ACEL Inspiring Educational Leaders | Australian Council for Educational Leaders

2025 NEW VOICE PERSPECTIVES

SUPPORTING EMERGING VOICES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

NEW VOICE PERSPECTIVES

Supporting emerging voices in educational leadership

The Australian Council for Educational Leaders is proud to present the *2025 New Voice Perspectives*—a collection that reflects the strength, diversity and future of educational leadership across Australia.

Each year, the New Voice Scholarships recognise emerging leaders who are not only excelling in their contexts, but who are also shaping what comes next. These are educators who are thinking deeply, acting courageously, and leading with purpose. Through this publication, their ideas extend beyond their own settings to inform, challenge and inspire the broader profession.

What is particularly striking in this year's contributions is both the urgency and the humanity of the questions being explored. Across these pages, our scholars grapple with the defining tensions of our time: how we lead in an age of artificial intelligence while preserving what is deeply human in teaching and learning; how we respond meaningfully to growing wellbeing needs; and how we move beyond structures and systems to cultivate genuine connection in our schools and communities.

These are not abstract challenges. They are lived realities. And they demand leadership that is thoughtful, relational and adaptive. At ACEL, this work sits at the heart of our strategic intent.

We are committed to ensuring that educational leaders are **seen**—that the complexity, impact and professionalism of leadership are recognised and valued across Australia. We are equally committed to ensuring leaders are **heard**—that their insights, experiences and expertise actively shape national conversations and influence the future of education. And we are intentional about helping leaders **connect**—with each other, with ideas, and with a shared sense of purpose as part of a dynamic, national community of practice.

Perspectives is one of the ways we bring these commitments to life.

It is more than a publication. It is a platform. A space where emerging voices stand alongside established ones. A space where ideas are tested, stretched and shared. And importantly, a space that invites all of us—as leaders—to engage, reflect and act.

As you read this edition, I encourage you not to remain a passive observer. Engage with the ideas. Challenge your own thinking. Share these perspectives within your teams and networks. Most importantly, consider your own voice—what you are seeing, what you are learning, and what you are ready to contribute to our collective future.

Because the future of educational leadership in Australia will not be shaped by a single voice, but by many.

And at ACEL, we are proud to ensure those voices are shaping the future of education.

Lisa Newland
ACEL CEO

ACEL
Inspiring Educational Leaders

The New Voice in School Leadership

The New Voice In Educational Leadership Research

The New Voice in Early Childhood Education Leadership

Emma Clemens

Director, Teaching Schools Alliance

New Voice in School Leadership 2025 Recipient

Emma Clemens is Director of the Teaching Schools Alliance Sydney (TSAS), an innovative teacher education internship program across eight independent schools in NSW and Queensland. She serves as Vice President of the Australian Association of Teaching Schools. A former Deputy Head of Primary, Curriculum Coordinator, Gifted Education Coordinator and Innovation Leader, she is recognised for high-impact professional learning, leading strategic initiatives and her deep commitment to Christian education. Emma holds two Master's degrees and a Bachelor of Education. She is a graduate of the AIS Flagship Leadership Program and AICD Company Directors Course.

Effective AI use begins with effective leadership. Leaders set the tone for adoption, integration, and evaluation.

In an Age of AI, How Can Leaders Benefit From the Technology While Ensuring Leadership Remains Human-Focused?

What is AI?

At the ACEL National Conference in 2025, Dr Sandra Peter and Professor Kai Riemer offered a constructive framing of artificial intelligence (AI) that cuts through alarmism and provides guidance for educational leaders. AI is often misunderstood by what we assume it can do rather than what it actually does.

AI does not store knowledge like humans. Rather, it encodes statistical patterns from large datasets. Apparent recall is a probabilistic prediction. Most AI tools educators use are pre-trained, so they do not reflect, accumulate wisdom, or grow in discernment through use. Nor does AI think or reason. Outputs are not grounded in understanding but in predicting the most likely response to a prompt (Peter & Riemer, 2025). Accuracy, truth, and ethical integrity are not intrinsic; human users must supply them.

By contrast, AI performs well at tasks that rely on patterns and regularities. It excels with language, text, images, voice, and data, and can simulate role play, perspective-taking, and provide feedback. These capacities explain both its rapid adoption in education and the unease it provokes.

What has Changed?

In education, the most significant shift is not simply the availability of new tools, but our relationship to core professional practices (Jackson & Esterman, 2024). For example, writing has fundamentally changed. With AI, leaders, teachers, and students rarely begin with a blank page. AI generates credible drafts, embodies tones or styles and reduces cognitive load. Intellectual work is increasingly about discernment through evaluating, refining and contextualising AI-generated outputs.

AI is already widely used by students and teachers. Leaders cannot assume they fully understand how, when, or why these tools are used. Even when staff and students access the same platforms, their purposes and practices differ (Peter & Riemer, 2025). The gap is not just technical, but also pedagogical, ethical, and relational.

For educational leaders, this represents a significant shift in the conditions under which teaching and learning occur. The challenge is not whether AI will be present, but how leaders respond with clarity, wisdom, and a commitment to human-centred practice.

Can AI Replace Teachers?

Educational leaders may question whether artificial intelligence will ultimately replace teachers. Are there dimensions of teaching that are fundamentally human and therefore not readily automated (Matias, 2012). This challenge remains pressing as AI systems increasingly undertake tasks that were once considered distinctive to the teacher's role.

Those who frame teaching as replaceable by AI often reduce teachers' role to two core functions: delivering curriculum content and facilitating a learning environment (Jackson & Esterman, 2024). Viewed this way, replacement seems plausible. Yet teaching is "highly complex, highly human and highly contextual" (Jackson & Esterman, 2024, p. 85). COVID-19 lockdowns highlighted the limits of learning without shared physical presence. Learning is deeply social, not merely cognitive.

Teachers guide students to sustain attention, develop critical thinking and navigate wellbeing challenges. While AI can present information, ask questions or provide feedback efficiently, it cannot notice what is unsaid, respond to emotion and make context-sensitive judgements. Leaders must protect this complexity, facilitating school environments that nurture academic, social and emotional growth. Leadership in an AI age requires resisting narratives of replacement and seeing teaching as relational and formative.

The Impact of Relationships

"Meeting and learning are inseparable… We must meet to learn" (Joint Contribution, 2004, p. 5). Learning is inherently relational, shaped by presence, interaction and mutual recognition. Relationships influence thinking, wellbeing, and longevity (Loe, 2017). In schools, they shape how children grow, how teachers shape learning and how leaders steward communities. Schools are communities of people, not systems of delivery.

Face-to-face interactions enhance reasoning and are linked to health and wellbeing (Pinker, 2015). While AI can simulate dialogue or offer advice, these interactions are imitative. AI does not know the person it responds to. Nor does it carry responsibility for the relationship. With many young people experiencing fractured social networks, schools increasingly function as relational anchors. Leaders, therefore, carry a profound responsibility to protect and prioritise human connection.

Implications for Leaders

Effective AI use begins with effective leadership. Leaders set the tone for adoption, integration, and evaluation (Kober, 2025). Transparency and discernment are essential. Leaders must understand AI use and establish boundaries that protect human-centred practice.

AI can be extraordinarily powerful. It can support data analysis; and identify trends in achievement, behaviour, and enrolments to then inform strategic decision making (Jackson & Esterman, 2024). Used wisely, it enables earlier intervention and targeted resource allocation.

AI can also reduce workload amid high staff burnout (Gallup, Inc. & Walton Family Foundation, 2025). In Australia, nine out of ten teachers report moderate to extremely severe stress and nearly 70% describe workload as unmanageable (Granziera et al., 2025). By streamlining responsibilities such as reporting, policy development and curriculum planning, leaders can reduce workload and protect wellbeing.

AI also supports diverse learners through differentiated resources and accessible learning design (Matthews, 2024). It makes accessibility practical, manageable, and scalable. Leaders who advocate for these applications are not simply adopting technology; they are also promoting equity and inclusion within their schools.

AI can also function as a coaching tool, providing feedback on communication, supporting reflection and helping leaders prepare for complex conversations. In this way, AI enhances rather than replaces leadership judgment.

Ultimately, leaders are called to steward AI wisely. Leadership in an AI age is about discernment, moral purpose, and preserving what is most human in education. Leaders who act intentionally can ensure AI serves the school's mission and enriches the learning and wellbeing of staff and students.

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Siobhan Jones

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New Voice in School Leadership 2025 Recipient

Siobhan Jones is a values-driven educator whose leadership has reshaped cultural practice at her school and across her network. As leader of the school's Culturally Responsive Team, she embeds approaches that affirm Aboriginal identity and support high-impact teaching, including co-designing with families and leading culturally responsive programs grounded in Aboriginal worldviews. She brings this commitment to her work with staff, supporting culturally responsive practice and fostering a shift toward restorative, relationship-focused teaching. Her approach is grounded in collaboration and cultural integrity.

Relational leadership, candid truth telling, and authentic connection become the levers that generate the trust needed to reframe thinking, confront bias, and shape schools that are truly equitable.

The Human in the Loop: Leading with Connection in an Age of AI

We are entering an era of profound technological change. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is recasting the fabric of education at an extraordinary pace, offering tools that promise to streamline planning, personalise learning, and make once-unthinkable innovations accessible in every classroom. Yet in the dash to seize the new we must cling tight to the heart of true educational transformation: human connection.

In my day-to-day work as a school leader committed to education, I have observed profound learning and real change sprout not from spreadsheets but from the relationships we build. Relational leadership, candid truth telling, and authentic connection become the levers that generate the trust needed to reframe thinking, confront bias, and shape schools that are truly equitable.

Leading from Country, Not Just Code

The future of education cannot be written in code alone; it must also be carved from the stories that shape us, the Country that teaches us, and the living cultures that thrive within our schools.

At Brabham Primary School in Western Australia, our journey toward cultural responsiveness has been grounded in a Two-Way Approach (Department of Education Western Australia and Department of Training and Workforce Development, 2012; Sarra, 2011), where Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing sit alongside Western pedagogies. We have embedded culturally responsive practice into every layer of our school: from curriculum design to community engagement and from leadership structures to policy (Vass, 2013).

We walk this path not as isolated individuals but as a community (Department of Education, Western Australia, 2015). Among the ties that have coloured this journey the most significant is the bond with my colleague, now sister, Rikiesha Dimer. Side by side, we created this work from the ground up and continue to walk this path of continual learning. Her strength, leadership and daring courage have shaped me as a leader and anchored the school's approach. This work simply would not have been possible without her.

Through initiatives, like our Kwobidak Moorditj Koolangas program (shaped by local worldviews of giftedness), our Two-Way Science implementation, and our shift from punitive discipline to restorative practice, we have seen measurable growth in attendance, engagement, and identity development for Aboriginal students.

More than the numbers, what really matters are the stories: the child who finally feels seen; the parent who returns to a school they once feared; and the staff member who learns to listen differently.

The Limitations of AI and the Power of Presence

AI can support many aspects of this work. It can help us analyse data, spark ideas, and simulate scenarios. I use it regularly as a thought partner, a planner, and even an occasional provocateur.

But AI cannot build trust. It cannot read the room after a difficult conversation with a parent. It misses the hesitation that lingers behind a teacher's silence in a professional learning session about racism. It cannot hold space when an Elder shares painful truths.

Human leadership is messy, a tangled affair. It requires emotional labour, intuition, and moral courage. These are not glitches in the system, they are the system. No algorithm can replicate the transformative power of presence.

Coaching, Connection and Capacity-Building

I view my leadership as a coaching effort that aims not to refine practice but also to nurture a deeper cultural self-awareness (AITSL, 2020a,

2020b; Picower, 2009). This is slow, relational work, grounded in dynamics, listening attentively, reflecting together, and walking alongside. I believe in "connection before content," because lasting change surfaces when people feel safe enough to take risks.

Last year, I organised a professional learning session featuring a screening of The Grey Line (Quayle, 2023), a film exploring the intergenerational impacts of the Stolen Generations. The Q&A with the film's lead, herself a survivor, left many of our staff in tears. That gathering left an imprint on our thinking. It did more to shift mindsets than a dozen policy documents.

That is the power of human-led leadership. It may not be a model of efficiency. But it is effective.

A Call to Action: Leading with Heart in an AI World

As we move further into the AI era, the question is not whether we will use technology, we will. The question is whether we will also retain the courage to lead with heart.

We need leaders who can sit with the paradox: people who explore emerging technologies while staying rooted in Country and community; who can use AI as a tool, but never mistake it for wisdom.

We must invest in the slow, relational work of trust-building. Culturally responsive leadership should be lifted beyond an equity checkbox, positioned as the very blueprint for education in a diverse democracy. We need to coach the wave of leaders to wield not only strategy but also spirit.

This work is both visionary and enduring, anchored in deep relationships and driven by a commitment to equity, accountability, and reconciliation.

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Obayda Kannouj

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New Voice in School Leadership 2025 Recipient

Obayda Kannouj brings 13 years of teaching experience to her roles as Head of Coaching and Head of Media Arts at Al-Taqwa College in Melbourne. Obayda is committed to fostering student growth through building self-awareness and self-esteem, equipping students to use media as a powerful tool for change. She brings similar energy to her coaching role, supporting teachers in developing reflective practice and purposeful teaching. Her approach is grounded in collaboration, and the belief that professional growth comes through shared reflection and intentional practice. She continues to enhance and expand the programs she leads, building capacity and momentum across the college.

A defining outcome of the coaching process is its capacity to extend beyond teaching skills and classroom strategies to engage teachers' core beliefs, identity, self-awareness and sense of purpose.

Preparing to Coach: Coaching to Prepare

Coaching is an established trend in education; however, in many ways, coaching practice in schools is still emerging. In the Australian context, increasing attention to teacher wellbeing, professional growth and retention has prompted renewed interest in professional learning models that are collaborative and embedded in practice. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011) emphasises professional learning that strengthens teacher capability through reflection, professional dialogue and ongoing development.

Coaching aligns strongly with these priorities because it enables teachers to refine their practice while building professional identity within their own school context. Preparing a coaching program that centres authenticity, teacher identity, flexibility and collaboration can help schools realise the individual and collective benefits of coaching over the coming decade (Costa & Garmston, 2016). In this sense, educational leaders are both preparing to coach and using coaching to prepare teachers for the complex and evolving demands of the profession.

This is echoed in Netolicky's (2016) study that found school-based cognitive coaching programs empower teachers and strengthen professional identity through reflection and professional dialogue. She describes this coaching model as enhancing collaborative, non-hierarchical relationships and improving overall school culture and teacher practice. This research suggests that coaching should be viewed by educational leaders not simply as a professional development strategy, but as a long-term investment in professional growth and school culture.

A defining outcome of the coaching process is its capacity to extend beyond teaching skills and classroom strategies to engage teachers' core beliefs, identity, self-awareness and sense of purpose. This shift in emphasis from doing to being, as described by Danvers et al. (2020), outlines the "five ways of being" teachers and their coaches need to adopt in order to lead learning in others: being trusting, being brave, being a storyteller, being purposeful and being growth focused.

Self-discovery and self-awareness are the most transformative aspects of coaching and through this process teachers realise that "*good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*" and "*cannot be reduced to technique*" (Palmer, 2017, p. 10). Research demonstrates that coaching and structured reflective dialogue can significantly increase teachers' self-awareness and reflective capacity.

Studies on instructional coaching have found that teachers who engage in coaching conversations report increased awareness of their own instructional decisions, professional beliefs and classroom practices (Warnock et al., 2022). Similarly, reflective coaching models create structured opportunities for teachers to examine their intentions before teaching and reflect on their actions afterwards, supporting deeper self-assessment and professional insight (Göker, 2023).

Through guided questioning and reflective dialogue, coaching enables teachers to explore their thinking, examine assumptions and develop a clearer understanding of their identity. Through this process, teacher authenticity, confidence, clarity and professional fulfilment develop, aligning more closely with their core beliefs and values. In this way, coaching not only strengthens teaching practice but also prepares teachers to sustain their sense of purpose and professional identity in a demanding profession.

Prepare Your Approach

Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2016) is particularly well suited to this focus on being and teacher identity. It attends to the perceptions, beliefs and values that inform

practice and ultimately impact student learning. Using this approach, teachers and coaches cultivate "five states of mind" that activate excellence: efficacy, flexibility, craftmanship, consciousness, and interdependence.

The aim is to develop self-reflection and evaluation, where the coach acts as a "mediator of thinking" to help the teacher unlock their own potential and develop their professional identity within a learning community (Costa & Garmston, 2016). Research on instructional coaching also highlights that professional growth is most powerful when teachers engage in reflective dialogue rather than simply receiving advice or directives (Knight, 2018).

The process of planning and reflecting during coaching sessions allows teachers to refine their teaching practice and professional performance. No more is this evident than in improved student outcomes and more engaged classroom interactions. In light of this, when leaders structure a coaching program at their school, they not only create the conditions for deep reflection but also for sustained professional learning rather than short-term improvement initiatives (Al-Taqwa College, 2025).

Be Prepared to Change Your Approach

"*The skilful, sensitive coach will ultimately default to Cognitive Coaching as it is most likely to support self-directed learning*" (Costa & Garmston, 2016, p. 9). That said, the flexibility cultivated through Cognitive Coaching is described by Costa and Garmston (2016) as the ability to see situations from multiple perspectives and generate different strategies. Differentiated Coaching reminds us that, just as students need differentiated learning, coaching approaches need to be adapted to teachers' styles and personalities (Kise, 2017), including those moments when a coaching session may not be what is most needed for a teacher.

Lipton et al. (2001, as cited in Costa & Garmston, 2016) distinguish five functions intended to support teacher development: evaluating, collaborating, consulting, mediating and coaching. While three of these functions — coaching, collaborating and consulting— interact to improve instructional practice for early career teachers, the consulting and collaborating features are often where the coaching conversation starts. Therefore, a coach's emotional intelligence and flexibility are essential to recognise when a different support function is required, such as shifting from coaching to consultancy when reflective dialogue is no longer generating new thinking.

In a coaching role, having a deep understanding of the school context and culture, knowing colleagues' strengths and expertise and actively connecting staff, fosters the collaboration that strengthens coaching outcomes. For leaders preparing coaching programs, this underscores the importance of training coaches who can respond to teachers' needs while maintaining a clear focus on professional growth.

Prepare for Collaboration

Costa and Garmston (2016) describe interdependence cultivated through cognitive coaching as the understanding that we learn better together. Coaching develops the capacity to think interdependently and work collaboratively, as coaches are mediators of thought, supporting others in becoming effective collaborative thinkers (p. 124).

Emerge (Grift, 2023) provides purposeful ways of addressing some of the challenges leaders can face when trying to invite collaboration. As such, successful collaboration extends beyond the immediate participants. It requires a whole school approach that understands and supports its value.

In this context, this may involve addressing misconceptions or myths that can negatively impact implementation of coaching, such as the belief that it is only for new or struggling teachers, that it functions as a performance management tool, or that it should not be prioritised over other responsibilities.

Preparing staff for coaching therefore becomes an important leadership responsibility, ensuring that coaching is understood as a developmental and collaborative process rather than an evaluative one.

Prepare Coaching Time

Ensuring that time for coaching is deliberately scheduled, protected and respected amid the many competing demands of teaching can be challenging. Nevertheless, safeguarding this time is critical to ensuring that teachers feel valued and that coaching programs, along with their participants, are able to realise their full potential.

By intentionally challenging these barriers, leaders can support a shift in mindset that recognises coaching as deep and meaningful professional work, deserving of time, attention and sustained commitment. When leaders deliberately protect time for reflective conversations, they signal that reflection, collaboration, and ongoing professional learning are central to the work of teaching.

Preparing for the Next Decade

Coaching can help teachers prepare for current and future educational challenges. As coaching participants, teachers gain a better understanding of themselves and are better able to cope with and manage challenges as they arise.

This is not in place of broader systemic changes that may be necessary for the teaching profession, rather, it is about positioning ourselves to manage inevitable changes as best we can, individually and collectively as teachers.

For educational leaders, investing in coaching is therefore both a preparation strategy and a capacity-building strategy. By *preparing to coach* and using *coaching to prepare teachers* for the future, schools can strengthen professional learning cultures and support teachers to thrive in an increasingly complex profession.

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Suren Mendis

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Suren Mendis is a science teacher at Burgmann Anglican School and serves as the Co-Director of the Junior Science Olympiad Program. He completed a Bachelor of Medical Science, a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education and a Master's Degree in Science Communication. He is currently undertaking a PhD, exploring teacher perspectives of digital literacy and online learning. Suren was formally the chemistry coordinator of the Australian National University Extension program and the project coordinator for meriSTEM, a not-for-profit group which creates free educational resources for science teachers. He has previously worked as the Head of Science at Burgmann Anglican School, as the Biology coordinator for the Diploma of Science Program at the ANU, and as a Chemistry educator at the University of Canberra.

Digital Literacy: The Urgent Need to Look Beyond Technical Competency

"The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air" (Tolkien, 1955, p. 959). Not my words, but the words of J. R. R Tolkien in his legendary *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. These words, nonetheless, echo the sentiments of many teachers who find themselves at a critical juncture in education. Among their growing set of responsibilities, teachers now find themselves at the forefront of fostering digital literacy, the skills and traits required of students to thrive in the so called "digital age" (Becker, 2018, p. 2). However, recent changes and developments, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread uptake of AI, have emphasised the need to look beyond a checklist of technical competencies and focus on broader cognitive skills associated with the use of digital tools.

Digital Literacy – A Brief History

First proposed in 1997 by Paul Glister, the term digital literacy (DL) was defined as "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats, from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers" (p. 1). In this context, DL was seen as an extension of traditional definitions of literacy. The term itself has since broadened to encompass a range of different skills with ties to media literacy and information literacy (Koltay, 2011). The definition of digital literacy can also be expanded to incorporate critical literacy, including the need to question the validity, motives and sources of information (McNicol, 2016).

Separately, key DL skills have been linked to improved self-efficacy, empowering students to make best use of their learning opportunities (Aslan, 2020). DL is also liked to digital citizenship and identity, and the need for individuals to understand their roles and responsibilities in online environments (Johnston, 2020). This includes using technology in an ethical and safe manner to engage positively in online communities. As such, Version 9 of the Australian Curriculum lists digital literacy as a key competency for students and provides a continuum of skills for each age group (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022).

Prioritising Flexibility, Versatility and Cognitive Skills Over Technological Competency

Recently, DL has been used as a "catch-all" term to represent the skills required to capitalise on learning opportunities in a wide variety of educational settings (Yu, 2022). In this context, technical capabilities of students and teachers are often assessed based on their ability to demonstrate particular DL competencies (Reichert et al., 2020). The emphasis on technical capabilities was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a sudden shift to online learning served as a conduit to identify perceived skill gaps in the teaching workforce (An & Zakaria, 2022). However, simply limiting the nature of digital literacy to a core set of technical competencies may inadvertently hinder DL development. Defining DL as a set of technical skills often results in a very narrow and transactional relationship with technology (McDougall et al., 2018). Firstly, the nature of DL is often fluid. Tools that are seen as being vital today may be deemed less important tomorrow. Similarly, DL skills themselves may go through a process of change and reprioritisation. A prominent example of this is coding. Until recently, the ability to learn programming and coding were seen as a vital skill for the future. However, recent developments in AI and increased availability of user-friendly coding platforms have made this skill much more approachable (Cheah et al.,

The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air.

2025). The ease of access of coding resources by no means diminishes the need to teach coding skills, but the tools available have placed a greater emphasis on evaluative skills over technical ones (Becker et al., 2023).

Hence, students and teachers may be best served if they have the adaptability and flexibility to meet the needs of the future. Kop (2011), for instance, describes the need to have a flexible mindset in the face of change, while Barak (2017) emphasises the importance of adaptability, considering the rapidly changing needs of learners. Adaptability and versatility are often most useful in the face of rapid changes. The need for adaptability, was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the ability to change direction appeared to serve educators better than a set of hard-wired technical skills (Tejedor et al., 2020).

More broadly, there is a need to look beyond technical capabilities themselves. Ng (2012) distinguishes between the technical and cognitive dimensions of DL, with the technical domain of DL consisting of basic operational skills, while the cognitive domain explores the nature of information, learning and other underlying skills that underpin DL. Cognitive skills are often transferrable, even if tools change (Becker, 2018), and are often linked to cognitive development beyond the digital space itself. In the coding example above, problem-solving and logical thinking skills, often intrinsic to coding, are valuable additions to learners, even if they never use coding (Becker et al., 2023). Hence, a greater emphasis must be given to the cognitive skills that underpin technical capabilities, as these skills may be transferrable, even if the tools themselves change.

Cognitive Offloading and the Potential Loss of Key Skills

Discussion around AI and its role in education has also brought another important consideration around DL to the forefront. To what extent can (and should) available tools replace cognitive activity? This phenomenon of outsourcing aspects of cognition to technology is known as "cognitive offloading" (Yiğit, 2025, p. 33). On the one hand the offloading process can have the benefit of easing cognitive load, opening capacity for other tasks. On the other hand, cognitive offloading may have detrimental effects on engagement and development, if the skills replaced are important stages of the learning process (Gerlich, 2025). The rapid uptake of AI has called into question the risk to skills related to research, data processing and creativity, to name a few (Bozkurt et al., 2024).

The risk of losing vital cognitive skill development opportunities may be a cause for concern for some. For instance, Yiğit (2025) describes how cognitive offloading may by-pass key development opportunities for cognitive skills such as reasoning and problem-solving. Nevertheless, the solution is, perhaps, to approach the issue with a more nuanced, case-by-case discussion. For each cognitive activity which is replaced or appears to be threatened by offloading, it may be pertinent to ask the following set of questions:

- What are the cognitive skills and attributes implicit in certain activities that can be replaced by digital shortcuts?
- Are the skills which may be developed by these activities transferrable and useful beyond the specific niche itself?
- Are these skills truly important? Are there benefits for students to possess and develop these skills, even if there are digital alternatives which can do the job more efficiently?

For instance, an educator may need to identify the skills associated with a learning activity such as undertaking research on a topic. They may then seek to identify if these skills are useful and transferrable in other contexts. They could then weigh up the relative merits of doing so the "old fashioned" way (e.g., using journal databases) as opposed to using tools such as perplexity which offer shortcuts to the research process (Roy, 2025). The answer to each question will differ from case to case and individual to individual, but the questions themselves must be asked to ensure that what we do is intentional and contextually appropriate.

Amid rapid changes in the digital age, it is vital to look beyond technological capability. Firstly, it is important to remain flexible and adaptable to changing needs and contexts. Secondly, it is essential to be aware of the cognitive skills and competencies which are associated with technical prowess, as these skills may be transferrable. Finally, in the midst of increasing levels of cognitive offloading, it is imperative to be deliberate about which cognitive processes we want to retain and why. None of these perspectives diminish the need to possess certain technical capabilities. Rather, they emphasise the need to link these capabilities to a "bigger picture". The world may be changed, but educators still have a large role to play in shaping the big picture.

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As a forward-thinking educator and researcher in educational leadership, Andrew Pennay has demonstrated a strong commitment to innovative curriculum design, teacher advocacy, and arts-based pedagogical research, sharing his expertise nationally and internationally. With teaching qualifications and extensive leadership experience across secondary and tertiary education, he currently serves as Director of Creative Futures at Brisbane Girls Grammar School while undertaking doctoral studies at Queensland University of Technology. His research critically examines songwriting instruction and its intersection with broader music education paradigms, reflecting his passion for reimagining creative pedagogy. Pennay has led and contributed to national conversations on arts education, facilitating and participating in roundtables and convening a Creative Arts, Creative Futures symposium.

Creativity is not a decorative extra. It is the everyday medium. If creativity is understood, in a familiar shorthand, as producing something both novel and useful, leadership already looks inherently creative.

Making a Song and Dance of Leadership

The next decade is likely to intensify a familiar pattern: schools will be asked to pivot faster, with less certainty, and under tighter scrutiny. Change arrives as interference rather than sequence, pressing on learning, wellbeing, accountability, and community confidence at once. Preparation begins to look like an organisational capacity to re-read conditions while staying in relation.

A recent school assembly sharpened this for me because it balanced tradition and novelty in the same breath: a pipe organ processional, followed by speeches that set the year in motion, including the Principal's snowflake metaphor, offered as a reminder to student leaders that the work is ensembled individualism, not sameness. Later that day, as I returned from City Hall to our inner-city school, the opening of *The Go-Betweens*' "Streets of Your Town" simply popped into my head: "Round and round, up and down, through the streets of your town" (The Go-Betweens, 1988, 0:14–0:28). I have learnt to pay attention when a lyric does that. It is not background music. It is doing interpretive work, continuing to work on me, organising what I notice and what I am ready to name.

Schools, after all, repeat and disrupt concurrently: ironic bastions of tradition and custody, while also being sites of innovation and rapid pivoting. I used that same lyric refrain last year to think about authority and the quiet force of curriculum verbs in arts education (Pennay, 2025). Re-using it here, to think through leadership creativities, is meta-reflexive in Archer's sense: noticing the loop in one's own meaning-making and choosing to work with it deliberately, rather than treating it as noise (Archer, 2003).

In leadership discourse, reflexivity is often invoked as a generic virtue: leaders reflect, schools review, improvement cycles roll on. Hibbert, Coupland, and MacIntosh (2010) argue that reflexivity is not one thing. It moves between modes, shaped by recursion and relationality. Recursion names how organisations return to habits and structures, and then find themselves returned to by those same structures. Relationality signals that reflexive work is never only private cognition; it is made with and against others (Hibbert et al., 2010).

Other accounts foreground the person, particularly Archer's theory of the "internal conversation" (Archer, 2003, 2007, 2012). That lens helps when attention is on individual deliberation under constraint. Hibbert et al. (2010) are used here as one practical organisational vocabulary for reflexive movement, read diffractively through music and arts education.

A diffractive reading is a post-qualitative analytic practice that attends to patterns of difference and interference, rather than neat parallels or direct causal explanation (Barad, 2007; Mazzei, 2014). The point is not that leadership is 'like' music. It is that music-making and leadership can disturb each other, bringing routines and power relations into view.

Music and arts education offer a useful case because creativity is not a decorative extra. It is the everyday medium. If creativity is understood, in a familiar shorthand, as producing something both novel and useful, leadership already looks inherently creative (Plucker et al., 2004). Burnard (2013) sharpens the claim by pluralising the term: leadership *creativities* name multiple ways leaders shape conditions so that other creativities can emerge, be recognised, and be sustained. In the following four brief sections, I again borrow lyrics from The Go-Betweens (1988, 0:14–0:28) as cues for thinking through leadership modes.

"Round and Round"

Most often, *repetition* is the quiet infrastructure of trust. Timetables, rituals and reporting cycles stabilise attention and create predictability. Music education makes repetition's double edge clear. Conservatoire traditions apprentice students into refinement, craft and ensemble accountability, yet they can also become conservative, mistaking inherited convention for truth. Burnard (2013) shows how leadership can facilitate or impede staff and student creativities. Read with Hibbert et al. (2010), repetition becomes a leadership creativity of deciding which routines hold learning and belonging, and which narrow what becomes thinkable.

"Up and Down"

Extension increases complexity without collapsing it into a single fix (Hibbert et al., 2010). Tensegrity offers a helpful image because it treats tension as structural rather than pathological. In biological accounts, stability emerges through a balance of continuous tension and local compression (Ingber, 2003; Stamenović & Ingber, 2009). Organisational research similarly describes "productive tension" as a condition for learning and influence, held through boundary work that stays open and coherent (Risien & Goldstein, 2021). Read diffractively, extension names leadership work that adjusts tensions so they remain generative rather than corrosive, and so innovation does not become churn.

Through the Streets of Our Town

Participation foregrounds relational reflexivity: being implicated with others in how meaning and change are produced (Hibbert et al., 2010). Creativity scholarship helps here, especially Glăveanu's (2010, 2020) we-paradigm. Burnard (2013) makes this operational by describing leadership as distributed, shifting role-sets. Her jazz metaphor is useful for schools: leadership as public performance that depends on everyone performing as individuals and as a group, with leaders sometimes being led by the 'band'. Participation becomes design work: the routines, meetings, and trust conditions that let professional judgement travel.

Every Day We Make Our Way

Disruption is easy to caricature as novelty for its own sake. Hibbert et al. (2010) describe it as interruption and reversal that makes room for the other, resisting oversimplification and the exclusion of outliers. Punk pedagogies offer a disciplined provocation: DIY learning, community formation, political awareness, and a refusal to confuse compliance with education (Smith et al., 2017). In music education, disruption is also organisational, asking who gets heard and what counts. Disruption becomes the creative judgement of when to unsettle routines so learning can re-enter the room, and when to protect routines because they are doing quiet equity work (Burnard, 2013).

If accelerated pivots are the emerging trend, preparation begins to look less like a perfected plan and more like a richer repertoire of reflexive movement. The Go-Betweens line keeps tugging because it refuses the fantasy of linear progress. School life moves "round and round" () in rituals and roles, and also "up and down" () as conditions shift and decisions land unevenly. Leadership creativities show up in how those movements are held: when repetition becomes care rather than inertia, when tension stays productive rather than corrosive, when the "we" becomes audible, and when disruption makes room for others rather than simply speeding up the room. In that sense, music and arts education do not decorate leadership discourse. They keep its improvised flourishes accountable.

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NEW VOICE PERSPECTIVES

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Dr Matt Pitman is author of *The connection curriculum* and *The connection conundrum*, both published by Amba Press. An experienced educational leader and a researcher of connections across school communities, Matt's experience is varied, from the leadership of curriculum teams and programs to student wellbeing, student improvement and community engagement portfolios. He has led Positive Education and student support programs and has a passion for working with students, parents, and staff to develop new understandings of the needs of young people in the 21st century.

What Have You Given Them To Connect To?

I have had the great pleasure of walking through many schools and hearing leaders speak confidently about culture, relationships, belonging and connection. In my work, connection is understood as a lived, relational experience rather than something created by language, platforms or systems (Pitman, 2024, 2025). We say these words often, sometimes so often that we begin to believe saying them makes them true.

But imagine, even for a moment, that nobody is connected to your school. Not your students, not your families, not your staff. Imagine that what we read as resistance, refusal, or disengagement is not a set of individual problems to be solved, but symptoms of a system that has failed to give people anything meaningful with which to connect.

If that possibility makes you uncomfortable, it should. The growing mental health and wellbeing needs of young people (and of the adults who support them) are not appearing in a vacuum (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2024). They are emerging in environments where connection is too often assumed rather than earned, despite substantial evidence that it is shaped by relationships, school structures and everyday interactions with the school environment (Australian Education Research Organisation [AERO], 2024; Štremfel et al., 2024). When we see low retention, escalating classroom issues, staff burnout, or sharp increases in mental health referrals (AIHW, 2024), we tend to treat each issue separately even though research consistently shows that behaviour, engagement, and mental health outcomes are strongly linked to sense of belonging and broader school connection (Allen et al., 2024; Cohman et al., 2024). So, if they are not isolated problems at all, are they indicators of the same underlying question: What, if anything, have we offered them as a point of connection?

The Myth of Connection Through Compliance

One of the great misunderstandings of contemporary schooling is the belief that wearing a uniform, following rules, or meeting prescribed behavioural expectations equates to belonging. You may have even used this type of statement in a staff briefing to support some data. But let us be realistic: if there is consequence for non-compliance in any of those areas, what we have is not connection, it is simply compliance being dressed up as culture (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A student wearing a blazer does not guarantee community. A teacher standing at the door greeting every student does not guarantee relational safety. A staff morning tea does not guarantee wellbeing. We are mistaking coordinated systems for connected communities.

Leadership cannot claim that connection exists simply because the outward (and outdated) markers of "schooling" are visible and intact. If our indicators of success rely on signs of uniformity rather than signs of humanity, then we should not be surprised when young people and adults alike start to withdraw.

Playing it Safe is Hurting our People

It has been entrenched for a while now, but we need to be clear that educational leadership has operated on the belief that safety lies in consistency and tradition. We repeat procedures because "that's how it's always been done," and we defend legacy practices as if they were evidence-based rather than inherited. I would argue what we call "the status quo" is far from neutral, in fact, it may be actively eroding wellbeing and doing nothing to change this is negligible laziness.

Students are not refusing learning; they are refusing environments that feel irrelevant, disconnected, or unresponsive to who they are

The next decade of educational leadership will be defined not by how well we manage the individual crises, but by how courageously we cultivate connection.

(Ryan & Deci, 2020). Staff are not burning out because they lack resilience; they are burning out because we have normalised systems that drain them. When leaders choose predictability and comfort over curiosity and courage, it is the people in our schools who pay for that decision. We cannot keep prescribing the same solutions when the world around us and the people within our schools have changed. Playing it safe is no longer safe, it is inherently dangerous.

Fix your Leadership Posture

If connection is the antidote to disconnection, then curiosity is the doorway to connection. Not the superficial curiosity of a translated flyer or a tokenistic morning tea, but the deeper kind; *empathic curiosity*. A willingness to approach people not as data points or problems, but as complex, culturally rich, human beings (Pitman, 2024).

Our diversity in our schools is one of its incredible strengths and, as such, this kind of curiosity is no longer optional. The real Australia is made of communities that are multilingual, multicultural, multi-faith, neurodiverse, and globally connected (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). You should not have to look like me to gain access to everything education has to offer. Our students sit at an intersection of identity and experience that many school systems were never designed to hold. So, the question becomes: *How can we claim to care about wellbeing if we are not even curious about who people are?*

Connection requires more than representation. It requires *recognition*. Leaders must take responsibility for creating environments where curiosity is embedded in culture:

- where staff are encouraged to *ask*, not assume, what students need;
- where systems are built *with* communities, not merely for them;
- where cultural knowledge is not occasional but a *structural expectation;*
- where belonging is not a slogan but a *daily practice.*

I will not sugar-coat it (why start now!); this kind of empathic curiosity is demanding. It requires leaders to confront their blind spots, challenge inherited norms, and redesign systems that feel comfortable to adults but alien to young people (and sometimes the other way around too). But it is also the work that will define educational leadership for the next decade and our future communities for the next few.

Connection is not Connectivity

As social media bans arrive and devices govern our attention, we have been sold the lie of living in an age of infinite connectivity despite growing evidence that online connection does not necessarily produce belonging and that digital environments frequently fragment attention (Ansari et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2025; Plackett et al., 2023). Messages, alerts, dashboards and data streams may be everywhere, but none of these guarantee authentic human connection. Schools have more platforms, portals, and communication tools than ever before, and yet students report record levels of loneliness, isolation, and stress (Ending Loneliness Together, 2025). I know personally that staff feel constantly monitored but rarely seen.

Real connection cannot be automated, it requires presence, listening, humility, and cultural literacy. Technology may support wellbeing, but it cannot replace the relationships that sustain it. Leadership must therefore ask: *Are we increasing connection or simply increasing connectivity?* One nourishes wellbeing, the other exhausts it.

Why Wait for Change When We Can Start Doing Something Now?

Perhaps the most confronting truth is that we already know what makes a difference. We know that students thrive when they belong, when they feel understood, when they can see themselves in the curriculum, and when relationships are grounded in trust rather than authority (AERO, 2025; NSW Government, 2024; Pitman, 2025). We know that staff thrive in cultures where it is safe to be vulnerable, where voices matter, and where leadership models authenticity rather than detachment (NSW Ministry of Health, 2024; Pitman, 2025). So why are we waiting? If our systems continue to disconnect, we must recognise that they have been built to do this or, at the very least, are being kept that way.

Your Chance to (Actually) Reflect…

I truly believe that the next decade of educational leadership will be defined not by how well we manage the individual crises, but by how courageously we cultivate connection. Mental health initiatives, policies and programs matter, but without a foundation of authentic relationships, belonging and meaning they cannot do the work we hope they will.

So, ask yourself, as a leader: *What have you given them with which they can connect?*

- A set of rules or a sense of purpose?
- A uniform or a community?
- A vision or a story in which they can see themselves?

Connection is not accidental, it is designed, modelled, protected, and renewed daily.

If we want schools where students and staff can truly flourish, then we must stop waiting for connection to appear and start creating it; boldly, intentionally, and with relentless empathic curiosity. It is time to start doing this like the future depends on it. Because it does.

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Nadia Walker is an experienced educator whose career spans classroom teaching, school leadership, teacher education, and system-level curriculum reform across NSW and Victoria. As a curriculum leader and policy advisor, she has contributed to the development of high-quality resources that support teachers' professional learning and pedagogical practice, including work on the reSolve: Maths by Inquiry project. She is currently undertaking a PhD at Monash University, examining how leadership decisions shape opportunities for mathematical thinking in classrooms. Her work is grounded in a commitment to strengthening teacher expertise and improving student learning outcomes.

Leading in the Age of AI: Why Pedagogical Leadership Must Remain Human

Effective teaching has never been a technical act alone. It is profoundly human—relational and responsive. The moments that matter most rarely appear in documented lesson plans.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping curriculum work. Lesson plans appear in seconds. Assessment tasks are developed at the click of a button. Teaching sequences can be designed with unprecedented efficiency. For teachers and leaders, the appeal is obvious. Yet beneath this momentum lies a deeper question: what happens to professional judgement when pedagogical decisions are increasingly outsourced to algorithms?

Effective teaching has never been a technical act alone. It is profoundly human—relational and responsive. The moments that matter most rarely appear in documented lesson plans. They emerge when a student's curiosity sparks an unexpected discussion or when a teacher senses the need to pause, probe and pivot mid-lesson. These "teachable moments" are not inefficiencies. They are where learning lives.

AI's efficiency carries a subtle danger: *professional growth bypass* — when tools designed to help inadvertently remove the very experiences that build professional expertise. Planning lessons, anticipating misconceptions, and sequencing content are not merely tasks to complete; they are the complex, intellectual work through which teachers deepen pedagogical reasoning (Loughran, 2019). When AI performs this work, time may be saved but opportunities for professional growth diminish, gradually eroding adaptive expertise (Timperley & Twyford, 2022). The bypass initially feels like timesaving, but its long-term cost may be a profession less prepared for the pedagogical reasoning that students benefit from most.

Consider a Year 4 fractions lesson. The AI-generated plan describes comparing halves, thirds, quarters, and eighths using partitioned shapes. Mid-lesson the teacher notices several students applying whole-number thinking to the fraction comparisons: one argues that eighths must be larger than thirds because "eight is more than three", while another orders the fractions by denominator, explaining that "they have to go in order." The teacher pauses. Recognising the misconception, she changes the mathematical representation. Replacing the area-based shapes with paper folding and a linear fraction bar, the meaning of the denominator becomes visible and students see that increasing the number of equal parts makes each part smaller.

This pedagogical decision was not scripted in the AI lesson plan. It exemplifies what Remillard (2005) describes as the complex relationship between teachers and curriculum resources—teachers do not simply implement curriculum resources but actively interpret and transform them through interactions with students, content, and context. Building on this, Brown's (2011) notion of "pedagogical design capacity" describes teachers' ability to perceive, mobilise and adapt resources to create meaningful instruction. In this moment, the teacher noticed the error in the students' mathematical thinking, diagnosed the conceptual barrier, and redesigned the learning in real time. Teaching is not the delivery of a plan, but the ongoing design of learning as it unfolds.

This capacity for responsive, contextual decision-making represents the essence of professional judgement. Mason and Davis (2013, p. 184) describe it as "in-the-moment pedagogy"—what teaching actions come to mind when students surprise us, drawing on content knowledge developed through years of thinking carefully about student thinking. It exemplifies what Marzano (2007) described as the art of teaching, distinct from the science of research-based strategies. While AI excels at the science—synthesising research, collating effective strategies, generating curriculum sequences—teaching's art lies in knowing when to adapt, pivot, or abandon the plan entirely. This requires something no algorithm possesses: genuine connection with the humans in the room. Recent analysis of AI-generated mathematics lessons confirmed that, while structurally sound and reflective of curriculum requirements, these plans

systematically omitted practices that foster meaningful learning: student reflection, collaborative exploration, and responsive teaching. AI specified *what* to teach but not *how* learning happens (Cameron & Mesiti, 2024).

For leaders, the question isn't whether to use AI but how to position it. One mindset positions AI as an authority, producing optimal products. This approach contributes to professional growth bypass and narrowing pedagogical decision-making resulting in pedagogical atrophy — teaching reduced to delivery. The other mindset values AI as an assistant—reducing administrative burden while preserving teachers' intellectual work. AI provides the fabric, but teachers must still cut the cloth to fit the class.

Which path schools take depends on leadership. Stein and Nelson (2003) shift attention from *what leaders do to how leaders think about instruction*, making visible the cognitive and pedagogical work embedded in leadership. The closer leaders are to the classroom, the more fine-grained their content knowledge must be — suggesting that leaders intellectually invested in teaching are better positioned to recognise and protect the kind of professional judgement teaching requires. Strong pedagogical leadership in the AI age means:

- framing AI outputs as starting points
- investing in professional learning that builds teachers' capacity to critique, modify, and improve AI-generated materials
- protecting teachers' pedagogical responsibility to adapt in the moment
- valuing the professional growth that comes from grappling with complexity.

Leaders also need clear guardrails for safe and ethical use, bias awareness, and disciplined checking of AI outputs (NSW Department of Education, 2024).

Most crucially, it means remembering that students do not fall in love with learning because lessons are efficient. They fall in love with learning because teachers notice them, wonder with them, and care about their thinking.

AI will shape education's future. The measure of our leadership will be whether we harness generative technologies to strengthen professional judgement or allow them to erode pedagogical reasoning — the very thing that makes teaching transformative. Our students need teachers who think, not just implement; who notice, not just deliver; who teach with both mind and heart.

Author note: Generative AI tools (Anthropic, 2025) were used as an editorial aid to improve clarity, refine the expression of ideas, and enhance readability. The core arguments, examples, theoretical connections, and critical insights are the author's original contributions. The author takes full responsibility for the content and any errors.

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Tom Porta

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New Voice In Educational Leadership Research 2025 Recipient

Dr Tom Porta is a Lecturer in Education and Director of Secondary Programs at Adelaide University. His research focuses on inclusive education, differentiated instruction, curriculum design, and pedagogy, with a particular emphasis on teaching practices that foster full participation for all students in inclusive schooling systems. Tom's current research explores how teachers can design for inclusion using backward planning approaches. Prior to academia, Tom was a classroom teacher and leader across a range of schooling sectors in Adelaide. He currently serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs (JORSEN) and is Board Director at St Dominics Priory College in Adelaide.

Inclusive leadership will become a key differentiator between schools that thrive and those that struggle, as leaders shape the structures, culture, and priorities that determine whether inclusion is treated as core business.

The Next Decade in Education Belongs to Inclusion: Are we Ready?

The most significant force shaping the next decade of Australian education is not artificial intelligence. It is, and will continue to be, the increasing diversity of children and young people in our classrooms. Diversity is accelerating, with undeniable variation in students' identities, backgrounds, skills and capabilities, cultural backgrounds, health and wellbeing and socio-economic backgrounds (Abawi et al., 2019).

Yet, despite this classroom reality, inclusive education is still too often positioned as an "add on" by teachers (Porta, 2025), school leaders, and school systems. Thus, reflecting a narrow view of what inclusive education is, and whom it is intended to serve Anderson et al., 2020). This mindset will not survive the decade ahead. Rather, inclusive education should be viewed for all students not just a select few. If we want an education system that is high performing, equitable, and sustainable for teachers, especially in a time of teacher attrition, inclusion must shift from the margins to the mainstream, in how we design teaching, learning, assessment and school systems themselves. The choice before us is simple: plan for, and celebrate, the diversity in our classrooms now or continue to exhaust teachers and underserve students in outdated models of schooling.

Teachers across Australia are encountering increasingly diverse classrooms, a shift that is already reshaping everyday teaching practices in curriculum planning, assessment, and classroom organisation and we see this with increased emphasis on inclusive frameworks and pedagogies such as Universal Design for Learning and differentiation. The rise in recognised neurodiversity such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), dyslexia, and other developmental and learning difficulties reflects an increase in understanding. At the same time, migration is creating more multilingual, multicultural classrooms where students arrive with vastly different prior schooling experiences (Gilmour et al., 2018). Mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and disengagement continue to influence learning trajectories and behaviour (Angus et al., 2010). Even academic readiness has become increasingly variable, with teachers reporting that the spread of prior knowledge within a single class can span several year levels. These patterns are not anomalies but the new normal, and they will continue to intensify. The traditional model of one curriculum pathway, one pace, and one assessment format simply cannot meet this level of complexity.

In this context, inclusive education is not just a moral imperative, it is a system necessity (Graham, 2024). The reactive model that has dominated for decades, where a lesson it created and taught to the mythical "average" learner, and adjustments are added only once a student struggles, is inequitable and exhausting! Teachers are overwhelmed by the individual adjustments they are expected to produce (Page et al, 2024), often on top of lessons that were never designed for diversity in the first place. The future will require a shift toward proactive, whole-class approaches grounded in accessible design from the outset. Frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning, Differentiated Instruction, and explicit teaching must be understood as mutually reinforcing rather than separate pedagogical camps (Porta et al., 2025). Effective teaching increasingly demands a combination of clarity, structure, flexibility, and responsiveness. When curriculum and assessment are designed for multiple entry points at the beginning rather than retrofitted later, both students and teachers benefit.

Several key trends will drive this shift over the next 10 years. The first is a movement away from individual adjustments as the primary mechanism for inclusion and toward the deliberate design of accessible learning

experiences for entire classes. Lessons that incorporate varied representations, scaffolded tasks, flexible groupings, and clear success criteria reduce the need for time-consuming retrofitting. This approach does not lower expectations; it ensures that high expectations are genuinely attainable by removing barriers unrelated to the learning itself.

A second trend involves assessment. Assessment practices remain one of the most significant sources of educational inequity (Scott et al., 2014), often unintentionally privileging certain learners while disadvantaging others (Kleinlein, 2025). Traditional assessment formats, such as time-limited written tasks or linguistically dense examinations, tend to favour students with strong language skills, test familiarity, or stable learning conditions, while disadvantaging students with disability, emerging English proficiency, or anxiety. In these cases, assessment measures compliance with a narrow set of norms rather than valid evidence of learning, thereby reproducing inequity rather than addressing it. In the coming decade, there will be growing pressure for more flexible ways for students to demonstrate understanding, for clearer alignment between tasks and learning intentions, and for formative assessment to play a more central role in guiding teacher decisions. If learning is diverse, assessment cannot remain standardised in form but must remain rigorous in intent (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2017). Designing assessments that capture what students know, rather than how well they navigate hidden barriers, will become essential.

The third trend is the rise of artificial intelligence as a partner in inclusive practice. While AI will never replace the relational, intuitive, and professional judgment of teachers, it will become increasingly valuable in planning and differentiation. AI has the potential help teachers generate scaffolded materials, anticipate student misconceptions, create accessible alternative tasks, and analyse patterns in student responses. For instance, AI tools can support teachers to adapt a single assessment task into alternative formats without altering the learning intention, identify recurring errors in student work that signal conceptual misunderstanding, and surface patterns in responses that inform timely instructional adjustments. The risk lies not in the technology itself but in adopting AI without the pedagogical expertise required to use it ethically and effectively (OECD, 2025). AI has the potential to reduce workload and increase responsiveness; if adopted without such guidance, it could widen inequities related to disability, language, culture, and access to learning opportunities.

These shifts will place significant pressure on school systems, but they also offer significant opportunities. Schools that invest in collaborative cultures, where teachers plan together, share expertise, and problem-solve collectively, will be better placed to meet student needs (Vescio et al., 2008). Inclusive leadership will become a key differentiator between schools that thrive and those that struggle, as leaders shape the structures, culture, and priorities that determine whether inclusion is treated as core business. Inclusive leadership will become a key differentiator between schools that thrive and those that struggle, because leaders determine whether inclusion is embedded systemically or left to individual teacher capacity. In increasingly complex classrooms, sustained inclusive practice depends on leadership decisions that shape time, resources, professional learning, and collective responsibility

If Australia fails to embrace inclusive thinking now, the next decade risks entrenching a two-speed system where the quality of a student's education depends on the school they attend (OECD, 2018). But if we embrace inclusion proactively through curriculum design, assessment reform, AI literacy, quality school leadership, and collaborative professional cultures, we can create schools where every student experiences belonging, success, and dignity in learning.

The question is no longer whether diversity will continue to reshape schooling. It will. The real question is whether we will redesign education to meet this reality or continue patching an outdated system built for another era? The next decade demands courage: courage to rethink traditional practices, courage to lead with equity, and courage to reimagine classrooms as places where every learner can thrive. Inclusive education is not the future of education; it is the present. The time to act is now.

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NEW VOICE PERSPECTIVES

Michelle Heath

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New Voice in Early Childhood Education Leadership 2025 Recipient

Michelle Heath is Director of Early Learning at Trinity College, leading early childhood education across multiple sites. With extensive experience teaching, leading and consulting across Australia and internationally, she advocates for current, evidence-based pedagogical leadership that strengthens educator confidence, coherence of practice, and high-quality foundational learning experiences. Her work focuses on play-based and inquiry-driven pedagogy and on bridging preschool and school contexts by making early learning practice visible, valued, and enacted within broader education systems.

Beyond Pay: Pedagogical Leadership for Workforce Stability in the Early Years and School Settings

Workforce retention is often framed as a matter of pay, conditions, and supply. While these factors are important, they do not fully explain why educators leave or why they stay. Across early childhood education and care (ECEC) and junior primary contexts, workforce instability is increasingly shaped by the quality of pedagogical leadership that influences everyday practice. In Australia, less than 40% of staff remain in the same service over three years, with many educators indicating an intention to leave within the next one to five years (Bull et al., 2024). Internationally, stress, workload, and limited professional support influence retention (OECD, 2025). Policy reform and improved pay may ease workforce pressures, but current research indicates that when leadership provides pedagogical clarity and coaching through modelling, feedback and opportunities for reflection, educator confidence, efficacy and professional commitment is built, strengthening both workforce stability and quality learning for children.

Changing the Narrative from Workforce Challenges to Pedagogical Challenges

Bull et al. (2024) report that early career educators and junior primary teachers frequently feel overwhelmed, uncertain and unclear about expectations because they lack pedagogical clarity and practical support. Experienced teachers and educators may disengage when their knowledge is perceived as undervalued, or when long-established practices are dismissed rather than examined, renewed or extended, particularly when expectations are high, but support is limited. Anxiety increases when educators are expected to implement complex approaches — such as play-based pedagogy, developmentally appropriate intentional teaching aligned to curriculum expectations, or trauma-informed practice — without opportunities for shared planning, modelling, or feedback. Over time, this erosion of confidence and professional satisfaction suggests an increased likelihood of leaving the profession. Perhaps addressing workforce sustainability now requires a shift from viewing retention as a motivational issue and towards understanding it as a leadership responsibility grounded in providing learning and practical support.

The Critical Fole of Early Childhood Pedagogical Leadership

Fabry (2024) positions Early Childhood Pedagogical Leadership (ECPL) as a core leadership role essential to ensuring high-quality learning for children from birth to eight. Her model distinguishes between operational leadership, focused on compliance, staffing and administration, and pedagogical leadership, which centres on teaching, learning and professional growth. This style of leadership has the potential to influence educator confidence, self-efficacy, practice and in turn workforce retention.

Effective ECPLs are not simply experienced educators given additional responsibilities (Fabry, 2024). ECPLs require protected time, authority, and specialist expertise to be transformative rather than symbolic. To have genuine impact and influence, leaders need to timetable classroom engagement noticing pedagogy, working alongside educators to mentor and coach, collaborate in planning, and translating research into practice (Fabry, 2024). Fabry argues that ECPL's must work closely with those school and system leaders who do not have early years expertise, to ensure that early childhood pedagogy is understood, valued and embedded in whole school decision making.

Play, Pedagogy, and Professional Confidence

A key challenge across early childhood and junior primary settings is ensuring shared understanding of quality, developmentally

As education systems prepare for the decade ahead, early childhood pedagogical leadership must be treated as vital to system effectiveness.

appropriate pedagogy, particularly in relation to play. Christakis (2016) argues that play is a fundamental driver of cognitive, social, and emotional development, however in the early years sector and Junior Primary classes, educators enter the profession with varied qualifications, experiences and understandings of what play-based learning looks like in practice.

Without strong pedagogical leadership, they are left to navigate the complexity of effective play pedagogy without guidance, limiting growth in knowledge, confidence and practice. Strong ECPLs support educators and teachers by making pedagogy explicit: clarifying how play supports curriculum outcomes, modelling developmentally appropriate intentional teaching strategies, and supporting educators to plan, enact, and reflect on learning together. These leaders ensure practice is aligned with the principles of Being, Belonging, and Becoming in the *Early Years Learning Framework Version* 2.0 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022), as well as relevant aspects of the Australian Curriculum Version 9.0 (*Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* [ACARA], n.d.), supporting confidence, purpose and efficacy.

From Anxiety to Efficacy: The Power of Pedagogical Leadership

If an investment in pedagogical leadership with time, expertise, and influence is provided, educators will develop understanding, capability and confidence, strengthening both workforce stability and quality practice. Hadley et al. (2025) identify the value of structured mentoring roles in reinvigorating experienced teachers while building the expertise of those new to the profession. This research suggests leaders who establish practice-focused Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and provide targeted mentoring and coaching see changes in practice and higher workplace satisfaction (Hadley et al., 2025).

This value of mentoring and PLCs also aligns with research on leadership efficacy and its role in sustaining the workforce. In their keynote address at the 2025 ACEL National Conference, DeWitt and Nelson (2025b) argued that anxiety diminishes efficacy, while clarity and shared purpose strengthen it. They emphasised that collective efficacy is built not through congenial cultures, but through collegial ones grounded in shared responsibility for practice. Collegial teams engage in joint work which includes, using meeting time for shared planning, reflective problem-solving, implementing and evaluating practice together. Although collaboration and general sharing of resources and ideas is often encouraged through PLCs, it is joint work that deepens professional learning, strengthens collective responsibility and builds confidence in practice (DeWitt & Nelson, 2025a). Leaders who expect and timetable opportunities for all members of their team to engage in meaningful joint work will foster competence and connection, key drivers of retention in early years teams.

Workforce sustainability in early childhood and junior primary settings will not be achieved through incentives alone. While policy reform and improved pay matter, lasting retention depends on whether educators experience clarity, support, and growth in their daily practice. This requires deliberate investment in Early Years pedagogical leaders who have protected time to be present in classrooms, who facilitate joint work, and provide coaching that makes teaching visible. When educators feel confident in what they teach, supported in how they teach it, and able to see the impact of their work, they are far more likely to stay. As education systems prepare for the decade ahead, schools and early learning settings that prioritise and embed early childhood pedagogical leadership within their structures will be best placed to strengthen workforce sustainability and the quality of learning for young children.

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