-influenced interpersonal practices based on the matrix. This signalled a shift in how they interacted with research to develop leadership skills. Previously, Allan provided academic readings, but middle leaders did not apply this research to reframe their practice. At Southern College, Eleanor focused on PI process understanding, with little discussion on leadership capabilities. As a result, middle leaders could structure PI activities but lacked skills for deeper collaboration through rigorous inquiry.

The overarching constraints—whether their approach was prioritised relationships or controlling the task—continued to drive Allan and Eleanor’s approaches to leading, impacting the likelihood middle leaders used these new capabilities beyond planning meetings. Allan continued to want to show he valued his middle leaders’ expertise and did not want to risk relationships by requiring his middle leaders to use and evaluate the new capabilities in their own conversational practices. Although Allan’s theory revision changed the way middle leaders participated in meetings, there was little impact on how these leaders inquired with teachers beyond these meetings (see Figure 1).

In comparison, Eleanor continued to want her middle leaders to use consistent practices. Her emphasis on setting goals with her middle leaders to apply new conversational skills beyond meetings built confidence. One middle leader explained: “I’m getting better at actually having these conversations ... advocating for what I think is right, finding out [the teacher’s] perspective, and coming to an agreed solution or an agreed next step” (ML4). Her middle leaders also began teaching the theory and skills they were learning to the teachers they worked with, extending the impact of the intervention (see Figure 1). These findings showed when the senior leader used the tool with their middle leaders to evaluate current conversational practices, to reframe talk and to set goals to apply what they had learned, middle leaders’ rigorous inquiry increased.

Discussion

Now, we focus on the significance of these findings for senior leaders supporting middle leaders’ capability development, including using highly structured theoretical tools to help shift practice.

The Power of Leaders Robustly Examining Their Own Practice as a Norm of Leadership

Senior leaders play a crucial role in shaping the capabilities that middle leaders develop on the job. While professional inquiry (PI) frameworks emphasise interpersonal capabilities for co-constructing understanding (Donohoo & Velasco, 2016), the ability to lead learning conversations that critically examine underlying beliefs was rarely observed at the outset of this study. The first research question examined the intervention's impact on senior leaders' actions leading PI. Initially, both senior leaders prioritised what to lead, focusing on coordinating and organising PI activities for middle leaders to use with teachers. Focusing on what to lead aligns with Havnes' (2009) concept of surface-level collaboration, with some deeper cooperation refining and developing resources.

Just as teachers are required to examine the effectiveness of their practice as a norm of teaching (PI), school leaders should also be required to examine the impact of their practice as a norm of leadership. Robust examination requires all school leaders to critically engage with the theories underpinning their leadership practices. Research highlights that professional learning is most effective when it challenges underlying beliefs and assumptions (Spillane et al., 2018). The second research question investigated the beliefs and assumptions driving senior leaders' approaches. Initially, both senior leaders believed rigorous inquiry was important and could be achieved by curating the kinds of activities middle leaders led with teachers. When senior leaders used a theoretically grounded tool to examine their practices, they were better able to evaluate their effectiveness, bringing to light the beliefs and assumptions that shaped their actions. Through this evaluation, their belief about the importance of deliberately developing the interpersonal capabilities for leading rigorous inquiry was given prominence and was integrated with their other beliefs about leading effectively. These revised constraints prompted a change in both senior leaders' actions. They began designing activities to deliberately develop the interpersonal skills they and their middle leaders needed to rigorously inquire, providing further understanding for research question one. An implication of this research, therefore, is the need to support senior leaders to access professional learning opportunities that foster desirable capability development in ways that engage and evaluate their beliefs about the effectiveness of their current practices.

The third research question explored the consequences of senior leaders' approaches on middle leaders. The initial findings in this study concur with Havnes' (2009) assertion that deep-level collaboration, examining practice and associated beliefs is rare. Merely progressing through the PI framework did not foster deep-level interactions engaging with teachers' backgrounds, existing knowledge, and beliefs. When senior leaders prioritised what to lead, this study found that middle leaders relied on sharing their experiences and expertise to develop their practice. It is not enough to expect these middle leaders to rigorously inquire especially when such expertise is counter to the interpersonal skills people rely on in their everyday interactions (Argyris & Schön, 1974). This shifted when the intervention was introduced, as senior leaders began considering how they and their middle leaders led PI. Designing novel activities focusing on how to lead, senior and middle leaders began evaluating existing practices and new practices they trialled for leading rigorous inquiry.

The literature identifies senior leaders as instrumental in developing middle leadership capabilities (Bryant & Walker, 2022; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2023). This study contributes to the limited existing research by explicitly connecting senior leaders' beliefs and practices to the development of middle leaders' capabilities. Ultimately, middle leaders' growth is influenced by senior leaders' priorities. As this study demonstrates, the capabilities middle leaders develop on the job are influenced by the senior leader's own approaches to leading and the current levels of interpersonal expertise and confidence of that leader. To grow school leaders' interpersonal capabilities in schools for rigorous inquiry, senior leaders first need to develop their own beliefs, capabilities, and expertise so that they are confident to establish new norms fostering ongoing, reflective practice among middle leaders.

Theoretically Strong Tools Support Robust Examination of Leadership Practice

Highly structured theoretical tools can influence the nature of interactions, maintaining a focus on instructional matters, increasing the likelihood that beliefs about effectiveness are tested and revised (Shirrell et al., 2019). However, this study found that focusing on instructional matters was insufficient to support middle leaders to rigorously inquire with teachers. Evaluating current practice using tools is an important feature of on-the-job learning, allowing beliefs associated with being effective to change over time (Spillane et al., 2018). To effect desired change, this study asserts that tools must be structured to target specific capability development. The rigorous inquiry matrix required all leaders to focus on the conversational strategies they practiced leading professional inquiry (PI). The rigour matrix supported these leaders to develop new routines and habits by requiring them to evaluate and reframe their current conversational practices in relation to theoretically endorsed practices promoted in the teaching for better learning model and the process model of quality problem solving.

Overt critical evaluation of practice is rare in collaborative settings as school leaders are largely self-professed conflict avoiders (Patuawa et al., 2021). Findings indicated that using the tool supported evaluation and reduced the feeling of risk because it mediated interactions between these leaders. Furthermore, senior leaders' willingness to position themselves as learners, evaluating their practice and underlying assumptions using the tool, reduced feelings of risk among leaders in the group. Evaluation and a commitment to trialling new skills increased the instances of rigour in practice in this study. Using theoretical tools has potential to systemically unite and amplify on-the-job leadership development by providing a structure to monitor and evaluate progress establishing new habits for leading.

Theoretically Strong Tools Can Support Norms and Creativity

Habitual routines are central to the ongoing accomplishment of recognisable creativity in organisations (Sonenshein, 2016). When people are involved, routines are partially "alive" and generative because participants' experiences inevitably give rise to learning, including new creative patterns of action (Glăveanu, 2012; Pentland & Feldman, 2008). This study suggests that aligning a tool's structure with school leaders' existing practices not only facilitates the development of new routines but also supports the creative application of these routines. The tool

provided senior leaders with the confidence to design novel engaging activities that expanded middle leaders' conversational routines, while maintaining a strong connection to the counterintuitive capabilities that underlie effective learning conversations. Routines provide crucial conventions and repeated practices for creative expression (Glăveanu, 2012). Furthermore, the rigour matrix was used in creative ways by the senior leaders to connect middle leader development with the situated nature of their practice, a condition needed for powerful professional learning (Spillane et al., 2018). This research highlights the critical role of a tool's structure in establishing these conventions and routines and the creative application of the tool by senior leaders for their school contexts.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations associated with qualitative studies were considered at the outset. For this study, the purpose was to intervene in a way that improved senior leaders' approaches to leading rigorous inquiry with middle leaders. While the overarching goal of professional learning in both participating schools was to improve instructional effectiveness, the study did not include direct student achievement measures.

The study did not seek generalisability; rather, it aimed to provide rich, contextualised accounts of each senior leader's approach, enabling readers to assess potential transferability to their own settings. It was assumed that most school contexts would fall between the two extremely different contexts of the selected schools, enhancing the findings' relevance.

The matrix development served as a tool to support and identify dialogue patterns characterised by mutual respect, shared control, and enhanced validity of information used to address practice-based problems. However, the matrix is not a validated instrument. Further research is needed to investigate its validity and explore how it might be refined and applied to build interpersonal capabilities in professional learning contexts.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

This research provides insights into the dynamic interplay in schools between senior and middle leaders who work together to lead instructional improvement. This study highlights the central role senior leaders have in determining middle leaders' leadership priorities. These priorities impact the types of knowledge and capabilities middle leaders develop on the job.

An implication of this research, therefore, is the need to support senior leaders to develop expertise and capabilities that are desirable and stretch beyond group experience. Using a theoretically strong tool can help people evaluate the impact of their current practice and new practices on desired outcomes. Research claims infrastructure (for example, tools) have the potential to enable and sustain practices associated with desired improvements (Kali et al., 2018; Shirrell et al., 2019) that lead to changes in beliefs about being effective over time (Spillane et al., 2018). The current study demonstrated that by using the rigour matrix tool, senior leaders were able to create activities that intentionally developed desirable interpersonal capabilities for rigorous inquiry with middle leaders that would have otherwise been overlooked.

This study highlights that we can't just do studies of practice and expect practice to change without attending to the constraints driving them. We also can't expect the current professional development methods to deliver the changes they promote. Although webinars, documentation packs, and watching pre-recorded videos are cost-effective ways of delivering learning at a systems level, they bypass what drives leaders' practices. Professional learning prescribing change that does not align with an expert's beliefs tends not to impact their routine practice (Noonan, 2019; Timperley et al., 2009). An important implication is for policymakers to consider what investments should be made across the system so that senior leaders can access common, theoretically strong development opportunities that engage their beliefs. Theory engagement would require resourcing at a systems level beyond the current investments made to develop school leaders' capabilities.

The way development is provided for senior school leaders can change how these leaders work with and develop others' capabilities. Future research is needed across a wider variety of schools and a larger sample of participants to understand the impact of senior leaders and theoretically strong tools on developing others' leadership capabilities. It would be useful to examine the effects of interpersonal leadership development on perceptions of trust and willingness to take risks to trial new practice. The findings could be tested to find out how attitudes towards learning change longitudinally over years as leaders' perceptions of their expertise changes.

Conclusion

This study offers an important glimpse into the potential of a theoretically strong tool supporting senior leaders' approaches to developing others' capabilities on-the-job. The crucial connection between a senior leader's approach to leading and the capabilities middle leaders subsequently develop was highlighted. The PBM intervention and tool supported senior leaders to develop the expertise and confidence needed to shift their approach. These leaders used the tool creatively to design novel activities engaging middle leaders' current practices as the basis for developing new rigorous inquiry capabilities. The activities senior leaders created had more impact when middle leaders were required to set goals and use the capabilities learned in meetings in their day-to-day practice. Given these capabilities are central to creating conditions for professional learning, our hope is that this study prompts further research into how desirable leadership capabilities can be developed across school layers through interventions that engage with leaders' beliefs and practices.

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Appendix 1: The Rigorous Inquiry Matrix Tool with Selected Conversation Examples

		Teaching for better learning resources				
		Education's body of knowledge (content, pedagogical, curriculum, the learners, the context)	Competencies (cultural, critical, relational, technical)	Demonstrating dispositions (open-mindedness, fallibility, discernment, agency)	Applying ethical principles (commitment to learners, families, the profession and society)	Demonstrating a commitment to social justice (challenging racism, deficit thinking, disparity and injustice)
Public validity-testing behaviours	Disclosing beliefs			It seems like you have chosen to disregard student feedback.		I noticed that you think this group of students are not capable of higher achievement. I also noticed that this group of students are all Pasifika students.
	Providing grounds			I say this because over 60% of the class suggested the information on your power points was overwhelming and confusing but you have chosen to focus on a different topic for your inquiry.		The reason I think this is because you have referred to this group as the low achieving group.
	Inquiring			Why did you decide to focus on a different topic rather than being open to considering your students' points of view?		Tell me more. Why do you describe the group in this way?
	Engaging with difference			I think the current priority for you should be focused on how you clarify your explanations for students, so they do not get confused. I do not think the topic you have chosen to focus on addresses your students' concerns.		I think the group you have identified can achieve highly, whereas you think they will only reach an achieved level at best.
	Evaluating linkage			If your students are saying that the amount of information on the power points is overwhelming, then choosing to focus on learning intentions does not seem well placed to address the learning struggle your students identified. I do not see the logic between what the students say is the problem and the action you have decided to take. Let's talk about this...		The problem you have identified is that this group of students are not achieving because they are not academically capable. Achievement data in other subjects shows that each of these students has achieved excellence at one time or another. That is why I don't think the reason they are only achieving is due to their inability to learn. Tell me more about your thinking
	Reaching agreement			So, are we agreeing to co-construct a set of questions together? Through these questions we will try to get ideas from students about what is working in lessons and compare these responses to the first set of feedback.		So, we agreed we will both go away to find out more information about the skills that were assessed when each student achieved excellence. When we meet next, we will look for patterns that might identify the conditions that support each student to achieve highly.
		<i>A person's ability to consider alternative approaches to teaching and learning</i>	<i>A person's ability to demonstrate knowledge</i>	<i>A person's willingness to consider alternative explanations</i>	<i>A person's commitment to build respectful relationships with stakeholders</i>	<i>A person's commitment to equitable learning opportunities for all learners</i>

Appendix 2: Code Assembly to Determine General Theory-in-action Descriptions (Samples)

A Sample of Interrelated Components Describing Part of Allan's Original Theory-in-action

Component	Pattern Description (Generalisation)	Examples of related datum from First Cycle coding
Action	<i>The SL structured meeting activities to involve middle leaders sharing the strategies they used for leading professional inquiry.</i>	<p>He [Allan] brings up a question he lets us debate about it. He lets us freely debate and he doesn't interrupt us (ML2)</p> <p>Sharing different strategies of coaching ... I think they are enjoying hearing their colleagues have that sort of knowledge (Allan)</p> <p>People [leaders] are collaborating a bit more easily, sharing what they are doing. A good example is when [Ben] said I'm going to do it like this and he very quickly flashed it up onto the screen. Quite a few people liked it. (Allan)</p>
Constraint	<i>The SL expected all teachers would carry out a rigorous professional inquiry focused on a school priority.</i>	<p>A large overarching goal this year is very much around <i>building teachers' capacity to focus on literacy</i> (Allan)</p> <p><i>The focus this year is in your professional inquiry is working with junior classes</i> (Allan)</p> <p>Students are not coming in with a desired level of literacy that is a pattern school-wide, so the <i>focus is on using inquiry as a vehicle to improve the literacy</i> (Allan)</p> <p><i>The expectation would be that people are investigating how to teach literacy better</i> (Allan)</p> <p><i>The principal is trying to think about the impact of inquiry this year and how rigorous the inquiries have been.</i> (Allan)</p>
Consequence	<i>Middle leaders shared a variety of strategies, some but not all strategies supported the expectations for rigour or the school priority</i>	<p>It is getting that different types of perspective on it and is totally beneficial because it makes you say, oh I can use that idea (ML1)</p> <p>It was a big sort of sigh, here we go again we've got to do another one. So, I prompted, I said - look let's move away from the line inquiry and think that like - Growth mindset. (ML8)</p>

A Sample of Interrelated Components Describing Part of Allan’s Original Theory-in-action

Component	Pattern Description (Generalisation)	Examples of related datum from First Cycle coding
Action	<i>Developed novel activities from inquiry-coaching transcripts (using his own transcript first) for middle leaders to identify undisclosed beliefs and assumptions</i>	<p>I’ve sort of taken it [a transcript of Allan’s inquiry conversation with a teacher] away and tried to extract a part of the transcript to something manageable. (Allan)</p> <p>In the side B exercise, we looked at thinking about that checking, looking at assumptions or spotting assumptions (Allan)</p>
Constraint	<i>Believed examining current leadership practices was necessary to increase inquiry rigour</i>	<p>I think is really important that we want the real conversations, and we want some real practising in the meetings (Allan)</p> <p>How do we respectfully talk about each other’s practice? (Allan)</p> <p>Focusing in on those two ideas around the conversation and wanting to have that rigorous inquiry (Allan)</p>
Consequence	<i>Middle leaders felt confident and safe sharing their alternative responses with the group</i>	<p>He is the one with all the skills and experience. Even within his own interviews there are what you could consider to be mistakes, or there are opportunities for further improvement, for reflection. He is also open and willing to share his conversations with us and allow us to critique his practice so that he can learn and we can learn...It builds trust between us. (ML2)</p> <p>I always want to give my own opinion (ML1)</p> <p>I really liked it [sharing alternative responses], really liked it because we had time to look at it ourselves and did a bit of sharing and then even going round the table. I felt there were some different ideas. (ML3)</p>

A Sample of Interrelated Components Describing Part of Eleanor's Original Theory-in-action

Component	Pattern Description (Generalisation)	Examples of related datum from First Cycle coding
Action	<i>The SL sought agreement with the middle leaders on the plan they would use to progress professional inquiry with teachers.</i>	<p>I did this because we hadn't reached a consensus last time (Eleanor)</p> <p>we need to work out as a group how we are going to facilitate the key learnings (Eleanor)</p> <p>I am checking a couple of times if we are on the same page or if people are in agreement, it also gives people a window to say actually, I have just had a quick thought and maybe we need to tackle it a bit differently (Eleanor)</p>
Constraint	<i>The SL assumed agreement would increase middle leaders' commitment to leading professional inquiry in a uniform way.</i>	<p>[Agreement is important because] I think it is going to mean there is more consistency with how they are working with their teams (Eleanor)</p> <p>If there is like a majority or a large agreement on what we are deciding to progress there is going to be more consistency from the approach each leader takes with their groups (Eleanor)</p>
Consequence	<i>Middle leaders stuck to what was agreed and did not make leadership decisions beyond the scope of this agreement.</i>	<p>I ran it exactly the same [as the other leaders meetings] (ML4)</p> <p>We all left knowing what we were going to have to do and all agreeing on what we were going to do together (ML5)</p> <p>It is almost like a silent contract, we all agreed (ML5)</p> <p>I am not making decisions about what is happening ... I want to know what the others did (ML6)</p>

A Sample of Interrelated Components Describing Part of Eleanor’s Revised Theory-in-action

Component	Pattern Description (Generalisation)	Examples of related datum from First Cycle coding
Action	<i>The SL structured meetings to teach middle leaders the theory and skills for selected interpersonal capabilities.</i>	<p>I am going to give you another minute, so make sure you’ve found at least 1 to 3 examples of where you thought something and it hasn’t been expressed (Eleanor)</p> <p>I am going to ask you each to share one example (Eleanor)</p> <p>The purpose of today’s session is to analyse our past conversations which we started and to practise using a tool to improve our future conversations (Eleanor)</p> <p>(You) need to do it correctly and build the capabilities needed to do this (Eleanor)</p>
Constraint	<i>The SL believed middle leaders must be taught the theory and skills underpinning the new interpersonal capabilities to rigorously inquire.</i>	<p>By seeing their own practice, they have to take ownership of what they do (Eleanor)</p> <p>I wanted them to be able to be quite personal and share reasons why they hadn’t (shared their beliefs). Before showing them some of the theory behind what tends to happen in conversations (Eleanor)</p>
Consequence	<i>Middle leaders’ views about their existing capabilities influenced their engagement with the resources and what they learned.</i>	<p>I can absolutely put my own thinking out there. I think I decided that wasn’t what the job of that conversation was at that point. I’m not quite sure why actually, but I think it was based in this belief that I was helping her to uncover her thinking (ML6)</p> <p>I don’t think I am leading them, and I don’t think I should be either. I felt other people felt maybe I should be leading them more and I’m not sure. I think it’s right to genuinely inquire (ML6)</p> <p>I didn’t find anything new in the learning for me at that moment (ML6)</p>

The Opportunity in Staffing Shortages: Solutions to Monocultural Staffing Within Diverse School Communities

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ABSTRACT: The Canadian educational landscape is characterised by a profound and growing paradox: student populations are increasingly racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse, while the teaching workforce remains predominantly monocultural. This staffing misalignment is not merely a demographic concern; it is an equity imperative with direct consequences for student achievement, school climate, and staff retention. Compounding these challenges are pervasive staffing shortages that strain resources and often force school principals to prioritise filling vacancies over pursuing strategic hiring for diversity. The purpose of this research is to reframe this crisis as an opportunity. Rather than viewing shortages as a barrier to diversification, this study explores how it can be leveraged to create immediate, tangible pathways for equity-deserving individuals into the education field. Using a Narrative Inquiry Case Study approach to unpack the practical steps of school staff diversification in the short-, medium-, and long-term, this article hopes to make progress both explicit and manageable.

Key words: Diversity, diversification of staff, equity, leadership moves, public education

Introduction

The Canadian educational landscape is characterised by a profound and growing paradox: student populations are increasingly racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse, while the teaching workforce remains predominantly monocultural (Turner, 2014). This staffing misalignment is not merely a demographic concern; it is an equity imperative with direct consequences for student achievement, school climate, and staff retention (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Blazar & Lagos, 2021; Tran, 2024). Compounding these challenges are pervasive staffing shortages that strain resources and often force school principals to prioritise filling vacancies over pursuing strategic hiring for diversity.

The purpose of this research is to reframe this crisis as an opportunity. Rather than viewing shortages as a barrier to diversification, this study explores how it can be leveraged to create immediate, tangible pathways for equity-deserving individuals into the education field. This article presents findings from a seven-year practice-based initiative, analysing a tailored mentorship program for foreign-trained and racialised teachers, educational assistants, support staff, and volunteers. Through a narrative inquiry methodology, it centres the lived experiences of racialised staff to answer three core questions:

1. What specific mentoring practices effectively support foreign-trained and equity-deserving staff in navigating public school systems?
2. Which short-, medium-, and long-term actions can school districts implement to broaden staff diversity proactively?
3. How do these mentoring and pathway approaches affect student support and overall equity outcomes?

This article argues that the current staffing shortage presents a unique strategic opening to dismantle monocultural structures. By integrating volunteers from diverse communities, implementing responsive mentorship, and consciously diversifying support staff roles, schools can immediately better address diverse student needs while simultaneously creating a pipeline for future educator positions. This dual-focused approach benefits all stakeholders—students, staff, and the broader community—and provides a practical blueprint for systemic change.

Author's Positionality

As a White school principal, I acknowledge that doing this work is complex. Building trust and authenticity with equity-deserving individuals occurs one at a time. Holding space for their realities, hearing concerns of discrimination, and accepting how my presence impacts the conversation is a key piece in this work. I attempted to counter this by working with racialised leaders, family, and friends to check my understanding throughout this process. I thank them for their honesty and holding me accountable for the work in which I was engaging.

Literature Review and Context

The Impact of Teacher Diversity on Student Outcomes

A substantial body of research demonstrates the significant educational benefits for all students when staff demographics reflect student diversity (Abawi, 2018; James & Turner, 2017). Research validates that having a same-race teacher significantly increased reading and math test scores for both Black and White students, while lowering disciplinary exclusion for Black students (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Dee, 2004, 2005). These findings suggest that demographic matching can reduce implicit biases in teacher expectations and perceptions.

Blazar and Lagos (2021) furthered that teachers perceive smaller racial gaps in academic ability and exhibit more positive relational behaviours with students who share their race or ethnicity. Additionally, improved student attendance, higher rates of gifted program identification,

increased college aspirations, and stronger student–teacher relationships result from staff diversification (Gershenson et al., 2022).

For immigrant and Multiple Language Learners (MLL) populations, the presence of staff who share a common language or immigrant experience is invaluable. These staff members often serve as cultural brokers, translating not only language but also navigating the nuanced social and institutional expectations (Smith, 2018). This support fosters a sense of belonging, which is a critical component of academic engagement and success.

In Ontario, Canada, the move to mandate schools' inclusivity began relatively recently. Campbell (2021) highlighted the progress towards equity and inclusion during the 2004–2019 period. Several educational policies looked towards valuing all voices and supporting equity-deserving communities. In 2009, the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education [OMoE], 2009), and in 2010, *Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools* (OMoE, 2010), introduced strategies to support positive learning environments, create accountabilities and eliminate discrimination within our schools. In 2022, the *Racial Equity in the Education System Act (Bill 67)* prescribed educational equality for all (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2022). The government also recognised the gap between staff composition and student demographics, encouraging faculties of education to accept diverse teacher candidates (York University, 2025). Collectively, these policies identify the work necessary to redress a different historic reality where White Europeans were the dominate population. This is no longer Ontario's demographic reality. Reconciliation with our Indigenous communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), addressing academic inequities and discipline patterns directed towards Indigenous and racialised students is a collective goal for Ontario educators (Government of Ontario, 2017). All of these policies acknowledge the work that we need to do within the Ontario educational landscape towards inclusivity and representation.

Barrier to Diversifying the Teaching Workforce

Despite clear benefits to all identities, significant barriers exist for internationally-trained teachers (ITTs) to join the teaching profession in Ontario, Canada. For ITTs, there are often significant processes, a lack of recognition of their expertise and expensive re-training in order to teach in Ontario (Tran, 2024). This process represents a formidable structural barrier that discounts global knowledge and different educational systems.

Furthermore, equity-deserving teachers frequently face isolation, microaggressions, and racial bias within school cultures (Kohli, 2018; Matias, 2016; Tran, 2024). Burdening expectations of racialised students' mentorship, being the voice for equity issues, and masking personal cultural distinctions create extra emotional and time labour for racialised staff (Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Tran, 2024). Finally, typical hiring practices disadvantage those with divergent lived-experiences from the predominantly White hiring team (Blazar & Lagos, 2021; Dandala, 2020).

Mentorship as a Strategic Plan

Effective mentorship is known to support the retention of equity-deserving staff. It is also known that race-matching and lived-experience matching creates the strongest connections and

develops trusting relationships quickly (Bettini et al., 2022). Unfortunately, in a White dominated mid-manager structure, finding those similarities was difficult. To compensate, mentor training in anti-racist and culturally sustaining practices was employed (Bettini et al., 2022). The mentorship should focus on navigating the hidden curriculum politics, understanding union contracts, building professional networks, and developing strategies for self-preservation and advocacy. This study contributes to this literature by detailing the structure and outcomes of a participant-driven, tailored mentorship model designed to address these precise needs.

Methodological Approach

This study employs a narrative inquiry approach, a methodology grounded in the understanding that humans make sense of their experiences through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Narrative inquiry is particularly suited to exploring complex, lived experiences of identity, culture, and belonging within our educational contexts. It moves beyond mere description to analyse the meanings participants assign to their experiences.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2004) emphasise, narrative inquiry rests on a three-dimensional framework: temporality (the past, present, and future aspects of experience), sociality (the personal and social conditions), and place (the specific physical and contextual boundaries). This framework guided the study's design, focusing on participants' past professional experiences, their present barriers and supports within the Canadian school system, and their future aspirations. The sociality dimension was central, acknowledging the intersection of their personal identities with the social conditions of race, power, and institutional culture within schools.

Participant Selection and Composition

This article draws on a practice-based initiative spanning two decades, with a concentrated focus on the last seven years, during which over 60 equity-deserving employees participated in a voluntary mentorship program. From this larger group, a subset of 18 participants was selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This constituted a convenience sample, drawn from individuals with whom a trusting relationship already existed or could be readily established—a key tenet of narrative inquiry. The participants were comprised of:

- 17 racialised females and 1 male;
- 9 internationally trained teachers;
- additionally, 3 internationally trained (but not in education);
- aged 32 to 67 years old; and
- from India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean, North America, and South America;
- 5 participants were Canadian-born;
- average immigrant duration in Canada was 12.9 years; and
- 16 spoke multiple languages.

To provide a racialised leadership perspective and to triangulate the findings from the ground-level staff, three additional interviews were conducted with racialised principals. Their insights helped to contextualise the experiences of staff within broader district policies and leadership challenges.

Interview Structure

A semi-structured interview was conducted with individuals in a variety of roles including: Parking Lot Attendants, Literacy Volunteers, Lunchroom Supervisors, Teachers (in permanent, term, and emergency supply positions) and Educational Assistants (EA). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, thematically coded, pattern compiled, and data reduced. The diversity of participant roles provided an enriching perspective to explore both their experiences and insights, as it related to staff diversification. Some consistent patterns emerged which were confirmed by racialised principals.

Ethical Considerations

Acknowledging the positional power of the author relative to the participants, their participation request was done through a passive advertisement. This led to a group of individuals self-selecting. The participants were given the questions in advance of the interview. All participants who granted consent were included in the findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis identified recurring barriers, supports, transitions, and recommendations. Four core thematic findings arose. Additionally, a basic sentiment analysis was performed on the coded data, which revealed the most positive sentiment clustered around discussions of “mentorship supports” and the most negative around experiences of “discrimination”.

Racial Disparities in Education and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

This article will not go into discussions highlighting the discrimination and barriers that equity-deserving communities face in education. For the purposes of this article, I will acknowledge the research that has robustly highlighted Indigenous students (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020) and students with special education needs (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014), and racialised students face more office referrals, disciplinary consequences and experience more behavioural interventions than other students (Liu et al., 2024; Owens, 2022). The debates have been settled long ago. This article explores the short-term, mid-term, and long-term practical actions that individual school leaders can do to increase diversity in their schools.

Getting from where we are to where we need to be is not a direct route. It is not something that can be changed quickly. The average Ontario teacher teaches for 13.9 years, with 22% of teachers remaining in the role for more than 25 years (Ontario College of Teachers, 2023). Entire generations of students will complete their public education before the average teacher leaves the profession. Therefore, we must welcome diversity into all the positions within our educational

system. We cannot wait for teachers to retire; we must diversify staff now and plan for teacher diversification over time.

Findings and Themes

The analysis of the participants' narratives revealed four central, interconnected themes that directly inform a strategic framework for action.

1. Systemic Barriers are Pervasive and Predictable

An overwhelming consensus emerged regarding the obstacles faced by equity-deserving educators. These barriers were remarkably consistent regardless of the participant's country of origin or specific role, pointing to systemic rather than individual failures.

- **Credential Recognition:** For ITTs, the process was described as “tedious” with many teachers receiving probationary certifications. Many had taught for over a decade in their home countries yet were required to take additional courses, teach outside of their expertise, and had little job security.
- **Lack of Networks:** Participants repeatedly sought support in interviewing and mentors' advocacy during the hiring season. Without connections within the predominantly White administration, many qualified candidates felt they were never seen.
- **Experiences of Discrimination:** Narratives included frequent experiences of being overlooked or isolated on staffs. Others described not being able to be their “full self” or trying to be “more white” in their self-presentation. One participant of colour stated: “There is a constant pressure to prove you belong, to be twice as good, that my white colleagues simply don't have to”.
- **Communication Expectations Are Different:** How we speak to caregivers about negative behaviour is different. One internationally-trained diverse teacher remarked: Different cultures are more direct and that's not the problem for us. It's being honest but in Canada there is a certain phrasing. ... I have lived in four countries ... And Canada is the only country where you're supposed to do this [frame things gently]... if you actually [are] not being honest for me, in my culture, [it] means I'm a bad person. This is a challenge for new international teachers that requires additional training.

2. Tailored, Responsive Mentorship is a Transformative Support

The most positive sentiments in the data were associated with the mentorship program. Participants did not describe a generic mentoring relationship but highlighted specific aspects that made it effective:

- **Participant-Driven Agenda:** The flexibility to set their own goals was paramount. One mentee appreciated “changing what we talked about, based on what I needed”.

- **Advocacy and Navigation:** Mentors acted as advocates and translators of the system. Several participants described their mentors prepping for interviews and wanting to understand what administrators are looking for in their responses. “I can be successful with the right support”.
- **Reduction of Isolation:** Simply having a designated, trusted confidant was repeatedly cited as a critical factor in perseverance. “Just knowing someone was in my corner, that believed in me really makes a difference”.

These findings underscore that effective mentorship for this population is not about top-down but was responsive, advocacy, and emotional support.

3. Volunteer and Support Staff Roles are Critical Pathway Bridges

The diversity of roles among participants illuminated a natural, yet often unintentional, pipeline. Volunteers and support staff who immersed themselves in the school community became invaluable assets:

- **Cultural Immersion:** They learned the unwritten rules, rhythms, and personalities of the school. One felt proud how she helps others, and sent a photo of her, other parents, and the principals back home.
- **Proven Competence:** They could demonstrate their skills, work ethic, and rapport with students directly to the administrators who would be making future hiring decisions. One respondent spoke about a shared plan to increase their confidence— leading to a permanent job.
- **Foot-in-the-Door:** These roles provided income and relevant Canadian experience while they navigated the job market or waited for a teaching opportunity.

The study reveals that formally recognising and supporting these individuals as future teacher candidates is a powerful short-term strategy for diversification.

4. Lived-Experience is a Professional Asset

Participants consistently articulated how their multilingualism and cultural fluency were direct benefits to the school, and schools valued them.

- **Support for MLLs and Newcomers:** They could connect with newcomer students and families in profound ways, easing the transition and building trust quickly: “Every single day we had parents that don’t know the culture, the rules about the school, so I try [to] help them, to clarify everything”.
- **Enriched Perspective for All:** They brought diverse perspectives into the classroom; benefiting all students. “I enjoy sharing and explaining world celebrations with many students”.

This theme reframes the narrative from one of “deficit” (needing to learn Canadian ways) to one of “asset”, where their unique identities and experiences are a crucial resource for the school community.

Attracting Diversity in Educational Staffing

There are some practical things that school leaders can do to increase staff diversity. One is active, targeted recruitment; another is careful wording of postings that show value for diverse experiences, and thirdly, building cross cultural networks and connections.

Recruitment is a crucial first step in diversifying staff. Without a diverse applicant pool, staff representation won't occur. To address this, school districts are implementing protocols to interview a specified number of diverse candidates for each job posting. Similar to hiring practices that require interviews for the most senior applicants, but this can encourage diverse hires. We must shift towards a more inclusive system. Active efforts to attract underrepresented communities to teaching are vital. As one racialised principal noted: "You have to go where they are ... I offered to hold short presentations about becoming a teacher in Ontario at their mosque". Engaging racialised youth in education careers is essential.

The language of job postings also matters. Emphasising a commitment to diversity and broadening recruitment channels can significantly impact candidate attraction (Dandala, 2020). Collaborating with diversity-serving institutions and community organisations can enhance visibility for recruitment.

Incorporating diverse perspectives in the hiring process—like involving underrepresented leaders in interviews—is crucial, though care must be taken to avoid overburdening them. One principal shared: "When I hired, my partner was a white woman ... No one questioned the integrity of the process". She also warned against tokenism: "EDI burnout is real ... Are you only asking to interview with them because they are racialised?" Building supportive relationships between staff of all backgrounds is vital for retention.

After hiring, there are considerations to ensure engagement and retention. To effectively integrate diverse staff; the hiring, onboarding, and mentorship processes must be intentional. Identifying potential biases and ensuring multiple perspectives guide decisions are critical safeguards.

Once diverse staff are onboard, providing ongoing support is essential for their success. Professional development should be flexible and long-term, addressing specific barriers and lived experiences. Data indicated that participants sought tailored support in resource curation and behaviour management.

Finally, understanding diversity in education must involve the community and caregivers-at-large. Engaging parents and local resources fosters trust and inclusivity; inviting typically marginalised families into the conversation.

A comprehensive approach to attract diversity in education involves community engagement, tailored professional development, and intentional recruitment strategies, all rooted in equity. Investing in underrepresented individuals builds trust, improves communication, and facilitates meaningful discussions, ultimately enhancing our capacity to reach diverse populations.

Discussion

Our Changing Landscape

According to Statistics Canada (2021), over 8 million individuals identify themselves as racialised. This constitutes 22.3% across the country. In urban centres, southern towns and port cities, these numbers are even higher. Unfortunately, the demographics of teaching staff have not kept abreast of these shifting realities. In 2014 Ontario, only 10% of the 70,520 secondary school teachers and 9% of the 117,905 elementary school teachers were racialised (Turner, 2014). With expectations from Statistics Canada (2024b) that by 2036, Canada will be 34.4% racialised, the importance of addressing this gap will be even greater. School leadership's composition is also disproportionately skewed toward historical demographics of a predominantly White/European population. More recently, in 2020, Ontario's Principal Council, representing Ontario's public schools' practicing principals and vice principals, surveyed their school leaders. Progress had not been as great as we might have hoped. At that time, 83% of school leaders were of White/European origins, despite only representing 68% of the general population. Ninety-two percent of school leader respondents identified as heterosexual and 68% were female (Turner, 2021). Although we had reached the tipping point of gender representation (albeit lower than the 75.7% of teaching positions held by women) (Statistics Canada, 2024a), we had made little gain toward true representation of the students in our schools.

Short-Term, Mid-Term, Long-Term

There are three stages of diversification, all of which a school leader has a great deal of influence over. While constraints exist, focus on areas where you can make a difference. The following findings culminate in practical, actionable items that school and district leaders can embark upon. They are divided into short-, mid-, and long-term steps.

Short-Term (Implement Now)

Start where you can. The opportunity of emergency staffing can give the experience to teachers as they await credentialling. Don't create a barrier of "current position attainment" to participate in formalised mentoring programs. Ensure that these programs are flexible and responsive, highlighting one-to-one mentorship partners. Intentional volunteer recruitment from diverse communities helps give work experience opportunities to newcomers. It is important to work with immigration-serving organisations, places of worship, and your own schoolyard to find these volunteers. Within your school, make it an action item at staff meetings for teachers to develop close connections with two racialised families. Have staff actively encourage those parents to join school council or volunteer for school trips. When you have lots of volunteers, actively select those marginalised parents. Finally, when hiring, audit your own practice. Look at interview questions and their possible implicit biases. Use rubrics to evaluate candidates with clear equity-inclusive standards. Once you have multiple diverse staff (both paid and unpaid), more will come.

Medium-Term Strategic Planning (1–3 Years)

During this timeframe, map out your goals. Start with creating your own pipeline of diversity. Partner with local high schools, colleges, and universities to target messages towards diverse support staff and volunteers with district endorsement. At the district level, track equity-deserving volunteers and support staff, offering them professional development opportunities to lead to greater engagement. Formalise your partnerships with immigrant-serving agencies to create a pathway for employment with the school or district.

Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)

Get political. Work with governments to advocate for changes in credentialling internationally-trained professionals. Efficient and transparent processes are very important to newcomers. And be clear about the equity hiring plan your district has. Know your districts' demographics and advertise in languages and places that will be seen by diverse candidates. Be explicit. Continue to provide long-term support for those diverse candidates, as a transition to a more accepting and inclusive workplace will require it.

The Opportunity of a Staffing Crisis

In the highly unionised education sector, staffing changes are complex. Stable, permanent staff often face challenges due to ongoing shortages, prompting short-term diversity hiring outside traditional pathways. Increased job absences have led unions to allow unqualified staff for coverage, permitting “emergency staffing” measures. A 2023–24 report indicates that 24% of elementary and 35% of secondary schools face daily teaching staff shortages, with 42% and 46% reporting shortages in support staff, respectively (People for Education, 2024). While this threatens stability, it offers opportunities. Welcoming internationally-trained, non-provincially recognised teachers helps them gain confidence and secure roles aligned with their preferences. I invite these diverse supply staff to meetings and encourage them to observe experienced teachers, fostering reflection that boosts their interview readiness.

Individualisation: Scaffolding Experiences

As my school's demographics became more diverse, I applied an equity mindset to our Home Reading program, recognising that many families lacked tutoring resources. To improve literacy levels, I invited seniors from a retirement home to read with students and recruited volunteers, including three recent immigrants. I assured them that limited English was not a barrier, and after practicing at home, they gained confidence.

One volunteer, a Muslim woman with teaching experience, aimed to improve her English and enter the job market. We set goals for her speaking abilities and used the Strong Start© program to enhance her skills. I encouraged her to apply to an EA position, which she got. She shared: “I am loving my job. I get to be with children that really need me”. This illustrates how scaffolded support can build confidence and facilitate entry into the Canadian job market.

Immeasurable Staff Contributions

Diverse frontline staff fosters a welcoming environment. One parking lot attendant, who has been in Canada since 2017, connects with marginalised parents, primarily women, who are also navigating Canadian culture. She explains: “Every single day we had parents that don’t know the culture ... I try to help them, to clarify everything”. She recognises shared experiences among immigrants, stating: “I understand that we have lots of immigrants here ... it is easy [for] me to try [to] help them”. Despite language barriers, she finds that body language facilitates understanding: “We speak different languages but we understand [each other]”.

When frontline workers feel supported, they engage in organic community connections that enhance the school’s inclusivity. However, many internationally-trained individuals often occupy lower-paying roles due to non-recognition of their credentials. For instance, a Muslim woman from Libya, a certified Math teacher, expressed her frustration: “You need to go to school for two or three years ... that is very hard for me now”. Despite this, she finds pride in her role as an emergency supply staff member and enjoys working with students, saying: “I know everything ... it’s easy for me”. Her engagement ultimately led her to help with a Muslim Club, where she emphasised the importance of creating a safe space for students: “It is good for them to have a space together”.

While economic factors may deter diverse candidates from remaining in lower-paid roles, their increasing comfort can lead to permanent positions. For example, a lunchroom supervisor transitioned to a school secretary after gaining confidence and improving her English. She stated: “I have worked hard back home ... Now that I feel okay in schools, I was [able] to get a better job with more hours”.

The barriers posed by Canadian accreditation limit opportunities for foreign-trained candidates. To stabilise the education workforce and benefit all students, we must reevaluate pathways to better-paying positions for newcomers.

Inspiring Racialised Students to Consider Education

Racialised students and their families must view the education profession as a viable career path. High school course selections can influence their aspirations toward or away from the education sector. This awareness led to my collaboration with the local High School Black Brilliance Union to inspire leadership among racialised students.

Elementary students benefit from observing high school leaders. Partnering with *Adventure 4 Change*, we matched high school students with mentors to deliver interactive presentations in elementary classrooms for Black History Month. One participant noted: “I was nervous, but the children responded quickly, and I was okay ... I would have never done this on my own”. While this experience doesn’t guarantee a commitment to teaching, it may encourage students to consider future educational placements.

Intentional engagement is essential. School leaders must identify who is missing from student leadership roles and actively create opportunities for underrepresented groups, helping students envision themselves as future leaders.

A Foot in the Door, and Then the Reality Hits

The voices of racialised educators highlighted systemic barriers and negative experiences that often left them feeling undervalued and discriminated against. One participant shared: “As a woman of color, it took me a long time to get a contract”. Another reflected:

I think what you don’t understand is there is racism [in our schools]. I felt like when I was supplying, I would look at the staff list and see one name after the other—all white names. Then you’d see new hires, and they were also all white.

Participants also noted inequities in hiring practices. One shared:

The teacher that got the [permanent] job was right out of teachers’ college ... [she] did the job for the year [in the term position], and the next year the position became permanent and she got it. I didn’t even get an interview for the term position.

Others described taking less-preferred roles just to gain entry into the system. As one participant explained: “I taught for 16 years back home. I took an EA job for a day, and the principal offered me a term position. I accepted it, but I really want to teach—and I need help to get there”.

Many participants felt they had to “go above and beyond” compared to their White colleagues. One teacher shared: “I noticed white teachers could be strict, but I had to be kind and fun. I couldn’t show that strict side of me”. Another added: “I have to accept [students’] disrespect for fear that their parents will call the principal again”. Many internationally-trained teachers noted that communication in Canada is nuanced, and lacking that “soft approach” can lead to miscommunications. A recurring theme left foreign-trained teachers feeling that parents blame teachers rather than addressed their child’s behaviour. Staff needed mentorship to understand how to share information with families.

Participants consistently identified mentorship as the key to overcoming these challenges. One stated: “I think we all can teach very effectively, but we just need some guidance. If we are better prepared, we can do very well”. Another participant reflected: “When I walked into Ontario classrooms, I was surprised by the behaviour problems. I wasn’t ready to handle them, but once I learned new skills, I was okay”. Shadowing experienced staff and reflecting on their classroom practices proved critical for internationally-trained teachers.

Navigating Cultural Differences

For racialised candidates educated outside Canada, cultural differences in teacher–student relationships presented unexpected challenges. Teachers from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, South America, and Africa often found the informality between students and teachers surprising. One participant shared: “I was shocked, when I started, with the relationship between students and teachers—how they are friends. It’s a good thing now, but it was shocking at first”. Others initially perceived students as disrespectful, noting that students spoke to teachers in ways that were unexpected.

Navigating this cultural distinction was particularly difficult for teachers unsure of how much personal information to share with students. While many initially found the openness

uncomfortable, some saw its benefits. As one participant noted: “Students here can comfortably talk about what they are feeling, which is good from a mental health side of things”.

Differences in Parent Communication

Once in the role, many foreign educated staff are surprised by how Canadians communicate with families. One internationally-trained diverse teacher remarked:

Different cultures are more direct and that’s not the problem for us. It’s being honest but in Canada there is a certain phrasing. ... I have lived in four countries. Canada is the fourth one. And Canada is the only country where you’re supposed to do this [frame things gently] ... if you actually [are] not being honest for me, in my culture, [it] means I’m a bad person.

For many diverse transcultural staff, learning how communication is different is something that new staff need support with. Specialised professional development has helped during the initial onboarding process. When they know what to expect, they are better prepared to have those conversations with confidence.

Addressing Curriculum Challenges

Several research participants also struggled with Ontario, Canada’s vagueness of curriculum and the lack of assigned resources. Many foreign-trained teachers lacked networks to share materials, leading to significant time spent creating resources or searching online. Additionally, several participants were accustomed to teaching a single subject but found themselves teaching multiple subjects outside their areas of expertise.

One participant explained: “We have done a Master’s in a subject, and we teach that, but here we have to learn Canadian Geography or Music and teach it the next day. That can be a challenge”. These challenges underscore the importance of mentorship, resource sharing, and professional development tailored to the needs of internationally-trained teachers.

Mentorship is the Key

Despite the stark revelations shared by participants, one sentiment resounded across the study; mentorship is essential to becoming confident, effective educators. Every participant emphasised the value of mentorship for networking, accessing resources, and emotional support. Importantly, participants noted that shared lived experiences with mentors were less critical than the mentor’s willingness to meet them where they were and demonstrate belief in their potential. One participant shared:

I think one of the things is having a really great administrator who will sit down with you and walk you through it. That is indispensable to any teacher because when you have someone like that who’s willing to take the time and say, “Okay, let’s talk about X”, it makes all the difference.

Another participant explained: “Mentors need to believe in me and my abilities even when I am down ... I want a mentor that I know has the skills to help me”.

Participants also described the emotional support mentors provide. One commented: “My mentor is like my therapist. I can come to the meeting overwhelmed and leave relaxed and ready to give it another try”. Another added: “Knowing something about my background—or wanting to know about it—is important for building trust. I don’t want to feel judged. I need to feel safe because I am vulnerable”. Some participants highlighted the unique challenges they face. One noted:

I want you [the mentor] to understand that being a minority means I am discriminated against, but I cannot show that. I have to pretend to be white to get the job. It means pretending I went to school here since birth, that I am rich, that my parents have good jobs, that I play the piano and five sports ... and that isn’t the case for white people.

Finally, participants underscored the transformative impact of mentorship. One shared:

My mentor makes me see how hard he knows I am working. He knows I just want to be an effective teacher. I think we all can be effective, but we just need some guidance, and if we are better prepared, then we can do better.

Another reflected on the sense of community mentorship fosters:

Seeing, sharing space with other racialised educators was wonderful. I felt safe in that space! I was also encouraged to see others landing in great places. The mentorship program has been deeply, profoundly encouraging for me. I needed this—I think we all did.

The Path Forward

Schools are imperfect spaces filled with competing interests, and there is rarely enough time, resources, or energy to achieve all we aspire to. But that does not mean we should do nothing. Small, intentional actions can make a significant difference in diversifying school staff.

Hiring or finding volunteers from diverse backgrounds is a small but impactful step. Listening to volunteers and staff, reflecting on what is heard, and taking action—however humbling—are critical. For me, this has meant acknowledging blind spots and recognising biases I had not initially seen.

Formal and informal mentorship remains the most effective way forward. Newly hired diverse staff require focused attention early on, including regular check-ins. In our district, early mentorship workshops designed for racialised staff allowed networks and supports to be developed.

Some staff preferred working directly with a school leader, while others requested mentorship from racialised colleagues in similar roles. Asking staff what they need and ensuring the right mentors and resources are available is essential. As one participant put it: “We can do it; we just need the right people supporting us, who believe in us”.

Implications/Recommendations

Canada is one of the most diverse nations in the world, with our schools welcoming students from all backgrounds daily. Yet, the composition of our school staff rarely reflects the diversity of the students we serve. The pursuit of diversity within staffing in Ontario's schools is both a moral and pragmatic imperative. By adopting intentional recruitment strategies, fostering mentorship, and engaging with community organisations, educational leaders can work towards creating reflective workforces that serve all students. The demographic disparities between staff and students must be addressed to ensure equitable educational experiences.

First, we must acknowledge that lived experiences are as valuable as formal qualifications. A person's unique perspective and background bring richness to the classroom that extends beyond academic credentials. Actively seeking diversity requires inclusive invitations directly to underrepresented groups. Partnering with community organisations, engaging local elders, and ensuring diverse voices are present in decision-making processes can also have a profound impact.

To create sustainable change, school leaders should focus on four key areas:

1. **Encouraging Diverse Students to Enter Education** – Inspire students from varied backgrounds to consider an educational career. Programs like cooperative education, guest speakers, and mentorship opportunities can plant these seeds early.
2. **Targeted Recruitment** – Recruitment efforts must be intentional. Engage with community organisations, faith-based groups, and cultural networks. Use inclusive language in advertisements to signal that diversity is valued.
3. **Cultivating Volunteers** – Volunteers from diverse backgrounds provide role models for students and can transition into staff roles. Recognise that volunteering is a privilege; reduce barriers to participation and actively recruit volunteers who reflect the community's diversity.
4. **Inclusive Hiring Practices** – Hire diverse candidates for all roles. Conduct interviews with diverse colleagues to signal an equity-focused mindset.

By encouraging students to consider an education career, cultivating volunteers, targeting recruitment and embedding inclusive hiring practices, much can be done to diversify staff. As a school leader, we have influence over hiring, and the individuals we bring into our schools. Done wisely we can have immediate, mid-term and long-term impacts on the makeup of our school staff.

Conclusion

Participants in this research shared experiences revealing barriers to securing positions, accessing resources, and effectively communicating with families. They felt equipped to fulfil any role they applied for but encountered hiring practices that hindered their opportunities. Those unable to obtain Ontario certification sought paths to Educational Assistant positions, often facing challenges due to student behavioural needs. Yet, they expressed joy in working with children. Although the journey to permanent contract jobs often took longer than for their White peers,

mentorship provided the individualised support they needed. They valued professional development tailored to their needs and the networking opportunities arising from formal mentorship.

This research underscores how every role within the school positively connects students to diverse cultures and allows them to see themselves reflected in the staff. Racialised principals echoed these findings, recognising that cross-cultural colleague networks are vital for their leadership connection. However, the potential for overburdening diverse leaders emerged as a challenge.

My own learning through this work has required humility. Conversations with 15 diverse staff members and three racialised principals revealed patterns of discrimination and racism that were difficult to hear but essential to address. Conscious mentorship and individualised support have become the highlights of my role as a school leader. When staff and volunteers feel supported and valued, they are better equipped to succeed—ultimately benefiting students who see themselves reflected in their schools.

Throughout my 21 years as a principal across eight schools, my most significant impact has come through mentorship. Mentoring diverse staff has allowed me to witness their growth and success, reinforcing the idea that school leaders can enact meaningful change at the local level despite systemic constraints. The current staffing crisis can catalyse diversifying school staff and fostering an inclusive educational environment that empowers all students to succeed.

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People Management in Schools: Practical Strategies Used by Selected UK Local Headteachers to Create Supportive and Respectful Working Environments for Teachers

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ABSTRACT: Headteachers who overlook the importance of teachers' professional expertise and contributions can negatively affect teachers' occupational wellbeing, by increasing the risk of attrition, and breaking an element of the UK Headteachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2020). These challenges may often stem from ineffective people management, particularly the failure to nurture a working environment in which teachers feel valued and respected. Although existing literature acknowledges these issues, there remains a gap in research concerning the practical, day-to-day strategies local UK headteachers as people managers could employ to foster such environments. To address this gap, this study investigated the following research question: As people managers, how could headteachers nurture a working environment where staff feel valued and respected?

Using Microsoft TEAMS and the Joint Information Systems Committee (Jisc) Online survey platform, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six headteachers from two underrepresented regions in England—namely the Midlands and Yorkshire—which are seldom explored in existing research literature relevant to this study. Additionally, four more headteachers contributed through an online qualitative survey. Purposeful convenient or opportunity sampling was used to select interviewees, and a snowball strategy was used to attract survey participants. The NVivo software was used to analyse the data. Both universities involved granted ethical approval.

The findings revealed that, as a key aspect of people management, selected local UK headteachers fostered a working environment in which teachers feel valued and respected by engaging in a range of supportive practices. These include supporting teachers' personal and professional welfare, treating the process as a moral responsibility and high priority, being mindful of their time and emotional wellbeing, offering meaningful recognition and rewards, communicating effectively, motivating staff, treating teachers as professionals, enabling teacher voice, providing leadership opportunities, and promoting collaboration. While these findings are not new, they contribute to the literature by validating and extending knowledge within a new geographical context—Midlands and Yorkshire, England. Although well-documented in broader educational discussions, applying previous findings to a localised setting provides valuable evidence of how national and international occurrences manifest in regions often overlooked by the literature.

Key words: Headteachers, principals, teachers' wellbeing, people management

Introduction

Headteachers who overlook the importance of teachers and acknowledging their professional abilities and contributions are factors that significantly affect teachers' occupational wellbeing and may contribute to attrition. A recent Office for Standards in Education ([Ofsted], 2019) report helps to support this idea when it highlights that "... only 57% of teachers surveyed in the report said their headteachers gave them praise or recognition" (p. 46). A respondent in the Ofsted (2019) report also said, "Higher management walk past teaching staff and do not even say hello" (p. 45). The report goes on to state that this lack of praise, recognition, and appreciation for the work done by staff or unpleasant behaviour negatively influences staff occupational wellbeing in schools (Minott, 2024). Importantly, this lack of valuing and respecting teachers by some headteachers breaches an aspect of the UK Government's Headteachers' standards 2020 (Department for Education, 2020).

While we recognise the many and varied daily demands facing headteachers, we suggest that the less-than-complimentary findings outlined in the Ofsted citation above may stem from ineffective people management, particularly the failure to nurture a working environment in which teachers feel valued and respected (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Having said this, and in the spirit of critical reflection, we are mindful of the difficulty of establishing a clear cause-and-effect relationship within complex social settings such as schools. Therefore, we intentionally use the word "may" to indicate a degree of caution, suggesting a possible, but not definitive connection.

Importantly, what is missing from the literature is focused research on the practical, everyday actions local UK headteachers as people managers could use to nurture environments where teachers feel valued and respected. Given the foregoing discussion, the aim of this study was to provide answers to a research question: As people managers, how could headteachers nurture a working environment where staff feel valued and respected?

This article commences with a review of the literature and then presents the research supporting the article, the findings, summary, limitations, and implications for practice.

Literature Review

This literature review succinctly examines the concept of people management including challenges headteachers may encounter in their role as people managers and ways that they could, potentially, nurture a working environment where teachers feel valued and respected.

People Management: Definition

The term people management (PM) is often linked to the fields of business and Human Resources, leading to most definitions being framed within the context of these disciplines. For example, Visier Team (2025) and Armstrong (2020) see PM as a set of practices that includes talent acquisition, onboarding, development, and retention, all while providing continuous support to the organisation and individual employees. While this definition could be applied to education and schools, it does not fully capture the nuances and uniqueness of these areas—education and schools—where people are the most valuable resource (Bush & Middlewood, 2005) and they are prioritised above earnings, budgeting, marketing, and business planning.

A synthesis of several recent works provides a useful definition of people management that captures the uniqueness of education and schools. Jerrim (2025) explores the relationship between school leadership, teacher job satisfaction, and retention in England. The longitudinal study highlights the pivotal role of headteachers in shaping working conditions and emotional support for staff. People management is conceptualised through the actions of school leaders who balance job demands and resources, foster positive relationships, and protect staff from external pressures. This framing positions leadership as central to staff wellbeing and motivation, with direct implications for retention outcomes.

See et al. (2024) present an international evidence review on the relationship between school leadership and teacher wellbeing. People management is defined as an integral component of school leadership, encompassing activities such as shaping a shared vision, fostering a supportive school climate, developing leadership capacity in others, improving instructional practices, and managing people, data, and processes. The review highlights the importance of supportive and empowering leadership that protects staff from external pressures and promotes professional development and wellbeing.

ImpactEd (2022) conducted a national survey exploring staff satisfaction in schools, with a particular focus on the role of leadership in shaping school culture, communication, and morale. People management is conceptualised through the quality of line management, assessed via

observable behaviours such as openness, fairness, consistency, conflict resolution, guidance, relationship-building, and developmental support.

A synthesis of the above studies reveals that people management in schools refers to the strategic and relational practices employed by school leaders—particularly headteachers and line managers—to support, develop, and retain staff. This suggests that people management must be purposefully planned and is a central responsibility of leaders such as headteachers. But, most importantly, people management encompasses creating a supportive work environment, balancing job demands and resources, fostering professional growth, and cultivating trust through fair and consistent leadership behaviours. Effective people management also involves shaping a shared vision, empowering others, managing interpersonal dynamics, and protecting staff from external pressures, all of which contribute to staff wellbeing, morale, and retention (ImpactEd, 2022; Jerrim, 2025; See et al., 2024).

An examination of the synthesis and subsequent definition of PM above reveals several key insights. Firstly, it removes direct references to business-oriented terminology such as budgeting, finance, talent acquisition, onboarding, marketing, and earnings, thereby shifting the focus away from business priorities. Secondly, it places people at the centre, recognising them as the most valuable resource within an organisation (Bush & Middlewood, 2005). Thirdly, it emphasises that a key component of people management is the creation of a working environment in which staff feel valued and respected, and where their wellbeing is actively supported (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Finally, it involves practices such as recognising achievements, providing opportunities for growth, fostering open communication, and building strong interpersonal relationships among staff.

People Management: Local Challenge

Heath and Sherwood (2024) and Allen et al. (2025) support the idea that presently in the UK, headteachers face numerous significant challenges in their role as people managers when striving to nurture a work environment where staff feel valued and respected. Challenges such as limited time to engage meaningfully in the process and addressing a wide array of responsibilities that demand their attention, many of which are perceived as more urgent or pressing. These include, but are not limited to, staff recruitment and retention, student attainment, the integration of technology, the increasing prevalence of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), mounting pressure on SEND services, and the mental health and wellbeing of both students and school staff. Despite all these, it is a responsibility of headteachers as people managers to nurture a working environment where staff feel valued and respected (Tummers & Bakker, 2021). Therefore, as managers of people, how could they nurture such a working environment? The upcoming discussion considers a range of potential answers.

People Management: Nurturing a Working Environment Where Staff Feel Valued and Respected

The literature suggests several potential ways headteachers, as people managers, could nurture a working environment where staff feel valued and respected. These are discussed here.

Prioritising Staff Personal and Professional Welfare

Day and Sammons (2014) identify understanding people as a key trait of effective school leaders, including attention to teachers' personal and professional welfare, which positively influences their feelings (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). Several suggested activities in which headteachers could engage are connected to the idea of looking out for teachers' personal and professional welfare.

One, is to display empathy. Doing so fosters emotional safety and trust and helps teachers feel understood and valued (Twyford & Le Fevre, 2019). Twyford and Le Fevre found that teachers felt respected when headteachers considered their perspectives, treating them as "whole persons" (p. 315), which promotes flexibility and understanding (Mattock, 2017). Two, is to offer supportive classroom supervision that encourages teachers' growth. It involves active engagement in supervision of teachers—observations, feedback, goal setting—and care for teachers' development (Quick & Normore, 2004). Ebmeier (2003) and Hughes et al. (2014) add that headteachers must also understand daily school realities in order to reduce teacher isolation and burnout. Three, is to provide general support that empowers teachers professionally. This includes being approachable, offering constructive feedback, advice, and encouragement (Mestry & Vanitha, 2021; Twyford & Le Fevre, 2019). Four, headteachers must be attentive to teachers' time and promote work–life balance. Headteachers might also protect non-contact time and avoid introducing initiatives during peak workload periods (Morris et al., 2021). There is also a broader call among writers such as Scott et al. (2021), Masoom (2021), Bayles and Knowles (2019), and Butt and Lance (2005), to reduce curriculum changes, improve communication, and increase preparation time, though this poses timetabling challenges. Finally, there is also the suggestion that headteachers and school leaders should personally help to mitigate teachers' workload by (where possible) taking responsibility for extra tasks placed on teachers. This action is defined as "tasks exclusion" (Soini et al., 2016, p. 464)—where headteachers taking on extra responsibilities can reduce teacher stress and burnout, thus allowing focus on teaching and personal wellbeing (Soini et al., 2016).

Fostering a Culture of Recognition and Appreciation

Recognising or acknowledging teachers via monetary incentives or pay increases is just one form of recognition and appreciation. Braga et al. (2020) suggest such incentives or pay increases may only appeal to a limited group. Teachers also value public recognition from headteachers and colleagues, changes in responsibilities, and career advancement opportunities (Hughes et al., 2014).

Additionally, teachers perceive effective headteachers as those who are visible within the school (Johnson et al., 2005). Lambersky (2016) supports this view and states that headteachers' presence in school physical spaces enables impromptu social interactions that provide opportunities to express appreciation and set a positive tone for staff and students.

Building Autonomy and Trust

Blase and Blase (2000) emphasise the importance of school leaders showing fundamental respect for teachers' knowledge and abilities, viewing them as intellectuals rather than technicians

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Butt and Lance (2005) further highlight that teachers value being trusted to exercise professional judgement. This includes being encouraged to use their skills and initiative, express ideas, receive constructive feedback, and feel genuinely valued in their roles (Masoom, 2021).

Encouraging Open Communication

Communicating with teachers is a key way for headteachers to demonstrate value and respect for teachers. Hughes et al. (2014) emphasise that communication supports a positive school culture, helping to overcome barriers and implement constructive ideas. Open and frequent dialogue, soliciting teacher input on instruction, and involving them in decision making are essential communication practices (Blase & Blase, 2000; Easley, 2008; Ford et al., 2019; Quick & Normore, 2004). Central to this is enabling teacher voice. Lambersky (2016) found that when headteachers seriously consider and act on teachers' input, professional engagement improves. Drawing on Lundy's (2007) model, headteachers should create opportunities (space) for teachers to express their opinions, allow teachers to express their opinion (voice) without fear of reprisal, taking their opinion seriously (audience), and appropriately acting on the opinion (influence).

Providing Professional Development

Providing continued professional development (CPD) is another way headteachers can demonstrate value and respect for teachers. This includes allocating departmental funds for teachers to attend conferences and seminars and encouraging them to share knowledge gained during staff meetings (Mattock, 2017).

Promoting Collaboration

Blase and Blase (2000) advocate for headteachers to intentionally create time and opportunities for peer connections among teachers. Ford et al. (2019) and Hughes et al. (2014) emphasise not only the need for collaboration time but also the importance of meaningful interactions. These should involve strategic exchanges that support teacher growth and practice improvement, rather than focusing solely on school or student needs.

While the above literature suggests several potential strategies that headteachers in their role as people managers could use to nurture a working environment where staff feel valued and respected, there remains a gap in understanding how selected local UK headteachers actually nurture such a working environment. To address this gap, the present study was launched.

Methodology

The study uses an instrumental case study approach, where the case serves to highlight a broader issue (Creswell, 2018; Stake, 2000). In our study, local UK headteachers from two regions rarely explored in the existing research literature addressing the concerns of this study—namely the Midlands and Yorkshire England—were used to explore how headteachers, as people

managers, could nurture working environments where teachers feel valued and respected. This methodology also aided in providing answers to our research question as aptly demonstrated in the section titled Discussion of Findings.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Semi-structured interviews and qualitative online surveys were the data collection methods used. Interviews were conducted and audio recorded via the Microsoft Teams online platform. Two of the three members of the research team individually arranged and carried out one-to-one interviews with participants. A copy of the interview questions developed based on the literature reviewed above can be requested from the authors, if desired. For individual interviews, at an agreed time, the interviewer called the participants (via Microsoft Teams), requested confirmation that they had understood the study information and addressed any questions they had. The interviewer then carried out the interview. The qualitative online survey was created and implemented using the Joint Information Systems Committee (Jisc) Online survey platform. The reviewed literature was used to aid the construction of survey questions. A copy of the qualitative questionnaire can be requested from the authors, if desired. Via interviews, six headteachers provided data and there were four additional respondents to the online survey. The online survey ran from November 2023 ending in March 2024.

Piloting of Instrument

The piloting of the interview schedule confirmed the research interview schedule as effective in collecting relevant data within the specified time allocated for its use. The piloting of the interview was also confirmatory in the relevance of the interview questions to generate data to answer our main research question (Creswell, 2018).

Participants Selection Process

Interview participants selected for the study were primary and secondary headteachers (five males and one female) working in the Midlands and Yorkshire regions of England. Aside from identifying participants by gender here in this section, no additional background or biographical data were collected, as such information was not relevant to achieving the study's aim. In the selection process, we used purposeful convenient or opportunity sampling (Creswell, 2018). The participants were selected based on their extensive experience as headteachers and their capacity to offer in-depth insights into the research issue. An analysis of the study's findings and participant responses will demonstrate that they were able to provide in-depth insights and relevant and unique perspectives on the topic under investigation. Participants were also introduced to the research team by university staff or were known personally by members of the team hence easily accessible and readily available.

Qualitative survey participants were those in the interviewees' network. Here too, no background or biographical data were collected, as such information was not relevant to achieving

the study's aim. Interview participants were asked to forward an electronic link of the qualitative online survey to their network of headteachers, following a snowball sampling technique.

Data Analysis

The automatic transcribed qualitative interview and qualitative questionnaire data (Jisc) Online software and Microsoft TEAMS were added to the NVivo computer software, and the content analysed to identify phrases or words that captured the essence of the data (Cresswell, 2018; Stake, 2000). The data from the interview were treated as the primary data and that from the survey as the secondary. This means, the qualitative survey data were used to make plausible the findings of the interviews. These were analysed using “within and cross-case” analysis (Creswell, 2018). This meant that an analysis was done on each participants' views as was a cross-examination of emerging categories or themes to discern findings that were common to all cases (Creswell, 2018). This process was carried out individually by members of the research team. Later, the team met to discuss and finalise the emerging categories or themes. This process also aided in reducing researchers' bias and the use of “investigators' triangulation” (Archibald, 2016) adds further rigour to the study. Table 1 displays the identified theme and subthemes.

Ethical Issues

Ethics committees of the universities involved approved this research. Consent forms were created, sent to participants who signed and returned them, thus indicating their willingness to participate. To ensure anonymity, unique identifiers were assigned to interview participants (headteachers). These were H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6, that is, headteacher 1–6. The online survey participants were assigned the following identifiers R1, R2, R3, R4, that is, respondent 1, respondent 2, respondent 3, and respondent 4.

Discussion of Findings

As indicated above, we commence this discussion by presenting the main theme and subthemes in Table 1.

Table 1

Main Theme and Subthemes

Main Theme	Subthemes
Supporting Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending to teachers’ personal and professional welfare • Internalising the need to support teachers • Viewing support as a moral responsibility • Being mindful of teachers’ time • Displaying “affective-ness” • Offering recognition and rewards • Communicating effectively • Motivating teachers • Treating teachers as professionals • Enabling teachers’ voice • Offering leadership opportunities • Promoting collaboration

The main theme was supporting teachers. This phrase emerged consistently across all participant responses. Also, in their role as people managers, headteachers prioritised a range of supportive practices (Subthemes).

Supporting Teachers

An overview of the findings reveals that, while headteachers never directly used the term “people management”, the results point to the fact that they engaged in the area.

For example, leading teaching and supporting staff with empathy—see the discussion under subheading Displaying “Affective-ness”—and seeking to develop supportive working environments. When asked to describe his working environment, H4 stated: “I think it’s very supportive, very positive, we call ourselves—it’s not just me—, but we call ourselves our school family”. Implicit in this statement is the idea that a family is a source of support (Buchanan & McConnell, 2017). Taken together, these actions are indicative of people management (ImpactEd, 2022; Jerrim, 2025; See et al., 2024).

Attending to Teachers’ Personal and Professional Welfare and Internalising the Process

“I think we ... for the staff and the children, really, we focus on supporting people’s emotional wellbeing, on supporting their development” (H1). “I’ve been headteacher for several years now and I view my work in England as doing my very best to protect staff, the first port of call is always support” (H3). H4 said, when talking about supporting teachers, “that is what I am”. Used this way, H4 has internalised the process for the phrase reflects an inherent quality, indicating that supporting teachers is internal, satisfying, and enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Viewing Support as a Moral Responsibility

For H1, supporting teachers is a moral responsibility or a sense of duty based on her personal beliefs, values, and principles. Therefore, she views supporting teachers as her “moral role” which prompts her to deliberately find ways to support their development. She said: “I’ll take a breath and notice what’s going on around and then look at how best to utilise a person— and not always for the benefit of the school— but to support that person’s development” (H1). This sense of duty seems to result in some participants prioritising the support of teachers. For example, H2 sees the support of teachers as a high priority. This means ensuring teachers are well, supported, heard, and able to teach. This prioritisation is especially important, given the current demands on headteachers’ time to attend to issues considered more urgent and pressing (Allen et al., 2025; Heath & Sherwood, 2024).

Being Mindful of Teacher’s Time

In relation to planning, preparation, and assessment (PPA) time, H1 supported by R2 stated that teachers’ PPA time is precious and must be protected. H1 supports teachers by giving them options to engage in their weekly PPA responsibilities and sees this as valuing them.

One of the simple things we do is with their PPA time each week. Teachers are given the option of half a day a week or a day, or a fortnight, and they do not have to be on site to have their PPA. They can do the PPA from home. (H1)

Bayles and Knowles (2019), Butt and Lance (2005), and Masoom (2021) call on schools and headteachers not just to be time flexible in relation to PPA as suggested by H1, but to extend the PPA time offered to teachers.

The discussion of literature in this article outlines several time-related support headteachers could employ. Morris et al. (2021) and Soini et al. (2016) suggest headteachers (as appropriate) take responsibility for extra tasks placed on teachers and not introduce new initiatives or a school-wide improvement project during periods when teachers are engaged in marking student work or students’ examination script. Further, Lemaire (2014) suggests beginning each academic year by reviewing school practices that may divert teachers from focusing on student learning.

Displaying “Affective-ness”

Headteachers valuing and respecting teachers is reflected in support that is mindful of the affective aspect of the teacher, that is, looking out for their personal wellbeing (Day & Sammons, 2014; Quick & Normore, 2004; Twyford & Le Fevre, 2019). Participants demonstrated that they value and respect teachers by offering support that is mindful of emotional and relational needs (affective). H1 gives an example:

We do initiatives from time to time. This Christmas, the last few weeks we do a staff prize draw every day ... and there’s little gifts and things we do like that during the year as well, if we detect that staff struggling a little bit ... towards the end of the year we just try and put things in to boost morale a little bit.

Twyford and Le Fevre (2019) also argue that being affective during lesson observations means going beyond the technical aspects of teaching to also recognise and celebrate the teacher as a person.

Offering Recognition and Rewards

Participants showed they valued and respected teachers by providing recognition and rewards. Recognition took the form of saying thanks or writing a thank you letter to staff (H1, H4, H5, H6), giving badges for years of service (H5), encouraging students to say thank you to teachers (H1), rewarding teachers with an extra day for a good Ofsted outcome (H5), and giving cards to teachers and sending letters to parents outlining staff achievements (H3). One participant highlighted that while headteachers are not always able to offer financial recognition or rewards to teachers, they can be progressed faster through the pay scale (H5). However, teachers also value a personal thank you from headteachers and/or public recognition (Braga et al., 2020; Hewett, 2023). H3 noted that he does not always engage in traditional forms of recognition, such as sending thank you letters. He states:

I don't do the sort of classic recognition of you know, let's send a letter saying you're great ... I try and encourage people to get involved in things that they like ... it's getting people involved in the things that they're interested in.

Communicating Effectively

Participants engaged in both personal and formal supportive communication with teachers. Personal communication included actively listening (H4, H5, H2, R1, R2) and holding regular one-to-one meetings (H1, H4, H5). These meetings may involve informing teachers about a system that will be used (H5) and explicitly sharing the headteacher's vision for the school and consulting with staff on various matters (H3).

Lambersky (2016) adds that personal communication also includes impromptu social interactions—such as informal chats in hallways—which give headteachers small but meaningful opportunities to express gratitude and set a positive tone with staff and students. In personal supportive communication, participants highlighted the need for openness, that is, an open-door policy and open discussion culture.

So, at the end of the academic year, we have a full review of how the year's gone ... it's very much an open-door policy where staff feel that they can always see me or the deputy and talk. (H6)

I'm not saying we never have any staff issues. Of course, we do, but we meet and talk these through ... we have an open discussion culture where people can come and add their concerns and then we work together to address them. (H1)

Formal supportive communication included staff surveys, briefings, feedback, and meeting notes—tools used to keep teachers informed and to gather their views, reinforcing a sense of inclusion and support.

Motivating Teachers

Participating headteachers identified key motivators for teachers. These included a love for teaching and seeing children progress (H2, H1, H4), being listened to and fast-tracked on the pay scale (H2), headteachers' sense of humour (H5), and being granted time off for urgent personal matters (H1). The findings support the use of Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a useful framework for headteachers to foster and sustain teacher motivation.

According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), people are motivated by three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the intrinsic motivation individuals experience when engaging in activities they find inherently interesting (Skinner et al., 2012). H3 shared an example of identifying what motivated a staff member named Chris and enabling her to lead a whole-school project. This action encouraged Chris to stay at the school, even after receiving a job offer elsewhere. H3 made the point that motivating teachers involves "finding opportunities that work for the member of staff and actually produce something productive for the school" (H3).

In SDT, competence refers to teachers' tendency to engage in activities where they feel skilled and capable (Izzati et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In Chris's case (H3), competence is reflected in her completion of a relevant master's degree and upcoming PhD, which made her feel capable of performing the project tasks. Stupnisky et al. (2017) note that teachers with high relatedness tend to collaborate more, learn from others, and support their peers. Chris's running of the whole school project would require the ability to collaborate with, learn from others, and support peers. H3 however cautions headteachers that this way of motivating teachers demands flexibility.

If you talk to teachers about what they want, you should be willing to realign the values of the organisation to fit various needs. So, you've gotta change your sense of direction to fit ... You've gotta be willing to change the goals of the organisation.

Treat Teachers as Professionals

The literature reviewed indicates that treating teachers as professionals reflects headteachers' value and respect for them (Blase & Blase, 2000; Easley, 2008; Ford et al., 2019; Masoom, 2021; Quick & Normore, 2004). Participants in our study suggested that one way to demonstrate this is by trusting teachers to carry out their assigned tasks.

So, that's what we do ... trust them to undertake their work as professionals who don't need somebody waiting for them to trip up. And if they do trip up, we kind of pick them back up and help them along the way. (H4)

H6 highlighted the importance of resisting micromanagement and allowing teachers to take ownership, lead, and make decisions. R3 emphasised the need to develop a personal philosophy built on trust, while R2 stressed that headteachers should focus on enhancing teachers' professional practice.

Enabling Voice

H1 made a statement that encapsulates the essence of this section: “I think everybody wants to feel heard”. H4 added to this noting that teachers “... respect the fact that they’re given an opinion so that they don’t just have a voice, but their voices are actually listened to”. H6 echoed this idea stating: “Staff are motivated when they feel as though their ideas are listened to”. An examination of the literature discussed suggests that by using Lundy’s (2007) model, headteachers should provide space for teachers to share their views, ensure their voice is heard without fear, treat their input seriously, and act on it appropriately.

Offering Leadership Opportunities

The findings of this study support Skerritt et al. (2023) who suggest that headteachers demonstrate respect for teachers by deliberately supporting their promotion into middle leadership roles. Participants highlighted the significance of positions such as subject leaders, heads of year, and leadership team members. H3 spoke positively about distributed leadership, where responsibilities are shared across individuals or teams rather than centralised in the headteacher. Participants often contrasted this approach with authoritarian leadership. While distributed leadership offers benefits such as shared responsibility, H3 cautions about a potential issue. In the following quotation, he highlights this concern while also noting a benefit of authoritarian leadership.

So, one of the issues that you get when you distribute leadership is sometimes the things that you want to happen are harder to make happen. It’s much easier to be authoritarian sometimes. But as soon as you disempower somebody else in a leadership position, then you’ve lost their faith and trust.

In promoting teachers to middle leadership positions, participants shared two insights. One was that headteachers play a key role in “growing leaders” from within, and another suggested that promotions should align with teachers’ skills and areas of interest.

It just improves morale a bit more.... we often have a lot of our senior leadership team, and our middle leadership team are grown leaders. So, we’re growing them, and the Trust [Multi Academy Trust] are also enabling us to grow our own. (H2)

I think again, it’s tapping into people’s personal interest and their skill set and allowing them to engage in those areas. So, for example, if you’ve got a musical member of staff ... putting them leading in that area, you [will] get a better result from someone passionate about that area. (H1)

R3 also supports this idea of tapping into people’s interest and also highlights the importance of providing staff with opportunities to engage in activities that are genuinely interesting and motivating. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which states that people are intrinsically motivated when activities are inherently enjoyable and meet personal needs and interests (Skinner et al., 2012).

Promoting Collaboration

Blase and Blase (2000) and Johnson et al. (2005) suggest that headteachers who support teacher collaboration demonstrate value and respect for their staff. Most participants described their schools as collaborative environments (H6, H5, H1, H4, R2, R3) where teamwork fosters a sense of contributing to educational improvement, and the opportunity to make a difference for students.

So, I would describe the work environment at my school as incredibly collaborative ... teachers feel as though they can contribute to the improvement of the education for the children. And I think that in most cases because staff feel part of the team and because they feel as though they can contribute and collaborate, they then inherently feel motivated because they are making a difference in the job they love. (H6)

H4 highlighted the centrality of collaboration in his school, stating that “every time we would look at changing something, whether it’s curriculum, leadership, documentation, whether it’s how we do assessment, there is always collaboration to assess how the change might have an impact”. R3 added that collaboration shapes the leadership team in their school, while R2 emphasised that the goal is for everyone to work and play together, enabling all to reach their full potential.

Summary

An overview of the findings reveals that, while headteachers in this study never directly used the term people management, the results point to the fact that actions in which they engaged were indicative of the area (ImpactEd, 2022; Jerrim, 2025; See et al., 2025). This suggests participants viewed their role through the lens of people management. This is important because teaching is a people-driven profession where staff morale, motivation, and wellbeing directly influence the quality of teaching and, ultimately, student outcomes. By prioritising people management—protecting teachers’ time, reducing workload, recognising contributions, and fostering trust—headteachers can create conditions where teachers feel valued and respected. This also strengthens professional practice and collaboration. In other words, effective people management is not an insignificant task for headteachers; it is key to nurturing a positive school environment.

This study was guided by a broad research question: As people managers, how could headteachers nurture a working environment where staff feel valued and respected? The findings highlight that this could be accomplished in several ways: 1) supporting and attending to teachers’ personal and professional welfare and internalising the process; 2) viewing the process as a moral responsibility and prioritising the process; 3) being mindful of teachers’ time; 4) displaying “affective-ness”; 5) offering recognition and rewards; 6) communicating effectively; 7) motivating teachers; 8) treating them as professionals; 9) enabling teachers’ voice; 10) offering leadership opportunities, and 11) promoting collaboration.

While these findings are not new, they contribute to the literature by validating and extending knowledge within a new geographical context—Midlands and Yorkshire, England.

Although well-documented in broader educational discussions, applying previous findings to a localised setting provides valuable evidence of how national and international occurrences manifest in regions often overlooked by the literature.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It draws on a small sample—10 participants (six interviewees and four online survey respondents) and three researchers. This narrow perspective allowed only relatively general statements and precluded large-scale generalisation of the findings.

While headteachers as people managers described support strategies in detail, the study did not capture teachers' perspectives. As a result, it remains unclear whether these efforts were effective in creating a working environment in which teachers felt valued and respected. Consequently, the study cannot fully assess the impact of headteachers' practices, highlighting the need for future research that incorporates teachers' voices to achieve a more balanced understanding. That said, it is important to acknowledge that capturing teachers' views was not the primary aim of this article.

Implications for Practice

The findings highlight key implications for the professional practices of headteachers as people managers. As people managers, headteachers should continue to nurture a working environment where teachers feel valued and respected, protecting and flexibly scheduling PPA time, and reducing non-essential workload to prioritise student learning. Support teacher wellbeing through recognition, morale-boosting activities, and small but meaningful rewards. Effective communication that builds openness and trust is also vital. Motivation among teachers can be strengthened by applying Self-Determination Theory and empowering teachers with autonomy, voice, and leadership opportunities. Promoting distributed leadership and collaboration in decision making further enhances engagement and morale. Collectively, these strategies help headteachers as people managers create working environment in schools where teachers feel valued, respected, and supported.

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Unlocking Artificial Intelligence in School Leadership: Understanding the Limitations From the Cypriot Context

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ABSTRACT: Artificial Intelligence is transforming school organisations, offering school leaders new tools to enhance their leadership practices. However, this article explores the limitations to AI integration in school leadership within Cyprus's centralised education system, aiming to inform the field and support more effective implementation. A qualitative research study was conducted using an interview protocol, which identified the limitations faced by school leaders in adopting AI tools. In total, 43 school leaders from both primary and secondary education participated in the study. The study sample was drawn from all districts of Cyprus, ensuring representation of school leaders from both education sectors and districts. The data were analysed through a three-phase qualitative analytical framework. The main findings revealed the following key areas of limitation: 1) Limited access to AI resources and infrastructure; 2) Lack of specified training and professional development; 3) Resistance to change and limited understanding of AI's potential and applications; 4) Inadequate policy frameworks to support AI integration; 5) Concerns about data privacy and ethical implications; and 6) Time constraints and dependence on centralised decision making that slow AI innovation. This study offers new knowledge in a limited research area by integrating the topic of AI with the field of school leadership. Based on these findings, school leadership can gain a better understanding of how AI integration can be effectively implemented while overcoming potential limitations. Also, for educational policymakers and professional development centres to fully support this integration, understanding limitations to promoting AI tools could further aid implementation.

Key words: Artificial Intelligence, school leadership, limitations, AI integration, school organisations

Introduction

Digitalisation has served as an important topic during the pandemic crisis (Ärlestig et al., 2021; Bathon & Socol, 2021; Harris, 2020; Pressley et al., 2023) and further defined the way digital tools are used in today's school organisations (Palm et al., 2024). Despite the importance of digitalisation that influences school organisations (Tulowitzki et al., 2022), the advancement of digital transformation in education, and more precisely in school organisations, has become more prominent with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in today's world (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2023; Göçen & Döğler, 2025; Kafa, 2025). Particularly, AI technologies such as OpenAI and Generative AI include tools that radically change the way people generate answers and texts to support their daily lives (Thorp, 2023). This shift from digitalisation to AI encompasses web-based intelligent chatbots to autonomously carry out instructional tasks and responsibilities alongside human instructors (Chen et al., 2020; Kafa & Eteokleous, 2024; Karakose, 2024).

The development of AI within the education sector has already drawn considerable scholarly attention, even amidst the pandemic crisis (Chen et al., 2020; Feng & Law, 2021). More recently, this growing interest in school organisations has been linked to the promising and transformative potential of AI tools to enhance traditional teaching practices and further support teachers' work within the classroom (Elbanna & Armstrong, 2024; Javaid et al., 2023; Kafa & Eteokleous, 2024; Rodafinos, 2024). In addition to supporting teachers' professional responsibilities in the teaching and learning process, AI can also be considered a significant factor in the instructional dimension of school organisations, contributing to the formulation of learning objectives, supporting pedagogical approaches, and promoting instructional strategies (Chiu, 2023). However, as Javaid et al. (2023) argue, much of the current interest of AI in education and in particular in school organisations remains focused on AI's use and application from teachers and students.

School leaders, as heads of school organisations, are expected to stay informed about current technological advancements and need to understand how AI, in particular, can support their leadership practices and daily responsibilities (Kafa, 2025; Rodafinos, 2024). Yet, there is a notable lack of scholarly research on AI within the field of school leadership, especially regarding how school leaders can effectively integrate AI tools and other AI advancements into their everyday leadership practices (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2023; Igbokwe, 2023; Kafa & Eteokleous, 2024; Karakose, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). An important aspect highlighted in the current literature (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Karakose, 2024; Mohebi, 2024; Ratten & Jones, 2023), when discussing AI and school leadership, concerns the practical constraints, challenges, and limitations that may hinder the effective use of AI tools by school leaders in their professional practices. Therefore, it is essential to empirically explore how prepared school leaders are to engage with AI and what kinds of limitations they currently experience. Such insights would further support the development of school leaders' capacity and readiness for AI implementation within their school organisations (Fullan et al., 2023; Kafa, 2025; Kafa & Eteokleous, 2024; Karakose, 2024; Rodafinos, 2024).

Given the scarcity of research in this area, particularly regarding how AI is reshaping school organisations and how school leaders can leverage AI tools to enhance their leadership practices,

there remains a limited understanding of the constraints associated with AI use in school leadership. Therefore, this article addresses this gap by exploring the limitations of AI integration into school leadership within the centralised education system of Cyprus. The central research question guiding this study is: What kinds of limitations do school leaders face within a centralised education system that affect their ability to effectively utilise AI tools as part of their leadership practices? This study contributes new knowledge to a relatively underexplored field by bridging the gap between AI and school leadership. Based on the findings, school leaders can gain clearer insights into how AI integration can be embedded more effectively in leadership practices while navigating potential constraints. Furthermore, for educational policymakers and professional development centres, understanding these limitations is essential to supporting the successful and sustainable implementation of AI tools in schools.

Literature Review

From the early 2010s up to 2019, AI in education was primarily presented through the lens of intelligent tutoring systems (Feng & Law, 2021). More recently, AI, particularly through the cutting-edge technology of generative AI that includes language processing, machine learning and tools developed by OpenAI, has begun to exert a profound influence on contemporary society, including the field of education (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2023; Kafa, 2025; Kafa & Eteokleous, 2024). In general, although a universally accepted definition of AI does not exist (Collins et al., 2021), the term is commonly associated with algorithms, through web-based chatbots that autonomously perform a variety of cognitive, perceptual, and conversational tasks typically miming human intelligence (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Feng & Law, 2021; Longoni et al., 2019; Mohebi, 2024). AI has been applied to areas such as medical diagnosis, autonomous vehicle design, game simulations, speech recognition, language translation, etc. (Feng & Law, 2021).

The topic of AI within the school leadership field is limited. Yet, the importance of further understanding the future use of AI in leadership positions and particularly within the educational context remains crucial. A few years back, Tyson and Sauers (2021) explored the experiences of school leaders in adopting and implementing AI tools, finding that leaders were actively engaged in discussions about AI integration. Also, Wang (2021) investigated the prospective use of AI in school leadership, highlighting its capacity to provide real-time insights that enable leaders to make data-driven and evidence-informed decisions. However, Wang (2021) also emphasised that AI-driven recommendations must be complemented by human judgement grounded in ethical values to ensure sound decision making at both individual and organisational levels. While AI tools offer promising support for school leadership, researchers caution that their use must be guided by ethical awareness and human judgement (Crawford et al., 2023; Wang, 2021). Similarly, Göçen and Döger (2025) highlight the importance of human traits like empathy and moral reasoning, underscoring that these qualities remain essential alongside technological innovation. Thus, while AI tools can offer valuable information, it is essential for school leaders, as human agents, to understand the use of AI and apply moral judgement accordingly. Additionally, recent studies (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Dogan & Arslan, 2025; Kafa, 2025) emphasise that for AI to reach

its full potential in education, issues such as ethics, privacy, cybersecurity, and the need for targeted professional development must be addressed.

From the perspective of school leadership, research on how AI can improve the work of school leaders is still very limited, with few papers addressing this topic (Fullan et al., 2023; Göçen & Döğ̈er, 2025; Wang, 2021). The use of AI in school leadership is a relatively new and underexplored area (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2023; Wang, 2021), and although there is a lack of extensive empirical research, current discussions emphasise the growing potential of AI tools to reshape leadership practices and support various managerial responsibilities (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2023; Kafa, 2025; Karakose & Tülübař, 2024). Fullan et al. (2023) argue that AI tools are significantly transforming school leadership by easing many of the administrative and managerial challenges that school leaders currently face, particularly as education continues to evolve with all the upheavals, crises, and times of uncertainty. Additionally, Karakose and Tülübař (2024) highlight how AI can enhance management practices and decision making while fostering collaboration among teachers, students, and parents to advance the effectiveness of school organisations. Similarly, Dai et al. (2025) emphasise the role of AI in supporting school leaders to gather and analyse school data more effectively to inform their leadership practices. More recently, Göçen and Döğ̈er (2025) explored AI integration in school leadership through interviews with 32 school leaders from 20 countries. They identified six managerial areas where AI is used, including data analysis, planning, and communication. AI also takes on multiple decision-making roles such as facilitator and policy developer. While participants reported benefits like increased efficiency and inclusivity, they also highlighted challenges related to creative process standardisation and colonial influences in knowledge production.

Overall, AI tools are expected to significantly reshape the nature of school leadership by alleviating many of the managerial burdens faced by school leaders (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2023; Kafa, 2025). Therefore, exploring the limitations of AI is essential for understanding how to better support school leaders in adopting AI tools as part of their leadership practices. This study contributes to a growing but still limited body of research by unlocking the potential use of AI in school leadership, while addressing the potential limitations. Furthermore, recognising these limitations can help educational policymakers and professional development centres to create more effective strategies for supporting AI adoption in school organisations.

The Study Context

School organisations in Cyprus operate under a highly centralised educational system where the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth, and Sports holds overarching authority over school governance, policy implementation, and instructional oversight (Pashiardis & Tsiakkios, 2015). Despite EU-level encouragement to advance digital education, such as through the European Commission's "Digital Education Action Plan" (2021–2027), which prioritises building digital education ecosystems and enhancing the digital competencies of both teachers and school leaders, Cyprus has shown minimal progress in integrating technology within its school organisations (European Commission, 2020). Yet, recently, Ministry of Education, Sports and

Youth (2022) initiatives suggest a shift toward prioritising digital transformation. However, supporting school leaders in developing AI competencies remains notably absent. This lack of targeted leadership development risks hindering the effective adoption of AI tools within the school organisation. Furthermore, the lack of information regarding the challenges or limitations school leaders encounter with AI complicates its successful implementation and must be addressed to enable meaningful integration. Therefore, by contributing to a largely under-researched area, this study provides valuable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and professional development centres seeking to promote the use of AI in school leadership practices.

Methodology

Design Type

This particular study followed a qualitative phenomenological design (Creswell, 2024; Merriam, 2009). According to Creswell and Merriam, phenomenological design is a method of studying the lived experiences of participants concerning a particular phenomenon. This was deemed appropriate, since this study focused on capturing school leaders' personal experiences on the limitations of AI as part of their leadership practice, allowing an in-depth exploration of how context limitations shapes AI adoption in school leadership.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell, 2024), with interviews serving as the primary method of qualitative data collection (Jamshed, 2014). The aim of this study, from the perspective of school leaders operating within a centralised education system, was to explore the limitations associated with integrating AI into their leadership practices. The central research question guiding the interviews was: What kinds of limitations do school leaders face within a centralised education system that affect their ability to effectively utilise AI tools as part of their leadership practice? Through interviews, the participating school leaders express their opinions and attitudes (Dunwoodie et al., 2022) toward the limitations they encounter in their school organisations on AI.

Research Instrument

An interview protocol was used as the primary research instrument to collect data from school leaders. This interview protocol was specifically developed for the purposes of this study, as no validated tools existed at the time. Drawing on the available literature (Baidoo-Anu et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2020; Chiu, 2021, 2023; Elbanna & Armstrong, 2024; Feng & Law, 2021; Grassini, 2023; Javaid et al., 2023) and taking into consideration the educational context in which the study was conducted, the protocol consisted of 20 targeted questions designed to extract information regarding the limitations of AI from school leaders in the centralised education system

of Cyprus. A small pilot study, with five school leaders, was conducted to ensure the relevance and clarity of the questions for school leaders. From the pilot study, all school leaders understood the relevance of the questions with their leadership practice and no changes were made. Additionally, input from an expert colleague in educational technology was sought to ensure the appropriateness of the questions. This process resulted in the finalised version of the interview protocol. Overall, the interview protocol consisted of four categories, with five questions in each category (20 questions in total). The following four categories were created, along with examples of questions included in the protocol: (1) Perceptions of AI in school leadership practice: *Do you think modern AI developments will influence your leadership practices positively or negatively? Can you give examples? Can AI tools assist school leaders in their daily administrative and leadership tasks?* (2) Challenges and limitations of AI use in school leadership practice: *What concerns or challenges do you foresee with the use of AI tools in your leadership capacity?* (3) Systemic and policy constraints of AI use in school leadership practice: *Do you feel that policy or regulatory restrictions limit your capacity to use AI effectively?* (4) Professional development and support of AI use in school leadership practice: *What kinds of professional development and support would you require to use AI in your leadership role?*

Sample

The study population included all primary and secondary school leaders across the five districts of Cyprus. Email invitations were sent to all school organisations using contact lists provided by the Ministry of Education. This method of random sampling ensured representation from both educational levels. Out of all the recipients, only 43 school leaders responded positively and volunteered to participate in the study. Table 1 presents details of the sample which included 24 school leaders from primary education and 19 from secondary education. The school leaders had varying years of experience across the districts, with the majority having over 15 years of professional experience.

Table 1*Research Study Sample With Demographic Information*

Sector	Total Participants	Gender (F/M)	Leadership Experience (Years)	Regional Breakdown (No. of Participants)
Primary	24	19F / 5M	5–10 years: 2	Paphos: 8
			11–15 years: 10	Famagusta: 5
			More than 15 years: 12	Larnaca: 5
				Nicosia: 4
				Limassol: 2
Secondary	19	14F / 5M	5–10 years: – 3	Larnaca: 6
			11–15 years: – 6	Limassol: 5
			More than 15 years: – 10	Paphos: 4
				Nicosia: 3
				Famagusta: 1
Total	43	33F / 10M		

Data Gathering

Interviews were conducted between January and mid-April 2024 at times and locations chosen by the participating school leaders within their respective schools. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes in school organisations. Prior to participation, school leaders received an information letter and consent form, ensuring ethical standards were met, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the research process at any time. Additionally, research approval was granted by the *Centre for Educational Research and Evaluation in Cyprus*.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

With regards to the data analysis, the qualitative data analysis followed the three-phase qualitative analytical framework developed by Miles et al. (2014), ensuring an objective approach to interpreting the interview data. In the initial phase, “data condensation”, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and meaningful segments of text were identified and coded. This phase focused on capturing school leaders’ views on limitation for the use of AI in their school organisations. The second phase, “data display”, involved organising the generated codes into broader thematic categories. These categories were constructed using descriptive labels and supported by visual representations such as charts and matrices to facilitate deeper analysis. For these phases, a deductive coding approach was employed, guided by the central research question. The identified codes were derived from the interview protocols categories which included:

Perceptions of AI in school leadership practice; Challenges and limitations of AI use in school leadership practice; Systemic and Policy constraints of AI use in school leadership practice; and Professional development and support of AI use in school leadership practice. While the initial coding was deductive, additional emergent codes were added along the data condensation, such as concerns about AI data privacy and ethics. Based on both the deductive and emerging coding approach, the main limitation themes were identified, supported by quotations, and presented through a figure. In the final phase, “drawing and verifying conclusions”, the thematic patterns were synthesised to construct an overarching presentation that addressed the central research question and reveal the main limitation themes. In this final phase, the initial coding was conducted by the author of this article. Yet, to enhance the credibility of the research analysis, the research associate who supported the field study also reviewed the transcripts and preliminary codes. Following, the coded and themes were discussed collaboratively to ensure the accuracy of school leaders’ perspectives and eliminate any discrepancies.

Main Findings

The findings revealed six key limitations regarding the potential use of AI by school leaders within Cyprus’s centralised education system. The following themes emerged: 1) Limited access to AI resources and infrastructure; 2) Lack of specified training and professional development; 3) Resistance to change and limited understanding of AI’s potential and applications; 4) Inadequate policy frameworks to support AI integration; 5) Concerns about data privacy and ethical implications; and (6) Time constraints and dependence on centralised decision making that slow AI innovation. A more detailed presentation of each theme limitations is provided below, along with the extracted quotations from the interview data.

Limited Access to AI Resources and Infrastructure

A primary limitation reported by all school leaders was the inadequate availability of AI tools and the supportive infrastructure necessary to meaningfully integrate AI into their leadership practice. This limitation ranged from insufficient internet speeds and broken to outdated hardware and systems. Some school leaders mentioned the following:

There is no adequacy in all schools, and we know it. Even for basic things, we’re lacking. How can we implement more complex processes like AI? With what kind of hardware and infrastructure? (Primary Principal 2)

We need equipment. Some computers in my school don’t even work. Spaces are not accessible for all students. How can I even have the opportunity to utilise and use AI tools. (Secondary Principal 13)

I don’t have a high-speed internet. Imagine this. I don’t have an updated infrastructure to support the use of AI. Not even to use digital tools during the pandemic. (Primary Principal 21)

Lack of Specified Training and Professional Development

School leaders from both primary and secondary education levels emphasised the need for targeted training and professional support to effectively integrate AI tools into their leadership practices. While they demonstrated a general openness to adopting such modern tools, the absence of adequate training and guidance emerged as a significant limitation. All school leaders highlighted the importance of acquiring specific knowledge and competencies to confidently and effectively use AI tools. In fact, school leaders indicated they would be willing to incorporate AI tools into their leadership roles, provided they received the necessary training to use AI. The following quotes are from school leaders:

Currently, there is no training available. While these AI tools seem useful for administrative purposes, their use requires a transitional phase involving specialised training. Not just general training. (Secondary Principal 14)

We need training and not just initial training, but ongoing support as this tool evolves. Continuous training is essential. (Primary Principal 9)

Additionally, lack of professional development in topics related to AI was mentioned by school leaders. School leaders emphasised that effective training must go beyond brief, superficial sessions and should instead involve meaningful and practical training. They also stressed that training should not be a one-time event but should include ongoing support and access to expert guidance when challenges arise. These insights reflect a clear need for a more strategic and expert-driven approach to professional development in the use of AI tools for school leadership. The following quotations are from school leaders:

We need systematic training and real learning, not just someone speaking for a day. We need to understand and practice. (Secondary Principal 17)

Training isn't just for the moment. We need support afterward. We need someone from the Ministry that we can turn to when issues arise. (Primary Principal 9)

A guide would definitely be helpful, but a guide and a checklist alone will not cut it. We also need proper training from experts to make sure we are using it effectively. (Primary Principal 17)

What we have now is useful, but specific training is essential. It should cover everything systematically, and ideally, it should take place within the schools themselves. Maybe from people with technological expertise. (Secondary Principal 18)

Resistance to Change and Limited Understanding of AI's Potential and Applications

Based on the findings, a lack of clarity regarding AI's purpose, together with resistance to change and limited understanding of AI's potential and applications, led some school leaders to express hesitation toward AI use. Some school leaders mentioned:

I don't know anything about the AI tools you mention. I've only heard of it. I have reservations because I don't understand its purpose. I don't know if I want to learn something new. I have a lot to do as a school leader. (Primary Principal 11)

There are concerns with anything new, especially if it's unexplained. But if someone shows us how it works, those concerns disappear. (Secondary Principal 13)

I strongly believe that ignorance creates concerns, but once explained, those concerns will no longer exist. We know that everything is in flux; we saw this during the pandemic. We need to learn, but I don't know if I have the power to do so. (Secondary Principal 4)

Inadequate Policy Frameworks to Support AI Integration

Another important theme that emerged from the interviews was the absence of a clear policy framework. Many school leaders emphasised that, alongside the lack of professional development and specified training, there is a gap of formal guidelines, legal clarity, clear direction, and a specific policy framework for the effective integration of AI into their leadership practice.

For me a specific framework is important, but just uploading a guide is not enough. We need someone to explain it, answer our questions, guide us. This framework needs to be specific and guide me through how to use AI tools. (Primary Principal 15)

We need legal and policy changes. If we don't have clear regulations to rely on, it's hard to know how to successfully use AI tools. (Primary Principal 9)

Concerns About Data Privacy and Ethical Implications

Furthermore, a notable finding was that some of the school leaders, who better understood the use of AI tools, expressed concerns about data privacy and ethical considerations when using AI tools during their leadership practices. These concerns were linked to the current discourse on AI tool usage and how individuals can successfully integrate them into their professional and personal lives.

There are concerns in every new tool. For instance, I am hearing a lot about the data privacy of people when using AI tools. Imagine, using AI tools and add to the system students' names etc. The solution is proper guidance. (Secondary Principal 12)

If privacy issues aren't considered, it can backfire. We need clear policies and awareness around data handling. Also, ethical issues on using AI for taking decisions in my school. I am following this a lot. (Primary Principal 21)

Time Constraints and Centralised Decision Making That Slow AI Innovation

Finally, an important theme that emerged from the interview data was the impact of the centralised character of Cyprus's education, with centralised decision making and administrative tasks that create time constraints for school leaders to learn and adopt the use of AI as part of their leadership practices. In fact, for some school leaders, the integration of AI was seen as an

additional burden rather than an opportunity, primarily due to severe time constraints and the already overwhelming workload school leaders face. Some leaders mentioned the following:

Time is the biggest obstacle. Administrative duties overtake everything else. There’s no time left to innovate. How can I learn, use and apply AI tools during my practice? (Secondary Principal 7)

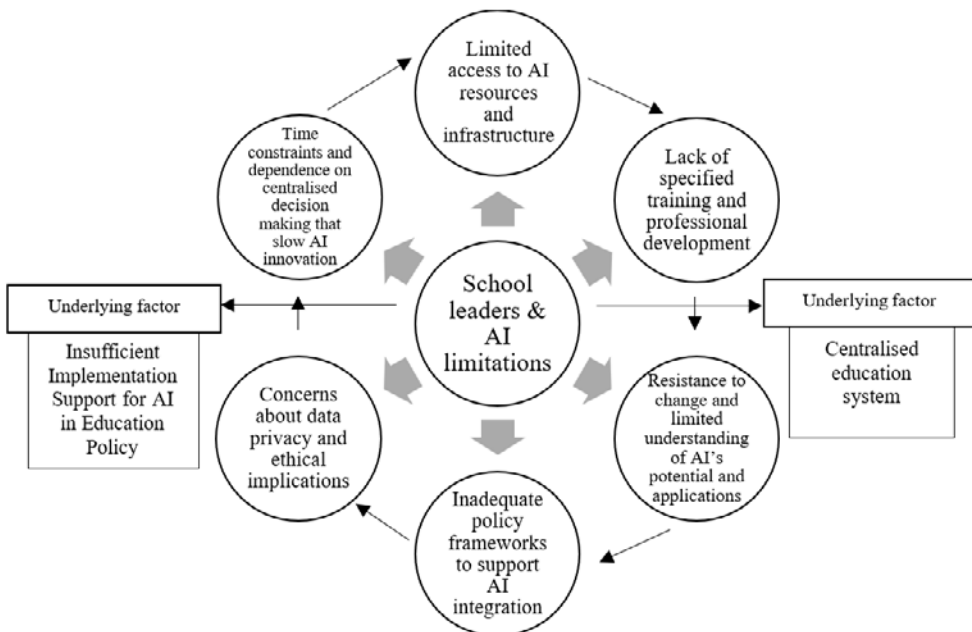
Even if we have the will, we don’t have the time. And the processes from above are too slow to support new ideas. (Primary Principal 24)

A proper transition phase is essential for integrating AI into school organisations. Particularly, for us as school leaders. We need time to familiarise with this but having to lead a school with decisions from above is difficult. (Primary Principal 2)

Based on the aforementioned, Figure 1 captures the overall findings of limitations of AI in this particular context. Specifically, school leaders’ Ai limitations include: 1) Limited access to AI resources and infrastructure; 2) Lack of specified training and professional development; 3) Resistance to change and limited understanding of AI’s potential and applications; 4) Inadequate policy frameworks to support AI integration; 5) Concerns about data privacy and ethical implications; and (6) Time constraints and dependence on centralised decision making that slow AI innovation. Additionally, two important underlying factors were identified that further constrain school leaders’ AI potential use and include the centralised education context in which they work, together with the insufficient implementation support for AI in Cyprus’s policymakers.

Figure 1

Limitations of AI Use From the Cypriot Context



Discussion and Implications

AI has the potential to transform school leadership by alleviating administrative burdens, enhancing data-driven decision making, and supporting strategic planning (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2023). However, the reality experienced by school leaders in Cyprus reveals a profound gap between potential and practice. Specifically, for unlocking the use of AI in school leadership, the findings of this study provide a critical understanding into the important limitations that school leaders face, within a centralised education system, together with insufficient implementation measures and support from Cyprus's education policy when integrating the use of AI into school leaders' practices.

In order to fully leverage the capabilities of AI in school leadership, school leaders must have access to the necessary resources and infrastructure. However, this study reveals that even basic requirements, such as modern infrastructure, computers capable of running AI applications, and tools are lacking in some school organisations. In addition, essential technological equipment like high-speed internet is also missing. Kafa and Eteokleous (2024) emphasise the importance of infrastructure, arguing that policy centres and Ministries, particularly in centralised education systems, must take into account the specific needs of each school organisation and address them in order to support the effective integration of AI tools. Also, the importance of training and professional development was raised by school leaders in this study. In fact, this finding was one of the most prominent themes that emerged, in which school leaders consistently voiced the need for comprehensive, practical, and ongoing training in AI and AI tools. This aligns with the growing body of literature that supports context-specific professional development focused on AI literacy (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Javaid et al., 2023; Kafa & Eteokleous, 2024; Rodafinos, 2024). As Dunnigan et al. (2023) argued, the use of AI, with tools such as ChatGPT, does not come with a specific user manual and targeted training is important for its user.

Additionally, in this study, several school leaders expressed scepticism or uncertainty regarding the potential use of AI, highlighting a resistance to change and to adopting new ideas and innovations. This hesitation is often rooted in a lack of understanding or prior exposure to AI tools. The literature also indicates that unfamiliarity and fear of the unknown frequently accompany technological changes in education (Göçen & Döğler, 2025; Karakose, 2024). In the case of Cyprus, the absence of a clear and supportive policy framework emerged as another major concern voiced by school leaders. Specifically, they reported a lack of formal guidelines, legal clarity, and institutional support for AI integration. As Rodafinos (2024) argues, advancing the connection between school leadership and AI requires not only investment in infrastructure but also equipping school leaders with the skills, capacity building, and framework necessary for AI integration through diverse and ongoing professional development programs.

Another key finding was the concern expressed by some school leaders regarding data privacy and the ethical implications associated with the use of AI. More broadly, the adoption of AI in schools raises significant ethical and data privacy issues that demand thoughtful and deliberate attention (Adams & Thompson, 2025; Fullan et al., 2023; Kafa, 2025; Kafa & Eteokleous, 2024) when using AI tools as part of their leadership practice and include the use of

students' names, etc. Consequently, effective AI integration requires a clear implementation roadmap by taking into consideration ethical and other aspects (Kafa, 2025; Rodafinos, 2024).

Finally, school leaders highlighted how the centralised nature of the education system in Cyprus hinders AI-related innovation. In particular, the presence of centralised decision making, combined with limited autonomy at the school level, presents some restriction time that hinders school leaders' ability to learn and use AI tools. Additionally, the heavy workload of school leaders may leave little time or flexibility for engaging with AI tools or participating in professional learning. As Karakose (2024) emphasises, for AI to be meaningfully integrated into school leadership practices, dedicated time and structured opportunities must be provided for systematic training so that school leaders could learn and successfully implement the use of AI into their leadership practices.

Based on the findings of this study and specifically on the limitations raised by school leaders regarding the use of AI, it is important to consider the implications for school leadership, policy, and research. In general, there is a need to recognise that these kinds of limitations could hinder the flourishing of AI innovation in school organisations and in particular in the way school leaders could utilise AI tools as part of their leadership and managerial practice.

Therefore, based on the findings, school leaders need to embrace the concept of innovation, avoid resistance, and take advantage of any professional development opportunities related to AI tools. In order to do so, both the Ministry of Education and policymakers in Cyprus, together with the support from professional development centres, such as the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, need to promote AI into school leadership. However, school leaders need to reflect on their own about this technological advancement and understand that AI can support and enhance their administrative and managerial tasks. Therefore, it is important for school leaders to consider how to overcome different obstacles when applying or introducing new ideas in their leadership practice, even when working in a centralised environment where everything is strictly controlled and regulated.

Alongside this, policy centres and policymakers need to support school leaders in deepening their understanding of what AI is, what it can and cannot do, including aspects of data privacy, and how using AI tools could align with their leadership tasks and organisational goals. In addition, it is crucial to develop AI school leadership strategies that include clear frameworks, ethical guidelines, and implementation roadmaps tailored for educational leadership. Within the context of Cyprus, policymakers in education must also address the issues of time constraints and heavy workloads faced by school leaders, which are partly a result of the centralised nature of the education system.

Research should also focus its attention on conducting studies on school leaders' views on the use of AI, together with longitudinal studies to explore how school leaders' use of AI evolves over time and across educational policy shifts in different education systems, both centralised and decentralised. This will inform educational policy to design effective professional development framework on using AI. Furthermore, beyond the use and constraints of the AI use, future research should focus on the impact of AI use on school leaders on ethics, on decision-making influence, and other influencing aspects such as school leaders' identity and professional autonomy when using AI tools as part of their leadership practice.

Finally, this study has some limitations. It includes a relatively small sample, and a larger sample size could strengthen the generalisability of the findings across Cyprus. Moreover, as the study focuses specifically on the context of Cyprus, within a centralised education system, additional limitations may be raised by school leaders in other centralised or decentralised education systems.

Conclusion

This article presented the limitations school leaders face in integrating AI into their leadership practices within the centralised education system of Cyprus. Based on the findings, six important limitations were observed: limited access to resources and infrastructure; lack of specified training and professional development; resistance to change; inadequate policy frameworks; concerns about data privacy and ethics; and time constraints arising from centralised decision making. These findings contribute to the limited body of literature on AI in school leadership, offering important insights for policymakers, professional development providers, and school leaders themselves. In the case of Cyprus, school leaders need structured professional development and support from the Ministry of Education, together with acknowledging the limitations that derive both from the centralised education system of Cyprus, as well as from the lack of training and infrastructure for the use of AI.

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A review of Doyle, T., & McSwan, R. (2025). *Workplace culture: Tips & traps for school leaders*. Hawker Brownlow Publishing. (143 pp.) ISBN: 978-1-923428-36-2. <https://hawkerbrownlow.com/products/tips-and-traps-for-school-leaders>

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In the dynamic and often demanding world of educational leadership, *Workplace culture: Tips and traps for school leaders* by Trevor Doyle and Ross McSwan offers a beacon of clarity, wisdom, and practical guidance. This book is not just a resource—it's a companion for leaders navigating the complexities of human relationships, team dynamics, and personal growth within school communities.

The credibility of the authors is unquestionable. Trevor Doyle brings strategic insight and a deep understanding of leadership frameworks, while Ross McSwan's decades of experience in conflict resolution and facilitation shine through every page. Their combined expertise makes this book a must-read for current and aspiring leaders—not only in education but across all sectors where people and culture intersect.

Having had the privilege of working with both authors, I can personally attest to the transformative impact of their teachings. Over 20 years ago, as an early career leader, I attended a professional learning day on the Gold Coast facilitated by Ross. It was during this session that I first heard his mission to teach people to resolve disputes:

- at the earliest opportunity
- in the most informal way
- by the most appropriate people

This approach to conversations and conflict resolution became my mantra. It has shaped how I lead, how I engage with others, and how I foster trust and psychological safety within teams. Even today, this philosophy remains a cornerstone of my leadership practice, proving its enduring relevance and effectiveness.

The book itself is structured in a way that supports both deep reflection and practical application. Each chapter concludes with an “In Short” section—succinct summaries that distil the key messages and serve as powerful reminders. These sections are invaluable for busy leaders who need quick access to insights and strategies, and they make the book a resource I return to regularly.

One of the most impactful chapters for me was Chapter 4, which explores the challenges of working with dysfunctional teams. Doyle and McSwan emphasise the importance of self-awareness and the need for emotional and social competence. They introduce the concept of “followship”—the art of leading through trust and influence rather than authority. This resonated deeply with me. As a Senior Education Leader, I've learned that effective leadership is not about

being the loudest voice in the room but about cultivating trust, listening deeply, and empowering others to lead alongside you.

Chapter 5 builds on this by highlighting the power of transformative collaboration. Trevor Doyle outlines the conditions necessary for optimal collaboration: a shared purpose, high trust levels, and aligned practices. This chapter challenged me to reflect on the culture within my own teams. It prompted me to ask: Are we truly aligned? Do we trust each other enough to challenge and support one another? Are our practices consistent with our shared goals? These questions have led to meaningful conversations and shifts in how we work together.

A standout feature of the book is Trev's Triangle—a model that has profoundly influenced my leadership. The triangle, which balances clarity, consistency, and care, offers a simple yet powerful framework for decision making and reflection. I've used it to guide team discussions, evaluate my own leadership actions, and mentor emerging leaders. It's a model that brings both structure and heart to leadership, reminding us that effective leadership is as much about relationships as it is about results.

The authors also tackle the difficult terrain of conflicting personalities and challenging behaviours. They provide practical tips for becoming a conflict-competent leader—someone who doesn't shy away from difficult conversations but approaches them with empathy, clarity, and courage. This section of the book reaffirmed my belief that leadership is not about avoiding conflict but about navigating it with integrity and skill.

Perhaps the most poignant part of the book is its final message: the importance of looking after yourself as a leader. Doyle and McSwan remind us that leadership is a marathon, not a sprint. They advocate for intentional wellbeing practices and encourage leaders to take control of the factors that impact their health. This message hit home for me. In the busyness of leading schools and supporting others, it's easy to neglect our own wellbeing. This book gave me permission—and a practical framework—to prioritise self-care without guilt.

Reflecting on my journey, I realise how much of my leadership capability has been shaped by the messages in this book and by my interactions with Trevor and Ross. Their teachings have helped me build resilience, deepen my emotional intelligence, and lead with greater authenticity. They've taught me that leadership is not about having all the answers but about asking the right questions, listening with intent, and creating cultures where people feel seen, heard, and valued.

Workplace culture: Tips and traps for school leaders is more than a book—it's a leadership toolkit, a reflective journal, and a source of inspiration. It challenges, supports, and equips leaders to build cultures of trust, collaboration, and wellbeing. For me, it has been a catalyst for growth and a reminder of why I chose to lead in the first place. I wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone committed to leading with purpose and compassion.

The Leaderisation of Schools: How Did Schooling Come to be About Leadership?

ADAM BONGERS¹

A Problem of Leadership

What do pandemics, equity, AI, wellbeing, and ecology all have in common? If today's school researchers are to be believed, these are all problems of "leadership". At least, this is the impression given by recent research on crisis leadership, inclusive leadership, digital leadership, resilient leadership, and environmental leadership in education.

In the early 21st century, school researchers in the English-speaking world have come to a consensus that these and other issues are best approached through the lens of educational leadership. Here, leadership means to exercise influence over staff perceptions and attitudes, in order to build commitment towards a mission or vision of change. It lends itself to the language of purpose, inspiration, empowerment, motivation, and commitment.

The choice to frame schooling in this language is not an obvious one. It is not immediately apparent why small-group, leader-follower relationships should be the entry point for understanding organisational improvement in mid-sized schools and colleges. This uneasy match becomes more pronounced in the concept of "system leadership", where a group psychological concept is applied to the public administration of education at a state or federal level. Even still, educational leadership has ascended (Bush, 2004), and inquiries into organisational learning or educational administration have been sidelined. There has been a "leaderisation" of schooling.²

The leaderisation of schooling has effectively reorganised schools around leadership theory. This does not just mean that researchers offer leadership as a solution to a range of problems in schools. It goes further. Leaderisation has changed what is perceived to be a problem, and what kind of problem it is perceived to be. Under leaderisation, "school" problems become reframed as "school leadership" problems. In discursive and professional practice, leadership theory is not simply one answer among many. Instead, leaderisation has changed what practitioners take for a valid answer. This can be seen in the "leader-centrism" of school discourse (Grice et al., 2023;

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² I use this term to refer to the reorganising of schooling around leadership theory (as opposed to administrative theory, for example). The term has also been used to discuss the reframing of party politics, or educational policy, around individual leaders (Mancini, 2011; Gunter, 2016).

Gronn, 2002), and “leaderism” in school conduct (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Evans, 2022; Riveros et al., 2016; Simkins, 2012). These two developments have arisen from a chain of historical events.

How Schooling Came to be About Leadership

I contend that the leaderisation of schooling was not a straightforward case of the “best” theory inevitably winning, or simply due to political and economic pressures (as critiques of neoliberal policy have already argued). I propose that leadership theory’s ascendance was due, in no small part, to an unlikely source: survey research designs. The combination of leadership theory and survey questionnaires promised productive and consistent evidence for evidence-based practice. However, this promise came at the expense of concerns about the validity of relying on such research.

My investigation into Leadership Theory in Schooling suggests that leaderisation occurred in four phases: emergence, adoption, diffusion, and reproduction. Firstly, leadership theory as we know it emerged in workplace research in the 1970s. It switched the target of workplace research to focus on interpersonal influence over staff. This was because survey designs were better suited to producing reports of staff perceptions and ratings of staff attitudes, and less suited to measuring supervisor behaviour and performance outcomes. This pivot was needed to leverage the benefits of questionnaires, which included their affordability, feasibility, scalability, machine-readability, and amenability to statistical analysis. These benefits were already apparent from survey studies at Ohio State and Michigan universities, as well as contingency research, which attracted significant U.S. government funding.

Second, leadership theory was adopted into schooling in the 1980s because of its promise to address the problem of purpose and values, which had been neglected by administrative theory. Leadership theory was driven by the school effectiveness movement which brought attention to educational mission, and by critical perspectives scholars concerned with visions of transforming society. These two traditions were both capitalised upon by transformational school leadership, which repurposed leadership theory to build commitment to school restructuring and systemic reforms. Both school effectiveness and transformational leadership research were able to produce consistent research using structured, fixed-response survey instruments (the PIMRS and NSL, respectively).

Thirdly, leadership theory diffused throughout education in the 1990s and 2000s, because it promised to consolidate a range of research gaps into a single, leadership-sized gap. Leadership theory, once concerned with interpersonal leader-follower dynamics, was expanded to take in policy implementation (in the form of Self-Managing Schools), pupils (through Organisational Conditions and School Leadership research), international projects (such as the ISSPP), and participatory governance (with the model of Distributed Leadership).

Finally, leadership theory could be reproduced due to two developments in the 2000s and 2010s. These consolidated research approaches and shored up research findings in meta-reviews. By the early 2000s, work was underway to integrate instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and teacher/shared leadership. The resultant “leadership for learning” framework consolidated the various research approaches that had flourished with the collapse of

administrative theory. Effective schools research became “successful school leadership”, cognitive research became “distributed leadership”, interpretivist and humanist inquiry became “ethical leadership”, social theory became “social justice leadership”, cultural theory became “culturally responsive/relevant leadership”, and critical theory and feminism became “transformative leadership” and “advocacy leadership”.

It was not long before meta-syntheses, meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and science mapping were leveraged to settle any reservations about the promise of school leadership theory. These meta-reviews have become the most cited papers in the field, and their production continues to be popular. With these, a new de facto epistemology was established, which set new standards for what is deemed as acceptable research on schooling. Today, school researchers are free to pose research questions as they wish, but their research risks irrelevance if not couched in the language of leadership. Likewise, scholars have licence to deploy a range of methods, including qualitative and mixed-methods designs, but they are expected to build on the accepted “knowledge base” of school leadership research. This knowledge base is now grounded in meta-reviews that favour instructional and transformational leadership surveys, because they produce large datasets of pre-coded quantitative data amenable to aggregation. A knowledge base premised on meta-reviews recycles the headlines, the broad generalisations, the bold claims. The details—discussions of context, research design limitations, and the tentativeness of the findings—are relegated to the footnotes.

Towards Better Leadership Theory, or Something Better Than Leadership?

Leaderisation has played a historical role in stabilising school discourse. From the 1970s to the 1990s, educational administration discourse was gripped with anxiety about the incompatibility of its diverse research traditions and methodologies (Greenfield, 1993; Griffiths, 1979). This no longer presents a problem: with “leadership for learning”, once irreconcilable approaches are now viewed as different perspectives on the same agreed-upon object.

However, this stability has come at the cost of over-concentration, and schooling now risks being captured by a narrow conceptualisation of leadership. In the interests of diversifying the portfolio of school research, I identify four lines of inquiry forged by Australian and international scholars:

1. *Clearer delineation of what leadership is (and what it is not)*. My commentary on leaderisation should not be read as a simple opposition to leadership theory. Leadership theory has its place, and its uses. The challenge is to identify precisely where that place is, and what those uses are. When conducting inquiry, school researchers cannot assume from the outset that all problems will inevitably point to some form of leadership influence, and that these can be addressed by articulating a vision or mission of change. Moreover, “leadership” requires greater conceptual clarification, building on work that has decoupled leadership identity from the position of the “principalship” (Blackmore, 1999; Lingard et al., 2003; Niesche, 2011).
2. *Greater competition between research designs*. School leadership research has traditionally relied upon “influence” (impacts on morale), because that is what surveys

and interviews are designed to reveal. This has resulted in repurposing cross-sectional designs to describe the impact of leadership over time, and the use of terms like “effect size” to refer to correlations when no cause-effect relationships were tested for. By contrast, Australian “Leadership for Organisational Learning and Student Outcomes” (LOLSO) research stands as an example of longitudinal research that trialled principal interventions (Silins et al., 1999).

3. *Greater competition between theories.* Leadership theory enjoys its current prominence because of what it promises to explain. However, leadership theory is only as viable as the alternatives it is tested against. One alternative is naturalistic organisational theory, which shifts the unit of analysis from “influence” to “cognition”, in order to better cohere with the methods and findings of natural science (Lakomski, 2005). Another candidate is sociological organisational theory, which replaces “influence” with a “relational” approach that investigates how interactions dynamically reorganise the experience of space and time in schools (Eacott, 2018).
4. *Competing virtues for judging theories.* Leadership theory has spread due to two promises. In epistemological language, leadership’s first promise has been “explanatory unity” and “comprehensiveness”: that is, to provide a single framework for investigating all manner of problems in schooling. Its second promise has been internal consistency: to reliably produce data. However, Evers and Lakomski (1991) argue that these epistemic virtues are not complete unto themselves, and ought to be counterbalanced with other criteria, such as external consistency, conservativeness, parsimony, and fecundity. On these counts, current leadership theory fares less well, because it is committed to a view of atomistic individuals who are at once detached from their environment, but also play a casual role within that environment. More pressingly, under leaderisation, leadership theory is not especially fecund, because it functions to answer all questions in advance. No matter what issue arises, some tried-and-true blend of shared-transformational-instructional leadership will inevitably be the solution.

Leadership theory ascended out of discontent with theories of educational administration, and has its merits. However, such comparative advantages will remain invisible unless leadership inquiry is permitted to compete with alternative research designs and theories, and subjected to competing criteria for judging theories. Greater theory competition is needed if schools are to move toward better leadership theory, or something better than leadership theory.

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Comprehensive History of ACEL

Written by Dr Marie Jansen (FACEL)

https://www.ancel.org.au/ACELWEB/About/Comprehensive_History_of_ACEL.aspx

How It All Started: The History of ACEL

In the literature of professionalism, there is general agreement that the establishment of a professional association represents an important early step in the evolution of an occupation into a full profession. The founding of the Australian Council for Educational Administration in 1973 is linked to this concept of an “emerging” profession. By the 1950’s the study of educational administration as a discipline, still in its infancy in Australia, was already well established in the USA. Goldhammer recalled the excitement of those early years: “It was great to be an administrator and scholar of educational administration in the decade of the 1950’s, but to be young and have a part in the rebuilding of a professional orientation was heaven”.

The field was permeated with a new enthusiasm and hope that out of the new research and analysis would come the true foundation for a sound professional approach to educational administration. The efforts of these “administrators and scholars” had led to the formation of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), an organisation representing major universities in the United States and Canada, established with the aim of advancing research and development in educational administration.

In the mid 1960’s, an enthusiastic Australian, William Walker, was a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley. He was asked to organise a conference for educational administrators “in his spare time”, with a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. This 1966 conference became known as the First International Intervisitation Program – participants held a residential seminar in Michigan during week 1, visited U.S. universities in weeks 2 and 3, before assembling in Alberta to report their findings. Enthusiasm ran high. A Second International Intervisitation Program was held in Australia in 1970, at the University of New England in Armidale. Already Walker had observed:

Educational administrators had virtually no tradition of working together or of a professional association; unlike doctors and psychiatrists, they had not formed any such significant professional group.

Walker’s vision for a Commonwealth-wide association for educational administrators had begun to set root. By the time the IIP delegates had completed their orientation session in Sydney, dispersed throughout Australian universities for 2 weeks, and reassembled at the University of New England, Walker was ready to propose the establishment of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration. One observer noted:

In the initial discussions it was evident that there were misgivings as to the viability of such an organisation. The clouds of doubt were dispelled by a masterly exposition from Bill

Walker. I can recall most vividly the feeling of excitement, exhilaration and exuberance when the roll was called of representatives of 14 Commonwealth countries and it was resolved that a (British) Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration should be established.

An offer to house the CCEA Secretariat at the University of Calgary in Canada was rejected when the University of New England, offered its support. Bill Walker became the first President, and Ross Thomas was elected Secretary. In June 1971, the Commonwealth Foundation in the United Kingdom agreed to support the establishment of CCEA financially. Walker commented: “Thus was the infant equipped for the first time with real teeth!”

The CCEA Executive in Armidale then commenced one of its primary tasks – encouraging the establishment of national, regional and local professional bodies in educational administration. Walker recalled:

The first thing we did was to use the Old Girls and Old Boys network. The people who had done the Ed. Admin course, or people we knew from other contacts – quite often a Director or a Director-General – we wrote to them and said: “Look we’d like to have a meeting in Melbourne or Sydney or Brisbane or wherever. I’ll come along with Ross Thomas. Can we get together and look at the desirability of establishing an institute?”

From 1972, groups began to form in capital cities and provincial centres around Australia.

1973: ACEA is founded

In 1973, ACEA become only the second national body to be established under the auspices of the then (British) Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration (the first being the British Educational Administration Society.) Walker observed:

This provides an interesting contrast with other professional groups, whose national bodies are usually in existence before any international organisation is set up.

Representatives from each state or regional association in Australia, already members of CCEA, were invited by the CCEA Executive to attend a meeting in Canberra in November 1972, where general support for the formation of a national council was expressed. These representatives assembled again in Sydney for 2 days in May 1973 to found the Australian Council for Educational Administration.

The question of how ACEA would differ from the Australian College of Education became a major point of discussion among participants on Day 1. The majority were of the opinion that the proposed new body would allow for a broader membership than the College and would also provide a concentration on educational administration which was not evident in the ACE.

On Day 2, 18 May 1973, delegates resolved unanimously that a national body of educational administrators be established. Constituent groups were Queensland, Sydney, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, the ACT, Riverina and Darling Downs. Harry Harris (Sydney) was elected Foundation President and Bob Pearson (Queensland) Vice-President. Among those who attended the inaugural meeting of the new ACEA Board, which met in Canberra on 19 November 1973, was the driving force behind ACEA’S establishment, Bill Walker. He later

recalled that he came away from that meeting, humming to himself... “The country’s in the best hands”.

2002 A New Chapter Begins: The Name Change to ACEL

For several years, the Board of Directors discussed the possibility of a change of name for the Council to better reflect modern conceptions of the nature of educational administration. As scholarly thinking of the nature and distribution of leadership in organisations developed, it was felt that the inclusion of the term leaders in the name of the Council more accurately reflected the current and future aims of the organisation.

In 2002, the Board of Directors recommended that the name of the organisation be changed to Australian Council for Educational Leaders. This was passed at the 2002 Annual General Meeting of the Council.

2008: ACEL Begins a New Chapter

In 2008 the members of ACEL approved the transition from an incorporated association to a Company Limited by Guarantee. The Australian Council for Educational Leaders Ltd came into being on the 11th August, 2008. This governance change has enabled ACEL to take its place both nationally and globally in offering strategic direction and professional learning programs for those committed to improving outcomes for schools and their students.

A Statement of Commitment to the Profession of Teaching was developed by the Queensland Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL).
[https://media.ancel.org.au/Branch/QLD/Statement%20of%20Commitment%20\[v.3\].pdf](https://media.ancel.org.au/Branch/QLD/Statement%20of%20Commitment%20[v.3].pdf)

A STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT TO THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING

I acknowledge that I am a member of a profession that extends to me the opportunity and the privilege to make a positive difference in the lives of young people.

I bring to the profession my unique talents to teach and to lead, which I commit to nurturing and developing throughout my career.

I understand that teaching is a deeply human endeavour. While I teach subjects, ideas and skills, above all I teach young people, who are our future.

I recognise and respect the body of distinct theory and knowledge which is gifted to me by those who have come before. I draw from it and strive to contribute further to it.

I recognise that young people learn in different ways and at different rates. I believe that given appropriate support and resourcing, all young people can learn, and I strive to nurture a love of learning that will help every young person to succeed.

I make judgements to evaluate student achievement through assessment that is valid, reliable and fair, and I give value to those learnings that cannot be measured.

I recognise that teaching is a collaborative profession and I am not the only teacher in a young person's life. My work is enriched through working with my colleagues, learning from them and contributing to their practice.

I acknowledge the contribution of the many parents, caregivers, and teachers past, present and future who contribute to a young person's education. I work with them wherever possible to enrich the learning of young people.

I offer a spirit of optimism, resilience and hope as I support young people to develop and act on the values, beliefs and capabilities that guide them throughout their lives.

I recognise the changing nature of knowledge, and I commit to continuous learning throughout my professional career.

In committing to this statement I accept the responsibilities of being a teacher, and acknowledge the deep trust placed in me by young people, parents, caregivers and society.

The consultation, development and production of the statement were facilitated by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (Queensland), April 2017

Context of the Statement

What is the Statement of Commitment?

The statement is a voluntary declaration of commitment to a set of values and beliefs for the teaching profession in Australia.

Why was the Statement of Commitment developed?

In 2015 the Queensland Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) researched the criteria of established professions, with a view to ascertaining whether there exists a common set of criteria that comprise a profession. It was agreed that teaching clearly meets all but one of the criteria evident in the research. What is missing is a deep statement of ethically based values and beliefs that complements existing legislative and regulatory instruments.

The Executive resolved to lead the development of a professional statement that captures the spirit of the former Charter for the Australian Teaching Profession (Teaching Australia) and that of similar documents from other professions, and which speaks to all teachers.

Who has contributed to the development of the Statement?

The development of the statement was made possible through consultation with, and invaluable contributions from the following professional groups and their representatives:

Association of Special Education Administrators Queensland, Australian College of Educators, Early Childhood Teachers' Association, Independent Schools Parents' Network, Independent Schools Queensland, Isolated Children's Parents' Association, Joint Council of Queensland Teachers' Associations, Parents and Citizens Queensland, Queensland Association of State School Principals, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, Queensland College of Teachers, Queensland Department of Education and Training, Queensland Independent Education Union, Queensland Secondary Principals' Association, Queensland Teachers' Union, Queensland University of Technology, University of Queensland, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast.

How might the Statement of Commitment be used?

It is hoped that the statement will inspire and engage teachers to take pride in being members of the teaching profession. The statement can be used formally or informally, at graduation ceremonies, induction ceremonies, celebrations of transitional moments in the careers of early childhood, primary and secondary teachers, or for recommitment to the profession for long-serving teachers. It can be used by teacher educators in their work with pre-service students, at the beginning and end of their courses. When using the statement, systems, schools, universities and professional associations may wish to brand the statement with their own identification.

Leading & Managing

Journal of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders

Preparation of Manuscripts

Note 1: This Journal uses APA7 style and referencing, UK English.

Note 2: All submissions are completed on the journal website: <https://journals.flvc.org/leading-and-managing>

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If available, the 16-digit ORCID of the author(s)

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Corresponding authors are required to declare any potential or perceived conflicts of interest in relation to the research during the submission process.

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Preparing Manuscript

This Journal uses APA7 formatting and referencing.

Text: new times roman, 12pts and double time spacing.

File formats - .DOC or .DOCX

Include all tables and figures in the paper.

Image format: TIFF or JPEG are preferred for pictures (containing no graphs or text). EPS is preferred for graphs and line art. No colour images.

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The use of AI must be declared.

Acknowledgements

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A Commentary is a short (2,000 words) Opinion-Ed piece which one might find on the Opinion page of *The Guardian* or the *New York Times*. It is not just a short journal article because it has no abstract, key words, or the usual traditional benchmarks for a research article which discusses methods, data analysis, or findings. And the references are limited to two or embedded in the Commentary.

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Commentaries are not peer reviewed nor are they reviews of the literature. Rather they are selected by the Editors as a perspective worth consideration in a larger context surrounding an important issue, event, or topic. They are welcome to be submitted at any time.

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Special Edition Editor:

Associate Professor Krista Bixler, Florida Gulf Coast University, USA

Editor:

FENWICK ENGLISH & DOROTHY ANDREWS

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